

POLICY FORUM

POLITICAL SCIENCE

The need for a translational science of democracy

The political science community should focus on how to foster the health of democracy

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The bitterly factious 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign was the culmination of several trends that, taken together, constitute a syndrome of chronic ailments in the body politic. Ironically, these destructive trends have accelerated just as science has rapidly improved our understanding of them and their underlying causes. But mere understanding is not sufficient to repair our politics. The challenge is to build a translational science of democracy that maintains scientific rigor while actively promoting the health of the body politic.

The partisan divide has both widened and deepened over the past 40 years (1). Since the 1970s, Americans have become less trusting of each other and of their governmental institutions (2). Rising levels of economic inequality have depressed political interest, engagement, and participation among all but the most affluent citizens (3); this has led to gaps between the rich and the less affluent in effective representation (4). These gaps are exacerbated by growth in the physical, technological, and social distance between Americans without shared politics, and the result is a polity rent by suspicion and fear. Whereas each of these developments would be problematic in its own right, their confluence is dire.

Yet we know more than ever about how social pressure drives people to vote (5) and how microtargeting mobilizes and persuades (6). Further, we understand how citizens curate their political environments, subsisting on one-sided information diets (7, 8) and selecting into politically homogeneous neighborhoods (9). Similarly, research on

“the science of science communication” has increased our understanding of “cultural cognition”—the tendency for people to form perceptions that cohere with the groups with which they identify (10), sometimes in spite of objective, scientific evidence.

TRANSLATIONAL SCIENCE OF DEMOCRACY

In large part, contemporary political science has left translational applications of the science of politics to practitioners, rather than fostering an applied science of its own. Political scientists worry that efforts to act on political beliefs will compromise the science itself. This fear is not unreasonable. But political science has not always shied away from translating basic research into recommendations to improve politics and government. In the years just after World War II, ~20% of articles in political science’s flagship journal, the *American Political Science Review*, made policy recommendations. That figure is less than 1% today (11).

In 1941, the great political scientist, Harold Lasswell, in the midst of the struggle against fascism, wrote the following (12):

[We must] contribute to the development of an applied as well as a general science of politics, an applied science that bears much the same relation to the general science of politics that medical science bears to general physiology. Our task is not to add new general definitions of moral ideas....In this sense our aim in the cultivation of science is modest. Yet in another sense our aim is enormously high; it is nothing less than to give hands and feet to morality.

But in the 1960s, the behavioral revolution swept political science, and such translational work dramatically fell out of fashion. Yet Lasswell’s point remains important. It is one thing to forecast an election and another to engender engagement with voters and warrant trust in those elections, whatever the outcome. It is one thing to identify ways to



increase voter turnout; it is another to do so without inadvertently exacerbating existing inequalities in turnout, or inviting abuse by interested campaigns or third-party actors.

TOWARD A TREATMENT PLAN

Translational research on democracy should take many forms. In less consolidated democracies, it will focus on more basic questions of promoting free and fair elections, the rule of law, and civic education. Here, though, we focus on opportunities in more consolidated democracies to deepen citizen engagement via deliberative institutions.

Empirical deliberation research suggests that when a diverse set of people comes together to talk over a consequential decision, they tend to attenuate many of the problems we associate with our current mass democracy. Deliberation, although hardly a cure-all, works by posing a different question to the democratic citizen than politics dominated by interest-group liberalism and partisan blood sport. Instead of asking people, “What do you want?” a deliberative frame asks them, “What should we do?” The effects of this small shift can be profound.

Two features of deliberative institutions have emerged as key: Deliberative innovations should connect people from diverse

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groups with diverse opinions (13), and they should provide citizens with the opportunity to influence meaningful decisions (14).

These deeper forms of democratic participation are common in several other advanced democracies, yet almost entirely absent in the American political system at the national level, with some scattered experiments at the state and local level. Denmark, for example, uses “consensus conferences” to incorporate informed public opinion into the policy process (15).

Discussions between academics and governments have led to translational experiments with varying degrees of practical success. For example, Switzerland holds national referenda multiple times throughout the year and yet has seen a decline in traditional in-person deliberative participation at the local level. In light of this decline, the Swiss government turned to its political scientists to help find ways to improve the democratic quality of their referenda. André Bächtiger *et al.* (16) found that participants in an online deliberative forum scored much higher on a “discourse quality index,” and (relative to a carefully constructed control group) were much more likely to oppose a populist party’s extreme immigrant expulsion initiative. In the supranational context,

the EuroPolis Project deliberative opinion poll recruited citizens from 27 EU countries to simulate informed public opinion across Europe (17). Whether deliberative alternatives will supplement or replace the status quo system in either case remains unclear.

But other collaborations have seen clear results. Australia has developed a citizens’ parliament in conjunction with local scholars (18). Two Canadian provinces (19, 20) have conducted deliberative referenda in partnership with academics. And over the past two decades, academics and policymakers have experimented with applying deliberative democracy to policy discussions at the state and local level in the United States (21).

Our field experiments (22–24) bring such institutions to the national level in the United States by fostering direct and deliberative exchanges between elected officials and their constituents. We demonstrate that online deliberation between members of Congress and representative samples of their constituents produces democratic goods for both the members and the constituents.

The results of collaborative research on deliberation have been promising, but important questions remain unanswered. So far, scholars have assembled strong evidence that

deliberative institutions positively influence citizens. Yet there is less firm evidence that they change the voting behavior of elected officials. Causal attribution is especially difficult in elite settings, but carefully constructed case studies will be crucial to understanding how citizens influence their representatives.

We believe that there are three key strategies to gain widespread acceptance of this approach: (i) making such efforts time-neutral (or even subsidized) for overworked Congressional offices; (ii) getting government to fully appreciate the potential of information technology for scaling up their communication and outreach strategies; and (iii) effectively communicating to officials that they can actually do better by asserting less control over the message environment.

Policy-makers need not sacrifice their political interests to join such collaborative projects. Deliberative moments present opportunities for elected officials to persuade—on the merits—that are simply missing from our current political system. Despite their hesitation to go beyond scripted messages, when leaders participate in deliberation, they very often succeed in changing citizens’ minds. They can do well by doing right. ■

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