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Deliberation in Democracy's Dark Times

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Abstract

This piece reflects on the on the legacies of democratic deliberation, particularly mini-publics in responding to issues of disinformation, bigotry and nativism that has entered the political mainstream today. It aims to provoke conversations about the limitations of mini-publics in promoting democratic renewal and reconsider the functions of these forums in democracy's 'dark times.'

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Keywords

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Introduction

The theory and practice of democratic deliberation have often been framed as responses to political pathologies. Voter apathy, declining trust in authorities, increasing influence of spin doctors and corporate media contribute to democratic malaise and public discontent. For many deliberative democrats, there are various ways in which politics can be done differently. From taking part in citizens' juries on complex issues to convening citizen assemblies in deeply divided societies, a case can be made that governance innovations not only address democratic deficits but also create "real utopias" (Wright, 2010).

Advocates of democratic deliberation today, however, are faced with a new set of challenges. The issue is not just about political disaffection or intractable conflict but the seeming normalisation of disinformation, nativism, and bigotry in political life. One could not help but wonder whether deliberative democracy has suffered the same fate as liberal democracy—a promising ideal that has been taken over by political realities (Curato, Hammond & Min, 2019).

Our aim in this short piece is to reflect on the legacies of democratic deliberation, particularly mini-publics in relation to issues democracies face today. We recognise that deliberative democracy is a much broader scholarly field and political project than mini-publics, but we also acknowledge that mini-publics remain to be the most practical, visible, and structured instantiation of democratic deliberation among ordinary citizens. Our hope is 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" (see Hobson, 2018).

We offer three conjectures. First, we examine whether the problem with mini-publics has to do with its limited application and influence in public life (we haven't scaled up enough). Second, we consider whether the field of deliberation studies have focused too much on mini-publics while placing less emphasis on other spaces that build deliberative capacities (we are scaling up incorrectly). Third, we engage with the most critical take on this topic, whether mini-publics have role in democratic politics in the first place (mini-publics are not the answer). We conclude with modest proposals on possible trajectories for deliberative politics in the context of global democratic erosion (see Freedom House, 2018).

We Have Not Scaled Up Enough

The first is the issue of scale: Mini-publics have not yet been scaled up enough. Their applications have been disparate, inconsistent, and, small scale. Had there been more opportunities for people—especially the so-called category of "pissed off white men"—to participate in deliberation, then they may have taken a more complex view of issues that feel threatening to their identities, such as immigration or gay rights. Had smug "cosmopolitan-liberal-types" engaged in deliberation with "pissed off white men," then societies could have developed a shared vocabulary to cohabit a world with "meta-consensus" on the range of legitimate discourses (Niemeyer & Dryzek, 2011).

Claudia Chwalisz (2015) provides evidence to support this claim. She argues that contemporary populism should serve as warning for political institutions to up their game and "revisit their approaches to governance and representation" (Chwalisz, 2015, p. 97). She finds democratic innovations, particularly mini-publics, as having "real potential to improve the legitimacy and efficacy of our political system in the long term." Drawing on UK survey data where UK Independence Party (UKIP) voters—as well as displaying more dissatisfaction with current political arrangements—are more enthusiastic about the prospect of participating in citizens' assembly-type forums, Chwalisz finds that "these ideas have popular support, particularly among those groups in the electorate who currently feel that they do not have a voice in the political decisions being made by their governing elites" (Chwalisz, 2015, p. 55).

Decades of research on the acceptability of mini-publics among citizens bear out Chwalisz's (2015) argument. There are example of mini-publics working in deeply divided societies, such as deliberative polls in Northern Ireland (Luskin et al., 2014) or deliberative forums between ex-combatants and paramilitaries in Colombia (Jaramillo & Steiner, 2014). There have been experiments that show how group polarization can be overcome in carefully designed forums (Grönlund, Herne, & Setälä, 2015). We can now only wonder how the American elections or Brexit referendum could have turned out had a "deliberation day" been convened where citizens deliberated systematically before the vote. Political competition requires more than the people speaking, but the people thinking. Mini-publics offer the space for political will formation—the "real opportunity to think in depth about what they really want done" (Fishkin, 2018, p. 1).

What is it about mini-publics that deliver these dazzling outcomes? One oft-cited reason is the composition of mini-publics. Representativeness—sourced through random selection—is its source of democratic legitimacy. As well as ensuring

who gets "into the room," a representative sample will be perceived positively by the wider population—those outside the room. One of the attractive things about getting a randomly selected group of citizens to deliberate on an issue is that these citizens are "people like me." If those outside the room can identify with those inside the room, then there is more likely to be trust and confidence in the process. This is one of the reasons that Chwalisz (2015) suggests the populist voters are more enthusiastic about the prospect of a randomly selected mini-public: if "people like me" are able to participate in deliberative decision-making in this way, then mini-publics could give "people a genuine voice in the decisions affecting them" (Chwalisz, 2015, pp. 64-65).

There are, of course, many well-developed critiques of mini-publics. One such assessment relates to the issue of design, especially when scaling up. Several recent Citizens' Juries have involved upwards of 100 citizens deliberating face to face. The obvious implications of this are that dialogically, it becomes a lot harder to adhere to deliberative quality and principles with that number of people (Chambers, 2009). In practice, much of the discussion is carried in small groups with plenary sessions. Another attempt at scaling up deliberative moments in Australia involves a whole range of pre-engagement and outreach events: open meetings held in communities, pop-up events at shopping centres, school competitions—all aimed at engaging a broader public on an issue.

However, this carries its own risks. In the recent highly contentious issue of nuclear fuel storage in South Australia, the overall program (which involved a Citizen Jury of 350 people, as well as additional outreach and public engagement events) was titled "Get to Know Nuclear" (see Participedia, 2016; Russell, 2017). An explicit aim of the program was to ensure that the public properly understood a recent Royal Commission Report into the possibility of nuclear fuel storage in the state. This does not sit too comfortably with deliberative ideals, where citizens educate themselves rather than having education imposed on them by elites (Manin, 1987).

Another set of critiques question the extent of public enthusiasm towards mini-publics. Some scholars (e.g. Mudde, 2004; Stoker, 2016) argue that populist voters do not favour enhanced or increased participation. They just want politicians to get on with the job. Responsiveness, not inclusiveness, is the answer to the dangers of populism. According to Cass Mudde, "What [populism] demand[s] is responsive government, i.e. a government that implements policies that are in line with their wishes. However, they want the politicians to come up with these policies without bothering them, i.e. without much participation from them" (Mudde, 2004, p. 558).

Similarly, Will Jennings, Gerry Stoker, and Joe Twyman (2016) suggest that those discontented with politics want "latent representation" (p. 880) rather than more participation. Pauline Hanson, the headline-grabbing leader of Australia's One Nation Party, has called for further citizen participation in politics, with one policy advocating a Citizen Initiated Referendum to vote on any changes to the Australian Constitution. But the call is specifically for *direct* democracy and not necessarily *deliberative* democracy. Moreover, calls for greater participation from those with populist inclinations does not tell us anything about their willingness to endorse or accept either the process or the outcome of a randomly-selected mini-public. Chwalisz's (2015) populist support for mini-publics is premised on being in the room in the first place. For those outside the room, a mini-public remains as closed-off and distant as the existing deliberations of political elites.

We Are Scaling Up Incorrectly

This leads to our second point. One could argue that mini-publics, by themselves, are not the answer to democracy's legitimacy deficit. This seems like an obvious answer, especially in the context of deliberative democracy's systemic turn where scholars have turned their attention towards larger political projects and the public sphere as sites for deliberation beyond the forum (e.g., Dryzek, 2009; Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012; Elstub, Ercan & Mendonça, 2018). For some time though, deliberative democracy maintained an arguably disproportionate (though certainly not exclusive) focus on these carefully designed forums. Simone Chambers (2009) made this observation almost a decade ago, when she suggested that scholarship had focused too much on democratic deliberation at the expense of mass democracy.

Today, there is an increasing realisation that even when there are well-funded, thoughtfully designed, and high-quality deliberations that occur in mini-publics, these have little bearing if the epistemic gains and civic virtues developed in these forums do extend to the broader public sphere. Simon Niemeyer (2014), as well as Nicole Curato and Marit Böker (2016) have made these arguments when they conceptualise the notion of "scaling up" deliberation. To scale up deliberation is not simply to host bigger and better mini-publics but to think of ways in which mini-publics can be linked to the discourses of the broader public sphere. These arguments have a less enthusiastic, though not entirely unsupportive view of sortition, as advocated by David Van Reybrouk (2016) and Brett Hennig (2017). What use is it if we replace politicians with a randomly selected group of citizens if the public sphere, for the most part, is still characterised by partisan point scoring, cheap political tactics, spin doctoring and market-driven media? Reforms

to deliberative politics should focus equally on reforming the broader structures that shape the character of discourse in the public sphere. To this extent, we agree with Cristina Lafont's (2015) argument that democracy has no shortcuts.

Mini-publics are not *the* magic bullet antidote to democratic deficits. This is not a novel point, but it bears repeating. When viewed from this perspective it becomes clear how such democratic innovations, even at the larger scale, could not have averted the rise of contemporary populism without the corresponding changes needed in the broader public sphere (see Niemeyer, 2014).

Mini-Publics Are Not The Answer

Third, and perhaps the least developed of the ways to think about mini-publics, has to do with the inherent limitations of these forums in processing bigotry and hateful rhetoric.

The logic of mini-publics primes participants to be respectful, public-spirited, other-regarding, and open-minded. Citizens who harbour deep scepticism, strongly held views, and defensiveness in their private interests may not find space for understanding and support of their views in these settings. In other words, mini-publics—by design—aim to manage loud and insistent voices by emphasising virtues of reflection, respect, and public-spiritedness. In turn, discursive enclaves such as those found online, or in assemblies of populist supporters, provide a more hospitable space for impassioned, confrontational and sometimes bigoted discourses.

While mini-publics provide the opportunity to for citizens to carefully examine their prejudices, it is possible that some do not want to reconsider their views. Kersty Hobson and Simon Niemeyer's (2012) work on climate change deniers provide evidence to this point. Their research reveals how deliberation not only fails to dispel the scepticism of climate deniers, but it also made them feel they are not listened to. Qualitative data from the study suggested that climate deniers were unmoved by the deliberations and ended up more dogmatic and belligerent, with the authors concluding that "public climate change communication strategies or interventions can unintentionally alienate such individuals further" (Hobson & Niemeyer, 2013, p. 408). There is also data that demonstrates how people with a "social dominance orientation" tend to see participatory processes as rigged, if these forums to do not end up with their preferred outcomes (Werner & Marien, 2016).

Such alienation is further compounded by the importance of trust. Mini-publics typically rely on information presented by experts, and we now know that many people have reportedly "had enough of experts" (see Clarke & Newman, 2017). Even though the best-designed forums are independently organised and facilitated, we must consider that people may still simply not trust the process, organiser or the expertise presented. This appears to be the case in South Australia's nuclear process (Russell, 2017). There was considerable speculation that the state Premier, Jay Weatherill, explicitly supported the nuclear storage proposal before the public engagement process even began. The perception that the decision had already made arguably eroded trust in the subsequent deliberative engagements. Ultimately, the jury rejected the nuclear storage proposal citing distrust in the state government's ability to handle major economic issues as one of the reasons. Not long afterwards this outcome, the Premier called for a state-wide referendum on the proposal (ABC News, 2016). Given the considerable investment in the Citizen Jury, the referendum proposal served to further undermine public trust in both the South Australian government and their program of public engagement.

The above example highlights the importance of linking mini-publics to the broader public sphere. As Carolyn Hendriks (2006) pointed out over a decade ago, "micro" deliberative events do not reside in a political vacuum; it is not possible to simply design out the broader context and power relations. However, we can acknowledge that fact and begin to consider its implications in practice.

The Future of Democratic Deliberation

If these are the issues that deliberative democracy did not (yet) get right, what are the options for moving forward in the face of surging populism? Below we offer three conjectures for moving from today's hateful rhetoric towards deliberative reason.

First, deliberative democrats must push on in diversifying the strands of deliberative theory. While the breadth and depth of current populism's anti-democratic tendencies did come as a surprise to many, this must not invalidate the increasingly diverse body of work that deliberative democracy has achieved over the years. There are things that we do know. We do know, for example, that alternative forms of speech, those that do not rely on the aural quality of voice but rely on the creative, playful, emotional, sometimes carnivalesque forms of claim-making, can deepen democratic discourse more than carefully constructed arguments (see Rollo, 2016). We do know the power of disruptive politics, of spectacular protests, of democratic silences, and active listening in enriching the

moral economy of democratic discourse (Dodge, 2009; Mendonça & Ercan, 2015; Smith, 2016). These are important theoretical and empirical developments. The challenge now is to imagine how these developments speak to the practical demands of democracy in today's troubled times—in the same way that deliberative theorists were able to speak to democratic professionals in the field's "early days."

Second, the supposed "populist apocalypse" can be taken as a signal to forge new meaningful connections between deliberative theory and practice. The considerable developments in the past fifteen years or so, especially the systemic turn, have yet to gain ground in current deliberative practice. The critiques presented here are hardly new (e.g., Parkinson, 2003, 2006), but practice is still dominated by mini-publics. The spiteful rhetoric often associated to populism renews that challenge for deliberative democrats to revisit the void between theory and practice and to consider how theory can contribute to deliberative democracy in practice. This will require greater collaboration between deliberative theorists and practitioners not only in person but in substantive terms. This is not beyond the realm of possibility, as Simon Burall's (2016) report on UK democracy as a deliberative system shows, or Thamy Pogrebinschi's (2017) LATINNO project which documents the meaningful impact of deliberative processes in the everyday governance of Latin American countries.

Third, it is worth revisiting how deliberative democrats conceptualise power and its relationship to knowledge. Today's democratic erosion reminds us of the insidious legacies of power, the kind that is taken for granted, but experienced every day. Here we are reminded of C. Wright Mills's (2007) epistemologies of ignorance, where the solution is not to simply offer facts but to unpack the structural phenomenon that disables people from seeing a certain way. There is a form of ignorance that "resists . . . an ignorance that fights back . . . an ignorance that is active, dynamic, that refuses to go away' (Mills, 2007, p. 13). Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris's (2016) observation that populism is a cultural, not an economic reaction resonates here, for we see a generation that aims to cling on to a form of social dominance that is seemingly under threat by current trajectories of cosmopolitan liberalism. Whether it is mini-publics that can best respond to "epistemologies of ignorance" is worth debating, although arguments have already been made in favour of disruption (Hayward, 2017), or pluralisation of media sources as ways in which epistemologies of ignorance can be counteracted.

We conclude our comments on these three points of reflection. Deliberative democracy may have been the punching bag of those who remain sceptical of the virtues of participation governed by reason, but it has also been a beacon of hope

for visionaries who keep on asking how we can make democracy better. This field of democratic theory and practice has a lot more to offer, especially when we set our gaze towards spaces for reform beyond the forum.

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