

Types of Engagement: Thick, Thin, and Conventional

✖ The Types of Engagement model describes three foundational forms of civic engagement and participation—thick, thin, and conventional—and some of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach

In an effort to bring greater clarity to terms such as “participatory democracy,” “public participation,” or “civic engagement,” the scholar, practitioner, and writer [Matt Leighninger](#) developed the Types of Engagement model, which describes three common forms of engagement, which Leighninger calls *thick*, *thin*, and *conventional*. Leighninger’s descriptions offer a useful framework for understanding the varieties of participation available to local leaders, organizers, and facilitators, as well as some of the positive and negative features of each option.

“Defining public participation is a challenge. The term encompasses a wide array of activities and processes, which makes it confusing for both civil servants who are simply trying to understand their responsibilities and for citizens who may have never attended a public meeting. To understand participation, we must not only define the term, but also explore some of its variations.”

Tina Nabatchi and Matt Leighninger, Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy

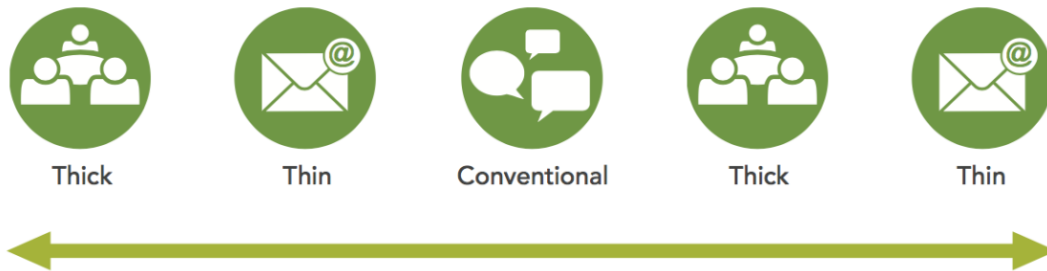
In his 2014 article [“**What We’re Talking About When We Talk About the ‘Civic Field’ \(And Why We Should Clarify What We Mean\)**,”](#) Leighninger argues that a lack of definitional clarity can undermine the goals and benefits of participatory forms of engagement. Without common definitions or a sufficient level of shared understanding, people are more likely to misunderstand or debate the purpose, value, and methods of engagement. For local leaders who need a simplifying framework that will help participants better understand what engagement is and how it works, Leighninger’s model clearly and succinctly describes some of the problems and practices of participatory engagement.

The Types of Engagement Model

To understand participatory engagement, it’s helpful to begin with the distinction between *direct* and *indirect* forms of participation in democratic systems or public processes. Indirect participation takes the form of electoral voting, financial contributions to political campaigns, political protests, corporate lobbying, and other activities that indirectly affect the outcomes of democratic processes by either (1) influencing the makeup of representative legislatures or (2) influencing the elected representatives

who determine public policy.

As Matt Leighninger and his co-author, **Tina Nabatchi**, write in ***Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy***, direct participation encompasses “activities by which people’s concerns, needs, interests, and values are incorporated into decisions and actions on public matters and issues.”



It is important for local leaders to choose an engagement strategy or format that is appropriate to the task at hand. Thick engagement can be executed poorly, and it’s possible for conventional to be done well. As Leighninger writes in his planning guide, “Thick, thin, and conventional engagement have different strengths and limitations, and they complement each other well. All of them could be part of an effective ‘multichannel’ system for engagement. Unfortunately, most communities do not treat engagement as a regular, sustained part of community life. People think of it mainly as a way to make big decisions and big plans—and because those things are usually done in conventional ways, residents often do not think positively about engagement. Taking stock of how engagement is working—the channels you have and the ones you want—can be helpful for creating a better system of engagement.” Image source: *Strengthening and Sustaining Public Engagement in Vermont: A Planning Guide for Communities*

The Types of Engagement model describes three common forms of direct participation:

1. Thick Engagement

Leighninger writes in **a planning guide he wrote for Public Agenda** that “thick engagement is more intensive, informed, and deliberative. Most of the action happens in small-group discussion. Organizers assemble large and diverse numbers of people; give participants chances to share their experiences; present them with a range of views or policy options; and encourage action and change at multiple levels.”

In the field of public participation, scholars and practitioners typically view thick engagement as the most desirable form of democratic participation in public decision-making, given that participants—whether it’s youth, families, and community members—generally have a much greater

impact on the outcome of a democratic process. Thick forms of engagement can also be more inspiring, motivating, and even personally transformative for participants and communities, given that a thick engagement process creates opportunities for participants to listen and learn from others (including people from different cultural backgrounds or those with whom they may disagree), collaborate with others to achieve goals or compromises, and be involved in a democratic decision-making process that is more meaningful, fulfilling, and rewarding than participation in a typical electoral process.

While thick forms of engagement offer many potential benefits, local leaders also need to consider that thick engagement generally takes significantly more time, which also means that it may be more complicated to organize and may require more resources, staffing, or funding. In addition, thick engagement processes can backfire when they are insufficiently inclusive, such as when a process fails to include racial or gender diversity, different ideological or cultural perspectives, or representatives of groups that have historically been marginalized, disenfranchised, silenced, or oppressed. Proponents of thick engagement would argue, however, that more intensive, participatory, face-to-face forms of engagement, particularly those that are inclusive and diverse, are more likely to produce better decisions, better results, and greater community support for the eventual decision or outcome.

While thick engagement can take a wide variety of forms in communities, Leighninger and Nabatchi describe a few of the essential features that characterize thick engagement processes in *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy*:

- **Proactive organizing, networking, and recruitment activities** that educate people about the relevant issues, increase participation in a decision-making process, ensure diverse cultural representation, and mobilize individuals and groups to participate, especially those who may not have participated otherwise.
- **Facilitated small-group discussions** that follow consistent ground rules, create conditions for equitable involvement, and allow all participants to express their opinions, concerns, priorities, or perspectives.
- An **intentional deliberation sequence** that allows participants to discuss, explore, or debate an issue in ways that are educational, respectful, and productive. According to Leighninger and Nabatchi, “The first step in this sequence creates understanding and empathy, the second informs and establishes common ground, and the third helps participants define goals and actions.”
- **Discussion guidance** that establishes appropriate expectations for participants by framing the issue under discussion, describing the decision-making process, articulating the options available to participants, or reviewing desired goals or outcomes. Leighninger and Nabatchi note that many national organizations have created discussion guides that help local leaders and facilitators develop constructive framing questions and deliberation processes.
- An **action strategy** that “helps participants, public officials, and other decision-makers capitalize on the input and energy generated through the process.” Without a thoughtful

strategy for action, even a well-intentioned or well-designed engagement process may result in community disengagement, given that participants may feel their time was wasted or their views were ignored, dismissed, or disrespected. While thick engagement processes can result in many different forms of action, specific actions are not determined in advance—one of the common goals of a thick engagement process is to give participants the opportunity to partially or entirely determine the actions that result from the process. Examples of actions that might result from a thick engagement process include forming a committee composed of local leaders and community representatives, executing a fundraising campaign, developing a public project, hiring a new district or school administrator, or merely telling participants how their feedback directly influenced an important decision.

2. Thin Engagement

In his planning guide, Leighninger writes that “thin engagement is faster, easier, and more convenient. It includes a range of activities that allow people to express their opinions, make choices, or affiliate themselves with a particular group or cause. It is less likely to build personal or community connections. One way of summarizing the difference is to say that *thick engagement empowers small groups* and *thin engagement empowers individuals*” (emphasis added).

The defining quality of thin engagement, according to Leighninger and Nabatchi, is that “individuals are provided with opportunities to express their ideas, opinions, and concerns in a way that requires only a few moments of their time.” Consequently, thin engagement activities are in some cases (but not always) quicker, cheaper, and more efficient, but they are less likely to produce the same beneficial results or levels of participant support that thick forms of engagement tend to produce.

For this reason, engagement practitioners often recommend using a blend thick and thin forms of engagement, particularly given that involving larger numbers of community members in a thick engagement process is often infeasible due to funding, resourcing, staffing, or time constraints. In these cases, thin engagement can allow a greater percentage of the community to voice their concerns or perspectives, which can then be incorporated into a participatory, administrative, or representative decision-making process.

Examples of thin forms of engagement include polls, surveys, petitions, and other activities that either (1) educate community members about an issue or (2) solicit their views on an issue, which extends to information booths, open houses, fairs, social-media groups, or other mechanisms by which community members and constituents can submit feedback by mail, phone, email, or online form. It is important to note, as Leighninger writes in his planning guide, that “thick participation opportunities are more likely to be face-to-face and thin ones are more likely to happen online. However, many thick

processes include both online and face-to-face elements, and some examples of thin participation, such as signing a petition, certainly existed long before the internet.”

3. Conventional Engagement

In his planning guide, Leighninger writes that “conventional engagement is what happens in most public meetings today. Citizens and officials are separated from one another, there are no breakouts or small-group discussions and citizens have brief opportunities, typically limited to two or three minutes, to address the whole group.”

Leighninger and Nabatchi also offer the following useful distinction in *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy*: “Conventional participation processes are older forms of engagement that were developed to uphold order, accountability, and transparency. If thick and thin participation are designed to empower citizens (albeit in different ways), conventional participation is intended to provide citizens with checks on government power.”

Conventional engagement remains the most common forms of engagement in most communities and school districts. School-board meetings are perhaps the most well-known and visible form of conventional engagement in education, yet Leighninger and Nabatchi note that even in “informal settings such as neighborhood associations or parent-teacher organizations, the participants often use [Robert’s Rules of Order](#) and other trappings of conventional participation.”

According to Leighninger and Nabatchi, conventional engagement is characterized by leaders sending out advance notifications or announcements in traditional media; classroom-style room arrangements in which community members face decision-makers who are seated behind a table or arranged on a stage; a predetermined agenda that is developed and strictly controlled by decision-makers; and a public-comment period during which a small number of community members are given a few minutes to ask questions or express their opinion on the issue or proceedings (though the decision-makers are typically not obligated to act on the recommendations of community members).

Importantly, Leighninger and Nabatchi note that “it would be easy to say that conventional participation is ‘bad’—and that because these processes are most often administered by the government, that all official participation is bad. However, many public officials and employees have led, organized, or supported better forms of public participation (both thick and thin). So the role of government does not have to be limited to official participation—and official participation does not necessarily have to be bad.”

The Problems of Conventional Engagement

For local leaders who are looking for more productive and effective forms of engagement, it is important to recognize and understand the problems that can be caused by conventional approaches to engagement. In *Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy*, Leighninger and Nabatchi describe a few of the problems that researchers have found to be associated with poorly executed forms of conventional engagement:

- Conventional engagement can exacerbate feelings of powerlessness or inefficacy among students, families, and community members, which then “decreases political interest, trust in government, and public-spiritedness, and damages perceptions of government legitimacy and credibility.”
- Conventional engagement can exacerbate political, ideological, cultural, or issue-based polarization, leading to increased levels of anger, disparagement, and conflict in public forums.
- Conventional engagement can demotivate public participation, resulting in fewer people being involved in governmental or educational decisions that affect them, their families, or their children.
- Conventional engagement can be personally, professionally, and financially costly or harmful to public officials and administrators because “they must organize and prepare for conventional meetings” that often produce poor outcomes, and because “it is frustrating, discouraging, and sometimes even dangerous to deal with hostile, uninformed citizens in public meetings.” And when a conventional public meeting goes poorly, public officials and administrators are then disincentivized to organize or facilitate additional meetings to resolve the problems caused by the original meeting.
- Conventional engagement harms the long-term efficacy and sustainability of democratic processes and public institutions by degrading the quality of public policy and decision-making. When the public is left out of public decision-making, the resulting policies are less likely to reflect their genuine needs and interests of the public, and the policies are less likely to be supported by those who are affected. Over time, trust in public officials, public institutions, and democratic processes is consequently eroded.

Acknowledgments

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