

# POLITICAL DISAGREEMENT

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*The Survival of Diverse Opinions within  
Communication Networks*

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# I

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## *Communication, Influence, and the Capacity of Citizens to Disagree*

There is a limit to the legitimate interference of collective opinion with individual independence; and to find that limit, and maintain it against encroachment, is as indispensable to a good condition of human affairs as protection against political despotism.

John Stuart Mill. 1859 (1984). *On Liberty*. New York: Penguin Classics, p. 63.

*Democratic electorates are composed of individually interdependent, politically inter-connected decision makers. These individual citizens do not go it alone in democratic politics – they depend on one another for political information and guidance, and hence political communication and persuasion lie at the core of citizenship and democratic politics. At the same time, the vitality of democratic politics also depends on the capacity of citizens to disagree – to reject as well as to accept the viewpoints of others. The questions thus arise, are citizens capable of maintaining durable patterns of both agreement and dissent within their closely held social groups? What are the circumstances that give rise to both agreement and disagreement within the networks that connect citizens in ongoing patterns of political communication?*

The capacity of citizens and electorates for tolerating political disagreement constitutes a central issue in democratic politics. The model of a free, open, and democratic society is one in which political issues are fully explored, and political debates are fully aired. In such a society, citizens are open to persuasion but sympathetic to ongoing disagreement, the social boundaries on political viewpoints are fluid and shifting, and individuals encounter the full spectrum of issue positions and political viewpoints.

How does this model correspond to contemporary analyses of citizens, communication, and disagreement in democratic politics? How does it correspond to the empirical reality of political communication among citizens?

We observe numerous examples in which disagreement and dissent are seemingly squeezed out of the political communication process among citizens. In a particularly compelling case, disagreement became quite

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difficult in the aftermath of the traumatic events that occurred on the morning of September 11, 2001. The horror of jet passenger planes slamming into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon carried profound political consequences, not only for American relations with Afghanistan, the Middle East, and the rest of the world, but also for patterns of communication and the expression of political viewpoints among Americans.

A well documented consequence of national crises is the phenomenon in which presidents receive increased levels of popular support, but another related consequence is the increased difficulty experienced by dissenting voices. Several months after the disaster, the publisher of the *Sacramento Bee* was shouted down and kept from finishing her graduation speech at the Sacramento campus of California State University when she attempted to warn the audience of the danger that the crisis posed for fundamental civil liberties (*Sacramento Bee*, December 21, 2001: p. L6).

Events such as this provide vivid and compelling examples of the difficulties posed by disagreement within the context of strongly held beliefs among citizens. Indeed, the tolerance of dissenting voices represents a state of affairs that is often quite fragile, but at the same time crucial to the vitality of democratic politics. Our primary concern is not with speeches and newspapers and politicians, but rather with citizens and their capacity for tolerating disagreement in their relations with one another. The difficulties and challenges posed by disagreement are certainly not unique to the public sphere. Rather, these problems penetrate closely held patterns of political communication among and between citizens in democratic politics.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF DISAGREEMENT IN DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

Why is political disagreement important? More to the point, why are patterns of disagreement among citizens important? The most direct answer is that the legitimacy of conflict and hence the legitimacy of disagreement lie at the irreducible core of democratic politics. It is perhaps safe to say that a democracy without conflict and disagreement is not a democracy. Democratic institutions are not designed to eliminate conflict and disagreement, but only to manage disagreement in a productive manner. In the words of James Madison, taken from the *Federalist* 10: "The latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man; and we see them everywhere brought into different degrees of activity, according to the different circumstances of civil society."

Hence, a central reason for focusing on disagreement relates to the "*different circumstances of civil society*" that affect the capacity of citizens – both as individuals and as groups – to deal constructively with political disagreement and conflict. There is more than ample justification in the

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historical record to generate concern regarding the capacity of citizens for constructive disagreement. Americans justifiably take pride in the world's longest surviving democratic constitution, but a candid assessment of our political history recognizes a series of democratic failures related to deeply imbedded patterns of conflict and disagreement. The American Civil War – the bloodiest war in American history and the bloodiest war fought anywhere in the nineteenth century – was motivated by the disintegrating consequences of *internally generated* conflict and disagreement organized on a sectional basis. A long and continuing history of racial and ethnic conflict includes race riots, lynch mobs, and the denial of civil rights. And political violence, in various forms, has been an integral part of our political history as well. Hence, one might say that the unruly and intolerant audience that made it impossible for the *Bee's* publisher to finish her speech was perhaps notable, but not entirely out of the ordinary.

Several different bodies of scholarship have considered the capacity of citizens for responding to political disagreement in a way that coincides with the requirements of democratic politics. One literature focuses directly on political tolerance – the individual circumstances that give rise to tolerance, its incidence in the population, and the meaning of tolerance in political terms. A breakthrough in this literature came in the recognition by Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus (1982) that tolerance only takes on meaning in the context of political disagreement – that tolerance is only relevant with respect to groups and causes that an individual finds truly objectionable. Hence, political tolerance among liberal Democrats might be conceived in terms of their willingness to tolerate anti-abortion demonstrations in front of abortion clinics, just as political tolerance among conservative Republicans might be conceived in terms of their willingness to tolerate the exercise of abortion rights.

A second body of scholarship focuses on political deliberation among citizens and its potential for enhancing the quality of democratic politics (for example, Fishkin 1991, 1995; Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Rawls 1996). Whereas definitions of deliberation vary across theorists, Mendelberg (2002) distills several ingredients that are particularly important for empirical investigation: Deliberation often takes place in small groups. It involves the egalitarian and open-minded exchange of viewpoints and positions. And it has the potential to produce higher levels of political engagement, tolerance, and compromise among competing viewpoints.

A crucial insight of the deliberation theorists, particularly relevant to our purposes, is that tolerance, compromise, and engagement are anchored in the personal experience of political diversity. In this way the benefits of deliberation depend on disagreement, where disagreement is defined in terms of interaction among citizens who hold divergent

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viewpoints and perspectives regarding politics. In summary, both tolerance and deliberation lose meaning absent disagreement, and we are particularly concerned with the experience of disagreement within closely held networks of political communication.

At the same time, the presence of disagreement and political heterogeneity within communication networks provides no guarantee of either tolerance or deliberation. In particular, political disagreement may fail to be communicated effectively – individuals may ignore, avoid, or dismiss politically disagreeable viewpoints, thereby rendering communication ineffective. In this context, it becomes important to make a primary analytic distinction between the effectiveness and the persuasiveness of communication. The communication that occurs between two individuals is *effective* when each individual understands the message being transmitted by the other individual. The same communication is *persuasive* when one of the individuals changes her opinion or preference as a consequence. A primary challenge of this book is to examine the factors that give rise to effective communication, as well as the factors that give rise to persuasive communication, and to understand the role of *both* effectiveness *and* persuasiveness with respect to the survival of political disagreement.

Disagreement that persists in the context of fully and effectively communicated viewpoints is not inconsistent with either tolerance or deliberation. Effective communication, as opposed to persuasive communication, does not imply that disagreement should necessarily disappear – citizens may agree to disagree based on their own understanding of one another's viewpoints. To the contrary, the persistence of disagreement in the context of effective communication is evidence of democratic vitality rather than failure. In contrast, if communication among citizens is rendered ineffective by the presence of disagreement, then the potential for tolerant citizens to be engaged in a productive process of political deliberation is rendered problematic. If disagreement is incompatible with the possibility of effective communication, then deliberative democracy is a contradiction in terms.

Viewed from a different perspective, it is conceivable that tolerant citizens might be well equipped to engage in a productive process of political deliberation, even though on a day-to-day basis they are imbedded within politically homogeneous networks of like-minded citizens. This is especially true to the extent that tolerance is a normative commitment made by particular individuals, rather than a socially learned habit encouraged by systematic and recurrent processes of social interaction.

In a similar vein, opportunities for political deliberation can be created through opportunities that are designed to be independent from ongoing, everyday patterns of social interaction and political communication. Most theorists of political deliberation are less concerned with patterns of

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recurrent, informal, face-to-face communication regarding politics than with processes of “public reason” (Rawls 1996: 212 ff.) that occur in “the land of middle democracy” (Gutmann and Thompson 1996: 12). The focus is more generally on public settings that provide the need and opportunity for people to confront fundamental forms of moral disagreement. In this context, Fishkin (1995) has sponsored structured public forums which create opportunities for strangers to come together voluntarily in order to discuss political issues and controversies.

Our own view is that the likelihood of a political system characterized by high levels of tolerance is reduced to the extent that political tolerance depends on individually based normative commitments disembodied from social interaction. As Gibson (1992: 350) demonstrates, “(w)hy people differ in their levels of intolerance – and with what consequences – cannot be well understood by conceptualizing the individual in social isolation.” Moreover, he shows that homogeneous peer groups, less tolerant spouses, and less tolerant communities place limits on the freedom perceived by individual citizens. Hence, we expect that normative commitments to tolerance and democratic ideals are likely to be short-lived unless they are reinforced through application in naturally occurring contexts of political communication (Gibson 2001).

Similarly, to the extent that opportunities for political deliberation must be created through town hall meetings and specially designed events that are separate and apart from normally employed networks of political communication, the potential for widespread deliberation is likely to be severely curtailed. This is not to minimize the importance of efforts aimed at providing formally and institutionally based opportunities for collective deliberation. Rather, the success of these efforts is likely to depend on the vitality of political communication closer to home – within naturally occurring communication networks.

Even if our view is incorrect – even if we are on the verge of a democratic renaissance in which the individual commitment to political tolerance becomes widespread and citizens make use of opportunities for discussing politics in open forums with strangers – the study of political disagreement is justifiable on its own terms. Substantial bodies of important theoretical work point toward the politically disabling consequences of disagreement (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Mutz and Martin 2001; Mutz 2002a; Mutz 2002b). Other bodies of important work point to the problematic capacity of maintaining disagreement within a population as the stable equilibrium outcome of a dynamic communication process (Abelson 1964, 1979; Axelrod 1997a, 1997b). But if disagreement produces a political angst that leads to a withdrawal from civic life on the part of individual citizens, or if political diversity is inevitably eliminated as a consequence of communication



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among citizens, where are we left with respect to the capacity of citizens for the give-and-take that is so crucial to life in a democracy? The ironic result is that disagreement is always on the verge of being eliminated, and the only individuals who are equipped to take on the full role of a participatory citizen are those imbedded within cozy cocoons of like-minded associates.

Finally, this book is not about tolerance or deliberation more narrowly conceived, but rather about the reality of political diversity and political discussion within the lives of everyday citizens – the patterns of disagreement among citizens who regularly communicate regarding politics. We expect that these patterns of disagreement define the potential for tolerance and deliberation within political systems, but the importance of disagreement to democratic politics extends beyond these matters to include fundamental issues regarding political change and the nature of citizenship. If citizens are incapable of accommodating disagreement and hence adopt agreeable preferences that yield political homogeneity within communication networks, then methodological individualism and the role of individual citizens are fundamentally called into question. Political analysts might be well advised to shift their focus to small self-contained groups of like-minded associates as the primary units of analysis. Alternatively, if citizens no longer encounter disagreement and dissonance-producing information, then the motivating force for individual change becomes problematic. As McPhee, Smith, and Ferguson (1963) argued so persuasively, the dynamic of opinion formation is motivated by disagreement among citizens, and if disagreement does not occur, the engine driving electoral change is absent.

Mendelberg (2002: 152) points out that “(d)eliberation is not merely a utopian ideal; it is practiced already, and may become so more and more widely. It is time we understood what it is expected to do, what it is in reality, and what it could become. Doing so can help us better understand how citizens should, do, and could practice politics in a democracy.” In the spirit of her admonition, we address a series of issues and questions: Do citizens possess the capacity to sustain ongoing patterns of communication that are characterized by persistent disagreement? Is disagreement politically disabling? Does disagreement render communication ineffective? These are important questions, and the answers to these questions are directly related to the prognosis regarding the vitality and possibilities of democratic politics.

Within this context, we turn to a series of important explanations for the elimination of disagreement among and between citizens in democratic politics. Taken together, these explanations provide a strong set of expectations regarding the inevitability of political homogeneity within closely held networks of political communication.

## *Political Diversity as a Rare Event*

### POLITICAL DIVERSITY AS A RARE EVENT

How have disagreement and dissent been understood within contemporary analyses of citizens, communication, and disagreement in democratic politics? According to one analytic perspective, citizens employ socially supplied information as a labor saving device. By finding well informed individuals with political biases similar to their own, citizens are able to reduce information costs by relying on individuals who are readily available within their own networks of social contact (Downs 1957). Hence, the likelihood of disagreement is reduced because individuals rely on the guidance of politically compatible experts, and political homogeneity is thus the naturally occurring state of affairs within communication networks.

Other analysts, inspired by a conformity model of social influence (Asch 1956), see a powerful social influence process within small, cohesive groups of interdependent citizens. The psychic discomfort of disagreement causes individuals to reduce dissonance through various means (Festinger 1957). In particular, individuals adopt socially prevalent viewpoints, and they avoid disagreement in the first place by censoring their patterns of social interaction to create politically homogeneous networks of political communication.

Neither of these analyses leads one to expect that disagreement would be able to survive within meaningful patterns of communication and deliberation among citizens. In the model of communication as a labor saving device, disagreement is unlikely to occur due to the purposeful action of individual citizens as they seek out politically sympathetic, like-minded experts. In the conformity model, disagreement is extinguished through powerful mechanisms of conflict avoidance and social influence. Hence, the capacity of democratic electorates to consider and reconcile competing viewpoints through a meaningful process of political communication is rendered problematic.

In summary, personal experience and scholarly analyses converge to suggest that political disagreement and dissent from widely held opinions are frequently unpopular; people often and inadvertently avoid political disagreement through a natural strategy for obtaining information in which they seek out like-minded political experts; and when disagreement is encountered, it is likely to be an unpleasant event that produces psychic and social discomfort. Hence, the political give-and-take that might be hoped to lie at the core of a free and open democratic society would instead appear to be unnatural and socially dysfunctional. People do not enjoy disagreement; it is frequently disturbing and they are unlikely to find it helpful.

This leaves students and friends of democratic politics with a problem: the requirements of democratic politics would appear to conflict with the

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capacities and realities of the way that citizens lead their lives, both as individuals and within the groups and networks of association where they are located. If people do not encounter disagreement as part of social interaction and political communication, the deliberative efficacy of political communication is seriously compromised. Just as important, the capacity of citizens to render political judgment is fundamentally undermined.

### EFFICIENCY AND COST CUTTING AS KEYS TO CIVIC CAPACITY

According to the Downsian argument, cost conscious consumers of political information seek out as informants other individuals who are both expert and politically compatible. In this way cost conscious citizens free ride on the efforts of others – they rely on others to assume the costs of acquiring and processing political information. These costs are very real, particularly for individuals who find no intrinsic joy in reading the newspaper or watching talking heads on television news programs. In such a context, these free riding behaviors produce obviously beneficial outcomes at the individual level by allowing citizens to invest their participatory resources in other endeavors. What are the aggregate consequences?

In a very important way, the Downsian analysis suggests that free riding may enhance the citizenship capacity of citizens, *both* as individuals *and* in the aggregate. Free riding becomes an efficient mechanism for a division of labor that is both individually and socially productive. At the individual level, capacity is enhanced because people are able to acquire useful information. Absent social communication, it is unlikely that individuals would work harder to stay informed, and thus political discussion allows individuals to become better informed than they would otherwise be.

The manner in which social communication and free riding benefit the aggregate capacity of the larger political community is perhaps less direct. At the simplest level, a summation of better informed individuals yields a more capable aggregate, but the aggregate benefits extend beyond these summary advantages, and they relate to the larger division of labor in the production of community participation. Although many of us might, in the abstract, endorse the idea that every citizen should stay informed about politics, most of us also recognize the imperatives of the 24-hour day. To the extent that every citizen spends serious time and effort staying informed about politics – reading the *New York Times* and diligently watching the television news shows – we would expect a serious erosion in the social resources available to coach little league teams, to organize Girl Scout cookie drives, to attend church council meetings, and so on. In short, citizenship activities do not begin and end in the voting booth, or even in the world of partisan politics, elections, and public affairs (Putnam 2000). A primary advantage of citizens who look to their politically expert

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associates for political advice is that this sort of social interdependence has the potential to produce a division of labor that is not only individually efficient, but socially efficient as well.

The problematic aspects of the Downsian argument arise because the utility of communication is seen as being predicated on agreement regarding fundamental points of political orientation. According to Downs, the cost conscious strategy of obtaining political information only succeeds if one has confidence in the expert from whom the information is obtained. And the best way to gain such confidence in the expert is to select one who shares the political biases of the consumer.

The problem with this selection criterion is that, if citizens only communicate with agreeable experts, they are never forced to consider new, novel, and perhaps uncomfortable political ideas. There is little opportunity for persuasion and hence little opportunity for political change. Rather than a community that responds to compelling arguments and changing circumstances, the community is organized into political groupings surrounded by non-permeable social and political boundaries. The capacity of the citizens to exercise judgment is undermined because they are inexperienced and perhaps incapable of entertaining and understanding the full range of political alternatives.

What does this have to do with an audience that shouts down unpopular ideas offered by a newspaper publisher at a graduation ceremony? Public displays of an unwillingness to tolerate dissent and disagreement are symptomatic of a broader unwillingness to tolerate diverse political communication in the countless informal venues that are an integral part of everyday life. In this way the public life of democratic politics is a manifestation of habits and patterns that are learned and employed in countless informal and less public settings.

In summary, the problem is *not* that citizens engage in free riding by making use of the efforts expended by others in the collection and analysis of political information. The problem is rather the Downsian stipulated criterion that free riders impose on the search for a political expert, looking for someone who shares their particular points of political orientation. Before considering this problem in more detail, we consider the related problem of conflict avoidance.

### DISAGREEMENT AND CONFLICT AVOIDANCE

The citizen in the Downsian analysis does not necessarily *avoid* conflict. Rather, the cost conscious citizen simply seeks out an agreeable political informant in order to obtain useful political information. In contrast, arguments anchored in group conformity and cognitive dissonance present an even less optimistic picture regarding the civic potential for