Common Voices:
Between the Theory & Practice of Deliberative Democracy

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OVERVIEW

Deliberative democrats seek to link political choices more closely to the deliberations of common citizens, rather than consigning them to speak only in the desiccated language of checks on a ballot. They claim that doing so will produce better decisions and promote freedom by deepening our involvement in creating the laws that we have to obey. This promise to promote better decisions and freedom at the same time has made deliberative democracy the most prominent development in political theory over the last twenty years.

Sober thinkers from Plato to today, however, have argued that if we want to make good decisions we cannot entrust them to the deliberations of common citizens. Soon after the theory rose to prominence, critics launched attacks on multiple fronts, arguing that deliberative democracy is: 1) *incoherent*, because peoples' varying reasons for and against policies will never add up to anything consistent; 2) *paternalistic*, because most people simply do not want to spend more time talking about politics; 3) *inefficient*, because widespread ignorance among citizens will actually make their decisions worse than those of competent elites; 4) *dangerous*, because pressure for consensus will steam-roll over legitimate differences in society; and 5) *naïve*, because power and self-interest will always trump idealistic calls for public spiritedness. All of these criticisms depend crucially on empirical claims, so the critics brought mountains of social scientific evidence with them.

Faced with these empirical challenges, theorists found themselves engaging on relatively unfamiliar and unfavorable terrain. They tended to choose one of two patterns of retreat: either they pulled back to the normative high ground, dismissing the social scientists as uninformed, and their evidence as irrelevant to a normative theory, thereby leaving the theory merely aspirational; or they withdrew into narrow, controlled environments (e.g., Deliberative Opinion Polls) fortified against the empirical critique. By largely abandoning the broader political system for lost, however, what started out as a theory of deliberative democracy evolved into a much more modest theory of democratic deliberation. Moreover, many of the critics have still not been won over, scoffing at the idea that "a few days of democracy camp" could overcome the fundamental problems facing any deliberative theory.[1] From this point of view, the recent surge in real-world deliberative reforms

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[1] Simone Chambers (2009) develops the distinction between deliberative democracy and democratic deliberation. The quip about "democracy camp" is from Bartels (2003: 15).

(e.g., the British Columbia Citizens Assembly, The Australian Citizens' Parliament, etc.) is little more than academic fashion made recklessly real.

<u>*Key Contributions*</u>

Common Voices cuts across this debate by clarifying the means, ends, and structure of a deliberative democratic system. The main goal of such a system, as I construct it, is to promote freedom understood in a specific way: a democracy is working well to the extent that it secures authentic deliberative buy-in from its citizens. Deliberative buy-in means that citizens can look at the policies, laws, and rationales produced by the political process, and recognize them as reasonable, and better yet, embrace them as their own. From this perspective all manner of institutions and practices that do not seem deliberative on their face (e.g., elections) may nevertheless serve deliberative ends. And conversely, superficially deliberative practices may fail to promote deliberative goals understood this way.[2] This move completely transforms deliberative theory's relationship to empirical social science. Rather than asking whether deliberative democracy is "realistic," we shift to more interesting and productive questions about how best to realize deliberative ideals. The key question is no longer whether some institution or practice looks deliberative on its face, but rather whether it contributes to deliberative results – again, defined as securing authentic deliberative buy-in from citizens. If this standard is correct, then we are not so concerned with the absolute distance between reality and ideal, but whether we can adjust our institutions and practices to help average citizens recognize themselves in the results of the policy process better than the going alternatives.

And so we shift our emphasis to a coherent deliberative *system*, rather than focusing serially on the deliberative quality of the discrete parts of that system. I develop a sophisticated account of the components of the deliberative system, and how they interact to secure authentic deliberative buy-in. From the most local, internal to each individual's mind, to the most global, encompassing the emerging inter-national human rights regime, I analyze each site of deliberation as it functions in

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[2] My discussion here draws upon, reassembles, and develops elements from Habermas (1996), Bohman (1996), and Warren (2007). Buy-in should be understood as operating over time, so remaining satisfied with those policies and rationales is part of the setup, and thus incorporates a notion of "good" decisions as well. "Authentic" is also doing work here that I develop in more detail in the book.

this new understanding of a deliberative system. Only such a unified account, going all the way from the level of individual citizens' webs of belief, up to the macro structures of the state, will allow us to trace the relevant standards of deliberation through the entire system.

In order to develop such a unified account methodologically, I conceptualize the various sites of deliberation and the way that they interact in terms of network theory. Others have used the concept of a network as a metaphor in the context of deliberation, but I deploy it in the more specific sense of analytical techniques that have been developed to great effect in sociology. Doing so integrates a whole range of empirical work that helps us generalize beyond extant case-studies of deliberation. So far, nearly all of the "large n" research on deliberation has been at the level of political psychology, rather than political sociology. Adopting a network perspective also provides a surprising amount of continuity between and within the sites of the deliberative system. For example, everything from our informal political discussions with friends to the webs of belief each individual carries in her head can be represented as a network; similarly, connections among interest groups, and, in turn, those groups' connections down to individuals as well as up to legislatures can be used to get some leverage on the complex workings of the entire deliberative system.

After clarifying the goals and structure of the deliberative system, *Common Voices* goes on to systematically re-evaluate the five main empirical challenges to deliberative democracy (aggregation, motivation, competence, pluralism, and power) in light of this new frame. In doing so, I simultaneously reclaim the larger theory of deliberative democracy, and meet the empirical critics squarely on terms that advance, rather than evade, the relevant social science. Doing so has important implications for institutional design, adjustments to the theory, and priorities for future research.

CHAPTER SYNOPSES

Chapter Descriptions

Chapter 1: Introduction

The introductory chapter develops the book's key problem, the theoretical framework for solving it, and the plan for the rest of the book. It opens by defining deliberative democracy and briefly develops the theory's normative attractions. I then develop the case against deliberative democracy as a workable ideal, organizing the various challenges under five main headings, corresponding to the challenges discussed in chapters three through seven respectively: aggregation, motivation, competence, pluralism, and power. I show how the response to these challenges, heretofore, has driven deliberative theory into two untenable variants, one that does not meet the challenges squarely, and the other that concedes too much to them and ends up sacrificing the theory's original attractions. The chapter concludes with a roadmap for the rest of the book.

Chapter 2: Form Follows Function

Chapter Two develops the notion of deliberative freedom as the relevant normative standard for democratic institutions and practices, and shows how conceptualizing deliberation in this way alters the theory's relationship to empirical research. Since deliberative quality is properly thought of as a property of the deliberative system, rather than discreet deliberative practices, I develop an account of the various sites of deliberation, and their structural relationships. Rather than requiring each moment of deliberative politics to look deliberative on its face, we shift to the system perspective where the architectural maxim that "form follows function" applies as much to designing democratic institutions as to the buildings that house them. Finally, I introduce the concept and

techniques of network analysis as the key methodological innovation linking together the deliberative system both theoretically, and for purposes of empirical evaluation.

Chapter 3: How Deliberation Counts

Chapter Three addresses the claim that no amount of deliberation can obviate the need for voting and other forms of democratic aggregation. If deliberative democratic systems will need recourse to voting, then they will be subject to the well known problems of instability, ambiguity, and manipulability emerging from social choice theory and game theory. Moreover, any attempt to invoke notions of the "general will" or cognate concepts as a way to avoid such critiques commits deliberative democrats to implausible entities and illiberal notions of consensus. In response, I outline an alternative model of opinion aggregation that explains how deliberators can go a long way toward reducing the force of the aggregative critique without invoking metaphysically or morally suspect crutches. Each individual has a complex web of beliefs that allows her to make novel inferences by reflecting on those beliefs and their implications. Since people are highly socialized creatures, there will be a significant degree of overlap between those webs of belief, generally increasing as we compare to our more intimate others. Deliberation, then, can be thought of as a process by which groups of people reflect on the overlapping and non-overlapping portions of their webs of belief, and recombine elements from each other in a search through the space of arguments to see if they can reach a more satisfying and consistent set of beliefs, and a more common path to public choices. If the process is working well, it will generally increase people's ability to recognize others as reasonable, and to enable a degree of convergence upon choices and rationales that will, ceteris paribus, reduce the force of the formal critique. As New York governor and reformist presidential candidate Samuel J. Tilden urged, "The means by which a majority comes to be a majority is the more important thing."[3] If the means are good, then this seemingly non-deliberative practice of voting becomes the key mechanism by which average citizens transmit the authority of their deliberation on to formal political institutions, and thus make it possible to recognize the echo of their voice in the laws those institutions ultimately produce.

Chapter 4: Who Wants to Deliberate?

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[3] Quoted in Dewey (1954 [1927]) p. 207.

Chapter Four addresses the criticism that most Americans want nothing to do with a more deliberative democracy and that such reticence is reasonable. If so, bullying citizens into more deliberative participation would be grossly paternalistic. From the system perspective, though, most citizens already engage in important political talk within their informal political networks. Pointing out that much of that informal talk looks like a far cry from the "ideal speech situation" is not to the point, because talk in informal political networks generally serves a different function. Such deliberation is akin to "brainstorming" wherein the main goal is to simply generate ideas, rationales, concerns, and perspectives on an issue whatever their source and content. Different sites and moments in the process are charged with filtering, refining, and evaluating what gets produced in this stage. Directly applying the normative criteria of deliberative theory to such processes would actually subvert their main function in the same way that censoring, immediately criticizing and evaluating ideas defeats the intention of brainstorming. Moreover, extent research has focused on "Who Deliberates?" rather than "Who Wants to Deliberate?" But if deliberative democrats are right that much non-participation is rooted in disaffection with status quo politics, then current patterns of deliberation would not reflect how citizens would participate given more attractive opportunities. I demonstrate that the profile of those willing to deliberate is markedly different from those who participate in standard partisan politics and interest group liberalism. This profile suggests that average citizens do not seem to regard deliberative opportunities as filigree on "real" politics nor as an indulgence meant only for political activists and intellectuals.

Chapter 5: A Few Days of Democracy Camp

Even if citizens are more motivated to deliberate than critics assume, it is not clear that they can overcome the formidable hurdles to informed participation. All of us are utterly dependent on experts for nearly all complex matters that fall outside of our narrow range of competence. Chapter Five addresses this concern with special reference to so called "mini-publics" (e.g., Deliberative Opinion Polls, citizen juries, town-halls by random selection, etc.). I argue that if mini-publics are made to bear the main weight of deliberative democratic reform, then critics provide strong reasons to doubt that they can appreciably alter the quality of democratic processes. If, however, we assign mini-publics more limited roles in the larger deliberative system keyed to the goals of that system, ample evidence suggests that they have significant potential for contributing. Two such roles stand out. First, mini-publics can span what in network theory are called "structural holes" between elected representatives and their constituents. That is, they create direct connections between actors

that reduce the distortion that comes from mediating communication through highly interested, non-representative actors. Second, mini-publics can help correct for the valuational biases that accrue from ceding decisions to experts and elites who have more technical knowledge, but not the same propensity for mapping that knowledge into policy decisions.

Chapter 6: Change for the Better?

Even if we vindicate deliberative theory from the preceding challenges the case for deliberative reform does not succeed unless we assume that deliberation changes opinions primarily via mechanisms specified in the normative theory. Otherwise the argument for deliberation gives us no warrant for believing that any changes are for the better. If the real sources of opinion change are morally inert, deliberation would, at best, waste social resources. And worse, if those sources include mechanisms that level difference and pluralism, deliberation would magnify social inequality and pervert its own goals. The injunction to "first, do no harm" surely applies *a fortiori* to the body politic as well. Even if we do decide that deliberative institutions deserve our support, we will want to know how to design them so as to further the normative goals of deliberation most effectively. In Chapter Six I bridge deliberative theory and practice by making explicit the causal claims implicit in the normative theory.

Chapter 7: Chumps & Change

Proponents of an agonistic conception of democracy (e.g., followers of Arendt and Foucault) have persistently challenged deliberative democracy as perverse on its own terms. They argue that deliberative democrats are naive to the role of power in all communication, that the "force of the better argument" will never and can never be truly "unforced." They argue that the ideals of deliberative theory are themselves undesirable, suggesting that consensus as a standard for conflict resolution is necessarily disciplining and conservative. In a case of strange bed-fellows, neo-liberal critics of deliberation also claim that deliberative theory is naïve to questions of power. The burden of Chapter Seven is to respond to these charges by showing not only that deliberative democracy is less susceptible to the distortions of power than other going alternatives, but also that the theory's role for consensus, properly understood, still allows for reasonable conflict and disagreement. Heretofore, agonistic theories have not been subject to anything like the kind of empirical scrutiny that deliberative theories have undergone. I argue that much of the same evidence that gets cited against deliberative theory would apply even more powerfully against agonistic models. Moreover,

the kind of respectful struggle recommended by agonists is most likely to work as intended if it comes after deliberative processes have run their course and been found wanting.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Common Voices concludes by discussing the implications of my research for both the normative and empirical study of deliberative democracy, as well as proposals for political reform. By keeping the deliberative system frame firmly in mind, we can get leverage on which deliberative reforms are most promising. On the empirical front, the most fecund research is likely to focus on studies that trace the consequences of deliberation throughout the entire deliberative system, over time, for a single issue, or set of issues.

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