

Journal of Public Deliberation

Volume 6

Issue 1 *Deliberative Democracy in Higher Education*

Edited by Nancy L. Thomas and Martin Carcasson

Article 7

8-30-2010

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Recommended Citation

Harriger, Katy J. (2010) "Political Science and the Work of Democracy," *Journal of Public Deliberation*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol6/iss1/art7>

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Political Science and the Work of Democracy

Abstract

The study of democratic theory and democratic politics is at the core of the discipline of political science. Yet the very centrality of democracy to the discipline may be what makes it difficult to sort out whether political science is doing the work of democracy rather than simply the analysis of it. Political science's origins were civic minded but it has evolved into a more professionalized observer of politics than a promoter or creator of democracy. Nonetheless, in recent years there has been, as in many disciplines, a renewed interest in the civic component of our work and a challenge to the dominant paradigms of disinterested analysis and formal modeling. There are promising developments in political science that are contributing to the deliberative democracy "movement," both in research and pedagogy.

Keywords

higher education, dialogue, deliberation, deliberative democracy

Political Science and the Work of Democracy

I attended a regional political science conference about a decade ago, and looked forward to attending a panel that considered contemporary issues in American politics related to party alignment and voter attitudes about then First Lady Hillary Clinton. I was teaching American politics and Women and Politics that semester and anticipated learning something that would be of value to my courses. For the next hour and a half, I listened to four political scientists first explain their methods for arriving at their conclusions and then argue about them for the time that was left. The amount of time spent on actually discussing the substantive content of their research was distressingly miniscule compared to the time spent arguing about the proper methodological techniques needed to answer the questions being asked. At the end of the panel, the chair, with no sense of the irony of his statement, invited what was left of the audience to stay put in that room for a roundtable discussion on “Why enrollments in political science are declining.” After having sat through the preceding discussion, I was pretty sure I knew the answer to that question. Somehow, the core of substantive questions that draw students (and future faculty) to the discipline of political science had been lost; consumed by an argument about methods.

It ought to be easy to write an essay about how political science is engaged in the work of deliberative democracy. After all, the study of democratic theory and democratic politics is at the core of the discipline. Yet the very centrality of democracy to the discipline may be what makes it so difficult to sort out whether the political science is doing the *work* of democracy rather than simply the *analysis* of it.

In this essay, I will argue three things. First, political science’s origins were civic minded but that it has evolved into a more professionalized observer of democratic politics than a promoter or creator of such. Second, in recent years there has been, as in many disciplines, a renewed interest in the civic component of our work and a challenge to the dominant paradigms of disinterested analysis and formal modeling. Third, there are promising developments in political science that are contributing to the deliberative democracy “movement,” both in research and pedagogy.

The Analysis v. Work Distinction

The analysis of political life – whether it is how governments are structured, how and whether individuals participate in those governments, or more normative considerations about the best kind of government and the best kind of citizen – is what political scientists do. Consequently, if we talk about civic education or democratic work as simply the creation or transfer of knowledge about democratic politics, then the discipline is front and center in this work. This

is what many of us write about and this is what most of us teach. However, if we think about democratic work as being the transfer not just of knowledge but of democratic skills and habits – that is, if our work has an avowedly democratic *purpose* of helping to create citizens committed to and prepared to be engaged in democratic life, then it is much more difficult to see the discipline as anywhere close to the center of that work. In fact, for much of the 20th century it developed as a social science discipline increasingly distanced from, and perhaps even contemptuous of, this work.

The best case that can be made for the discipline under this more activist definition of democratic work is that we have provided citizens with basic knowledge about how democratic governments work and the evidence is clear that knowledge matters (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996) We have also chronicled and attempted to explain both the expansion of democratic governments around the world, the barriers to developing them in other parts of the world, and the decline of democratic engagement among citizens, particularly in the United States.(Almond and Verba, 1963; Verba and Nie, 1972; Schmitter, et. al., 1986; Higley and Gunther, 1992; Verba, et. al, 1995; Linz and Stepan, 1996; Putnam, 2000). Some of this research has found a sufficiently broad audience that it has contributed to the alarm about declining American participation and the renewed energy outside of academe in promoting and developing democratic citizens (See for example Barber, 1984; Putnam, 2000). On the other hand, there has been a fair amount of disciplinary hostility to the notion that political science has any normative obligation to help develop and advance democracy. Indeed, David Ricci (1984) argues that the focus on scientific approaches to understanding human behavior have actually undermined our confidence in the legitimacy of democratic values and citizenship and the moral assumptions about human dignity that underlie democratic theory. Until quite recently there has also been an undervaluing of the importance of pedagogy generally and democratic pedagogy specifically.

A Brief History: From Good Government to Distanced Observers

Some versions of the story political scientists tell about their origins begin with Plato and Aristotle, others with the German university system, others the American founding, and still others with the creation of the first graduate programs in political science and the creation of the American Political Science Association in 1903 (Gunnell, 2004; Somit and Tanenhaus, 1967). What these creation stories have in common is the melding of normative theoretical claims about the best polity with an effort to describe and explain what we know about politics based on experience. When American political science made its break as a discipline from history and philosophy at the beginning of the 20th century, it still

saw political theory as an important part of the discipline, but it added to that the attempt to more systematically analyze and explain political phenomena.

In his study of the role of democratic theory in the development of American political science, John G. Gunnell argues that “[t]he discipline has consistently defined itself as a science devoted to the understanding and propagation of democracy, and it has played a large role in valorizing the concept and equating it with the American political system (Gunnell, 2004, p. 1).” Nonetheless, the discipline has had an uneasy relationship with the notion of advancing democracy rather than simply describing it. Gunnell notes that even while “it was committed to creating a truly scientific study of politics...there has been a persistent search for a discipline that would have an end in action and that would contribute to realizing and enhancing democratic values and institutions.” This latter search however has come with “considerable ambivalence about the discipline’s actual and proper relationship to politics...” (p. 5).

The rise of the social sciences generally in the twentieth century (and the insights gained particularly from psychology about human behavior) had a profound effect on the development of the discipline. Somit and Tanenhaus (1967) chronicle the ongoing methodological struggle within the discipline between those who sought to understand political phenomena through historical comparative analysis and those who sought to add in the insights gained from the study of human behavior. Included in that struggle were political theorists who emphasized the exploration of normative questions of the good polity. At least initially, the discipline evolved with multiple intents – to develop the scientific study of politics, but also to influence public affairs and educate young citizens for life in a democracy. As Somit and Tanenhaus noted, “[f]rom its very inception, then, the profession was committed to the pursuit of truth and to the propagation of democratic values and practices.”

But this combination of goals was not without its potential problems. “What if the pursuit of truth led to the conclusion that other political forms were superior to, or at least no worse than, the American democratic system?” they ask. “How freely and how effectively could the political scientist, in one capacity, study and criticize the political order whose virtues he was obligated, in his second role, to praise, defend and maintain? So long as it was obvious to all right-thinking men that democracy was the best and highest form of government, the inherent contradiction between these two obligations could escape notice. But either of two developments, a questioning of democratic dogma or a movement toward ‘scientific’ objectivity, would disclose the latent conflict.” (Somit and Tanenhaus, 1967, pp. 47-48).

After World War II, both of these developments occurred within the profession of political science. Scientific objectivity in the study of human behavior became the dominant paradigm in political science research and

challenges to the longstanding assumptions about democratic citizenship became the dominant theme in American politics research. The “behavioral creed” included the beliefs that political science: (a) could become “a science capable of prediction and explanation”; (b) should be concerned primarily with observable phenomena; (c) should rely on data that can be quantified; (d) should involve “theory oriented and theory directed” research that allows “over-arching generalizations which will accurately describe and interrelate political phenomena”; (e) should “abjure” applied research designed to solve social problems and “melioratory programmatic ventures” like projects to develop democratic citizenship; and (f) should abandon the notion that “the truth or falsity of values” like democracy can be “established scientifically” (Somit and Tanenhouse, pp. 176-79).

Significant behavioral research in American politics during this time reinforced these notions. Studies of American voting behavior, for example, challenged the traditional notion of the “good citizen” in democratic theory, finding instead that most voters were disengaged, lacking interest in and knowledge of politics. Rather than bemoaning these developments and advocating for new civic education efforts, the authors of these studies held them up as evidence of the value of behavioral research over traditional normative democratic theory (See for example, Campbell, et al., 1960).

Challenges to the Dominant Paradigm

The behavioral paradigm of a “value free” political science did not come to dominate the discipline without resistance. The first significant challenge came in the late 1960’s with the creation of the Caucus for a New Political Science. Susanne Hoerber Rudolph contends that this movement was driven by both a desire for better representation within the discipline of women and racial minorities, and by a political agenda motivated by the civil rights and anti-war movements. “Its spokespersons,” writes Rudolf, “felt that political science had become indifferent to the great social issues of the day...[and] was increasingly fixated on technique and methodological precision (Rudolf, 2005, p. 14).” The Caucus for a New Political Science opened space for those who would challenge the relevance of behavioral research but did not fundamentally alter the path toward “a political science that produced scientific knowledge regardless of its relevance for doing something about the problems political actors confronted. Universal, transcontextual, scientifically proven, objective knowledge was favored over more local, situated, contextual knowledge that embraced the contingencies of political life (Schram and Caterino, 2006, p. 3).” At the start of the 20th century, however, another significant challenge to the direction of discipline arose reflecting earlier concerns about the relevance of the field and new concerns about the lack of *epistemological* diversity within the field, and particularly, within the American Political Science Association. The

“Perestroika” movement offers a fascinating case study in grass roots organizing and the influence of the internet but that awaits another day. Here, it is important to note that in 2000, a disgruntled individual or group of political scientists (only they know for sure), became “[f]ed up with what they saw as the narrow parochialism and methodological bias toward the quantitative, behavioral, rational choice, statistical, and formal modeling approaches in American political science.” Believing that the American Political Science Association (APSA) “systematically underrepresented critical groups,” the dissenter(s) sent an anonymous email issuing “a call for change.” “The movement spread like the proverbial wildfire,” writes Kristen Renwick Monroe. Over the next two years, significant changes occurred within the dominant organizational structures of the discipline. New journals and task forces were formed. New sections and panels at conferences were organized. New faces appeared in leadership positions within the organization (Monroe, 2005, p. 1-2.)

The long term impact of the movement on the discipline seems difficult to discern at this point, but what does seem clear are two things important to emphasize in this essay. First, it revealed that in fact the discipline of political science was substantially more diverse in approaches both to methodology and to the “values” questions than the top journals/conferences/professional organization reflected. Despite the developments “at the top” many political scientists continued to believe, to research, to practice, and to teach that politics matters in the real world to real people with real problems. Second, like the Caucus for a New Political Science before it, the movement opened space for attempts to frame research questions driven by normative concerns about the state of democracy, revalue teaching, and more particularly, to think about the role of the discipline in civic education and democratic pedagogy.

Promising Developments in Organizational Mission, Scholarship, and Pedagogy

In response to the Perestroika movement, the APSA created new initiatives that addressed the concerns about both research and pedagogy. These changes included a section on Teaching Political Science with dedicated panels at the national meeting, the development of the Journal of Political Science Education, and the establishment of a national Teaching and Learning Conference. For at least the last two years, the largest number of participants have joined the Civic Education tracks of the conference. A permanent Standing Committee on Civic Education and Engagement was also created. In 2004 the Committee issued its report “Democracy at Risk: Renewing a Political Science of Citizenship” and identified its work as “part of a renewed commitment on the part of the American Political Science Association to take civic education and civic engagement seriously, and also to encourage political scientists to work together to address important public

issues. (2004, p. i).” The APSA also has a currently active task force on Political Science in the 21st Century which as among its central foci the question “How can more of the questions pursued by political scientists in their research speak directly to the challenges of effective, democratic governance facing many nation states today?” (http://www.apsanet.org/content_60076.cfm).

There is also evidence of increased research interest in public deliberation and citizen engagement, highlighted in a review essay in the 2004 Annual Review of Political Science (Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacobs). The 2008 Annual Review has two articles that explore the necessity for and challenges of empirical study of concepts from deliberative democratic theory (Thompson; Mutz). These essays recognize that theoretical and empirical concerns about democracy are not necessarily mutually exclusive and that each enterprise might be advanced by the work of the other. Scholars are beginning to consider the empirical evidence on how deliberation is used in democratic politics and to document its impact “on the ground.” (See for example, Leighninger, 2006). Research has also focused on the use of and dissemination of experience with democratic pedagogy and teaching deliberative democracy in the classroom (See for example, Becker and Cuoto, 1996; Mann and Patrick, 2000;- Dedrick et. al, 2008). For example, a four year experiment at Wake Forest University with a group of students (The Democracy Fellows) demonstrated that learning and practicing deliberation can positively impact students’ conceptions of democratic citizenship and participation (Harriger and McMillan, 2007).

A Call to Action

A brief review of the history and evolution of the discipline of political science reminds us of several things that are important to political scientists motivated to engage in the work of deliberative democracy in higher education. The first is that a commitment to democracy was at the root of the founding of our discipline and while it has struggled mightily to compete with the forces pushing for a “value free science” of politics that abandoned concern for public issues and civic education, it has never been completely lost. Further, commitment to democratic values has led to periodic “democratic uprisings” within the discipline itself, opening space for those who continue to enter the field motivated by these values. Finally, it is important to recognize that we are in one such time where there is space, need, and opportunity to re-engage with the democratic project of political science. One need not abandon the behavioral approaches to asking questions to contribute to this work, since we need to know what works and what doesn’t in developing citizens with democratic hearts and minds and habits. We also need to get beyond the American example and consider the way deliberative community politics is utilized around the globe. But that work is most likely to be useful to the work of democracy if the discipline models deliberative democratic

practice itself, through valuing inclusiveness, diversity, and multiple ways of knowing.

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