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The crisis of democracy and the science of deliberation

Citizens can avoid polarization and make sound decisions

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That there are more opportunities than ever for citizens to express their views may be, counterintuitively, a problem facing democracy—the sheer quantitative overabundance overloads policymakers and citizens, making it difficult to detect the signal amid the noise. This overload has been accompanied by marked decline in civility and argumentative complexity.

Uncivil behavior by elites and pathological mass communication reinforce each other. How do we break this vicious cycle? Asking elites to behave better is futile so long as there is a public ripe to be polarized and exploited by demagogues and media manipulators. Thus, any response has to involve ordinary citizens; but are they up to the task? Social science on “deliberative democracy” offers reasons for optimism about citizens’ capacity to avoid polarization and manipulation and to make sound decisions. The real world of democratic politics is currently far from the deliberative ideal, but empirical evidence shows that the gap can be closed.

Declining civility in interactions among elected representatives decreases citizens’ trust in democratic institutions. The more polarized (and uncivil) that political environments get, the less citizens listen to the content of messages and the more they follow partisan cues (1) or simply drop out of participating. Declining complexity in arguments means a growing mismatch between the simple solutions offered by political leaders and real complex problems. This decline combines with post-truth politics and the displacement of facts and evidence by the felt truth of “cultural cognition,” in which social identity conditions opinion, as seen clearly on climate change.

A long tradition of survey research in political science—going back to the 1950s—yields skeptical conclusions about citizen competence. Claims that people vote mainly guided by group identity, oblivious to reasons for or against candidates or policies (2), can fuel arguments against democracy and in favor of, for example, an “epistocracy” of government by wise elites (3). Not all survey research is so skeptical about citizen capacities; some treat cues from leaders and groups as useful cognitive shortcuts. But all survey research is “monological” in that it obtains evidence only about the capacity of the individual in isolation to reason about politics.

Psychological research shows that even if people are bad solitary reasoners, they can be good group problem-solvers (4). Individual reasoning can improve under the right social conditions (for example, ones that generate alternative viewpoints for the individual to consider), thus enabling the more positive assessment of individual reasoning found in cognitive and decision psychology (as opposed to social and political psychology) to come to the fore. Human life is indeed group life, but not in pathological form (5). Thus, research focused on individuals in isolation is not a strong match for the novel aspect of the contemporary crisis of democracy, which is a crisis of communication, not of individual reasoning, the virtues and flaws of which remain much as they have always been.

DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

The science of deliberative democracy seeks evidence on the capacities of citizens as they engage democratic dialogue, not as they respond as isolated individuals to survey questions (or even as they respond in social psychological experiments that fail to capture key democratic features). In addition to focusing on individual knowledge, preference, and voting, deliberative democracy also incorporates inclusive participation that encompasses citizens and leaders, mutual justification, listening, respect, reflection, and openness to persuasion. The field of deliberative democracy could be viewed as going as far back as Aristotle (who grounded practical reason in collective political life). But what is new in the past two decades is the

precision with which the tasks of deliberation—notably, the legitimation of public authority, mutual understanding, and the integration of diverse sorts of knowledge—have been specified and tested.

Deliberative institutional experimentation is flourishing throughout the world (a catalog is available at <https://participedia.net/>). Experimentation has included high-profile processes such as the Irish Constitutional Convention and subsequent Citizens' Assembly, which were convened to deliberate same-sex marriage, abortion, and other constitutional issues. The convention featured a majority of lay citizens and a minority of politicians. These processes reinvigorated the political landscape after the political disasters that the global financial crisis unleashed on Ireland. In Mongolia, any constitutional amendment now has to be preceded by a deliberative poll involving several hundred ordinary citizens. Thousands of citizens' juries, citizen panels, deliberative forums and polls, consensus conferences, and citizens' assemblies have now been conducted; these all involve diverse participants (sometimes randomly selected), facilitated dialogue, and an emphasis on norms of civility. The world's biggest deliberative institution is arguably constituted by the state-mandated village assemblies (gram sabhas) in India (see the photo).

Deliberation entails civility and argumentative complexity. To social scientists wedded to a monological account of citizen competence or incompetence, deliberative democracy may appear utopian and naïve in a world suffused by power, interests, manipulation, and demagoguery. However, empirical research supports the key claims of deliberative democratic theory (although not uncritically), enabling deliberative democracy to be deployed in both diagnosis of democratic ills and in the development of effective responses to the contemporary crisis of democracy. The many empirical tests of the core claims of deliberative democracy have led to refinement of the theory and then to widespread practical experimentation inspired by theoretical ideals, which in turn generates more useful empirical information (6).

WHAT RESEARCH FINDS

Deliberative experimentation has generated empirical research that refutes many of the more pessimistic claims about the citizenry's ability to make sound judgments. For example, claims that most people do not want to participate in politics prove false once the possibility of participation in meaningful deliberation is offered. Given the opportunity to deliberate with fellow citizens and their member of Congress, a majority of people wish to take the opportunity; moreover, "those most willing to deliberate are precisely those who are turned off by standard partisan and interest group politics" (7).

Ordinary people are capable of high-quality deliberation, especially when deliberative processes are well-arranged: when they include the provision of balanced information, expert testimony, and oversight by a facilitator. Analysis of the transnational "Europolis" deliberative process—a demanding multilingual setting—found that "the standards of classic deliberation are far from being utopian standards that only very few citizen deliberators can achieve" (8). Elements such as good reason-giving and respectful listening were present and reinforced each other. Opinion change in Europolis responded to well-justified arguments, not undesirable group dynamics. Citizen deliberators can counteract elite manipulation. Studies of citizens' juries show how ordinary people thinking together can see through elite manipulation of symbolic political appeals (9), and studies of citizens' conversations show how they can overcome the way elites try to frame decisions to their own advantage (10).

Deliberation can overcome polarization. The communicative echo chambers that intensify cultural cognition, identity reaffirmation, and polarization do not operate in deliberative conditions, even in groups of like-minded partisans. In deliberative conditions, the group becomes less extreme; absent deliberative conditions, the members become more extreme (11). Amelioration of extremism occurs even more strongly in deliberation that engages different sides. Moreover, deliberation can actually heal deep division. Deliberation can be effective in societies where ethnic, religious, or ideological groups have historically each found their identity in rejecting the identity of the other. Be it in mixed-identity discussion groups, structured citizen forums, or mixed bodies linked to decision-making, evidence from places such as Colombia, Belgium, Northern Ireland, and Bosnia shows that properly structured deliberation can promote recognition, understanding, and learning (12).

Deliberation promotes considered judgment and counteracts populism. In contrast to knee-jerk responses to partisan and populist cues, deliberation leads judgments to become more considered and more consistent with values that individuals find that they hold after reflection (9). In a deliberative poll in California (“What’s Next California”), for example, support for a “populist” proposal for a part-time legislature with part-time pay dropped massively after deliberation (13).

In recent years, practical experimentation has focused on making deliberation more democratic and inclusive. The idea is to create venues that are not simply another form of engagement for the elite. Experience has led to appreciation of how justification can involve not just abstract argument but also storytelling and other modes of communication based on personal experience. Such forms of communication may be more available to those not used to arguing in more formal terms, such as members of relatively marginalized groups and people with less formal education. We now see how rhetoric, once dismissed as the opposite of reason, can find a productive place in deliberation by engaging listeners—provided it is not used in demagogic ways and can build bridges across perspectives (6).

IMPLEMENTATION

These effects are not necessarily easy to achieve; good deliberation takes time and effort. Many positive effects are demonstrated most easily in face-to-face assemblies and gatherings, which can be expensive and logistically challenging at scale. Careful institutional design—involving participant diversity, facilitation, and civility norms—enables well known problematic psychological biases and dynamics to attenuate or disappear.

How can positive effects of deliberation be secured in larger publics? Beyond the multiplication of occasions for citizen deliberation, a key is to focus on powerful segments of the “deliberative system.” A deliberative system involves multiple locations for deliberation (such as political executives, legislatures, citizen forums, old and new media, and informal citizen gatherings) that are already found in many political systems, particularly liberal democratic ones. These locations are linked through (for example) the pressure that social movements exert on legislatures, the justifications for their actions that leaders give to the public, and the arguments that experts make to political leaders.

Introducing deliberative elements may sometimes slow decision-making down but may also generate smart and sustainable solutions and creative moves beyond impasse (as observed in many environmental cases in the United States). A major improvement to the deliberative system would involve enhancing moments and sites of listening and reflection and integrating these into political processes that are currently overwhelmed by a surfeit of expression (14).

Such moments might involve a randomly selected citizens' panel deliberating a referendum question and then publicizing its assessments for and against a measure, as now happens in the Oregon Citizens' Initiative Review, which was authorized by a state legislature tired of being hemmed in by ill-thought referendum measures. Or they could involve more direct deliberative exchanges between representatives and groups of citizens, some randomly selected, initiated by independent members of parliament (as has happened in Australia).

Social media now plays a major role in deliberative systems, often amplifying uncivil politics and pathological communication. Yet the problem is not social media per se but how it is implemented and organized. Algorithms for ranking sources that recognize that social media is a political sphere and not merely a social one could help. Citizens willingly deliberate when the context is right. Crowdsourced judgments of media quality could inform an algorithm that weights news sources by their trustworthiness, thus countering misinformation (15). The #Ichbinhier movement in Europe applies standards of evidence-based argument and civility.

Because the importance of deliberative moments lies in what they can do for the system as a whole, there is a pressing need to bring them in from the margins and make them a more familiar part of standard political practice. When these processes have made it to the center of the politics of a nation, as in the case of the Irish Constitutional Convention and Citizens Assembly, they helped make interactions in the Dáil (Irish parliament) more deliberative. Even if deliberative moments are brought in from the margins, it is important to remain vigilant against incentives for governments to use them as symbolic cover for business as usual, or for well-financed lobby groups to subvert their operation and sideline their recommendations. These problems are recognized and in many cases overcome by deliberative practitioners and practice. Broader positive deliberative change can come about in several ways. The Irish case shows that faltering trust in government and public disaffection can incentivize governments to engage in citizen deliberation in order to legitimate policy change. Alternatively, massive societal protests can induce governments to offer citizen dialogues, as in the case of the "Stuttgart 21" project to rebuild a train station in the central city. These moments can pave the way for sustainable deliberative innovations; the conflicts surrounding Stuttgart 21 led to official guidelines in Baden-Württemberg stipulating that citizen deliberation is compulsory in the context of large infrastructural projects. Responding to their failure to either overcome social problems or cope with the negative effects of economic development, governments sometimes constitutionalize (in India) or promote (in China) local deliberative exercises that have the potential to further broad dissemination of deliberative norms.

It is rare that deliberative development happens spontaneously in such cases. The prospects for benign deployment are good to the degree that deliberative scholars and practitioners have established relationships with political leaders and publics—as opposed to being turned to in desperation in a crisis. Examples here include the aforementioned Irish constitutional convention and Healthy Democracy Oregon, which runs the review process we described earlier.

The citizenry is quite capable of sound deliberation. But deliberative democratization will not just happen. Much remains to be done in refining the findings of the field and translating them into political practice. That political reconstruction itself would ideally be deliberative and democratic, involving social science but also competent citizens and leaders in broad-ranging political renewal.

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