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Beyond Deliberation: A Strategy for Civic Renewal

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Beyond Deliberation: A Strategy for Civic Renewal

Abstract

To expand opportunities for discussion and reflection about public issues, we should look beyond the organizations that intentionally convene deliberations and also enlist organizations that preserve common resources, volunteer service groups, civics classes, grassroots public media efforts, and partisan, ideological, and faith-based movements that have some interest in discussion. Many of these groups are not politically neutral; more are adversarial. But they have a common interest in confronting the forces and decisions that have sidelined active citizens in countries like the US. They are all threatened by the rising signs of oligarchy in the United States. Collectively, they have considerable resources with which to fight back. It is time for us to begin to stir and organize--not for deliberation, but for democracy.

Keywords

deliberation, democracy, civic life

Important work is underway that involves organizing public deliberations. Typically, these meetings have a human scale (5-5,000 people) and are meant to define and address real public problems. Often, the moments of deliberation lead to collective action by the participants. That is true (in various ways) of Study Circles, National Issues Forums, Citizens' Juries, Deliberative Polls, 21st Century Town Meetings, and Participatory Budgeting processes, among other practices--the kinds of activities that John Gastil and I collected in *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook* (2005).

More than 25 years of experience with these practices has shown that they work. Well-planned deliberations on real topics tend to satisfy the participants and yield wise decisions (in contrast to laboratory experiments and free-flowing discussions, which are plagued by group-think, polarization, and other faults). In fact, we already knew that deliberation could work from the much older experience of New England Town Meetings and village councils in many parts of the world.

But the scale of this activity is microscopic. Yes, hundreds or even thousands of well-moderated and well-organized deliberations may occur every year in a country like the United States. But our population is more than 310 million strong, and other forms of discourse utterly dwarf the organized deliberations. For example, \$7 billion of private money was spent to influence voters during the 2012 election campaign alone.

Virtually none of the campaign communications were "deliberative," by any plausible definition. In a 2012 survey, we asked a representative sample of Americans to comment in general terms on political advertising. One response neatly summarized their general verdict: "It is rampant and I despise it."

I think Albert Dzur (2008) poses essential questions in *Democratic Professionalism*: "Who will spark public deliberation, where will it take place, [and] how will the strong counterdeliberative forces in American political life be kept at bay?" To make Dzur's questions even harder: Why would any powerful institution consistently pay for deliberations or agree to honor the results? Why would citizens choose to deliberate unless someone subsidizes the costs or even pays them to participate, or at least offers them a share of concrete political power? To presume that large numbers of people are ready to deliberate at a mere invitation is to count on an unrealistic degree of civic virtue.

One common strategy has been to try to show people with political power or financial resources--generally, governmental agencies or foundations--that they would benefit from organizing deliberation. They may, for example, obtain better guidance or raise their popularity. Making this argument has yielded some successes: governments have sponsored public deliberations, and foundations have funded them.

However, writing just months after AmericaSPEAKS was forced to close its doors because of insufficient funding, I think it's worth noting the minuscule resources available for deliberation, especially when compared to the amounts spent on what Dzur would label "counterdeliberative" speech. If it weren't for three relatively small special-purpose endowments, The Kettering Foundation, the J. Paul Aicher Foundation, and the Whitman Institute, very little deliberation would occur in the US. But political advertising in a single year exceeds their collective endowments by a factor of at least 200.

We once had rough-and-ready, imperfect but serviceable answers to Dzur's questions. Unions recruited workers by gaining control of whole firms and even industries. Churches and other religious denominations recruited each new generation by persuading parents to raise their own children in the faith and by promising to save souls. Political parties recruited precinct workers and grassroots volunteers with various inducements, including jobs.

Once millions of people belonged to these organizations, their leaders had reasons to cultivate the members' political voice. These groups wanted their rank-and-file to be outspoken in the public sphere, making the case for the union, the church, or the party. In response to bottom-up pressure, they also permitted or even encouraged a certain amount of *internal* discussion about the goals and strategies of their own organizations.

As a result, in 1975, almost two thirds of Americans said they had attended a community meeting within the past year, and more than 40 percent said they had worked on a community problem with others. By 2005, each of those rates had fallen by roughly 40 percent, in a steady decline (Levine p. 95).

I would not claim that our traditional civic organizations were maximally deliberative, in that they tried to promote ideologically diverse conversations that were civil and inclusive. They had agendas and they were in conflict with various opponents. My own political theory would assign some value to deliberative values—but only some. I think mobilization, contention, and negotiation are also essential elements of a democracy. Further, an important byproduct of participation in groups like churches, parties, and unions was recruitment into the broader public sphere in which individuals of diverse backgrounds and opinions exchanged ideas.

The old civil society recruited people by offering them personal (non-civic) benefits and then gave them motivations and support to talk about political issues. Its leaders were dependent on grassroots members for dues and votes, and hence accountable to the members.

In contrast, the new civil society is all nonprofit and voluntary. It asks people to participate for explicitly civic reasons. Very few do. And it depends on the grace of powerful institutions, funders and agencies.

Deliberative democracy is the theory that citizens can and should come together to talk and form reasonable public opinions. I think this theory identifies some genuine values, but there are other values to consider as well. Further, deliberative democracy presumes the unrealistic psychological premise that people will choose to deliberate. And it makes the naïve political assumption that institutions will choose to support public deliberations. These assumptions are most egregious when deliberation (talking and listening) is divorced from membership and relationships, from work and common action. A more plausible strategy involves connecting moments of deliberation to ongoing struggles, which is certainly the goal of Study Circles and similar practices that straddle the border between deliberation and community organizing.

I would look well beyond even those examples. If we want opportunities for discussion and reflection about public issues, then we will also find deliberative impulses in efforts to preserve and enhance common resources (such as wetlands and forests); in volunteer service groups that decide where and how to work; in civics classes, from kindergarten through graduate school; in partisan, ideological, and faith-based movements that have some interest in discussion; in grassroots public media efforts; and in local partnerships built around community development corporations, hospitals, and colleges.

Like unions, churches, and parties, these are not primarily vehicles for deliberation. Only a small proportion see themselves as politically neutral; many are adversarial. Few see themselves as primarily involved in talking and listening. Not many share the widespread preference in deliberation for a “positive atmosphere” and “good emotional interaction” (Mansbridge et al 2006). Instead, many are angry.

But they have a common interest in confronting the forces and decisions--often intentional--that have sidelined active citizens in countries like the US. They have a common reason to challenge laws and policies, funding streams, educational priorities, and media coverage that ignore or marginalize citizens. They are all threatened by the rising signs of oligarchy in the United States. Collectively, they have considerable resources with which to fight back, both cash and people. It is time for us to begin to stir and organize--not for deliberation, but for democracy.

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