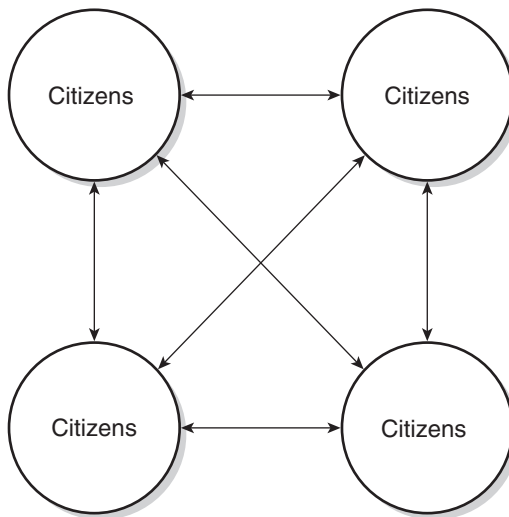


# 1

## *Democracy and Deliberation*



*If liberty and equality, as is thought by some, are chiefly to be found in democracy, they will be best attained when all persons alike share in the government to the utmost.*

—Aristotle<sup>1</sup>

**V**oting is a sacred act in a democracy. Whatever its virtues, a political system cannot begin to call itself democratic unless its citizens, one and all, have the right to vote. By degrees, many societies have met this basic standard, with each of their citizens empowered to elect representatives or vote directly on policy. But is that enough?

## 4 CHAPTER 1

Imagine a country in which all citizens could vote but they could not express themselves, save through marking a ballot. Would it be enough for people to go about their lives in quiet isolation, periodically appearing in public to punch holes next to candidates' names? Or, even worse, what if citizens could communicate but lacked the ability to think, to reason, to judge for themselves? What kinds of results would elections yield if voters had no concept of whom they were voting for or what a "yes" or "no" vote really meant on a ballot initiative?

This hypothetical nation of zombie-citizens, more likely to eat brains than use them, may sound like a made-for-television science-fiction movie, but the living dead have more in common with the living than we might care to notice. Most U.S. citizens shy away from political conversation and rarely attend public meetings of any sort.<sup>2</sup> Even then, only about half of Americans choose to express themselves by voting for their president, with far fewer choosing to vote during other elections.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, we often know precious little about whom or what we are voting for. In 2004, for example, a survey shortly before the presidential election found that two thirds of those voting to reelect George W. Bush believed he supported banning nuclear weapons testing and participating in the Kyoto treaty on global warming—two policies he openly opposed.<sup>4</sup> A 2003 study of voters in Washington State just a week before Election Day found that very few even knew what issues would appear on their ballot. On most issues, fewer than one in five Washington voters could make a pro or con argument.<sup>5</sup> A few days later, these people cast their ballots, endorsing or rejecting laws to which they had given precious little thought.

The lesson here is not that your long-lost neighbor has risen from the grave and may soon develop an appetite for human flesh. Rather, the point is that we may want to ask more of our political system than merely granting us the right to vote. More fundamentally, we might even say that democracy requires more than just voting rights and "rule by all." But what, then, does democracy mean? If we want to expect more of our fellow citizens, and perhaps our public officials and our media as well, what exactly should we expect? Beyond allowing the vote, how do we know when a system is democratic?

### **Three Criteria for the Democratic Process**

Anyone can call his or her country a democracy. It is quite fashionable for American politicians to refer to the United States as "the world's greatest democracy," despite remarkably high numbers of citizens declining to vote in each election. Indians refer to their country as "the world's largest democracy," despite its maintenance of a rigid caste system. Greeks call their nation "the world's oldest democracy," though the ancient Athenian system consciously excluded women and endorsed slavery throughout its existence. Cubans now

proclaim their system a “true democracy,” though the Cuban government profoundly limits dissent.<sup>6</sup>

Vernacular understandings of democracy are also inadequate. One careful study of what democracy means to average Americans found that, despite their devotion to it as a principle, most people lack a firm grasp of the concept. “You mean freedom?” one respondent asked. Another suggested that democracy means “freedom of choice in anything you want to do, short of killing somebody or kidnapping or stuff like that.” A third respondent expressed a sentiment many of us might share: “I feel so stupid. People come around and say, ‘Oh, you live in a democracy,’ [but] I don’t know exactly what they are talking about when they say that.”<sup>7</sup>

At its core, democracy means self-rule, rule by all. When Aristotle wrote *Politics*, he construed democracy as a set of institutions that make the will of the majority into the law of the land:

Such being our foundation and such the principle from which we start, the characteristics of democracy are as follows: the election of officers by all out of all; and that all should rule over each, and each in his turn over all; that the appointment to all offices, or to all but those which require experience and skill, should be made by lot; that no property qualification should be required for offices, or only a very low one.<sup>8</sup>

What is noteworthy about Aristotle’s conception of democracy is its emphasis on holding regular elections, giving persons an equal chance to hold offices, and limiting the constraints on full citizenship. Those are, indeed, foundational ideas in democracy, but in the modern context it takes more than these minimal characteristics to count as a full-fledged democracy.

There is no consensus on what democracy means, but political scientist Robert Dahl developed a useful way of understanding the term.<sup>9</sup> In his view, just as no human being is perfect, no nation is a pure democracy. Instead, each country is more or less democratic by degrees. The way you can tell them apart is by asking how well a system sizes up when measured by specific criteria: inclusion, effective participation, and enlightened understanding.<sup>10</sup> These criteria work equally well for large nations, small groups, or any association that hopes to call itself democratic.

## INCLUSION

First, a system (country, organization, group) must satisfy the criterion of inclusion by welcoming into its political process all adults who exist within its boundaries. To the extent that a system counts people as adult members but excludes them from its decision-making process, the system cannot call itself democratic.

## 6 CHAPTER 1

This definition presumes that children are incapable of creating a self-governing society, *Lord of the Flies* notwithstanding, but any parent will agree that, at least at early ages, children are ill-equipped to make judgments on behalf of the larger public. Left open to question is the precise age marking the end of childhood. After all, the voting age was lowered in the United States from 21 to 18 with the passage of the Twenty-sixth Amendment in 1971, and it may eventually fall to 16. Even advocates of lowering the voting age, however, are comfortable stopping at 16, for fear of the ramifications of handing over ballots to roaming packs of middle schoolers.<sup>11</sup> In addition to children, a democratic system can exclude those who are just passing through, such as tourists or visiting guests, as well as those who are severely mentally incapacitated to the point of being unable to care for themselves.

## PARTICIPATION OPPORTUNITIES

Once you are recognized as a member of a democracy, you must then have equal and adequate opportunities to participate in three related ways—putting issues on the agenda, expressing your views on those issues, and voting on those issues, directly or indirectly. What these processes mean depends, in part, on whether you belong to a representative or direct democracy.

In a direct democracy, such as a small group that elects no leaders and makes all its decisions by consensus, democracy requires that you have the same chance as anyone else in your group to put items on the group's meeting agendas, express your views on those items when they come up for discussion, and vote for or against an idea, presuming it garners enough support to even come up for a vote.

More common are systems that elect representatives. From fraternities and sororities to cities and nations, democratic systems rely on the election of representatives to carry out the business of making policies and laws. In these cases, it is critical that you and your fellow association members have an equal opportunity to nominate candidates, cheer some and boo others, and then vote for or against them. Those elected representatives then must have equal say in placing issues on their agenda, debating them, and voting on them.

Even in a system with elected representatives, however, democracy requires that all citizens have an equal chance to raise issues for discussion—either by fellow citizens or by their elected representatives. Citizens must also have the chance to articulate their positions and attempt to persuade one another and their public officials.

Moreover, many systems offer a mix of direct democracy with the election of representatives. If you live in a city or state that puts questions on ballots in the form of referenda, initiatives, or ballot measures, for instance, you are participating directly in the lawmaking process. A democratic process requires

that in such elections, you have an equal chance to put issues on the ballot (by gathering signatures or by other means), discuss and debate the issues with fellow citizens, and vote yea or nay on each issue.<sup>12</sup>

Note that your opportunities to participate—directly and through the election of representatives—must not only be equal to that of your neighbors but also must be adequate. This means that a system fails to be democratic if it divides up the opportunity pie evenly but fails to make enough pie to satisfy. Nobody likes getting shortchanged on pie, even if it's known that everybody else also got half a teaspoon. Thus democracy requires that all people have sufficient opportunities to set the agenda, speak their minds, and complete their ballots.

### ENLIGHTENED UNDERSTANDING

Finally, all members of a democracy must have the chance to figure out which issues concern them, what they think about those issues, and how they should vote when given the chance to do so. Enlightened understanding, the third and final criterion, is critical because, frankly speaking, it separates a deliberative system from an unreflective one. An inclusive system that gives everyone the opportunity to speak but does not grant the time (or tools) to think will be a dismal one indeed, full of empty speeches and reckless voting. Only when members of the public become accustomed to figuring out what's important will the issues of the day be of consequence. And only when people learn how to study issues and reflect carefully on their values—as well as those of their fellow citizens—will the public become well informed enough to speak, act, and vote in accordance with their enlightened self-interest, let alone for the greater public good.

This is not to say that I, you, or anyone else knows what is in everybody else's best interest. If we did, then who would need a democracy? No, what this means is that people need to have enough of a chance to work through issues to say with confidence that they understand which issues are important and to explain what their own views are on those issues. One clear sign of enlightened understanding, for instance, is when people can explain not only their own views on these subjects but also the views of others with whom they disagree. A person with an enlightened point of view incorporates relevant facts to arrive at informed judgments. Enlightened persons also can empathize with the emotional experiences of people on all sides of an issue, genuinely understanding the hopes and fears of others with views different from their own.

It may seem remarkable for a democracy to require such enlightened understanding from its citizens, but this is no different from expecting elected representatives to listen to competing points of view and to gather and weigh important facts. The only difference is the level of technical detail representatives must gather and the sheer volume of issues they must weigh in a given

## 8 CHAPTER 1

year. At a minimum, average citizens must become sufficiently enlightened to cast meaningful ballots in elections; ideally, democratic citizens must learn much more if they are to participate effectively in setting the system's agenda and persuading policy makers.

## **How Deliberation Makes Democracy Work**

Because democracies large and small require coordination among their members, democracy cannot long survive without communication. A democracy must be inclusive, and therefore its communication infrastructure must be able to accommodate diverse voices and ways of speaking. Because a democracy must ensure adequate opportunities to participate, its public must have the capacity to hear from thousands or even millions of fellow citizens at the same time. And because a democracy must cultivate an enlightened understanding of each citizen's interests, it must have a sophisticated means of collecting, processing, and distributing information and experiences among its diverse, large membership. Some of this communication infrastructure is inevitably centralized in government agencies, but the bulk of the political speaking, broadcasting, and publishing takes place in private institutions, such as newspapers and nonprofit organizations, and in informal encounters.

The character of centralized and decentralized political communication varies tremendously from one society to the next and even within a given system. Political communication likely includes every form of speech, such as explaining, arguing, refuting, criticizing, pleading, and so on. Deliberating is a particularly important way of communicating but not because it is most common, most popular, or most powerful. Instead, deliberation is valuable because it is the standard by which one can judge the wider array of political communication practices. The more often a system deliberates, the more readily it can meet the three criteria for the democratic process.

### WHAT DELIBERATION MEANS

When people deliberate, they carefully examine a problem and arrive at a well-reasoned solution after a period of inclusive, respectful consideration of diverse points of view.<sup>13</sup> That shorthand definition packs a set of discrete considerations into a single statement, but it is helpful to break the term down into separate parts. Each of these parts takes on a more precise meaning depending on the context in which we are deliberating, and each chapter in this book introduces a distinct meaning for deliberation. Nonetheless, as in the previous statement, deliberation has a general significance that transcends a variety of political communication settings.

Deliberation begins when we create a solid information base to make sure we understand the nature of the problem at hand, such as air pollution. Second, we identify and prioritize the key values at stake in an issue. In the case of controlling pollution, for instance, we might weigh values as diverse as maintaining public health, protecting endangered species, permitting free enterprise, and preserving the pleasant view of a blue sky. Third, we identify a broad range of solutions that might address the problem, including everything from enacting a system of voluntary self-regulation by polluters to prohibiting the emission of certain industrial pollutants to exhorting the public to change its consumption habits. Fourth, we weigh the pros, cons, and trade-offs of the solutions by systematically applying our knowledge and values to each alternative. Thus, a deliberating group might eliminate one solution as too costly, despite its profound health benefits. A group will have deliberated in this respect if it faces the trade-offs among different alternatives, recognizes that no solution is perfect, and tries to grapple with conflicting values and information. If it takes place within a decision-making body, deliberation ends with the group making the best decision possible, in light of what has been learned through discussion; otherwise, the deliberation may end with each individual participant arriving at an independent judgment on the matter.<sup>14</sup>

Deliberation, however, is not just about the substance of an exchange. Deliberation also refers to the social process of communicating. Foremost among these considerations is ensuring all participants an adequate opportunity to speak. If, for instance, our hypothetical pollution debate involves two people out of twenty monopolizing the discussion, the process would be less deliberative due to this domineering behavior.<sup>15</sup>

We are all familiar with this notion of speaking rights, which is taught to most people in early childhood (“You’ll get your turn to speak, Stewie”). Less intuitive is the idea that you also have a right to comprehend what others are saying, albeit within limits. If another person explains a problem to you in terms you cannot understand, it may be that you lack the technical training necessary to comprehend the complexity of the issue. It is more likely, though, that the speaker has not made an effort (or simply failed) to communicate in a way that you can understand. After all, if Stephen Hawking can make a small fortune by explaining intricate astrophysical principles in terms a general audience can grasp, it is likely that in most political discussions a speaker can help you follow what he or she is saying.

Just as deliberative speakers give you the chance to understand them, so do you have the obligation to consider carefully the words that you hear others utter. Consideration begins with careful listening that is attentive both to the content of a speaker’s words and to the speaker’s larger perspective or experience. You can consider what someone says about pollution by processing the raw content. Thus, the statement “I grew up in a city where our schools had to

## 10 CHAPTER 1

close due to ‘smog days’” tells you that some cities have such bad pollution that the air is unsafe for children—something you may not have known. In addition, though, you can consider the lived experience of the speaker, who is telling the group that he or she has personally breathed air so foul that the speaker can probably remember its smell and taste. Considering people’s words, then, means both reasoning through their words and taking them to heart.

Finally, the deliberative process requires maintaining a degree of respect for yourself and your fellow participants, unlike the all-too-common type of exchange shown in Figure 1.1. Respect is a complex concept, but at this point it is enough to say that deliberation asks you to remember that each participant is simultaneously a private individual with unique hopes and fears and a member of the larger group or society to which you belong. Respect also means treating all others as sincere, competent participants, as long as they do not themselves reject these principles.<sup>16</sup> When other deliberators begin to recklessly disregard the principle of respect, it is hoped that you can at least be congenial or neighborly, even if they make you want to scream (or worse).

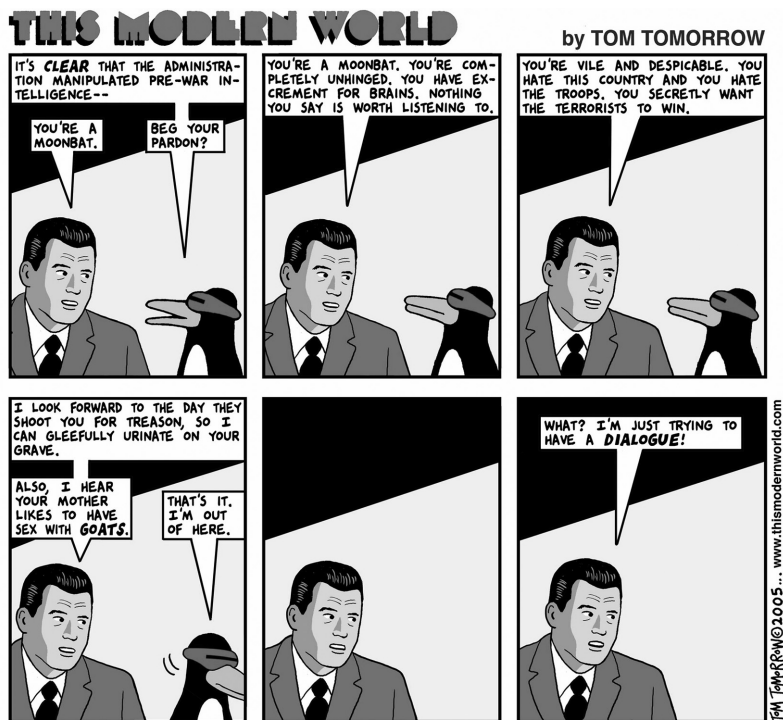


Figure 1.1 What the World Looks Like Without Deliberation



## DELIBERATION ACROSS DIFFERENT SETTINGS AND LEVELS OF ANALYSIS

One of the challenges of studying deliberation and political communication is that they happen in so many different places—from street corners to legislatures. But even more difficult is tracking them across different levels of analysis. The smallest social unit of analysis is the dyad, a pairing of two people, such as in a one-on-one political conversation. At this level, we look at the utterances of two people and examine how the people take turns speaking, how they listen and respond to each other, and so forth. The next largest unit is the group meeting, such as a deliberating jury, in which multiple people are speaking and listening. At this level, things can happen that don't occur in a dyad, such as a few group members breaking off into a side conversation or one set of members forming a coalition against others. The organizational level of analysis, which applies to legislatures, adds the extra complexity of group members not always being copresent (in the same room at the same time) and communicating with each other in a variety of settings (committee hearings, floor debates, conversations in the hall, confidential e-mails, etc.).

One can keep moving up to even higher levels of abstraction. When we talk about how the media facilitates deliberation, we must look at how independent groups of individuals (reporters, editors, bloggers, etc.) create a complex web of media that is then read, watched, or otherwise processed by a diffuse public. At the largest level of analysis, we can ask whether an entire election campaign is a deliberative process or whether a community, nation, or international community is deliberating effectively on a given issue.

The challenge of studying communication across these different political settings and levels is keeping a steady frame of reference. What the deliberative perspective offers is both a broad conceptual framework and a philosophical point of view. First, each of the facets of the deliberative process, such as the development of an information base to aid decision making, is a key concept that organizes a considerable amount of research in the field. Second, each facet of deliberation also identifies a key ethical principle in communication research, such as the idea that different persons, with their own points of view, should have equal voice. Deliberation is powerful because we can use its different components to organize research across the diversity of settings and levels of analysis in the field of political communication. For example, some media consolidation researchers worry about the exclusion of certain voices as media outlets become part of an ever-smaller number of parent companies. Research on public meetings often asks whether social or political minorities are likely to feel welcome to speak up during meetings. Despite the difference in scale and setting, both of these research areas are asking a question about equality of access—essentially, opportunities to speak.

## 12 CHAPTER 1

Using deliberation as a consistent set of concepts and ethical concerns, we examine in succession eight different political communication contexts. We begin in Chapter 2 with the simplest and most familiar form of deliberation, the political conversation or group discussion. The development of new communication technology now makes it possible to look at both face-to-face and online interactions, but in either case the number of participants is small and the interaction is relatively finite. Chapter 3 moves to a much higher level of analysis to look at the larger conversation that takes place when the public deliberates—or fails to deliberate—through the mass media. Chapter 4 moves to an even higher level of abstraction by asking whether elections are ever deliberative. This involves looking at not only media and public conversations but also strategic campaign communication through advertising, candidate debates, and other political activities.

The next two chapters return to a more focused setting for analysis. Chapter 5 examines whether those elected or appointed to government positions actually deliberate while serving as public officials. Chapter 6 looks at citizens who are temporarily in a kind of public office when they are sworn in as jurors and asked to deliberate on civil and criminal cases. Juries have been largely overlooked in political communication research, but as the most widely recognized form of public deliberation they merit careful study. Chapter 7 adds to the two previous chapters by looking at how public officials and citizens can work together in public meetings. This chapter considers a range of public meeting processes where citizens and officials meet, from conventional public hearings to citizen juries.

All of the processes in Chapters 2–7 come together in Chapters 8 and 9, which look at deliberation from the highest levels of analysis. These chapters consider what an entire political communication system might look like in terms of deliberation. Chapter 8 asks how a larger community could blend public discussions, media, and public meetings to foster a continuously deliberative process of solving its larger problems. Chapter 9 asks a similar question, but of international problems rather than local ones: How deliberative are international bodies such as the United Nations or the World Trade Organization, and how can we improve those institutions?

## **Conclusion**

Across all of the subjects covered in this book, the core questions remain the same: Are we deliberating? If not, how can we make the process more deliberative? Behind those questions is that same aspiration with which we started—a hope that we can make our society more democratic. In a modern society, even after we settle legal issues about who is included in our political process, we continue to struggle with questions about equal participation and how well the public understands the questions we must confront. In the end, it is deliberation that helps us decide which issues to place on our nation's agenda, and it is deliberation that

helps us work through those issues as we speak our minds before casting our votes. From the casual conversation to the congressional debate, we are nearer or farther from the democratic ideal depending on how well we learn to deliberate.

## Notes

1. Aristotle (1988, book 4).
2. See Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995) and Jacobs, Delli-Carpini, and Cook (2004).
3. Even then, only about half of Americans choose to express themselves by voting for their president, with far fewer choosing to vote during the more common varieties of elections.
4. See Ivins (2004).
5. These data were reported in Gastil and Crosby (2003).
6. Instances of these and similar phrases abound in the self-congratulatory texts and pronouncements of many nations. See Holt (2006).
7. Rosenberg, Ward, and Chilton (1988, pp. 70–71).
8. Aristotle (1988, book 6:2).
9. Dahl (1989).
10. Dahl (1989) has a total of five criteria, including the three listed herein plus “voting equality at the decisive stage” and “control of the agenda.” To simplify his model, I have collapsed those two criteria under effective participation by counting agenda setting and voting as critical forms of participation. Dahl defines voting equality thusly: “At the decisive stage of collective decisions, each citizen must be ensured an equal opportunity to express a choice that will be counted as equal in weight to the choice expressed by any other citizen. In determining outcomes at the decisive stage, these choices, and only these choices, must be taken into account” (p. 109). Control of the agenda means that “the demos must have the exclusive opportunity to decide how matters are to be placed on the agenda of matters that are to be decided by means of the democratic process” (p. 113).
11. See <http://www.youthrights.org/vote10.shtml>.
12. On the mechanics and impact of the initiative process in the United States, see Matsusaka (2004).
13. Burkhalter, Gastil, and Kelshaw (2002).
14. This model can be traced back to Dewey’s (1910) analysis of how people think through problems. Gouran and Hirokawa (1996) extended Dewey’s ideas to small groups.
15. Later, I stress that within a larger social context it can be important to have debates, polemics, and other “nondeliberative” modes of expression rounding out a larger systematic deliberative process. Thus, a deliberative media environment might include each of these modes, with the sum of the parts adding up to a lively, inclusive mass process of deliberation.
16. This definition of respect incorporates all of the elements of democratic relationship, which I outlined in *Democracy in Small Groups* (Gastil, 1993). At the time, I did not think of these as part of a group’s “deliberation,” but I have come to view them as being integral not only to democracy but to deliberation itself.



SOURCE: FIMA.