

7-1-2014

Why I Study Public Deliberation

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Recommended Citation

Gastil, John (2014) "Why I Study Public Deliberation," *Journal of Public Deliberation*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol10/iss1/art5>

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Abstract

The author argues that scholars can best advance public dialogue and deliberation by conducting systematic research on practical innovations that have the potential to improve political discourse. The author explains and justifies this position through a personal narrative that recounts formative experiences with debate, group dialogue, political campaigns, academic research, and electoral reform.

Keywords

activism, dialogue, deliberation, ideological conflict, political reform, praxis, research

When I considered the framing questions for this issue's symposium, I found myself reflecting on them in light of my experiences as a scholar and, before that, a student. My story passes through many of the threads of our field: radical politics, conflict mediation, social support, political theory, and the need to work within larger institutions. The patient reader of this essay will soon enough find direct statements about the condition and future of our field, but first, I beg indulgence. I've arrived at my answers over the course of three decades, and a series of reminiscences explain my present views.

Swarthmore College encourages free-thinking students, and in that spirit, I teamed up with some of my most creative senior classmates in 1989 to create a seminar on "personal ideologies." As passionate progressives, we hoped to sharpen our political commitments at the peak of the Reagan-Bush dynasty, which had just won a decisive victory over one of our college's most distinguished alums. Our seminar was no less disastrous than the Dukakis campaign. Infighting and idleness made us rival the worst Leninist splinter cell. The semester ended without memorable insights. We barely salvaged our friendships in time for graduation.

With my political compass broken, another path opened. A quixotic Swarthmore administrator was convening "human relations trainings," to which my girlfriend dragged me. These plunged students into quasi-therapeutic dialogues about family histories, future plans, and our budding neuroses. Looking back, I cringe to think how these unscripted psychodramas might have steered any one of us into a ditch. But whatever their hazards, they showcased the raw power of dialogue.

Next came my first glimpse of conflict mediation, a concept introduced by that same administrator, whose degree came from a discipline that didn't exist at my college, nor almost any of the universities I visited on the parliamentary debate circuit. Determined to become a mediator myself—to find the middle path between so many ideological opposites—I spent the next five years earning a Ph.D. in communication.

Hundreds of new articles now appear on deliberative democracy each year, but at the time I began my doctoral research, fewer than a dozen had been published. The translated work of German social theorist Jürgen Habermas had gained some notice, but I drew more proximate inspiration from political scientists Jane Mansbridge, Benjamin Barber, and James Fishkin. Each writer diagnosed the status quo as deficient in its deliberation. Raised with the Quaker consensus process, I set about defining democratic deliberation first in small groups, then at increasingly large social scales.

After a summer as a Kettering Foundation intern, I saw more clearly that what I sought was not simply a better model of dialogue and deliberation, but a superior method of *praxis*. That concept may have been the lone kernel of wisdom

retained from my fraught senior seminar: The highest form of scholarship moves reflexively between theoretical advances and practical achievements. As much as I enjoyed refining political theory and empirical models, my greatest pleasure came from testing those ideas outside the lab. Thus, my dissertation studied the National Issues Forums, a discussion format that proved as effective at clarifying points of disagreement as revealing common ground.

After graduate school, instead of seeking a tenure-track appointment I worked for three years at a public policy institute and managed campaigns for local, state, and federal office. Amidst New Mexico's fraught cultural politics, I got more sustained experience with public opinion, political rhetoric, and the power of face-to-face deliberation on everything from public transportation to nuclear power.

Serendipity led me to a lunch meeting with Ned Crosby, the civic reformer and philanthropist who invented the Citizens' Juries in the 1970s. Years of practical collaborations with Crosby and his wife Pat Benn, along with direct observation of Fishkin's 1996 National Issues Convention, led me to write a book that articulated the power of random-sample deliberation as a means of informing the wider electorate.

A decade later, the ideas I explored in *By Popular Demand* became a reality when Crosby and a team of activists persuaded the Oregon legislature to create the Citizens' Initiative Review. The only state-sponsored process of its kind, the Review brings together representative samples of Oregon voters to deliberate for five days on a statewide initiative, then write one-page analyses that appear in the official *Voters' Pamphlet*.

As Crosby and others worked to get the Reviews established in state law, I saw an opportunity to step back to a more critical vantage point better suited to serving as a neutral investigator. With funding from the National Science Foundation (NSF), I've studied these biennial Reviews since 2010. I've witnessed their ability to generate high-quality deliberation that influences the wider electorate.

This program of research also provided a career path for one of my doctoral students, Katie Knobloch, who now serves as a Colorado State University assistant professor and a co-Principal Investigator on a 2014 NSF grant. With more than two dozen research collaborators working on articles about the Citizens' Initiative Review, Knobloch and I have prioritized the production of timely reports to the Oregon state government, which has relied on our independent assessments.

As other western states seek to emulate the Citizens' Initiative Review, I have chosen to make it the focus of my research and writing for the rest of this decade. From that professional decision, and the incremental ones that preceded

it, one can infer my answers to the central questions posed in this issue about our field's scope, purpose, and future.

I believe that our field should maintain a broad scope that encompasses the full range of communicative practices that bring insight, enlightenment, and clear-headed judgment to publics, large and small. The field's core consists of research into the most advanced forms of public dialogue and deliberation, some of which likely have the potential to transform the way we resolve controversies and make political choices.

Studying the more anti-deliberative practices in society also has a place in the field, but advances in the design and execution of dialogue and deliberation merit our closest attention. Professional facilitators and experienced civic actors refine their practices principally based on their moral intuitions, educated instincts, and artistry, rather than on refined philosophical concepts or social scientific theory. Yet the success of dialogic and deliberative designs depends on systematic academic inquiry into these subjects via field research, experimentation, and theoretical advances. Scholars in our field must produce both rigorous peer-reviewed research and timely field reports that help reformers and public officials refine their methods of public engagement.

Attention to the most promising democratic innovations will yield the highest return on intellectual investments. It is tempting to throw one's weight into the most inflamed ideological battles of the moment, but creating a more deliberative democracy will do the most to speed the discovery and implementation of remedies to social disparities, persistent intolerance, and infringements on basic human rights. Though my personal politics remain as impassioned as ever, I maintain a professional impartiality toward the judgments rendered by robust public deliberation. I judge the progress of my community and my nation on the quality of its talk and its procedural justice more than by my personal assessment of the resulting policies.

Making democracy more deliberative is no simple task. Progress requires a more widely shared vocabulary for both theory and measurement. Establishing the *Journal of Public Deliberation* was an important step in that direction, and the development of the journal has paralleled the maturation of this field.

The best prospect for further advance lies in the proposed creation of the Public Dialogue and Deliberation division of the National Communication Association. No other academic field has a sufficiently broad scope to encompass such a division. Communication scholars study both micro-level social dynamics and macro-level media institutions and the rhetoric they propagate. They hail from both humanistic and social scientific traditions. Communication also operates as an inherently multi-disciplinary discipline, for both intellectual and historical reasons. Thus, a communication division can best integrate the advances

in deliberation and dialogue that occur in political science, sociology, education, environmental science, and the numerous other disciplines.

Even a strong academic home, however, will need strong links to associations that keep practitioners and academics in constant conversation, as has been done by the Kettering Foundation, the Deliberative Dialogue Consortium, and the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation. Working in and with such entities, our field can become a model for the engaged scholar in this century. We can produce ideas and insights that help cities, states, and nations develop richer public dialogue and decisive deliberation. In the end, there is nothing more satisfying than seeing one's work bear fruit in real public practices and institutions that improve the lives of those around us.

Recommended Readings

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Author Information

John Gastil is a professor of Communication Arts & Sciences and Political Science at the Pennsylvania State University, where he directs the McCourtney Institute for Democracy. Most recently, he is co-author of *The Jury and Democracy* (2010) and co-editor of *The Australian Citizens' Parliament and the Future of Deliberative Democracy* (2013) and *Democracy in Motion: Evaluating the Practice and Impact of Deliberative Civic Engagement* (2012). He received his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.