Faced with declining revenues and increasing costs, local governments across the country struggle to secure the money and resources they need to provide quality public services. To address this challenge, local public officials have several options. They can raise taxes, reduce services, or change the way they deliver public services.

To broaden public discussion of the hard choices facing communities in Allegheny County, in June 2010 The Pittsburgh Foundation launched the Allegheny Forum, a major initiative to gather public opinion on actions that could be taken to improve governance in the county and safeguard community services. One component of the Forum was a Deliberative Poll, conducted by the Program for Deliberative Democracy, a joint venture between Carnegie Mellon University’s Center for Applied Ethics & Political Philosophy and Pittsburgh’s Coro Center for Civic Leadership. In the Deliberative Poll, 406 county residents took a survey, and a broad cross-section of 183 residents engaged in a full day of discussion on the challenges facing local governments before giving their opinions on how local services—particularly police—might be affected by a choice to pursue different options (e.g., raising taxes, reducing services, or changing the way services are delivered).

A Deliberative Poll is designed to measure what the public might think about an issue if it had an adequate chance to reflect on the questions at hand. In a Deliberative Poll, a representative sample of a population completes a scientific survey on an issue. That group then receives balanced briefing materials before gathering together to discuss the issue in small, moderated groups, which formulate questions to ask during a plenary session with a panel of experts. After deliberating, participants complete a post-survey, which indicates conclusions the general public might reach if they had the opportunity to become more informed about the issue.

As with other deliberative polls, the Allegheny Forum poll can point to choices an informed citizenry might want their policymakers to make. Citizens in Allegheny County may have little knowledge or information about the trade-offs involved in making public policies that can improve the performance of local governments. By comparing responses on both the pre- and post-surveys, it is possible to determine how, if at all, opinions shift, and in what direction they may have shifted, after deliberation. Policymakers can then use this information to more effectively focus their own efforts to educate constituents on the trade-offs underlying critical policy choices.

In order to include as many different kinds of people as possible, the Program for Deliberative Democracy partnered with the Survey Research Program (SRP) at the University of Pittsburgh’s Center for Social & Urban Research. SRP administered the pre-survey and conducted the recruitment of poll participants using random-digit dialing and systematic sampling of telephone lists. Trained interviewers explained the background of the Allegheny Forum to respondents and invited them to participate in a full day of deliberation at Carnegie Mellon University, to be held on September 25, 2010. Respondents were offered a stipend of $50 to help offset transportation, childcare, and any other incurred costs of attending the event.
• Citizens’ opinions on the best ways to address local fiscal challenges can change when those citizens are provided good information and have a chance to deliberate with one another.

• After learning about the magnitude of local fiscal challenges, citizen deliberators became somewhat less optimistic that the public services in their communities would get better in the next few years. As they became more familiar with the problems facing the delivery of future services, deliberators wanted to become more involved in helping to solve the problem for their communities. After deliberating, citizens became much more likely to view citizen engagement as a necessary component of any solution to the fiscal challenge.

• Many citizen deliberators struggled with the complexity of the structure of local government, given the multiple classifications and sheer number of governments in Allegheny County. They expressed concern about inefficiencies in the local government system and the lack of flexibility in how governments can raise revenue. And many articulated a desire for state government to “remove obstacles” that hinder the ability of local governments to pursue creative solutions to local problems.

• After deliberating, citizens demonstrated more complexity and nuance of thought when thinking about fiscal challenges. They traded broad policy generalizations (e.g., “Combine resources to deliver services;” “Do not combine resources to deliver services”) for practical applications of policy knowledge (e.g. “Regional districts might be the best way to deliver police patrol services, while a county-wide department might be the best way to deliver investigative services.”)

• A majority of deliberators supported intergovernmental solutions to local fiscal challenges. They are split on whether the end goal of such solutions should be a reduction in cost or increase in service quality. Support for intergovernmental cooperation increased significantly after deliberation, along with a greater awareness of the need to evaluate each local service to determine how much cooperation could contribute to cost savings and/or quality improvement.

To access the full report, go to
Program for Deliberative Democracy: hss.cmu.edu/pdd/
Allegheny Forum: alleghenyforum.myupsite.com