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Reason-Giving In Deliberative Forums

Abstract

One aspect of deliberation is giving reasons to support a position. In this article, I explore how citizens engage in this activity by developing a framework that breaks down reason-giving into component parts, applying it to a set of eight National Issues Forums. Deliberators typically provided evidence (usually in the form of factual statements) to support their conclusions, but frequently did not tie them together with an infrastructure of logical and causal connections. Deliberators engaged in reason-giving by presenting evidence but did not explicate the underlying logic of their positions. This suggests that deliberative research should focus greater attention on understanding the conditions that encourage and facilitate the effective use of evidence to support conclusions, as well as how patterns of reason-giving influence deliberative quality.

Keywords

reason-giving, National Issues Forums

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Introduction

When citizens deliberate, how do they construct arguments? The empirical research on deliberation has focused on either inputs or outputs of the process, examining whether those who deliberate are representative of the public at large (Cook et al., 2007; Goidel et al., 2008) or whether there are measurable results from deliberation such as changes in opinion (Barabas, 2004; Fishkin, 2009; Gastil, Black & Moscovitz, 2008; Gastil & Dillard, 1999; Sulkin & Simon, 2001). There has been less research into how citizens actually deliberate—what they say to each other and how they make political arguments (Black, 2012). There is some psychological research addressing this issue, although it tends to focus on internal reasoning processes rather than interaction among people engaged in conversation (Delli Carpini, Cook & Jacobs, 2004; Gaertner et al., 1999; Mendelberg & Karpowitz, 2007; Nemeth, 1986; Ryfe, 2005; Schneiderhan & Khan, 2008). There are a few articles examining the content of online posts (Black, 2013; Cappella, Price & Nir, 2002; Jenkins, Nikolaev, & Porpora, 2012; Polletta & Lee, 2006), as well as some research examining how citizen interact face-to-face (Button & Mattson, 1999; Karpowitz & Mansbridge, 2005; Karpowitz, Mendelberg, & Shaker, 2012; Mansbridge, 1980; Steffensmeier & Schenk-Hamlin, 2008; Steiner et al., 2004). Despite these studies, our knowledge of conversational dynamics during deliberation is limited. As Ryfe (2005, p. 54) has noted, “researchers have been less interested in deliberation itself than in measuring its effects.”

The relative scarcity of research on how citizens deliberate is a significant gap in the literature, as analyses of conversational dynamics is essential for developing causal theories regarding why certain deliberative outcomes are present (or not present). For example, proponents argue that deliberation will enhance citizens’ political knowledge, as people engaged in policy discussions will learn facts and political concepts. But whether they learn anything, and what they learn, is dependent on how citizens discuss issues; some conversations are void of any useful information and others that are quite informative. Exploring how citizens deliberate is also necessary for addressing the arguments raised by critics of deliberation who argue that average citizens do not have the skills to engage in reasoned deliberation (Posner, 2003) or that citizens are capable of deliberation but are unwilling to do so (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). Assessing the merits of these critiques requires an understanding of how citizens make reasoned arguments and engage in an exchange of ideas with others.

In an effort to add to our knowledge of how citizens deliberate, I examine one specific conversational dynamic: how citizens give reasons to support their positions. Using a framework that breaks down deliberator comments into components, I analyze eight National Issues Forums, which are self-selected, two-hour forums comprising of average citizens discussing public policy issues. I find that participants engaged in reason-giving by proffering evidence (usually in the form of factual statements) to support their conclusions. On the other hand, their arguments frequently lacked warrants, which are statements that explain how evidence leads to conclusions, providing a logical and causal infrastructure to an argument. The paucity of warrants led to arguments with unsupported causal connections, controversial premises that were not defended, and missing logic behind claims. Thus, deliberators gave reasons to support their arguments but did not explicate the underlying logic. Reason-giving is just one aspect of deliberation and I make no effort to pass judgment on "deliberative quality" in some broader sense, but these findings enhance our understanding of how citizens deliberate and suggest fruitful lines of inquiry for future research.

Conceptualizing Reason-Giving

Most deliberative democrats identify "reason-giving" as a core activity in deliberation (Bohman, 1996; Cohen, 1998; Jacobs, Cook, & Delli Carpini, 2009; Knops, 2006; Thompson, 2008; see Yack, 2006, p. 427 for a critique). At its most abstract level, reason-giving means that speakers provide some explanation or justification for why they hold a particular opinion with statements that are falsifiable (Habermas, 1984). As Cohen (1998, p. 194) defines it, "A reason is a consideration that counts in favor of something."

Much of the empirical research on reason-giving has focused on developing a more concrete conceptualization that can be used to distinguish it from other forms of discourse and serve as a foundation to operationalize the concept for empirical research. [1] The most common approach has been to define the boundaries of an acceptable reason and the relative merits of different types of reasons (e.g. Chambers, 2009; Cohen, 1997). For example, Gutmann & Thompson (1996, p. 2) demarcate reason-giving through the use of the concept of reciprocity, defined as when citizens "seek fair terms of social cooperation for their own sake; they try to find mutually acceptable ways of resolving moral disagreements." Habermas (1984) and other early deliberative theorists have been criticized for holding up "rational" reasoning as paradigmatic of deliberation, meaning that arguments have a coherent logic, be based on evidence, and be falsifiable. Some deliberation scholars argue that this is both unrealistic and undesirable. Other forms of reasoning (such as storytelling) can furnish compelling reasons to support an argument, and emotional appeals have a legitimate role to play in deliberation (Ryfe, 2006; Sanders, 1997; Young, 2000).

Efforts to articulate a hierarchy of reasoning, where certain types of reasons are seen as better, are problematic. Distinguishing between "good" and "bad" reasons requires a theoretical framework that defines different types of reasons in mutually exclusive terms and then offers normative criteria for why some are better than others. These tasks are probably not achievable; passing judgment on the merits of an argument is necessarily idiosyncratic because the context in which an argument is made influences the perception of its substance. Even if researchers could identify "good" reasons, such a task is unnecessary. The underlying (often implicit) goal of developing criteria for legitimate arguments is to create a basis on which deliberators can reach a consensus or common ground. Yet the goal of deliberation is not necessarily to reach agreement and there could be many positive effects of deliberation without it, such as increased tolerance, knowledge about the subject, and enhanced political efficacy. Reaching these goals does not require agreement over what is a legitimate or acceptable argument. Further, increased tolerance of opposing viewpoints involves deliberators changing their views of what is a legitimate argument as a result of deliberation (to be more tolerant suggests that one has changed one's view of the legitimacy, if not the accuracy, of opposing viewpoints). Thus, successful deliberation does not require concurrence over what constitutes a legitimate or acceptable argument if the goal of reaching agreement is deemphasized.

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[1] See Mutz (2008) and Thompson (2008) for reviews of efforts to empirically test concepts found in deliberative theory.

The task for researchers should not be developing criteria for what constitutes a legitimate argument and then assessing whether such arguments are made during deliberation. Rather, our focus should be on distinguishing reason-giving from other discursive forms by operationalizing its elements. I start with a basic premise that reason-giving is fundamentally about making arguments that are mutually understandable to others who do not share the speaker's opinions and worldviews. The point of reason-giving is to explain to others why you hold a particular position, which requires reasoning to be explicit. This is especially important if listeners do not share the speaker's background, worldviews, or are otherwise different. When talking with those who are similar to us, we can get away with implying large parts of our argument because others will be able to "fill in the blanks." However, bridging across differences is facilitated by explicit reason-giving, as implicit information may not be shared.

There are three essential components to the act of reason-giving that, when explicated, would make an argument comprehensible to others: a speaker needs to offer a conclusion[2] (something that they are arguing), evidence to support the conclusions, and an explanation for how the evidence leads to the conclusion. In the context of a discussion over a policy problem, conclusions can take two basic forms: problem definitions that describe what needs to be addressed and proposals outlining what should be done to address it. Deliberators may avoid offering conclusions by presenting questions about an issue without articulating answers to them. They can also evade position-taking by resorting to vague generalities, making statements about how an issue is "difficult," presents "tough choices," or otherwise commenting on the nature of the issue rather than detailing a proposal to address it. A third avoidance option is to state random facts or information without tying that evidence to a specific conclusion.

Conclusions could also be present without reasons; speakers could state what they believe without explaining why they hold such positions. Here, political discussions take the form of preference expression: individuals state they prefer a particular policy in the same way they would express a preference for vanilla ice cream. The act of reason-giving requires conclusions to be supported by some type of evidence, broadly understood as empirical statements about the world. Evidence does not necessarily need to be "facts" acceptable as proof in a scientific context. Deliberators could present a story as evidence, defined here as a narrative that includes a sequence of events with a beginning, middle and end and pivots around an issue or problem (see Polletta & Lee, 2006; Ryfe, 2006). They could also rely on personal experience as evidence. For example, the statement "I run over potholes every day going to work" could be used as evidence to support a conclusion regarding the need for additional funding for road improvements. The appropriateness of different types of evidence is dependent on the context, as each can be compelling support for a conclusion in certain situations. However, there does need to be some type of evidence offered in support of a conclusion as part of reason-giving; a deliberator could not make an argument in favor of additional funding for road improvements without some type of evidence related to the condition of roads. Even reasons that revolve around emotional appeals need evidentiary support. For example, the statement "save the whales because they are helpless and innocent creatures" includes factual statements (whales are helpless and innocent) that meet our criteria for evidence. However, the statement "save the whales" is a conclusion without evidence, and by itself cannot constitute reason-giving.

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[2] The terms "claim" and "assertion" can be used as synonyms.

A critical part of reason-giving is tying evidence to conclusions. It is not sufficient to simply state a conclusion and offer a piece of evidence; the evidence needs to be used in a way that supports the conclusion. This bridge between evidence and conclusions is what Toulmin (2003, p. 91) calls a warrant, statements that authorize the steps that an argument commits us to.[3] Toulmin conceptualizes warrants as "rules," but in the context of political discussions they are better thought of as explanations of how one gets from a piece of evidence to a conclusion.[4] This connection is essential for reason-giving because warrants are frequently the key point of dispute in political disagreements, and their explication is often the central axis on which deliberation will pivot. Agreement on evidence will not necessarily lead to agreement on either proposals or problem definitions; how the evidence is understood, interpreted and used may lead to divergent conclusions. Deliberators may agree, for example, that greenhouse gases are warming the earth, but that evidence can be used in different causal chains leading to divergent conclusions regarding energy policy.

In everyday conversation warrants are often implied rather than explicitly stated. This is appropriate when the participants share common background knowledge and worldviews that lead them to make the necessary inferences. However, when group discussion participants have divergent backgrounds and opinions, warrants need to be explicitly stated because they add context and logic to arguments, rendering them comprehensible to others. For example, take the statement "transportation is a major source of greenhouse gases, therefore the government should promote cleaner-burning vehicles." This statement includes evidence (the fact that that transportation is a major source of greenhouse gases) and a conclusion in the form of a policy proposal. A warrant, however, is implied rather than explicitly stated: a government program to promote cleaner burning cars will lead to a reduction in greenhouse gases.[5] This is an important piece of the argument because one could agree that transportation is a major source of greenhouse gases without supporting the conclusion that government should promote cleaner-burning vehicles (for example, because one prefers market solutions). In a deliberative context such warrants should be stated explicitly, not implied. Of course, if all deliberators think similarly on this issue, then explicit warrants are unnecessary since everyone will assume them. But if everyone agrees at the outset there is little purpose to discussing the issue to begin with. In a scenario where deliberators hold divergent perspectives on an issue, explicitly stating warrants will enhance deliberation by allowing others to see the logic of the argument and potential critiques.

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[3] Toulmin (2003) identifies three other elements of arguments: backing, qualifiers and rebuttals. In the context of political arguments, however, these elements are difficult to distinguish from warrants, conclusions, and evidence, and thus for the empirical analysis of real-life arguments reducing the elements of arguments to the three core ones (conclusions, data and warrants) is necessary.

[4] Steiner et al. (2004) use the term "linkage" to refer to this dynamic. More generally, the "level of justification" element in their Discourse Quality Index captures similar patterns using slightly different terminology.

There is no agreed-upon definition or operationalization of warrants in the literature (cf. Freeman, 2005; Keith & Beard, 2008; Pinto, 2011). This is partly a function of warrants being field or discipline specific (Toulmin, 2003); warrants are not universal but rather context-specific. Operationalizing the concept of a warrant requires articulating the types of warrants that are used in policy-relevant arguments. I delineate four types of warrants that are likely to be found in arguments pertaining to immigration, energy policy, or health care (the topics of the forums included in this study). First are conditional warrants that take the form of if-then statements that bridge between evidence and conclusions by explaining how implementation of a proposal will lead to some desired outcome. The warrant above regarding greenhouse gas emissions is an example: if government implemented a policy promoting cleaner-burning vehicles, then it will reduce the amount of greenhouse gases. The conclusion can be either the "if" part of the statement (if we implement proposal x, then we will achieve desired outcome y) or the "then" part (if undesirable condition z exists, then we should implement proposal x). For problem definitions, they explain why a given condition should be understood as a problem. Thus, conditional warrants are by definition attached to a conclusion. The other half of a conditional warrant could either be a piece of evidence, a prediction, or a hypothetical.

A second type of warrant are analogies. Here, deliberators illustrate their logic by comparing the situation to another one that is presumably better understood or easier to grasp (for example, supporting a proposal to balance the federal budget by comparing it to the process of how individuals balance their household budgets). Analogies themselves often need further warrants to explain why the two items being compared are similar, although such explanations are rarely found in real conversations. Further, ideally deliberators would explicate the full logic of an argument first (conclusions, evidence and warrants) and then use analogies to use further support their logic; by themselves analogies usually present as weak reasoning. In practice, analogies are often used as a substitute for other types of warrants or appear without evidence or conclusions.

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[5] There are other warrants implied in this statement as well, such as cleaner burning vehicles are the most efficient means of reducing greenhouse gas emissions from transportation.

Warrants can also take the form of value statements, identifying beliefs or values that should guide action. They are warrants because the belief offers a justification for supporting a proposal or considering something a problem. They provide the infrastructure to use evidence to support a conclusion (e.g., because it is morally wrong for innocent creatures to suffer, we should save the whales). Value statement warrants can be problematic because each warrant in itself is a conclusion, and one could do an infinite regress of providing warrants for those warrants and so on (e.g., providing another warrant to explain why it is morally wrong for innocent creatures to suffer). This is an inherent characteristic of political argumentation, which never reaches a Cartesian starting point. But the fact that value statement warrants frequently need further justification does not limit their utility; even though deliberators never get "to the bottom" of an argument, the further down the path one travels the more participants will understand the logic and contours of the dispute.

Finally, the identification of a core political argument can serve as a warrant. These are statements about what we should do that cut across specific policy issues, meta-proposals that can apply to a wide range of policy problems. A statement such as "markets are more effective at solving problems than government programs" is an example. They serve similar functions as value statement warrants but differ in that they articulate social, economic or political dynamics rather than values. Like value statement warrants, they frequently need further warrants to explain how they apply to the specific policy under discussion, which in practice is typically lacking.

In sum, reason-giving can be understood as the process through which a speaker offers a conclusion supported by evidence and warrants. Stating a conclusion, providing evidence to support conclusions, and then explaining how the evidence supports the conclusion are the core activities of reason-giving. This conceptualization allows us to distinguish reason-giving from other forms of discourse and provides a framework to empirically examine how citizens engage in reason-giving during policy discussions.

Data and Methods

This study analyzes eight forums conducted between 2004-7, listed on table 1. All are National Issues Forums (NIF), which are sponsored by a network of civic organizations that promote deliberative democracy. Forums are loosely structured around issues books on a policy problem that are produced by the Kettering Foundation.[6] Each forum had between 13 and 24 participants and lasted approximately 1 ½ to 2 hours. During the forums, the moderator led the discussion through the three options listed in the issue book, but the conversation was not rigidly structured and deliberators were free to bring up any relevant points. NIF encourages deliberators to weigh choices based on their values and deemphasizes technical knowledge (although the issue books do provide some facts and figures). Deliberators are not asked to agree to a recommendation or reach a consensus on a specific path forward; rather the ultimate goal is finding common ground for public action on the issue (Kettering Foundation, 2003). Deliberation is presented as a means to think through how the public wants to address an issue. This approach, combined with the fact that issues are framed in very broad terms, leads to conversations that are unstructured and free-flowing.

Table 1: Overview of Forums

Location	**Issue**	**# of participants***	**Length**
Cedar Rapids, Iowa	Immigration	16	2:01
El Paso, Texas	Energy	21	1:51
Georgetown, Delaware	Immigration	19	1:27
Hempstead, New York	Energy	18	1:54
Kent, Ohio	Energy	24	2:00
Mesa, Arizona	Immigration	13	1:44
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania	Health Care	15	1:52
Rindge, New Hampshire	Immigration	14	1:52
	Totals	**140**	**14:41**

*Excludes moderators

Deliberators were self-selected, although forum organizers made efforts to promote diversity.[7] Systematic demographic data was not available, but during many of the forums deliberators introduced themselves (usually providing their occupation) and other demographic information was often revealed throughout the forum. There was minimal gender bias (participants were 53% male) but there appeared to be an SES bias, consistent with other research on self-selected forums

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[6] The Kettering Foundation produced a report on the forums using each of the issue books analyzed in this paper. See Paul Werth Associations, 2004; John Doble Research Associates, 2005; Public Agenda, 2008.

[7] The forums were taped as part of the *A Public Voice* program that the Kettering Foundation produced to air on PBS (Milton B. Hoffman Productions, 2004; 2006; 2007). Because the program strives to represent how “average Americans” deliberate over policy issues, organizers try their best to attract a diverse set of deliberators by recruiting through existing networks.

(Goidel et al., 2008; Jacobs, Cook, & Delli Carpini, 2009; Ryfe, & Stalsburg, 2012). Most notable was an education bias; because many of the forums were held at university campuses, there was an over-representation of university students, staff, and faculty. There was, however, a good age mix, with participants ranging from teenagers to retirees, and a wide range of political ideologies represented. Some forum organizers invited elected officials (two members of congress, a mayor, and a few town councilors) to the forums, but they were not given any "special treatment" or deference either by the moderator or the other deliberators, and in none of the forums did they dominate the discussion or act in a capacity other than as a deliberator (i.e. they did not give speeches or assume an "expert" role). In general, each forum had a diverse mix of participants, notwithstanding the SES bias.

I take a mixed-method approach to examining how deliberators give reasons to support their arguments. First I provide a qualitative analysis focusing on how evidence is used to support conclusions and whether warrants are employed to connect them. I then code the interviews, quantifying the prevalence of conclusions, evidence, and warrants. These two analyses provide mutually supporting evidence as to how deliberators engage in reason-giving. The qualitative analysis pulls out the nuances and details of how deliberators construct arguments, while the quantitative analysis establishes broader patterns of reason-giving within the forums. Findings consistent across the two methodologies provides support for the validity and reliability of both approaches.

The micro-analytic approach employed in both the qualitative and quantitative analysis documents how individuals construct their arguments but does not capture interpersonal dynamics. This limits its utility, in that some of the work of building arguments can be done through interaction across deliberators. Thus, coding individual comments in isolation does not tell us much about whether a discussion was "deliberative" in some sense. However, a micro-analytic approach is appropriate given the specific focus of this paper on how individuals construct arguments (as opposed to how individual comments fit together into a discourse). In other words, this analysis focuses on the inputs (individual comments) into deliberation, rather than the deliberation itself.[8] Understanding the former is an important part of the latter. Even though there is more to deliberation than individual giving reasons to support their conclusions, and reason-giving can happen collectively, knowing whether and how citizens engage in reason-giving as individuals provides insight into how deliberation unfolds during forums.

Because NIF forums are only one type of deliberative context, they cannot be used to make definitive statements about how individuals engage in reason-giving;

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[8] Alternatively, one could define the deliberative exchange, or the forum as a whole, as the unit of analysis (e.g. Black, 2008; Button & Mattson, 1999; Karpowitz & Mansbridge, 2005). These approaches have both their advantages and shortcomings, and focus on different aspect of the deliberative process.

it may be that other types of deliberative settings exhibit different conversational dynamics. Even though NIF forums cannot be generalized to all deliberative contexts, they are valuable to study because many deliberative events are organized in a similar fashion. Because of this they are a useful starting point for understanding patterns of reason-giving and can be used as a benchmark to see how variation in structure or composition influences deliberation in other contexts. Further, the analysis below demonstrates the usefulness of the conceptualization of reason-giving described above as a guide for empirical research.

The Construction of Reasons

Evidence and Conclusions

Providing evidence to support conclusions was the dominant mode of reasoning in all of the forums. Typically deliberators would draw a conclusion and offer some evidence, either in the form of a factual statement or personal experience, to support it. Here's an example of using personal experience to support a proposal (in response to another deliberator who pointed out that wind turbines take up a lot of land):

> I think you can put the wind farms just about in anywhere where people won't see them too. I don't think they have to be in your backyard. You can pipe it in through there. My wife and I drove from Las Vegas to San Francisco. It was just wind farm after wind farm, and no houses. Tons of wind farms. You go through the mountain pass and there they were, but there wasn't a house in sight. Lots of cows though [laughter]. But there was an availability of a lot of that. We can do wind, we can do nuclear. I think it's a combination of all of them. I think you're absolutely right when you say it has to be all of them, and not just one of them. There's no single panacea that's going to do it (Carl[9], Kent).

To support his claim that wind power is feasible, Carl uses personal experience to illustrate that there is sufficient land to have extensive wind power. This construction was repeated throughout the forums. A deliberator would offer some type of conclusions and then provide a fact, personal experience, or story to support it. There were plenty of variations within this broad pattern in terms of the type of conclusion, the type of evidence, and whether they were linked together through a warrant. But the basic structure of "I believe x and here's some evidence to support my belief" was the most common pattern for giving reasons.

Even though providing evidence to support conclusions was the predominant type of comment, there were other discursive forms present. Occasionally, deliberators would offer a conclusion without providing any evidence to support it, such as in this comment:

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[9] All deliberator names are pseudonyms.

> If we look at, instead of just looking at fossil fuels and such, alternatives, well other ways, get our creative minds together to come up with new ways of using what we have, and finding new ways to make energy. I think that would be valuable (Patrick, Rindge)

Patrick is making a proposal to focus on alternative energy sources in response to one of the options in the issue book that suggests developing fossil fuel resources. Yet he offers no evidence to support his claim (such as facts about the availability of alternative energy sources or limits to fossil fuel reserves) nor warrants (for example, stating that there would be environmental benefits if we transitioned to alternative energy sources). Here's an example of a problem definition without evidence or warrants:

> I think there's no question that we're headed for a [healthcare] crisis. But at the same time my greatest fear is that government will be called upon to solve that crisis. I don't want the government running healthcare. I can't think of anything more frightening. I guess as a human being and as a parent the most important thing I can do is keep myself and my children healthy (Kim, Pittsburgh).

Kim identifies a problem—that a crisis in healthcare is looming—and offers two proposals: that government should not be involved in solving the crisis and that individuals should focus on keeping themselves healthy. She offers no evidence to support her claim that there is a looming crisis in healthcare and does not explain why government involvement would be "frightening" nor how a focus on individuals keeping themselves healthy would stave off the crisis. These types of comments are what many critics would expect in deliberative forums—citizens stating opinions without providing reasoning to support them. But these types of comments were not typical; usually deliberators offered some type of evidence to back their assertions.

Even though conclusions without evidence were infrequent, the reverse scenario was quite common, where deliberators would offer a fact, personal experience or story without tying it to a proposal or problem definition (what I term "free-floating"). There are multiple factors behind this dynamic. Some of the free-floating evidence consisted of stories or personal experience where the "moral" is implied rather than explicitly tied to a conclusion. For example, during the Pittsburgh forum Paul tells a story about a misdiagnosis of his wife's medical condition with the intended point having to do with a lack of coordination within the healthcare system. Yet Paul neglects to specifically tie his story to the larger point about how lack of coordination is a problem or what to do about it. In other cases the free floating evidence was intended to draw a conclusion but the deliberator neglected to state it. For example, Mark (a member of Congress) responded to a comment about the ethical issues involved with deciding whether people who do not have healthy lifestyles should receive government-funded healthcare in this manner: "One politician at election time says I'm going to tell people no, and another person stands up there and says there will be no restrictions on healthcare. Well, let me tell you, I know who's going to get elected" (Mark, Pittsburgh). The point Mark seems to be making is that incentives within the political system make any type of decision to deny coverage unlikely. But he does not actually state that argument—he simply offers a fact about political incentives and lets his listeners draw the inference.

Sometimes deliberators seem to want to use evidence to support a conclusion but are unable to articulate the latter. Here is a comment made in response to a moderator prompt about 9/11's impact on immigration:

> I remember when a week after 9/11, I was taking a trip to Wilmington. I stopped at a gas station to get gas. It was an Exxon station and nobody came out to put gas or greet me. So I went up to one of the bays, and here are two Middle Eastern folk, to me looked like husband and wife, and they were afraid to come out because they looked different. I might hold them accountable for 9/11. I never forgot that (Tim, Georgetown).

Tim tells a story related to 9/11 but does not tie the story to a conclusion, and it is unclear what point Tim wants to make regarding immigration. Presumably he sees this dynamic as problematic, but he neglects to state it as such, with the end result that he tells a story without tying it to a conclusion. Here is another instance from the same forum:

> I, in the last few years did some farm work for my family, and we hired immigrant Mexicans. They speak very little English, and I speak no Spanish, and we had no problems at all. [laughter]. Understanding, communicating with each other and actually holding a conversation, I hold in English and they in Spanish. But, you don't talk about building rockets or anything like that, but the job that you're about, you get done. (Steven, Georgetown).

Steven seems to want to make the case that the language barrier created by immigration is not a problem. But he neglects to tie his personal experience where he "had no problems at all" to a conclusion about how language barrier problems are exaggerated. Some deliberators may have inferred this conclusion, but others may have missed the point because it was not explicitly stated.

Another tactic deliberators used in lieu of reason-giving was to ask questions. Specific questions—such as asking another deliberator to clarify a point or requesting factual information about an issue—are a normal part of deliberation. But general questioning, where deliberators pose broad questions about the issue that are more rhetorical than actual prompts for an answer, is more problematic. Instead of taking a position on an issue, deliberators may pose questions about it. For example, during the Pittsburgh health care forum one deliberator asked "That's one of the things that we typically don't address is what are realistic expectations for healthcare?" He did not offer an answer to this question—he just indicated that it is something that should be addressed (presumably by someone else in another context). Another instance of general questioning occurred in the Kent forum when someone asked "at what cost are we willing to become energy independent?" without making an effort to formulate a position on the issue. This type of general questioning can be seen as avoidance of reasoned argumentation; rather than stating conclusions, presenting evidence, and articulating warrants deliberators are simply asking questions. That said, general questioning can play a role in deliberation, prompting participants to think about questions they would not have otherwise considered and acting as a starting point for discussion. Thus, even though general questioning can be used to avoid reasoned argumentation, more commonly it was used in combination with reason-giving.

Another way that citizens can avoid making reasoned arguments is by offering vague generalities rather than specific conclusions. For example, in the Kent energy forum deliberators stated that we need more "education" so people learn about conservation and energy issues. This is a plausible argument, but it begs for specifics, such as who should be "educated" and how. Deliberators, however, often avoided specifics: they simply stated that education would be good without much consideration of what this proposal would actually entail. Another example occurred in the Pittsburgh health care forum when there was a discussion about whether health insurance should cover conditions that are the result of unhealthy behaviors (such as smoking). Some deliberators took positions on the general issue about whether this was a good idea, but none made a specific proposal about how coverage should be defined. Vague proposals do not lend themselves to reason-giving, especially when they are so broad and non-controversial (such as "we need more education") that no reasons are necessary. This could potentially be a tactic to avoid providing reasons: by presenting one's conclusions as vague generalities, one is relieved of the duty of defending them with specific evidence and warrants.

The overall conclusion that flows from this analysis is that the dominant discursive mode was to give evidence to support conclusions, but this was not the only discursive type present. Deliberators sometimes stated random pieces of evidence, offered questions rather than arguments, or resorted to vague generalities rather than specific arguments. At times conversations may have veered away from reason-giving, but when deliberators offered conclusions they usually provided some type of evidence in support. Thus the departure from the ideal-type of reason-giving is not that citizens neglected to support conclusions with evidence (they usually did that), but that they sometimes choose to not offer conclusions at all.

Warrants

Warrants are a critical part of reason-giving, as a coherent argument needs more than just a conclusion and evidence; it also needs warrants to tie these pieces together. Here's an instance of an effective use of a conditional warrant:

> Well I was sort of going to, trying to combine what some other people have said. You need government, and you also have to have incentives for companies. Our American automobile industry is in deep trouble because the Japanese came along and developed better cars. The usage of the oil, instead of having a twenty-five or thirty mile per gallon, if the government set some of these standards instead of going backwards the way we have in the last ten years, then the companies would have an incentive to produce cars that Americans could get the forty or fifty miles a gallon. Unless there is some way of inducing the companies to do this, they won't. Instead they develop this nonsense about SUVs counting as small trucks so that there are huge income tax deductions for them. We just have to change all that…(Amy, Hempstead).

Amy is proposing that government should create incentives for car companies to produce more fuel efficient cars and makes an empirical claim regarding how the American automobile industry is in trouble. The warrant explains what impact her proposal would have—that government incentives will lead to more fuel efficient cars. It highlights the causal mechanism and makes the logic of the argument clearer. Further, it provides an opening for others to critique the logic (for example, that government incentives will not change the behavior of American car companies).

Here's another example of an effective use of a warrant, this time a value statement:

> Let me speak to the, should we limit [immigration]. One of the founding values, I think of America, is that we are a melting pot. We accept all faiths, all races, all ethnic backgrounds, and we assimilate them into the American way. I would hate to see us do anything that would say we cannot keep the American dream available. I think that's un-American, to try to limit that. Now having said that, there are laws, and I think we need to follow the law. I think we need to establish as near as we can, follow the established rules and regulations of the federal government [and] the state government. If you don't like them then we need to change them, and legislate to change those laws…(Gary, Mesa).

The "melting pot" value statement at the beginning explains to Gary's listeners how he reached the conclusion that we should try to accommodate immigrants within the confines of existing laws, tying the proposal to a specific value to be maximized. This allows listeners to understand why he does not want to limit legal immigration and helps to identify potential avenues of criticism (such as that other values are more important, or we can maintain a melting pot while still limiting immigration).

Despite some examples of effective uses of warrants the majority of comments did not include warrants. One important function that warrants serve is to explain why a premise is a useful or justified starting point for an argument. Yet this type of explanation was uncommon during the forums, with many deliberators assuming away major points of contention. Consider this comment from the Cedar Rapids forum, made in response to a moderator prompt regarding the effects of immigration on American culture:

> Even as a teacher looking at the school calendar and the school year, holidays that we used to celebrate either are no longer celebrated or the name has changed. We don't have Christmas break anymore, we have winter break, in light of the fact that there are not just all Christians. This was founded as a Christian, Judeo-Christian country, and many immigrants are of that faith but some of them are not. So instead of going by still the majority we cater to the minorities. I'm not saying that we shouldn't be concerned about the minorities, but there seems to be more of a catering to the minorities and more of an acceptance to allow them to tell us what things what traditions we can throw out and what traditions they want us to maintain. That hardly seems fair to have it that way. So it’s kind of like the applecart's been upset and some people are very disturbed by that. For example, Easter isn't called Easter break anymore either, that's Spring break. Many of the other very important Christian holidays that have been observed are more or less tubed. Before immigration became a major issue we've had enough atheists and agnostics in this country [laughs] to undermine some of the Christian beliefs and the Christian holidays anyway. But then you add to it other religious beliefs and it makes it even more troublesome. It becomes almost a Pandora's box. How do we deal with this? (Sarah, Cedar Rapids)

Sarah is presenting evidence (changes in how holidays are labeled) to support a problem definition (undermining of traditions and “catering to minorities”). Missing is an articulation and defense of the underlying premises, which is that maintaining tradition is important and that there is social harm in accommodating minorities’ beliefs. A conditional warrant would add to the coherence of the argument by explicating the negative consequences of losing traditions. A value statement warrant could also be used to indicate the importance of maintaining Christian traditions. As it stands, deliberators who do not share Sarah’s worldview might have difficulty understanding the logic and substance of her argument because of the unarticulated premises.

Warrants are also useful in describing causal connections, such as explaining how a policy proposal will lead to desired outcomes. During these forums causation was more often than not implied or suggested rather than explicitly stated. A simple count of words used to indicate causation is illustrative. The words “cause” or “caused” appear 26 times, “therefore” 6 times, and “as a result” only 4 times total during the eight forums. Here is an example of a proposal that lacks a causal explanation:

> On a local level I cannot believe that here in El Paso, the sun city, home of the Sun Bowl, we don't have solar panels on every available rooftop. It's amazing to me, that there has not been a lot more, I mean a really big push towards harnessing solar power, maintenance notwithstanding. There are people in California and other places who use solar paneling. They create so much extra energy that the electric company pays them for their extra power. I think it's nuts that we're not taking much greater advantage of that. Of course it's also sometimes windy here, and we're not taking greater advantage of wind power as well. It just absolutely astounds me that we just sit here like this (Nancy, El Paso).

Nancy is making a proposal to utilize solar and wind power in El Paso and offers evidence to support it (the fact the El Paso has a lot of sun and that other places have done so successfully). Yet she neglects to provide warrants to explain why using solar and wind power would be valuable or why benefits outweigh costs. The benefits are easily articulated, such as less pollution and less reliance on foreign oil. Yet other deliberators who disagree with a focus on renewable energy may not necessarily be aware of those benefits, and even if they are aware they might not agree with the argument. Because Nancy does not use warrants to explicate the causal logic from her proposal to desired outcomes she does not prompt other deliberators to discuss the costs and benefits of renewable energy. Such a discussion could still ensue, but developing the logic of her argument with warrants would have made a fruitful discussion more likely because other participants would have a better understanding of the logic underlying her argument.

The immigration forums also contained many proposals that lacked a causal infrastructure to support them. One of the topics discussed in the issue book was whether there should be more or less emphasis put on border security. Typically deliberators would take a position and then offer various pieces of evidence to support it, such as by making factual statements about how the border is ineffective at limiting illegal immigration or how immigrants will find a way to come to this country regardless of the strength of border security. Missing was a discussion of the effects of border security on illegal immigration, such as whether and why reducing border security will or will not lead to an increase in the number of illegal immigrants. Some deliberators suggested causal patterns by indicating that less border security would mean more immigrants, but these were rarely developed. Here is an illustrative comment where a deliberator makes statements regarding border security without providing warrants that explicate causation:

> I think that it's a two edged sword when you talk about immigration, no matter what the specific issue that you have. As far as shutting down the

> borders, I don't think that's even a possibility. It's a federally mandated thing that we have to deal with, that they, whatever their policy seems to be, that we here locally have to deal with that situation. I have to agree with Teresa, I mean, if the people come here, had the good fortune to deal with a lot of her family, when they came here [Teresa previously indicated she is an immigrant]. I've seen them be successes in our community. I think that it's something that we all in our hearts would enjoy, seeing people come and be successes here in our community. On the other hand, I don't know how much, financially, the federal government can withstand in continuing to have a totally open border. All sides. You know, it's a double edged sword (Andrew, Georgetown).

Andrew argues that we cannot "shut down" the border, nor can we simply let everyone in. Yet he does not explain why neither of these options are possible. Crafting an argument for his position would require conditional warrants that explore the effects (or lack thereof) of greater border security or an open border.[10] He begins to do this by pointing out the financial burden posed by an open border, but does not tie that point into a logical structure behind his proposal. As it stands, he makes a proposal and offers random pieces of evidence to support it, but never explains the reasoning behind his opinion. This type of argument was fairly typical when it came to the effects of immigration policy: causal connections were mostly implied rather than explicitly stated.

These examples illustrate how warrants are needed to develop the logic of an argument and how their absence can undermine the ability of listeners to understand the point a speaker is trying to make. Stating conclusions and presenting evidence is not sufficient for crafting a coherent argument; deliberators also need to explain how the evidence leads to the conclusion. This did happen at times, but these connections were often lacking. Of course, in a deliberative forum where speakers are making comments off the top of the head, one would expect that not all arguments would be fully articulated. Further, even the most sophisticated and complex arguments could easily be picked apart for lacking necessary warrants. The point here is not to make a general critique of the ability or willingness of deliberators to fully articulate the logic of their arguments; rather the focus is on illustrating how the use of warrants, rather than the articulation of conclusions or presentation of evidence, is the weak link in deliberators' reason-giving.

Patterns of Reason-Giving

A second way to approach reason-giving dynamics is to quantify the frequency of conclusions, evidence and warrants and the likelihood that they will appear together in deliberator comments. The author coded the forums using

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[10] There is a warrant present in his comment, a value statement regarding the enjoyment of seeing immigrants be successful in the community. However, this is a tangent from his main point and does not assist in explicating his logic.

HyperResearch 3.5, a qualitative software program, and a coding scheme that identified the two types of conclusions, three types of evidence, and four types of warrants described above. Conclusions were operationalized as any statement where a speaker indicated what should be done about the issue under discussion (proposals) or what is wrong with the current situation (problem definitions). Proposals are proscriptive and problem definitions are descriptive, but the defining characteristic of a conclusion is that it is a judgment about an issue. Evidence can be in the form of stories, personal experience, or factual statements. Stories, following Ryfe (2006), were operationalized as a narrative of a sequence of events that focuses on a problem and has a beginning, middle, and end. Personal experiences were identified when speakers made first person statements about some aspect of the issue (e.g. “I once knew an immigrant who worked very hard”). There were distinguished from stories in that they were simple statements rather than an organized sequence of events. Factual statements are empirical claims but do not have to be statistical or quantitative; they are “empirical” in the sense that they make some declaration about the world. Factual statements cannot include judgment, which distinguishes them from conclusions, and are not in the first person, differentiating them from personal experience.

Warrants provide connections between evidence and conclusions, and are distinguished by the fact that they create an infrastructure or logic to an argument. Conditional warrants posit a causal connection between a proposal or problem definition and some piece of evidence. These can either be prospective (if we implement x policy, then y will happen) or retrospective (because of y, we should do x). The words “if” and “then” do not necessarily have to be present, but there does need to be terminology that indicates a causal connection. Value statement warrants are characterized by an indication that something should be valued and guide action, such as equality, inclusion, or freedom of choice. Statements were identified as core argument warrants when they articulated a general proposition about how to deal with a wide range of policies, and were distinguished from proposals because the speaker states them as general principles rather than specific proposals (although usually specific proposals came before or after). Finally, statements were coded as analogy warrants when a speaker compares the policy issue under discussion to some other issue.

Moderator comments were excluded from the analysis, as were introductions at the beginning of forums, conversational maintenance, asides, and general statements not part of an argument (grouped together in an “other” category). Questions asked by deliberators were also coded, either as a specific question, where the speaker is prompting for an answer from another deliberator or a general question, where it is phrased rhetorically. All deliberator statements (except for short utterances such as “right” or “I see”) were coded into one of the above categories, with no overlapping codes allowed.

Table 2 provides an overview of the prevalence of conclusions, evidence and warrants offered by deliberators. Factual statements were the most common type of evidence, consisting of over two-thirds of all the evidentiary statements. Using personal experiences as evidence was also common, with the immigration forums exhibiting a bit more use than the energy policy discussions, not surprising given the more “personal” nature of immigration. Stories were more common in the immigration and health care discussions, although they comprised less than 10% of evidentiary statements in each of the forums. Conclusions were fairly evenly split between proposals and problem definitions, although there is significant variation across forums. Participants in the energy forums were focused on making proposals, while those in immigration and health care discussions were just as likely to proffer problem definitions. It is unclear whether this difference is due to the more sensitive nature of immigration and health care (creating a hesitancy to make proposals), the structure of the issue book, or some other dynamic. Conditional warrants were the most likely to appear in each of the forums. The Hempstead energy forum was an outlier in terms of the extent of conditional warrants, with 42 total, but the other seven were consistent with about 15-20 conditional warrants and a few of the other three types of warrants. In general, table 2 indicates that participants offered up many pieces of evidence (typically in the form of factual statements) and stated conclusions, but were far less likely to offer warrants. This pattern was consistent across the forums: despite variation in the types of conclusions proffered, in all of the forums evidence and conclusions were far more common than warrants.

Table 3 examines these patterns further by exploring how conclusions, evidence, and warrants are used together. This table uses complete deliberator comments (defined as an uninterrupted speech[11]) as the unit of analysis. Each comment was coded based on whether conclusions, evidence, and/or warrants were present. The most common type of comment was a conclusion supported by evidence, comprising of almost a third of all comments. Providing warrants and evidence to support a conclusion happened in 20% of the comments, but in none of the forums was this pattern more common than the conclusion/evidence combination. Even though it was uncommon to see conclusions without any type of evidence, there were plenty of instances of free-floating evidence where deliberators made statements without connecting it to an argument. Hempstead is an outlier here, where free-floating evidence was rare and the vast majority of comments were conclusions supported by evidence or warrants.

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[11] Minor interjections by other deliberators, such as expressions of agreement or clarifying questions, were not considered to be interruptions.

Table 2: Frequency of Evidence and Conclusions in Deliberator Statements

			Immigration				**Energy**			**Health**
	Count	**Percent (within group)**	**CR**	**Gt**	**Mesa**	**Rindge**	**EP**	**Hp**	**Kent**	**Pitt**
Evidence										
Factual statement	701	79.8%	81	77	74	77	104	97	94	97
Personal experience	145	16.5%	12	29	27	14	20	12	14	17
Story	32	3.6%	6	6	5	3	0	0	2	10
Conclusions										
Proposal	453	55.7%	33	35	48	55	81	100	60	41
Problem definition	360	44.3%	60	37	48	33	37	55	38	52
Warrants										
Conditional	164	63.6%	22	14	16	20	19	42	16	15
Value statement	43	16.7%	7	9	11	5	2	7	0	2
Analogy	38	14.7%	2	2	5	0	10	8	6	5
Core argument	13	5.0%	3	3	2	0	2	1	2	0
Other Statements										
Moderator comment	297	NA	31	25	16	43	34	76	41	31
Other	207	NA	19	11	32	41	18	23	30	33
General questioning	74	NA	8	9	2	11	12	6	7	19
Specific questioning	52	NA	7	1	3	8	1	3	18	7
Unclear	54	NA	9	4	6	16	4	4	2	9

CR = Cedar Rapids; GT = Georgetown; EP = El Paso; HP = Hempstead; Pitt = Pittsburgh

Table 3: Deliberator Complete Comments by Type

			Immigration				Energy			Health
Type of comment	**Count**	**Percent**	**CR**	**Gt**	**Mesa**	**Rindge**	**EP**	**Hp**	**Kent**	**Pitt**
Conclusion-evidence	232	31.9	32	22	33	22	29	27	35	32
Conclusion-evidence-warrant	144	19.8	16	17	22	16	22	25	15	11
Free floating evidence	136	18.7	15	22	16	25	12	3	13	30
Other type of comment	88	12.1	14	5	17	19	0	5	9	19
Free-floating conclusions	48	6.6	7	4	4	9	4	7	8	5
Conclusion-warrant	40	5.5	4	4	4	7	3	9	6	3
Questioning alone	30	4.1	7	1	4	6	0	0	8	4
Warrant-evidence	10	1.4	2	1	2	0	0	1	1	3
Total	728		97	76	102	104	70	77	95	107

CR = Cedar Rapids; GT = Georgetown; EP = El Paso; HP = Hempstead; Pitt = Pittsburgh

Conclusion

Tables 2 and 3 support the same conclusions derived from the qualitative analysis: reason-giving generally took the form of offering evidence to support conclusions (even though at times deliberators chose to avoid proffering conclusions altogether). Whether that evidence was sufficient or compelling is a question for a different article, but regardless, they did support their opinions with evidence. However, deliberators' arguments frequently lacked warrants needed to provide a logical infrastructure to their reasoning; they typically did not articulate how they reached conclusions based on the evidence they presented. This does not mean that there was no logical coherence to the discussion as a whole, as deliberators could co-construct coherent arguments by pulling together various pieces of evidence, conclusions, and warrants. The findings presented in this paper do not speak to the quality of the deliberation present in the forums but rather highlights a particular conversational dynamic—how individuals give reasons to support their arguments—that is one aspect of how citizens engage in deliberation.

Empirical deliberation research has focused on many different aspects of how citizens engage in deliberation, such as the role of stories (Black, 2008; Polletta & Lee, 2006), argument justification (Steiner et al., 2004), and the effects of disagreement (Price, Cappella & Nir, 2002; Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009). My research also focuses on a specific practice (reason-giving) that is part of deliberative processes. One path for future research is to examine how these specific practices are connected to broader deliberative patterns. For example, one plausible hypothesis we can draw from the analysis above is that the lack of warrants stifles conversations by closing off openings to fully engage each other's arguments, as it is hard to critique an argument if you do not understand the casual logic underlying it. On the other hand, perhaps deliberators find ways to engage arguments that lack warrants, such as by focusing on disputes over specific evidence or assuming warrants that then become a focus of discussion. Further, arguments that lack a causal infrastructure may prompt others to "fill in the blanks," leading to co-construction of arguments. Drawing connections between specific practices, such as reason-giving, and broader deliberative patterns will assist scholars in their efforts to make assessment about deliberative quality.

Empirical deliberation research has also examined deliberation in various contexts, such as legislatures (Mucciaroni & Quirk, 2006; Steiner et al., 2004), juries (Devine et al., 2001), online forums (Black, 2008, Polletta & Lee, 2006), and minipublic forums such as NIF (Button & Mattson, 1999; Gastil & Dillard, 1999; Ryfe, 2006). The structure of these contexts vary, and the deliberative patterns that we see may be heavily influenced by them. However, there is minimal research that compares across contexts (for an exception, see Steffensmeier & Schenk-Hamlin, 2008). This type of comparative research is the next logical step in the examination of reason giving. One plausible conclusion from the analysis presented here is that the open-ended, free-flowing format of National Issues Forums does not lend itself to explaining one's reasoning through the use of warrants. Perhaps a more structured environment, where deliberators were prompted to identify premises or develop causal logic would lead to different results. The "off-the-top-of-the-head" format of NIF could constrain the ability of deliberators to use evidence effectively. A format where participants have some time to think through an argument before presenting it might lead to different conversational dynamics. Further, how issues are defined could also influence deliberative quality; narrowly defined issues may lend themselves to more focused and developed arguments and proposals (but could also have some negative impacts, such as restricting the scope of debate). Comparing reason giving across deliberative contexts would significantly advance our knowledge about the causal factors behind the reason-giving patterns identified in this study.

Finally, the findings presented in this paper have practical implications for forum moderators. Participants do not need to be prompted to either state conclusions or offer evidence in support of them. However, moderators could enhance the quality of reason-giving by asking deliberators to explain how their evidence connects to the conclusions they draw, encouraging them to think about causal and logical connections. This will allows others to better grasp the contours of the argument and either develop or critique it. Much work still needs to be done on how moderators affect the quality of reason-giving, exploring how the types of questions moderators ask and the structure of the conversation influences the propensity of deliberators to construct coherent arguments in support of their positions.

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