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Abstract

Review of *Democracy in Motion: Evaluating the Practice and Impact of Deliberative Civic Engagement* edited by Tina Nabatchi, John Gastil, G. Michael Weiksner, and Matt Leighninger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

After several decades of growth in deliberative civic engagement theory and practice, the benefits and capacity of a democratic citizenry to use deliberative techniques and engage in robust democratic deliberation remains heavily contested by academic professionals, practitioners, and others. *Democracy in Motion: Evaluating the Practice and Impact of Deliberative Civic Engagement* (2012) edited by Tina Nabatchi, John Gastil, G. Michael Weiksner, and Matt Leighninger, is a serious attempt by and for practitioners and researchers, together, to engage in this conversation. The many authors lay out the broad field of deliberative civic engagement, respond to salient critiques, and contribute to our understanding of what future research and practice will and should look like.

Despite a plethora of well-defined terms such as public dialogue, public deliberation and deliberative democracy, each which delineate “respectful and rigorous communication about public problems” (8), the authors choose the term “deliberative civic engagement” to mean “processes that enable citizens, civic leaders, and government officials to come together in public spaces where they can engage in constructive, informed, and decisive dialogue about important public issues” (7). The book is designed to work through several “big questions” about the intrinsic and instrumental values of deliberative civic engagement. In part one, Overview, the authors define their terms and ask, what organizations are doing deliberative civic engagement? In part two, Process and Design, the authors ask, what process and design questions are central to deliberative civic engagement? Who participates? And, how do people talk in deliberative events? In part three, Outcomes and Evaluation, the authors interrogate recent research, and ask, how do we evaluate impacts and outcomes? And, does deliberation make better citizens? Finally, in part four, Conclusion, the authors ask, how do we respond to critics of deliberation?

The book is able to address four significant challenges to research and practice facing deliberative civic engagement because it draws on a wide range of authors. Each of these challenges is outlined in chapter one, “An Introduction to Deliberative Civic Engagement” by Tina Nabatchi. First, research on deliberation and its effects come from a wide range of sources, all with dissimilar methods for researching and analyzing. Second, academic professionals and practitioners seldom work together, and often talk past each other in explaining the outcomes and effects of deliberative participation. Third, the process of deliberation varies so widely that measuring its effects to generate any generalizable conclusions is difficult; this is especially true in deliberation’s connection to the policy process. Lastly, deliberative civic engagement and scholarship is occurring all over the world, making it extremely difficult to synthesize and track literature in diverse contexts. Other authors throughout book address these deficits in research.

In chapter two, “Mapping Deliberative Civic Engagement: Pictures from a (R)evolution,” Matt Leighninger maps the field’s key organizational infrastructure and important leaders. He argues that deliberative democrats are typically leaders and managers of public agencies, practitioners specific to some public engagement field, or academic professionals. While each is working from a variety of motivations, the desire by officials to avoid angry meetings, or achieve some particular policy goal is especially salient. In chapter three, “The Participation and Recruitment Challenge,” by David Michael Ryfe and Brittany Stalsburg, the authors argue that very little is known about who participates

in deliberative civic engagement and why. To remedy the lack of knowledge about these questions, the authors suggest greater alignment between deliberative forums and random sampling surveys, such as standardized pre-/post-forum survey questions across deliberative events.

In chapter four, “How People Communication during Deliberative Events,” Laura W. Black reviews her ongoing research describing key discursive practices occurring during deliberative forums. She finds that a “positive assessment of the quality of communication that occurs in public events designed to promote citizen deliberation” should help ameliorate concerns about public participation from decision makers looking to achieve more sound public decisions or find alternatives to the angry public meeting (76). This chapter leads into chapter five, “Deliberation in Multicultural Societies: Addressing Inequality, Exclusion, and Marginalization,” by Alice Siu and Dragan Stanisevski where the authors provide insight into strategies with the greatest potential to ameliorate these problems. They discuss the strategic use of information, mandatory inclusion practices, and other processes that have potential. This chapter leads into chapter six, “Online Deliberation Design: Choices, Criteria, Evidence” by Todd Davies and Reid Chandler. The authors argue that more work needs to be done to align the tools of online deliberation with the broader goals of engagement.

Academic professionals and others have lamented the decline of American civic life and community capacity to solve problems collectively (see Putnam 1995; Mathews 1994). Part three on Outcomes and Evaluation include four chapters, which help us conceptualize how deliberative civic engagement is responding to these challenges. The first two chapters focus on the skills and capacities deliberative civic engagement is, and is not, building in citizens and communities. For example, finding ways to measure the impact of deliberation on participants continues to be an area of intense focus by academic professionals. Despite inconsistencies in how practitioners have designed and collected information and in how academic professionals have measured impacts, in chapter seven, “Does Deliberation Make Better Citizens?” Heather Pincock reports on a wide variety of capacities that are strengthened by deliberation, including increased political interest and political participation, greater expressed cosmopolitan views, and a greater ability to understand and articulate the interests of others. This leads into chapter eight, “Deliberation’s Contribution to Community Capacity Building” by Bo Kinney. Kinney offers a sociological framework for understanding how deliberation builds community capacity around four key characteristics: (1) sense of community; (2) commitment; (3) ability to solve problems; and (4) access to resources.

While specific deliberative civic engagement processes have been able to demonstrate isolated effects on policy making, chapter nine, “Assessing the Policy Impacts of Deliberative Civic Engagement: Comparing Engagement in the Healthy Policy Processes of Canada” by Gregory Barrett, Miriam Wyman, and Vera Schattan P. Coelho, argues that research is unclear on if policy-making in general is influenced by deliberative civic engagement. The authors suggest that deliberation rarely does influence policy making. They argue that government policies can encourage people to mobilize by threatening personal interests, and also by creating programs that affirm participation by providing

resources and places for citizens to meet. Lastly, civic organizations provide avenues for citizens to participate by providing infrastructure for sustained relationship building. This leads into chapter ten, “Evaluating Deliberative Public Events and Projects,” by John Gastil, Katie Knobloch, and Meghan Kelly. The authors lay out an in-depth agenda for research and practice, with sensitivity toward practitioners’ budgets and time; in doing so they help prioritize how evaluation should be improved. The authors tend to the most salient aspects of deliberative civic engagement, including (1) design and implementation, (2) quality of democratic talk and decision making, (3) ability to spark effective action and make influential recommendations, and (4) the long term effects on transforming citizens and public officials.

Chapter eleven, “Listening and Responding to Criticisms of Deliberative Civic Engagement,” by Loren Collingwood and Justin Reedy, responds to the most outstanding theoretical and practical criticisms of deliberative civic engagement. For example, a longstanding theoretical criticism of deliberation is that it privileges “reasoned, fact-based argumentation” to the advantage of some groups over others (234). To this point, the authors respond that practitioners have worked hard to respond to this criticism, and indeed, deliberative civic engagement has been shown to address power imbalances, not just replicate them. One of the practical criticisms continues to be that deliberative civic engagement is disconnected from the policy process. Indeed, there is a dearth of research examining the connection of deliberative civic engagement to the policy process, this is even evidenced in chapter nine, however, policy-specific deliberative events have been shown to rectify this, and, as the authors point out, there are many positive stories around the world: the Oregon Citizens’ Initiative Review, Australia’s 2009 Citizens’ Parliament, and Participatory Budgeting throughout the world.

In the conclusion authored by the editors, “Advancing the Theory and Practice of Deliberative Civic Engagement,” the main findings of *Democracy in Motion*, are outlined: first, deliberative civic engagement is expanding around the world. Second, practitioners have shown they can make deliberation more representative, although participants continue to be of higher social economic status. Third, high quality deliberative civic engagement can mitigate the potential downsides of power inequalities and other social problems. Fourth, deliberative civic engagement needs to be more formally evaluated. Fifth, online deliberation is particularly effective when coupled with face-to-face communication or when done synchronously. Sixth, deliberative civic engagement “can have educative effects for individual participants” (261). Seventh, deliberation is reviving community capacity to come together and solve public problems. Eighth, in some instances, deliberative civic engagement is having policy impacts.

The diversity represented by the authors’ disciplines and professional organizations makes this book notable. For academia, many of the authors are young, and part of an upcoming generation of scholars, and the book is an impressive collaboration among tenured professors, young assistant professors, and PhD and masters levels students. This highlights the increasingly prominent nature of research on deliberation and related fields, a point substantiated by John Gastil (2013). One of the clear arguments in about every chapter is that deliberation lacks coordinated, systematic, empirical (or even

normative) research. More could be done, indeed. But most organizations are at capacity simply trying to carry out high quality engagement opportunities, let alone, to research and report on their efforts. Reconciling this tension is a task with no easy answer. This volume helps to provide an introduction but also grounding in the theory and practice necessary for deliberative civic engagement to occur and hopefully flourish.

Additional References

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