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Equality and Equity in Deliberation: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract

This article introduces the special issue focused on equality and equity in deliberative democracy. The essay proposes some initial working definitions of equity and equality and offers reasons why scholars and practitioners should attend to both. We outline the basic structure of the issue's three sections and preview the contributors' articles, with special attention to the opportunities and the challenges of achieving equality and equity within the deliberative system.

Author Biography

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Keywords

equality, equity, deliberation

Deliberative democrats have had much to say about equality and have long been concerned with creating conditions for it in discourse. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, for example, write that the principle of political equality “stands behind” the demand for deliberation (1996, p. 28). That is, deliberation presupposes that people deserve equal respect and that in conditions of disagreement such respect demands the open exchange of views and the mutual attempt to identify fair and just solutions. Yet how is equal respect constructed in deliberation? For example, if pursuing equality means treating everyone similarly, regardless of what they bring to deliberation, there are longstanding concerns that this approach can reproduce and reinforce enduring hierarchies of income, education, race, gender, or other characteristics (Young 2000; Sanders 1997). These disparities have the potential to frustrate and even derail the attempt to create conditions in which all perspectives can be included and fully heard. At the same time, if attention to such inequalities means treating deliberators differently, then the worry is that such approaches may stigmatize disadvantaged voices or even provoke a backlash among the more powerful.

This special issue examines different approaches to the full inclusion, participation, and influence of all voices in deliberative theory and practice. In approaching this issue, we mark a key distinction between the values of equality and equity. By equality, we mean an approach to deliberative fairness that emphasizes the need to treat all deliberators the same, regardless of their power (or lack thereof) outside of the deliberative forum. This approach holds that deliberative fairness is most likely to be achieved when those background inequalities are put aside, bracketed, or neutralized in discussion. In contrast, equity means taking into account the advantages and disadvantages that have shaped participants’ experiences, which may require treating participants differently in order to create conditions that achieve fair deliberation and decisions. As Edana Beauvais and André Bächtiger (this issue) put it, equality asserts “the fundamental sameness of common humanity” and the need to “abstract from social circumstances,” while equity emphasizes “attending to” social circumstances and the resultant distribution of power and resources. The contributors to this issue take up this core distinction between equality and equity in a variety of different ways, and occasionally with slightly different terms, but all of them are confronting the common challenge of creating circumstances in which all deliberators can participate fully and even authoritatively.

Tensions between equality and equity emerge constantly in both formal institutions of political decision-making and the wider political culture. We see these struggles in debates over access to education, fair wages, health and welfare policy, policing, immigration, regulation of speech, and many other issues.

Should universities prioritize equal treatment of applicants by following a “colorblind” approach to admissions or remedy the accumulated effects of past disadvantages by practicing affirmative action? Should schools prioritize creating more supportive environments for students from non-dominant groups by regulating offensive speech directed at them or privilege equal rights to engage in robust, even uncivil, expression? Should countries give equal access to immigrants regardless of their geographic origins, economic status, and social condition, or privilege applicants from particular countries, the highly-skilled, political refugees, or others based on social and historic circumstances? When do assertions of equal rights function to dismiss aspirations for equity? For example, in the United States, when the Black Lives Matter movement for fair and equitable treatment of people of color by the police is met with the response that “All Lives Matter,” does invoking the language of equality make it more difficult to confront and address historic and systemic inequities?

Friction between equality and equity also emerges in each stage of public deliberation, confronting organizers with thorny decisions about the design of institutions and projects, naming and framing issues, recruiting community members, rules for participation and decision making, and implementing outcomes. At every point in the process, civic forums must address the question of whether public deliberation should be organized using an equality or equity approach, or how to balance the two. For example, if we issue a general call for participation through “neutral” channels, can we have much hope of attracting less privileged and empowered community members? In the absence of facilitation or institutional rules that actively promote contributions from non-dominant participants, and encourage thorough questioning of prevalent understandings of issues, are we likely to reproduce the power dynamics that helped create the very social problem under discussion? Alternatively, at what point does stocking the room with under-represented people fall prey to charges of stacking the deck in favor of particular outcomes, risking the perceived legitimacy of deliberation?

Equality and equity must also be considered as outcomes of public deliberation. The historically marginalized are often drawn to politics more by a hunger for more equitable policies than for opportunities to deliberate. How concerned should we be about whether the policies developed through deliberation are equal or equitable? Can we be assured that deliberation will deliver fairer outcomes than other kinds of political engagement? What steps, if any, should deliberative democrats take to compel attention to equity and equality as critical aspects of all policy decisions? These are the questions that have motivated this special issue.

The Plan of the Special Issue

To address these questions, we have sought a wide range of perspectives. As guest editors, we have recruited contributions from theorists, researchers, and practitioners of public deliberation. In the interest of mutual learning, we have invited practitioners and scholars to collaborate by co-authoring articles. In addition to more traditional academic articles, we also include a dialogue between a leading scholar (Jane Mansbridge of Harvard) and a leading practitioner of civic forums designed to give voice to all different perspectives (Martha McCoy of Everyday Democracy), as well as interviews with successful conveners of online and face-to-face deliberation among immigrants and individuals of low income. Our hope is that this collection of perspectives will prompt additional conversations about the competing values of equality and equity and how to navigate between those values in both theory and practice.

Given that equality and equity are at issue (and at odds) in many aspects of deliberation, we have divided the special issue into three sections: definitions and goals; processes and institutions; and outcomes. In the definitions and goals section, contributors ask how we should understand equality and equity in deliberation and which are most desirable in different contexts. Which value should we aim to achieve, and when, or how can we go about reconciling equity and equality? What are the trade-offs between pursuing equality or equity, and between other goals of deliberative politics?

Edana Beauvais and Andre Bächtiger engage these questions by arguing that the trade-offs between equality and equity must be negotiated in light of the different goals toward which any single deliberative process might aim – generating legitimate decisions, promoting mutual respect, or encouraging more informed opinions, for example – and that within a larger deliberative political system, no single forum or institution should attempt to satisfy all of these goals at once. They show how different aspects of institutional design, including participant recruitment and the nature and mode of the deliberative interaction, can facilitate different deliberative goals. Similarly, Christopher Karpowitz and Chad Raphael contend that the specific forms of recruitment and standards of representativeness by which a forum should be judged depend upon a forum's goals and its ability to accommodate all who might want to deliberate. Some forums are holistic in their approaches, aspiring to represent the collective opinion of an entire people or demos. Others take a relational approach, focusing on how one sector of the public relates to other sectors or to the public as a whole. Some forums aspire to open access and are able to include all who want to participate, while others are restricted to a smaller number of participants who deliberate on behalf of a larger

whole. Karpowitz and Raphael argue that forums' recruitment practices should vary with these goals and constraints and may thus sometimes need to depart from the effort to produce a strictly representative sample in order to include and empower all perspectives. David Moscrop and Mark Warren also emphasize the need to attend to what happens before deliberation even begins when navigating the tensions between equality and equity. They suggest that two pre-deliberative features – how individuals attain standing and voice as participants and how the agenda for discussion is set – are critical considerations that will affect deliberation's content and outcome as well as whether deliberation can be said to be democratic. In addition to theorizing the connections between standing, agenda setting, equity, and equality, Moscrop and Warren suggest concrete ways of institutionalizing equity-based considerations into the deliberative system. Together, the three articles in this section of the special issue develop deliberative theory in new ways and simultaneously introduce practical considerations that can serve as helpful guides for organizers of civic forums.

In the processes and institutions section, contributors report on what have we learned from practice and empirical research about how to promote equal and equitable deliberative processes or institutions, and identify what we still need to learn. They explore how practitioners have addressed background inequalities and the resulting disparities people can face in deliberation; what research tells us about how to achieve equality or equity through inclusive recruiting and retention, participation, authority and influence, and ongoing engagement in implementation and assessment of decisions. We begin this section with the dialogue between Jane Mansbridge and Martha McCoy mentioned above. These two leaders in the field discuss the theoretical and practical trade-offs between equity and equality, review lessons and best practices from practitioners, identify some of the challenges of measuring full inclusion, and consider some prospects for future theoretical and empirical work. Following this dialogue, the three of us (Abdullah, Karpowitz, and Raphael) examine how incorporating enclaves (sometimes called "affinity groups") of the disadvantaged into the deliberative system serves the goals of more equitable and higher quality civic deliberation. We confront potential dangers of enclave discussions – such as extremism, sectarianism, and conformism – and explain why we see these dynamics as pitfalls that can be avoided with thoughtful institutional design rather than the necessary elements of an inescapably inferior form of group discussion. With the help of an extended example from the *Facing Racism in a Diverse Nation* dialogues, we show how enclaves can be integrated productively into a more equitable deliberative process that also includes cross-cutting conversations that engage the public as a whole.

The processes and institutions section of the special issue also includes multiple reports from the frontlines of deliberative practice. Each of these reports identifies both opportunities and ongoing challenges in the attempt to create more equitable forms of deliberation. Hans Asenbaum examines the use of Wisdom Councils to incorporate everyday knowledge into the local policy process in Austria. He sees dynamic facilitation as central to Wisdom Councils' partial success in creating deliberative equality. In this method, a strong facilitator leads community members in giving individual testimony in a small group, which listens and responds mainly through their individual comments rather than via back-and-forth conversation, leading to group endorsement of consensus policy statements. This method helps to neutralize dominance among participants by giving each extended speaking time, and encouraging storytelling and testimony based on experience. The trade-offs include self-selection that tends to attract more politically active citizens, and consensus conclusions that can lack specificity, are non-binding on officials, and need to be integrated carefully with expert knowledge provided in other forums.

Turning to larger-scale deliberations in the U.S. context, Tom Campbell, Raquel Goodrich, Carolyn Lukensmeyer, and Daniel Schugurensky chronicle the Creating Community Solutions (CCS) initiative, a collaborative effort of six deliberative democracy organizations aimed at reducing barriers to mental health and creating greater access to mental health services, especially for youth and underrepresented populations. They show how a carefully designed deliberative process that included town hall meetings, community conversations, and an innovative texting platform attracted a diverse sample of participants, helped to reduce the inequalities and other challenges participants can face in deliberation, especially on topics like mental health, and resulted in action plans for creating more equitable access to services. Madeleine Pape and Josh Lerner ask whether the growing adoption of participatory budgeting (PB) in the United States has advanced equity. Drawing on interviews with 17 PB practitioners, their answer is that success in making democratic governance more equitable requires more than improving the quality of deliberation or reducing barriers to participation. While those are important factors, the achievement of equity faces three additional difficulties: unclear goals that shift the focus away from equity concerns; self-interested participant motivations that push the agenda away from equity goals; and the limiting structures and bureaucratic rules of PB itself, which can make it difficult to address broader equity concerns. Pape and Lerner suggest several possible routes to overcoming those challenges.

Katherine Cramer analyzes one attempt to create equity in a public input process on an important racial justice issue in Madison, Wisconsin: whether or not the

police department should implement body-worn video cameras. Drawing on the insights of two practitioners who led the process, Cramer suggests that the Madison case offers four lessons: first, the intentional exclusion of some voices – especially those of the “usual suspects” who tend to show up most often – may serve the cause if equity. Second, marginalized voices may be less motivated by the prospect of shaping the eventual policy decision and more motivated by the opportunity simply to be heard. But the differences between those motivations and the needs and expectations of the policy process may cause uncomfortable friction for both sides. Third, disempowered people may frame issues in terms of basic security and threats to their lives, not about the broader principle of democracy or their right to privacy, but this also suggests the possibility of friction when the understandings of marginalized peoples conflict with those of the people in power or the expectations of the policy-making process. Fourth and finally, pursuing the cause of equity will likely be bumpy: it will be characterized by institutional misunderstandings and disconnects, and the mere presence of public discussion or deliberation is unlikely to be sufficient. Instead, given the gap between the expectations, understandings, language, framing, and aims of existing institutions for public decision-making and those of marginalized or disempowered groups or individuals, the cause of equity needs persistent, sustained, and effective advocacy that prompts those in power to listen to previously marginalized voices, even in a place like Madison, where many residents profess support for equity in theory.

These reports emerge from a variety of different attempts to promote equality and equity in public decision-making, and it is clear that navigating these goals requires thoughtful participants and savvy organizers who pay close attention to all stages of the deliberative process and whose work is likely to continue even after deliberative forums have formally ended. We conclude this section with interviews with two practitioners who have succeeded at engaging immigrant communities and communities of low-income, one primarily online (Steven Clift, Executive Director of E-Democracy.org) and one mainly in face-to-face settings (John Landesman, Coordinator of the Montgomery County Public Schools Study Circles Program). Clift reflects on the changing online landscape and shares lessons learned about how to attract new immigrants and refugees to effective place-based online communities. He emphasizes that building a thriving and diverse neighborhood forum online depends on providing spaces where people can discuss community life, exchange free goods, and talk about civic issues in ways that arise organically from people’s everyday concerns, rather than recruiting people to a primarily political forum, which tends to attract privileged residents whose voices often dominate in offline politics. Drawing on his experiences with dialogues aimed at improving parental participation and student

learning in a diverse school district outside Washington, DC, Landesman argues that achieving equity will only occur when organizers develop an equity strategy from the start. Landesman also shares insights into how to practice equity at each stage of organizing a dialogue, from inclusive recruitment and retention of participants, to forum design and facilitation, to evaluating and implementing the group's plans. He discusses how affinity group discussions can be an effective part of an equity strategy, and like many contributors to this issue, he argues that specific equity strategies should flow from the goals of a particular dialogue.

The final section of the special issue is devoted to deliberative outcomes. In this section, the theme is how policy choices and actions that emerge from deliberation can affect political and economic equity and equality. The question of outcomes has hovered in the background of many of the contributions in previous sections and occasionally emerges explicitly, as in the Mansbridge and McCoy discussion of equality and equity as potential objects of deliberative discussion. But in this final portion of the special issue, contributors examine directly how equality and equity can be products of specific forums, events, or processes. Vera Schattan Coelho and Laura Waisbich draw from the rich laboratory of participatory governance opportunities in Brazil, with special focus on two experiences: São Paulo municipal health councils and the country's participation in the Open Government Partnership (OGP). The authors argue that participatory opportunities like health councils or the OGP may contribute to a reduction in inequality, but establishing a direct causal link is difficult and careful attention to the case studies shows that such outcomes are not simply a function of the deliberative quality of the processes or the inclusivity of the institutions. Rather, addressing inequality requires attention to other elements of the political setting beyond deliberation, such as the array of political alliances and broader patterns of mobilization. Thus, if reducing inequality is the goal, the effort to create change will face challenges internal to deliberative institutions and outside them. These helpful case studies thus connect to some of the themes that arose in other contributions to the special issue and highlight the need to study the relationship between more participatory (and especially more deliberative) forms of community engagement and established institutions for wielding political power. Last but certainly not least, Matt Leighninger provides a thoughtful coda to the special issue by bringing together disparate strands of research that give insights into the connections between robust civic engagement and economic vitality. Leighninger asks what evidence from existing forms of engagement – in Brazil, the United States, and elsewhere – can tell us about whether short-term engagement opportunities can yield long-term economic impacts, whether the stronger social networks and social capital that emerge from sustained engagement increase economic opportunity, whether private-sector engagement

has economic and public-sector effects, and how race and culture contribute to the answers to all of those questions. With these critical questions, he picks up the theme of how more participatory, deliberative, and democratic forms of decision-making relate to existing political institutions, and they identify both some initial insights and a rich set of possibilities for future research about the effects of empowered, participatory democracy on equality of opportunity, equity of outcomes, and overall levels of economic growth.

Achieving Equality and Equity: Provisional Answers?

Full and fair inclusion of all perspectives is a foundational element of deliberative democracy, but we still have much to learn about how such inclusion is achieved in practice, given connections, tensions, and trade-offs between competing values at all stages of deliberative processes. When it comes to issues of equality and equity, not enough space has been given to the insights and lessons that practitioners learn on the ground and to the benefits of conversations between scholars and practitioners about the hard choices that arise in different parts of the deliberative system. Too little effort has been devoted to understanding the conditions under which equality and equity reinforce each other and when they pull in opposite directions. We hope this special issue brings renewed attention and energy to theorizing and research on approaches to realizing equality and equity, to the ways the two values are both linked and distinct, and to how scholars and practitioners might collaborate to understand and produce more inclusive and effective deliberation.

One of the lessons that emerges from several different contributions to the special issue is that there is unlikely to be any single “magic bullet” for resolving disparities of power and influence and for creating more inclusive deliberative opportunities. Instead, resolutions are likely to be partial and provisional – dependent upon the specific goals and structure of any given forum or process, its place in the deliberative system, and its relationship to formal levers of political power. The ability to achieve equity and equality together, or at least to balance their demands, may depend on the specific issue under consideration, the mix of interests at stake, and the willingness of deliberators to make a sustained commitment to those values before, during, and after deliberation occurs. But the many hopeful examples of deliberation discussed in this special issue show that the provisionality of solutions does not render the issue intractable.

Nor does the inevitability of conditional, situational solutions make the struggle to reconcile equality and equity any less important. In the U.S. context in which we write, a commitment to political equality may be the nation’s first “self-evident

truth,” but the long effort to make that commitment a reality for all has also brought equity concerns to the fore in ways that existing political discourses and institutions have struggled to confront and accommodate. More broadly, political systems around the world seem increasingly stressed by questions of inclusion, with large numbers of people in Europe, the United States, and Latin America expressing alienation from their political institutions and leaders. One need only scan the headlines to see the evidence: the Brexit vote, tensions over issues of race and immigration on both sides of the Atlantic, the historic unpopularity of the U.S. presidential candidates, crises of economic populism in Brazil and Venezuela, and the rise of authoritarian populist leaders in many locations. In the face of those challenges, the task of creating a more inclusive, participatory, and deliberative politics could hardly seem more urgent.

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