

Cambridge University Press

0521612284 - Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy

Diana C. Mutz

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

## Hearing the Other Side, in Theory and in Practice

When I was a child my father and I often went to the dentist together because the office was downtown, near his office, and because it was *his* dentist, the one he had seen since childhood, and my dad wanted very badly for me to like him. I made it clear that I had mixed feelings about the guy. Even if I could get over his name (Dr. Risk), and the fact that he insisted on calling me “Missy,” there was the fact that he was independently wealthy and practiced dentistry *for fun*.

But the ritual between the two of them was well established. He would put my father in the chair, stuff his mouth full of cotton, and begin to talk politics. As president of the local American Civil Liberties Union chapter, Dr. Risk and my ardently Republican father had a lot to talk about. My father could barely contain his eagerness to spit just to get a word in edgewise. For the two of them it was sport, and it was clear that my father greatly respected Dr. Risk, even if he would never take political advice from him. I know this because if I ever complained about going to the dentist, my father would nudge me with guilt: “But Dr. Risk is such a good man.” Good man or not, he was, after all, a dentist.

My own political conversations with my father are not always so enjoyable. There is sometimes the uneasy feeling that perhaps the apple has fallen too far from the tree. Our conversations take the form of a delicate dance of approaching, backing off, and approaching again, that tension that is so characteristic of relationships involving love and affection as well as disagreement. In relationships of this kind, most of

I

Cambridge University Press

0521612284 - Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy

Diana C. Mutz

Excerpt

[More information](#)

us understandably find it easier to talk about things other than politics, to seek safer ground.

And yet we are told by many that these are conversations we need to have. Not necessarily with our relatives perhaps, but in order to be good citizens and compassionate human beings, we are told we need to hear the other side, whether we like it or not. This observation was my point of departure for this book. I wanted to know where people came into contact with political ideas they disliked, how they handled the situation, and what kinds of consequences it had when it occurred.

Some of the answers I have found are what I originally predicted, but many are not. Even the unexpected findings make a great deal of sense with the advantage of hindsight, but I found them surprising because their implications countered a great deal of the current conventional wisdom. For example, instead of suggesting that what we really need are closer, more tight-knit communities, with denser networks of mutual obligation, my findings suggest that American society would benefit from a larger number of weak ties, that is, relationships that permit looser connections to be maintained on an ongoing basis. Differences of political opinion are indeed more easily maintained and more beneficially aired with one's dentist than with a close friend or family member.

And despite the tremendous negative publicity that currently plagues American businesses, the American workplace is inadvertently performing an important public service simply by establishing a social context in which diverse groups of people are forced into daily interaction with one another. That interaction, as it turns out, often involves discussions of political matters with coworkers and clients who are not of like mind.

As I explain in subsequent chapters, my empirical work in this arena has led me to believe that there are fundamental incompatibilities between theories of participatory democracy and theories of deliberative democracy. *Hearing the Other Side* examines this theme in the context of the contemporary United States. It unearths the social contexts that facilitate conversations across lines of political difference, and the consequences that cross-cutting exposure has for political attitudes and behaviors. Drawing on large quantities of social network data, I illuminate both the benefits and the drawbacks of living in an environment that incorporates differing political viewpoints.

Cambridge University Press

0521612284 - *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy*

Diana C. Mutz

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Studying a Moving Target*

3

I began this project with the widely shared assumption that face-to-face exposure to differing political views is unquestionably something to be encouraged. But my findings soon convinced me that matters were not so simple as I had supposed. Although diverse political networks foster a better understanding of multiple perspectives on issues and encourage political tolerance, they *discourage* political participation, particularly among those who are averse to conflict. Those with diverse networks refrain from participation in part because of the social awkwardness that accompanies publicly taking a stand that friends or associates may oppose.

When the desire to get along with one another on a day-to-day basis conflicts with the normative dictates of political theory, that inconsistency should give us pause. Many conceptions of civil society blend participatory democracy with deliberative democracy in a seamless fashion, suggesting that the two goals are almost one and the same, with deliberation merely representing a subset of political participation more generally. But based on my findings, it is doubtful that an extremely activist political culture can also be a heavily deliberative one. The best social environment for cultivating political activism is one in which people are surrounded by those who agree with them, people who will reinforce the sense that their own political views are the only right and proper way to proceed. Like-minded people can spur one another on to collective action and promote the kind of passion and enthusiasm that are central to motivating political participation.

Social environments that include close contact among people of differing perspectives may promote a give and take of political ideas, but they are unlikely to foster political fervor. Thus the prospects for truly deliberative encounters may be improving while the prospects for participation and political activism are declining. *Hearing the Other Side* explores the inherent tension between promoting a society with enthusiastically participative citizens and promoting one imbued with tolerance and respect for differences of opinion.

**Studying a Moving Target**

Face-to-face discussions that cross lines of political difference are central to most conceptions of deliberative democracy.<sup>1</sup> But many of

<sup>1</sup> E.g., Fishkin (1991).

Cambridge University Press

0521612284 - Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy

Diana C. Mutz

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the conditions necessary for approximating deliberative ideals such as Habermas's "ideal speech situation"<sup>2</sup> are unlikely to be realized in naturally occurring social contexts.<sup>3</sup> For example, some suggest that in order to qualify, political discussion must take place among citizens of equal status who offer reasonable, carefully constructed, and morally justifiable arguments to one another in a context of mutual respect.<sup>4</sup> Participants must provide reasons that speak to the needs of everyone affected. Such interactions must exclude no one, or at least provide "free and equal access to all,"<sup>5</sup> so that no person has more influence over the process than the next. Strategic behavior is also forbidden. In addition, all participants must be free of the kinds of material deprivations that hinder participation, such as a lack of income or education.<sup>6</sup> And, according to some definitions of deliberation, this process ultimately should lead to a consensus.<sup>7</sup> As a result of these extensive requirements, it is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to "test" a theory of deliberative democracy.

Increasingly, political theorists have been willing to expand their definitions of deliberation beyond this ideal type of rational-critical argument to include more informal forms of conversation such as storytelling, jokes, and greetings and to extend the definition to include emotional as well as rational appeals.<sup>8</sup> Thus even informal discussions are highly valued by contemporary political theory.<sup>9</sup> As Mansbridge notes, "Everyday talk, if not always deliberative, is nevertheless a crucial part of the full deliberative system."<sup>10</sup> Once the bar has been lowered in this fashion, there is obviously more political talk to study, but this still begs the question of whether these political discussions produce consequences of value.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Habermas (1989).

<sup>3</sup> Sanders (1997).

<sup>4</sup> Gutmann & Thompson (1996).

<sup>5</sup> Knight & Johnson (1994).

<sup>6</sup> Ackerman & Fishkin (2004); Fishkin (1991); Fishkin (1996).

<sup>7</sup> Macedo (1999) notes that there are many definitions of deliberation, but as Sanders (1997) points out, most have this much in common.

<sup>8</sup> Young (1996). See Mansbridge (1999) for an overview of the conceptual expansion of the "deliberative system."

<sup>9</sup> Gutmann & Thompson (1996) also note this, though it is unclear whether informal everyday deliberation should be held to the same standards as, say, deliberative discourse among officials.

<sup>10</sup> Mansbridge (1999, p. 211).

<sup>11</sup> See Mendelberg (2002) for an excellent review of evidence related to these claims.

Cambridge University Press

0521612284 - Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy

Diana C. Mutz

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Studying a Moving Target*

5

In part, the absence of evidence for these benefits is understandable. According to theorists, the benefits of political conversations depend critically on whether such talk reaches the standards necessary to be deemed “deliberation.”<sup>12</sup> It is one thing to claim that political conversation has the *potential* to produce beneficial outcomes if it meets a whole variety of unrealized criteria, and yet another to argue that political conversations, as they actually occur, produce meaningful benefits for citizens.<sup>13</sup>

A highly restrictive definition of deliberation obviously presents a quandary for the empirical researcher. If one limits the political communication phenomena worthy of study to those examples of political talk that meet all of the necessary and sufficient conditions collectively invoked by advocates of deliberative democracy, then one is left with a near-empty set of social interactions to study. On the other hand, if one studies an isolated aspect of deliberative processes, one is easily accused of “missing the point” of the larger theory, or of neglecting to operationalize it adequately. To my mind, a third option, namely, avoiding empirical tests of complex theories, is probably least desirable of all. To the extent that empirical research and political theory fail to speak to one another, both fields are impoverished.

Robert Merton famously admonished social scientists to formulate “theories of the middle range,” that is, theories not too far removed from on-the-ground, operational research, yet not so narrow and specific as to be irrelevant to larger bodies of theory.<sup>14</sup> Research on deliberative democracy readily illustrates this need. Deliberative democracy is an attractive, broadly encompassing theory of how communicative interaction benefits democracies. But in part *because* of its all-encompassing breadth, attempts to test it empirically often seem lackluster at best, or even irrelevant to the larger theory. The richness of deliberation as a theoretical construct makes empirical research on its tenets pale in comparison. And yet it has not escaped researchers’ attention that deliberative theory makes many claims about the benefits of deliberation, claims that, to many scholars’ ears, call out for empirical examination.

<sup>12</sup> Habermas (1989).

<sup>13</sup> Conover & Searing (1998).

<sup>14</sup> Merton (1968).

Cambridge University Press

0521612284 - Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy

Diana C. Mutz

Excerpt

[More information](#)

In this research, I take the middle range approach advocated by Merton. I draw on political theory for my expectations, but I study political talk as it occurs (or does not occur) naturally in American social life. Thus rather than examine deliberation per se, that is, a large package of variables all rolled into one concept, I focus on one necessary, though not sufficient, condition in almost all definitions of deliberation: that is, that people be exposed to oppositional political perspectives through political talk. Because this is a minimalist conception of what it means to deliberate, falling far below the requisites of most theorists, I use the term *cross-cutting exposure* or *diverse political networks* so as not to suggest far more than I intend. As Chapter 3 demonstrates, even a minimalist conception does, nonetheless, have some significant consequences for the citizens who engage in it. These benefits are precisely what has been predicted by deliberative theorists.

Theorists may be disappointed with the stripped-down versions of these concepts as they appear in empirical research, and empiricists may chafe at the atypical measures that I have created in an attempt to crudely represent theorists' concepts. But if we are ever to understand what the effects of deliberation are in the real world among ordinary citizens, if we are to move toward a kind of political science in which normative theory and empirical evidence speak to one another, then we need to begin breaking down the various components of this rich concept in order to understand its effects.

Given the difficulties in finding naturally occurring examples of political talk that live up to the high standards of deliberation, some might think it preferable to study carefully constructed public forums, town meetings, or deliberative polls in which the standards of deliberative encounters are at least approximated through extensive advance planning, discussion mediators, rules of engagement, a supply of information and expertise, and so forth. I do not question whether these events have beneficial consequences of various kinds; in fact, my presumption and the preponderance of evidence suggest that they do, particularly for levels of citizen information. But I do question whether such attempts could ever be successfully generalized to large numbers of people and issues. Some see such potential in the Internet, which provides a low-cost means of communicating, but the eventual impact of its use for these purposes remains to be seen.

Cambridge University Press

0521612284 - Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy

Diana C. Mutz

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Avoiding What's Good for Us?*

7

For most of us, the ideal deliberative encounter is almost otherworldly, bearing little resemblance to the conversations about politics that occur over the water cooler, at the neighborhood bar, or even in our civic groups. The consequences of an ideal deliberative encounter will make little difference if there are few, if any, such exchanges. For this reason I concur with theorists who suggest that everyday talk should receive at least as much theoretical attention as formal deliberation in public arenas designed for these purposes.<sup>15</sup>

**Avoiding What's Good for Us?**

“Religion and politics,” as the old saying goes, “should never be discussed in mixed company.” And yet fostering discussions that cross lines of political difference has long been a central concern of political theorists. Political talk is now central to most current conceptions of how democracy functions.<sup>16</sup> More recently, it has also become a cause célèbre for pundits and civic-minded citizens who want to improve the health of American democracy. According to many prominent social theorists, democracy has a future only if “citizens come back out of their bunkers and start talking.”<sup>17</sup> The quantity and quality of political conversation have become “a standard for the accomplishment of democracy.”<sup>18</sup>

Support for the importance of cross-cutting exposure comes from many quarters. Contemporary social and political theory is rife with the assumption that exposure to conflicting political views benefits the citizens of a democratic polity. For example, Habermas’s “ideal speech situation” incorporates the assumption that exposure to dissimilar views will benefit the inhabitants of a public sphere by encouraging greater deliberation and reflection. Exposure to dissimilar views is deemed essential to transcending the parochial nature of personal experience: “In large internally diverse societies, no one’s immediate (lifeworld) experience prepares them adequately for political participation.”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Although other theorists have made similar pleas, Mansbridge (1999) makes this statement most directly.

<sup>16</sup> Schudson (1997).

<sup>17</sup> Gray (1995, p. 1); see also Elstain (1995); Lasch (1995).

<sup>18</sup> Sanders (1997, p. 347).

<sup>19</sup> Calhoun (1988).

Cambridge University Press

0521612284 - Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy

Diana C. Mutz

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Communitarian theorists further stress the importance of public discourse among people who are different from one another.<sup>20</sup> Political discourse is argued to depend less on the amount of political talk, and more on the quality of those conversations and the diversity of views represented. Calhoun concurs: “Democratic public discourse does not depend on pre-existing harmony or similarity among citizens . . . but rather on the ability to create meaningful discourses across lines of difference.”<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps the most often cited proponent of communication across lines of difference is John Stuart Mill, who pointed out how a lack of contact with oppositional viewpoints diminishes the prospects for a public sphere: “If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; if wrong, they lose what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth produced by its collision with error.”<sup>22</sup> Likewise, Habermas assumes that exposure to dissimilar views will benefit the inhabitants of a public sphere by encouraging greater interpersonal deliberation and intrapersonal reflection.<sup>23</sup>

According to Arendt, exposure to conflicting political views also plays an integral role in encouraging “enlarged mentality,” that is, the capacity to form an opinion “by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent. . . . The more people’s standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion.”<sup>24</sup> Interactions with others of differing views are assumed to be “essential for us to comprehend and to come to appreciate the perspective of others.”<sup>25</sup>

Awareness of rationales for oppositional views is a particularly important type of political knowledge because of its close ties to legitimacy. Cross-cutting exposure is assumed to promote greater awareness

<sup>20</sup> E.g., Barber (1984); Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton (1985).

<sup>21</sup> Calhoun (1988, p. 220).

<sup>22</sup> Mill (1956, p. 21) [1859].

<sup>23</sup> Habermas (1989).

<sup>24</sup> Arendt (1968, p. 241).

<sup>25</sup> Benhabib (1992, p. 140).

Cambridge University Press

0521612284 - Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy

Diana C. Mutz

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Avoiding What's Good for Us?*

9

of oppositional views because no individual person thinking in isolation can foresee the variety of perspectives through which political issues may be perceived.<sup>26</sup> Thus political deliberation “teaches citizens to see things they had previously overlooked, including the views of others.”<sup>27</sup> The purpose served by conveying rationales for oppositional views is to help render the ultimate decision or policy legitimate in the eyes of others.<sup>28</sup> If rationales are not made public, the losers in a given controversy will not know what reasons or arguments the winners judged to be stronger in deciding the merits of the case: “Hence discussion rather than private deliberation would be necessary to ‘put on the table’ the various reasons and arguments that different individuals had in mind, and thus to ensure that no one could see the end result as arbitrary rather than reasonable and justifiable, even if not what he or she happened to see as *most* justifiable.”<sup>29</sup>

To summarize, hearing the other side has long been considered important for democratic citizens. Advocates of deliberative democracy stress the importance of communication across lines of difference, and the existence of differing views is arguably the *raison d'être* for political deliberation. Unfortunately empirical work has fallen far behind political theory in this realm. Only recently have scholars begun investigations of where and with what consequences people interact with those whose political views differ from their own in the contexts of their day-to-day lives.

But if everyone is so deliriously enthusiastic about the potential benefits of exposing people to oppositional political perspectives, then what exactly is the problem? Given the unusually strong consensus surrounding its assumed value, one would assume this activity to be widespread. Why don't people go home, to church, or to work and discuss politics with their non-like-minded friends or acquaintances?

Social network studies have long suggested that likes talk to likes; in other words, people tend to selectively expose themselves to people who do not challenge their view of the world.<sup>30</sup> Network survey

<sup>26</sup> Manin (1987).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 351.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Fearon (1998, p. 62).

<sup>30</sup> In addition, Green, Visser, & Tetlock (2000) describe several ways that people who anticipate exposure to oppositional political views will avoid such encounters.

Cambridge University Press

0521612284 - Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy

Diana C. Mutz

Excerpt

[More information](#)

after network survey has shown that people talk more to those who are like them than to those who are not, and political agreement is no exception to this general pattern.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, many people do not have much desire to engage in political debate to begin with, even the informal variety. Exposure to diverse political viewpoints may be widely advocated in theory, but it is much less popular in actual practice. In this sense, the extent to which people are exposed to oppositional views demonstrates some of the same patterns as exposure to diversity along other dimensions, such as race and class. While diversity is a much-lauded public goal in the aggregate, few individual people live their everyday lives so as to maximize their exposure to difference.

### What Is Meant by Diversity? Some Definitional Issues

Discussions of how social environments affect citizens are frequently hindered by a confusion borne of inconsistent terminology. The term *context*, for example, has a colloquial usage that includes the environment, but it is not specific as to what kind of social milieu the writer has in mind. Further, since most people inhabit multiple social contexts – the home, the workplace, the neighborhood, the city, state, and so forth – it makes little sense to talk about the influence of context as if it were one identifiable unit for each individual. In some cases, the characteristics of these contexts are used as surrogates for characteristics of the person's social network or the social influence processes exerting influence on him or her.

For purposes of this book, I use the term *network* to refer specifically to the people with whom a given person communicates on a direct, one-to-one basis. Network members are clearly part of a person's communication environment. *Contexts*, on the other hand, refer to larger entities (neighborhoods, workplaces, cities, etc.) whose characteristics are typically known to the researcher strictly in aggregate form and are known to the individual only in piecemeal form. The communicative influence of social contexts on individuals flows *through* the people who are part of a person's network. An individual's network thus

<sup>31</sup> See Cotton (1985) for a review of evidence on selective exposure to communications more generally.