



Civic Renewal Movement

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Civic Dictionary

Deliberative Democracy

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Deliberative democracy rests on the core notion of citizens and their representatives deliberating about public problems and solutions under conditions that are conducive to reasoned reflection and refined public judgment; a mutual willingness to understand the values, perspectives, and interests of others; and the possibility of reframing their interests and perspectives in light of a joint search for common interests and mutually acceptable solutions.

It is thus often referred to as an open discovery process, rather than a ratification of fixed positions, and as potentially transforming interests, rather than simply taking them as given. Unlike much liberal pluralist political theory, deliberative democracy does not assume that citizens have a fixed ordering of preferences when they enter the public sphere. Rather, it assumes that the public sphere can generate opportunities for forming, refining, and revising preferences through discourse that takes multiple perspectives into account and orients itself towards mutual understanding and common action.

Deliberative democracy in its predominant usage today means expanding the opportunities of citizens themselves to deliberate. This is meant to respond to several kinds of problems:

- **Direct Plebiscitary Democracy**
Despite the intentions of the framers of the Constitution, a direct-majoritarian version of democracy has been in the ascendancy in the United States since the nineteenth century, and depletes our capacities for reasoned deliberation. In this version of democracy, those mechanisms that compel decisions to conform directly to existing majority opinion are seen as more democratic than those that filter decisions through representation. The ascendancy of opinion polls, talk show democracy, referendums, and primaries are manifestations of this. As a result, policy questions become oversimplified and stylized, and our capacity to solve increasingly complex public problems declines.
- **Interest Group Representation**
The increasing organization of citizens into interest groups has tended to turn politics into a competition of interests narrowly defined. The advocacy

explosion of recent years has helped to democratize access to the halls of power, but has also generated a kind of "hyperpluralism" that makes it increasingly difficult to address questions of common purpose and revise programs that may have outlived their usefulness. This hinders our capacity to innovate to solve new problems.

- **Professional Political Class**

Citizens have become increasingly disengaged and cynical about politics because they see it as an exclusive game for professionals and experts, such as politicians, campaign managers, lobbyists, pollsters, journalists, talking heads. Technocratic approaches within public administration exacerbate this sense of the displaced citizen.

Deliberative democracy introduces a different kind of citizen voice into public affairs than that associated with raw public opinion, simple voting, narrow advocacy, or protest from the outside. It promises to cultivate a responsible citizen voice capable of appreciating complexity, recognizing the legitimate interests of other groups (including traditional adversaries), generating a sense of common ownership and action, and appreciating the need for difficult trade-offs. And one of the central arguments of deliberative democratic theory is that the process of deliberation itself is a key source of legitimacy, and hence an important resource for responding to our crisis of governance.

Forms & Examples

Deliberative democracy can exist in many forms and combinations, and can be complementary to various other mechanisms that ensure democratic representation and efficient administration. Thus, we can see deliberative democratic forms used not only for shaping an independent citizen dialogue, but for complementing deliberations by a city council, state legislature, or administrative agency. Indeed, the Madisonian tradition itself can be viewed as a deliberative democratic synthesis of classical republicanism and emerging pluralism that contains considerably more room for citizen deliberation than James Madison himself would have allowed. Some examples are the following:

- **State Health Reform**

The Oregon Health Plan of 1990 was arrived at by combining a process of community deliberation on health values with several other forms of deliberation. An independent, nonpartisan grassroots group (Oregon Health Decisions) conducted 48 open community meetings around the state to discuss underlying health values that citizens might hold in common and that might guide the reform efforts. An appointed Health Services Commission, which included public interest group representatives, used the reports from these meetings to guide its own deliberations in establishing a treatment priorities list, and took further guidance from expert panels, public hearings, and a public opinion poll. The legislature framed its own deliberations accordingly, and passed the reform plan with overwhelming bipartisan political support. It also had broad support from affected constituencies and organized grassroots groups, including those whom

national public interest groups claimed would be affected adversely. In the years prior to the passage of the bill, Oregon Health Decisions had held several hundred community meetings and two statewide health care parliaments, and used these to educate legislators about health values deliberation in the reform process. See [Community Meetings Shape Oregon Health Plan](#). For a more general introduction to community dialogue on health values, see Bruce Jennings, *Voices of Value: What Americans Expect from a Health Care System*, A Report from American Health Decisions, 1995.

- **Environmental Dispute Settlement**

Environmental Dispute Settlement, or Alternative Dispute Resolution, relies on a stakeholder model for organizing deliberation, rather than on open community meetings. A limited number of representatives from affected interests agrees upon rules that are conducive to mutual understanding of each other's interests and perspectives, and seeks common ground for action. The internal rules of dialogue that structure negotiations are among the closest real-world approximations we have to the philosophically demanding conditions of "discursive democracy" and "communicative rationality" found in the influential writings of Juergen Habermas. The circle of deliberation can be extended considerably by communication of stakeholder representatives with their grassroots constituencies during the negotiations. This form of deliberative democracy has guided state legislatures in policy making and agency officials in rule making. It is often convened and facilitated by administrative officials in agencies such as EPA, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the U.S. Forest Service, leading some scholars to speak of "deliberative cultures" emerging within regulatory agencies. An increasing number of environmental officials, in fact, are aware not only of the practical techniques, but of the theoretical discussions of deliberative democracy. And policy analysts have begun to pay increasing attention to how policy designs can and should encourage citizen deliberation in confronting complex problems and tradeoffs. See the discussion of Environmental Dispute Settlement, and extensive references, in [Civic Environmentalism](#), by Carmen Sirianni and Lewis Friedland.

- **National Issues Forums (NIF)**

Utilizing issue books prepared by the Kettering and Public Agenda Foundations, citizens convene within various institutional settings to deliberate about public problems, the pros and cons of specific solutions, and to reflect on the underlying values and deeper motivations at play. The goals of these forums are to enhance learning of public issues through engaged discussion of options, to help form a public with the skills needed for democratic dialogue and reasoned judgment, and to help define the interests of the public. The range of issues is broad, with three issues chosen per year, and groups can be formed in virtually any setting: schools, churches, senior centers, libraries, literacy programs. At the local level, some groups use NIF methodologies and materials to address issues on the local agenda, and thus move from deliberation to action. This is also the case with groups using materials of the Study Circles Resource Center.

- **The Deliberative Poll**

James Fishkin's deliberative opinion poll is based on the conviction that credible deliberative democracy requires a representative sample of the population, rather than self-selected citizen participation in community meetings and dialogue groups, or organized stakeholder participation in dispute resolution. It builds upon citizens juries and the ancient Athenian Council in design, but assembles a larger representative sample of several hundred in an effort to model what the electorate as a whole would think if, hypothetically, it could be immersed in intensive deliberative processes. It is designed especially to influence the selection of candidates at the beginning of the American presidential primary season, before the rush of early primaries. The deliberative poll was first conducted in Britain on national television in 1994 with a representative sample of three hundred voters considering the issue of crime, and they seem to have developed a more complex understanding of the issue than previously held.

The National Issues Convention premiers in the US in January 1996 on PBS, with the Kettering Foundation and National Issues Forums providing moderators and briefing materials on three issues selected from opinion polling (America's global role, pocketbook pressures, and the troubled American family). Participants will frame questions for candidates. Kettering, NIF and other partners will extend Public Deliberation '96 beyond the January convention.

- **Public Journalism**

Public journalism, or civic journalism, engages the press in directly helping to revive civic life and public dialogue. It does this in various ways: by convening town meetings where citizens have the opportunity to discuss public problems, question candidates skillfully and in-depth, review policy options, discuss solutions at work in other communities, set an action agenda, and even to facilitate voluntary citizen action (e.g. on neighborhood crime). News and election coverage gives priority of place to citizens' own voices. Civic journalism interprets the public's right to know expansively and assumes the responsibility for enhancing those conditions that permit citizens to constitute themselves as a deliberative public. It also challenges citizens to deliberate responsibly, in view of conflicting views and interests of other citizens and even of themselves (e.g. a demand for more services, but an unwillingness to pay for them, or to cut other favored programs). In this way, it seeks to hold citizens themselves accountable to standards of complex and responsible deliberation, even as it assists citizens in holding their elected leaders accountable. See the essays and cases in the CPN [Civic Communication section](#).

Some Relevant Issues

There are many issues that need to be addressed in refining and evaluating deliberative democracy as a source of democratic renewal. A few of the most important ones are the following:

- **Complementarity of Deliberative Forms**

No major theorist sees deliberative democracy as supplanting representative democracy. But there has been little systematic attention to the conditions under which "deliberative complementarities" could improve our democratic institutions and civic culture, and how various civic, political and administrative actors can develop the appropriate capacities. How can city councils, state legislatures, and administrative agencies include citizens in meaningful and innovative forms of deliberation? This is an important touchstone for renovating our Madisonian deliberative heritage, and a needed bulwark against the forms of plebiscitary democracy that are eroding it.

- **Relation to Action & Ongoing, Practical Collaboration**

In some forms of deliberative democracy, there is a tendency to divorce public debate from common action to solve problems. Thus, citizens engage in discourse, but public officials act. Or those who have a history of community problem solving through organized groups are excluded from deliberations that seek a statistically representative sample of unorganized, "ordinary" citizens. Or citizens are convened for a discrete event, but are not provided with ongoing opportunities to collaborate nor compelled to confront the action consequences of their deliberative work. Such forms of deliberation can certainly add something to a public discourse that is generally nondeliberative. But we need to be aware of their limits, and ask how we might embed deliberative forms in contexts of ongoing public work and practical action.

- **Difference & Inclusiveness**

Deliberative theory can tend to privilege speech that is too narrowly rationalistic and argumentative, and hence marginalize those groups (women, minorities) whose styles of discourse might differ from this. In addition, it can presume too great an initial basis for commonalty, and downplay the degree of struggle for recognition that might need to occur before a more inclusive sense of common interest can be forged.

Deliberative practice, by contrast, tends to be much more attuned to forms of speech (storytelling, expressions of hurt, anger and injustice) that situate participants in specific contexts and groups, and that reference inequalities in ways that can be productive of mutual understanding and common action.

- **Is deliberative democracy possible on complex national policy issues?**

The failure of the Clinton health care reform has raised the issue of whether a more deliberative approach might have served as a sounder, albeit longer term foundation for reform. Such a deliberative approach to public discussion could have focused on health values and cultural expectations, and to underlying causes of increased health costs for which the public has had little realistic appreciation (aging population, high technology). The Kettering and Public Agenda Foundations, as well as the Hastings Center, American Health Decisions, and the American Civic Forum, presented

elements of this alternative deliberative approach, both before and after the plan's defeat. Is it possible to learn from this failure in such a way that refines such an alternative, and convinces a significant enough segment of the American leadership class to go forward with it on a subsequent reform occasion? Or is such an approach simply unworkable in light of short political election cycles, deep ideological divisions within the leadership class, and the complexity of issues. And will deliberative democracy be enough to counteract the tendency of the public itself toward wishful thinking on health and its unwillingness to come to grips with the hard choices?

Selected Readings

David Mathews, *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994.

This is the clearest and most popularly accessible account of deliberative democracy as a response to the crisis of politics and the displacement of citizens in America today. Mathews draws upon the research of the Harwood Group on citizen alienation, and the experiences of his own Kettering Foundation and the National Issues Forums. He presents a complex account of the conditions under which public officials feel threatened by public participation, and those under which they recognize the need for public involvement. He links deliberative democracy to a broader tradition of action-oriented community problem solving and capacity building.

James Fishkin, *The Voice of the People: Public Opinion and Democracy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

An excellent, clear theoretical introduction to the problems of plebiscitary democracy in America, and an argument for how we need to link political equality with democratic deliberation. Fishkin presents the argument for a deliberative opinion poll, and the tradition upon which this draws. This serves as the basis for the January 1995 National Issues Convention in Austin, Texas. This book also gives greater recognition to other forms of civic engagement than Fishkin's earlier writings.

Daniel Yankelovich, "The Debate That Wasn't: The Public and the Clinton Plan," *Health Affairs* 14:1 (Spring 1995), 7-24, and symposium, 24-36.

A forthright exposition of how public opinion would have to educate itself through deliberative processes if it were to come to grips with the costs, complexities and tradeoffs of national health reform, and the underlying values that should guide it. Drawing upon the work of the Kettering and Public Agenda Foundations, Yankelovich argues that this is possible over a 3-5 year extended process, but not in the kind of accelerated push that the Clinton administration attempted. Various health policy analysts challenge how and whether such deliberation is possible on

such an issue. Clearly, a more specific set of strategies for a deliberative democratic approach to national policy making is needed. (Some elements of this were discussed among administration officials and civic practitioners in late 1994, but too late for action.)

Jane Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy*. New York: Basic Books, 1980 (reissued by University of Chicago Press in paperback in 1984).

This is a major theoretical contribution in this area. It grounds theorizing in the everyday practices of members of a New England Town Meeting and an alternative service collective, and articulates the conditions under which they do—and ought—to choose either adversary or unitary democratic practices. Jane Mansbridge, "[Democracy, Deliberation, and the Experience of Women](#)," from the Kettering Political Education Series' *Higher Education and the Practice of Democratic Politics*. Dayton, Ohio: Kettering Foundation, 1991.

This article explores two schools of feminist thought which shed light on the nature of deliberative democracy. One stresses women's power of nurturance and relationships. A second, more combative school concentrates on asymmetrical power relations between men and women. Both lines of feminist thought favor a more participatory democracy and constitute a fertile source of new ideas and perspectives.

Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

An eloquent and influential critique of "thin democracy," and an elaboration of strong democracy as a way of living. This book discusses the various functions of strong democratic talk as essential features of citizen deliberation and common action. Chapter 7 ("A Conceptual Frame: Politics in the Participatory Mode") represents the core of the argument.

Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992.

The editor's introduction is one of the clearest short statements of the theory of the public sphere in English. It concisely summarizes Habermas's masterwork, while offering sympathetic criticism. While it is written primarily for academics, within this genre it is quite straightforward. The other essays in this volume are also quite interesting, especially those by Michael Schudson, Mary Ryan, and Harry Boyte. Boyte develops an important critique of the deliberative tradition based on the more pragmatic, public work of citizens. (The latter is developed at greater length in *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work*, by Harry Boyte and Nancy Kari, Temple University Press, 1996, and in Harry Boyte, [Beyond Deliberation: Citizenship as Public Work](#).) Habermas' concluding essay reconsiders his theory of the public sphere thirty years after it was originally published, and modifies it to take account of modern communication technologies

and the struggle to transform civil society in Eastern Europe and the West.

Michael Briand, [Building Deliberative Communities](#), Pew Partnership for Civic Change, 1995.

This report to the Pew Partnership presents a clear and accessible introduction to the basic concepts of deliberative democracy, and presents the "community convention" as one example of this. It is available online, where further information on the Pew Partnership and how to order publications can also be found.

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