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Authoritarianism and Deliberative Democracy: Responding to Our Current Political Times and Contexts

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Abstract

This article introduces the special issue on Deliberative Democracy in an Era of Authoritarianism. The essay highlights the relationship between authoritarianism and democracy, and discusses concerns about the current rise in authoritarianism in political systems. It poses questions about how deliberative scholars and practitioners should respond to authoritarian political contexts and how deliberation should relate to more activist forms of civic engagement. Finally, it previews the articles in the special issue and urges future work in the field to take up ideas, questions, and challenges posed by these essays.

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Introduction: Against the Larger Backdrop

In the introduction to *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt noted that “Military coups and other violent seizures of power are rare. Most countries hold regular elections. Democracies still die, but by different means” (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018, p. 5). They continue by emphasizing that most democratic breakdowns have happened by actions taken by elected government officials. This focus on elected officials is accurate, but it is not the entire picture. This special issue explores some of the other dimensions of democratic decline as well as some possible responses.

These days, it is relatively easy to find scholarly and popular commentary on the state of democracy and concerns about its outlook. The public’s reception of books such as *How Democracies Die* (2018), *The People vs. Democracy* (Mounk, 2018), and *Why Liberalism Failed* (Deneen, 2018) highlights a heightened sense of concern about the state of democracy and its future prospects. Observers note that while democratic practices globally are close to an all-time high, recent data highlight a troubling statistic: the number of countries (24) “backsliding on democracy” are equal to those advancing in more democratic ways.” Further, “autocratization is now showing up in larger countries such as “Brazil, India, Russia, Turkey, and the United States.” This is significant for these countries and beyond because this trend toward autocratization affects one third of the world’s population—2.5 billion people (Lührmann et al., 2018, p. 6).¹

Such concerns, however, are not entirely new and it is helpful to be reminded that scholars, practitioners, and concerned citizens have acknowledged and identified structural issues that are leading to democratic decline (Kotler, 2016) and the challenge to liberalism—the backbone of modern democratic ideals in many countries (Lowi, 1979). Doing a search for the term “authoritarianism” within previous publications of the *Journal of Public Deliberation* (JPD) results in 29 articles. The topic has been present, in various ways, since the very first issue of the journal in 2005. In fact, one of the contributors to this special issue first wrote about an earlier dimension of his research in that inaugural issue (see Muhlberger, 2005). Nevertheless, the journal has never dedicated an entire issue to the topic of authoritarianism until now.

Authoritarianism and Public Deliberation

In 2014, the *Journal of Public Deliberation* published a special issue on the state of the field. There, we outlined articles that spoke about the scope of the field,

¹ Richards’ article in this special issue also speaks to the degradation of democratic institutions.

challenges we face as a field, and promising future directions (Black, Thomas, & Shaffer, 2014). While the entire special issue on the state of the field is replete with important and critical voices, one contribution in particular stands out as we publish this issue.

Martha McCoy, the executive director of Everyday Democracy, wrote about a disconnect between the scholarship and practice of deliberative democracy with the wider world. As she put it, “Even with growing successes in democratic innovation and practice, and with meaningful results from those practices, we haven’t even come close to affecting the daily lives of most people. It’s as though we have some knowledge about effective medicine for treating a rampant disease, but haven’t figured out a way to mass produce and distribute it” (McCoy, 2014, p. 1). She continued by offering brief suggestions, the first being that as a field, we need to “envision and work toward structural change” even though those structures can seem “distant from human experience” even though they profoundly affect our lives (McCoy, 2014, p. 1). If we seek to cultivate or sustain more deliberative dimensions of democracy, then we must address the structural challenges facing “minimalist democracy”—the periodic casting of ballots—if we want to have something more robust (Goodin, 2008, p. 1). Compounding the hope for structural changes is the tension between participatory and deliberative democracy, the notion that it is difficult to reconcile the two into one conception of good citizenship that includes both advocacy and discussion (Mutz, 2006). In this vein, McCoy noted challenges for the field of public deliberation including the perception of the “honest broker,” an (increasingly) professional facilitator maintaining neutrality to detriment of acknowledging or addressing issues such as racism and other issues of equity (McCoy, 2014, p. 3).² Thus, a central theme put forward in this special issue is how deliberative democrats—scholars, practitioners, and citizens—can offer an alternative to the (seemingly) attractive appeal of authoritarianism.

As editors for the *Journal of Public Deliberation*, we have grown increasingly concerned for the state of democracy and the threat of authoritarianism. Our field has long discussed the fundamental tensions in our work between deliberation and activism, or neutrality and social justice. However, the changing political backdrop of the past few years has called us to refocus these discussions. Shortly after the 2016 U.S. election, our conversations as editors became increasingly centered on questions about whether our work was still relevant, what role deliberation and dialogue could and should have in this political climate, and what we as a field

² For more on the concept of the “honest broker,” see (Pielke, 2007). Particularly in the field of dialogue and deliberation, the neutral facilitator committed to democratic processes is paramount. On this concept, see (Carcasson, 2010; Sprain & Carcasson, 2013). On the professionalization of the field, see (Bherer, Gauthier, & Simard, 2017; Lee, 2015).

ought to be doing to respond to authoritarianism and populism. Ideally, deliberative democracy offers all members of a society, even those with minority opinions, an opportunity to express their viewpoints and influence change. In this era of extreme political polarization, however, deliberation has been criticized by the right as a form of liberal indoctrination and by the left as inadequate to ensure that the voices of those without power are heard. Moreover, the rise to power by undemocratic political leaders worldwide raises questions about the efficacy of deliberative—and arguably overly inclusive—approaches to governance. In this political moment, should we promote activism on behalf of democratic systems and outcomes over the desire for an inclusive and deliberative process? In other words, when is it time to step away from the deliberative table and take to the streets in protest? If we choose to stay at the table, who else should be there and what should we aim to do?

In these editorial meetings, Nancy Thomas argued that the *Journal of Public Deliberation* could be a leader in moving the discussion forward to the larger field. She stressed the urgency of the situation, and the need for our field to have a response to rising authoritarianism. To fully engage with these ideas, we hosted pre-conference sessions at the 2017 Frontiers of Democracy conference and the 2017 meeting of the National Communication Association's Public Dialogue and Deliberation division. In these sessions, we asked members of our field to engage with questions such as:

- What is the role of deliberative democracy in times of extreme divisiveness and polarized politics?
- When is deliberation not the appropriate form of political action?
- How should deliberation and dialogue relate to activism and social justice in this political moment?
- How and to what extent should we engage with those who promote ideas that are antithetical to democratic principles of equality, justice and inclusion? What concerns are raised if we engage those views? What concerns are raised if we do not?
- How do we judge the success of an engagement in the age of authoritarianism? In this context, what should dialogue and deliberation seek to accomplish?

Many of the articles featured in this special issue grew out of these pre-conference conversations.

Overview of Articles in the Special Issue

This special issue includes eight interrelated yet distinct articles that speak to the issues confronting those who are committed to democratic practices and see a role

for deliberation within the context and climate of increasing authoritarianism globally. The articles have been organized in three categories to help the reader situate topical interests, but these sections should not limit how people think about the impact of the arguments found within.

Mini-Publics as Democratic Discussion

Nicole Curato and Lucy J. Perry offer a short chapter that reflects on the legacies of democratic deliberation, particularly mini-publics. They focus on mini-publics because they “remain to be the most practical, visible, and structured instantiation of democratic deliberation among ordinary citizens.” As they note, Curato and Perry hope to provoke conversations about the limitations of mini-publics in promoting democratic renewal and reconsider the functions of these forums in so-called “dark times.”

Robert C. Richards, Jr also writes about mini-publics, but he focuses on the ways that deliberative democracy has the potential to counter the effects of authoritarian information strategies. Specifically, he offers a framework for measuring information quality in deliberative processes. The framework also permits comparison of deliberative information to other kinds of policy information—including information emanating from authoritarian or proto-authoritarian states.

Rethinking Deliberation Through Social Movements and Shared Stories

Peter Levine argues that organizing deliberation in response to authoritarian oppression is likely to fail. Instead, he suggests that we look to nonviolent movement not because nonviolent campaigns seek to build a deliberative democracy, but because these movements offer strategies that can yield deliberation. In doing so, he suggests that Jürgen Habermas has viewed in a way that has diminished his defense of nonviolent, contentious social movements to our collective detriment. Rethinking Habermas through a different lens affords an opportunity to situate deliberative practices within dynamic and contentious civic life.

In her article, Anna Wiederhold Wolfe, also engages the intersection of dialogue and deliberation with nonviolent movements and asks how we might think about deliberative practices being an opportunity to develop new and different conceptions of oneself and broader collective identities. Wolfe focuses on the ways that dialogue and deliberation hold the potential to constitute collective identities that “stand in direct contradiction to the values of authoritarian governance...in ways that undermine the very conditions needed for authoritarianism to gain traction.” Both Levine and Wolfe helpfully challenge the notion that deliberation is

purely an exercise in rational discourse and to be separate from contentious public life. The next article wades into the depths of contentious community politics and how to navigate an issue that has elicits strong responses because of the ways in which police can reflect the intensions of the state.

While not referencing nonviolent movements directly, Renee G. Heath offers an in-depth look at the work of New Hampshire Listens and focuses on its work addressing issues related to the (increasingly) fraught relationship between law enforcement and communities, especially communities of color. The article gives a glimpse into the depth of actual deliberative interactions and the process work that goes into making such public engagement possible. Similar to Wolfe's argument, Heath looks to storytelling as a way to "expose participant vulnerabilities that in turn may foster equity and challenge power." Police-community relationships are significant in the United States and elsewhere, and when considered within the context of polarized politics and authoritarian tendencies that privilege the power and authority of the state over citizens, exploring how to disarm police-community tensions becomes a very important way for deliberation to be impactful in addressing one of the structural challenges confronting communities today.

Resisting Authoritarian Inclinations

Peter Muhlberger argues for an alternative to the thesis of *Stealth Democracy* by John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse (2002) that states the public is unknowledgeable about public policy and critics who suggest otherwise "are pursuing a dangerous illusion." Muhlberger proposes and tests an alternative interpretation which is that stealth democracy beliefs may be driven by authoritarianism. As he notes, "Authoritarians should be attracted to stealth democracy beliefs. These beliefs include the view that unelected experts and business people should run the government and that government would be better without debate or compromise." By looking at two studies—the Virtual Agora Project and the National Dialogue and Summit on Engaging Young Canadians—Muhlberger's research suggests an "authoritarian stealth democrats" thesis could help us understand how to engage citizens in deliberative dialogue around complex public issues. As he puts it, "The current paper suggests that the stealth beliefs presumably emerging from apathy are driven by problematic authoritarian orientations, key components of which are ameliorated by democratic deliberation."

Relatedly, Robert S. Hinck, Hayley Hawthorne, and Joshua Hawthorne explore three case studies from China, Russia, and the United States that focus on authoritarian policies and messaging strategies as obstacles inhibiting deliberative

practices. The authors take a macro view to explain how and why authoritarian practices are spreading transnationally. They conclude with suggested interventions designed to stem the tide of global authoritarianism, reminding readers that accessing information and making sense of such information within deliberative experiences is a critical component to democracy, especially in a time of rising authoritarian tendencies. Muhlberger, as well as Hinck, Hawthorne, and Hawthorne, present arguments for information being available to those willing and interested in public deliberation so that individuals can make informed, deliberative decisions.

Finally, the special issue concludes with a revised version of Nancy L. Thomas' article "Democracy by Design" (2014). Along with Kyle Upchurch, Thomas presents an updated version of the earlier framework and argues that strong democracies are participatory, free and equal, educated and informed, and accountable and justly governed. Their essay uses this revised framework to evaluate the current political situation in the U.S. and the threats to democracy posed by things like income inequality, widening polarization, and weak civic education. If we take seriously McCoy's call for structural change and Curato and Perry's notion that we have not scaled-up deliberative democracy enough, then Thomas and Upchurch's essay points to the ways in which deliberative public engagement is situated within a more robust understanding of democracy. Although the situation they describe is dire in many ways, their article offers some insights into how deliberation can be part of an engaged and participatory rebuttal to authoritarian overtures diminishing democratic societies.

Conclusion

This special issue is not exhaustive. We do not include articles that speak to every aspect of the relationship between authoritarianism and deliberative democracy; we hope those articles will be written as part of a continued conversation that will be encouraged by the articles in this special issue. Nevertheless, the articles included here provoke and challenge us to think about how we explicitly engage questions about how democratic societies can use public deliberation to counter anti-democratic rhetoric and actions. If we take seriously the call for structural change, then attending to one of the most significant global issues facing communities and nations today is an important place to start.

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