

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Another Way for Deepening Democracy Without Shortcuts

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This article examines *Democracy without Shortcuts* by Cristina Lafont, focusing on its key concept of self-government. Lafont's argument and criticism of existing democratic theories in terms of the self-government perspective are very persuasive and insightful. However, this article argues that this perspective can be extended by referring to the recent development of the deliberative systems approach and considering its theoretical implications. The participatory conception of deliberative democracy argued in this book can be reconfigured by multiplying the sites of self-government.

Keywords: deliberative democracy; deliberative systems; self-government; family; multiple self-governments; private sphere

As dissatisfaction with democracy reaches a 'record-high' (Foa, Klassen, Slade, Rand and Collins 2020), democratic theorists are challenged to reconceptualize the ideal of democracy suitable for our times. Deliberative democracy is one of the most appealing options on the table today. All over the world, we have witnessed the explosion of experiments in democratic deliberation which aim to connect the voices of ordinary citizens to policymaking in various levels of governance (see Chwalisz 2019). These procedures, often called deliberative minipublics, have been welcomed by many scholars, practitioners, and policymakers for their track record in bridging polarized discourses, generating mutually acceptable decisions, and promoting political efficacy among citizens who have lost trust in democracy (Fishkin 2009; Fung 2007; Gastil and Levin eds. 2005; Grönlund, Bächtiger, and Setälä 2014; Smith 2009). The growing interest in minipublics is sometimes referred to as the *institutional turn* of the deliberative democracy research (Chambers 2003).

Within the scholarship of deliberative democracy, however, there have been strong critiques about the democratic quality of minipublics. This critique is most strongly articulated by Cristina Lafont (2019) in her book *Democracy without Shortcuts*, where she raises concerns about how minipublics could undermine the democratic ideal of self-government by promoting *blind deference* to the decision of minipublics (Ibid: 111). She then argues that only the 'participatory' conception of deliberative democracy can defend democracy in hard times. By this, she means a type of deliberation for 'justifying the coercive

power that citizens exercise over one another by trying to convince *each other* of reasonableness of the policies to which they are subject' (Lafont 2019: 168).

While recognizing the significance of Lafont's critique of minipublics, I propose another way for deepening democracy without shortcuts. Her criticism of democratic theories from the perspective of self-government is persuasive but this can be enriched by engaging recent developments in the deliberative systems approach to deliberative theory. I argue that the participatory conception of deliberative democracy can be reconceptualized by problematizing the sites where deliberation takes place and extending the democratic ideal of self-government to private spheres.

I develop this argument in three sections. First, I summarise and confirm the points of Lafont's argument. Second, I argue why pluralizing the concept of self-government is important. Finally, I draw a sketch of the multiple self-governments, where the deliberative system approach is applied and revised and the family is examined as a case.

1. Self-government as the Normative Criterion and Criticism of Democratic Theories

Democratic theorists, including deliberative democrats, consider political equality as one of the normative bases of deliberative democracy (see Swift 2006: 209–213; Dahl 1998; Beauvais 2018). Realizing the ideal of political equality is manifest in the design of minipublics through random selection and the equal consideration of participants' preferences (Fishkin 2009: 43, 54–55). Lafont contends that political equality is insufficient to defend the significance of democracy because it 'does not rule out political alienation' (Lafont 2019: 19). Aside from political equality, the *substance* of laws and policies that citizens

are bounded to obey must be considered (Lafont 2019: 19–22). Therefore, she identifies *self-government* as the fundamental concept of democracy. By self-government, Lafont refers to the democratic ideal where ‘all citizens can equally own and identify with the institutions, laws and politics to which they are subject’ (Ibid: 3). To realise self-government, citizens must have ‘some form of democratic control over political decision-making by the citizenry’ (Ibid: 7). Democratic control is compromised when citizens are expected to ‘blindly defer’ to decisions made by others (Ibid: 8). At risk with blind deference is the ‘misalignment’ between what citizens believe and the content of the laws to which they are subject. Blind deference, Lafont argues, is a form of a ‘shortcut’ which bypasses ‘public deliberation about political decisions’ (Ibid: 3). This only serves to worsen than improve on democratic deficits contemporary societies face.

Various theories of democracy fail to uphold the political ideal of self-government. Deep pluralist theories, which include not only the ‘purely proceduralist’ approach emphasizing majority rule but also agonistic pluralists (Lafont 2019: Chapter 2), are criticized for shortcutting the democratic process. For deep pluralists, due to the impossibility of overcoming serious disagreements among citizens, majoritarian procedures are the ‘only fair way’ to settle them (Ibid: 54). However, relying on majoritarian procedures means the ‘procedural shortcut’ (Ibid: 35) for solving disagreements because it removes political decisions from participatory moments, from ‘debates in the public sphere’ (Ibid: 3). Lafont also criticises epistemic democracy for its shortcut of democratic process based on citizens’ political ignorance (Ibid: Chapter 3). Focusing exclusively on the substantive quality of outcomes will bring technocratic understanding of politics and result in an expertocratic shortcut.

Deliberative democracy itself, Lafont argues, is not immune from democratic shortcuts. She criticises the ‘lottocratic’ conceptions of deliberative democracy or those that focus exclusively on minipublics (Ibid: Chapter 4). Although there are two reasons for justifying the decisional status of minipublics, both result in blind deference. The *epistemic* justification brings blind deference to experts and the democratic justification leads to blind deference to the majority. In order to avoid these shortcuts, Lafont emphasizes the pursuit of a ‘macro-deliberative strategy’ (Ibid: 134–136). For her, the ‘micro-deliberative strategy’ of using minipublics is ‘optional or dispensable for the realization of deliberative democracy’ and must be rejected (Ibid: 135–136). Instead of using minipublics as shortcuts, Lafont proposes not to empower minipublics but to explore democratic uses of them for empowering the citizenry so that they ‘can reach a considered opinion in the political decisions to which they are subject’ (Ibid: 146). They include contestatory, vigilant, and anticipatory uses of minipublics. The contestatory uses of minipublics mean, given the actual divide of public opinion between consolidated majority and a dissenting minority, utilizing the ‘independent evidence provided by minipublics’ to ‘help minorities

challenge consolidated majorities’ and then to scrutinize public opinions. The vigilant uses of minipublics mean that minipublics function to signal the citizenry that the ‘political system is not responsive to their needs to have access to quality information’ (Ibid: 152). Finally, the anticipatory uses of minipublics mean that minipublics take the role of demonstrating what citizens would think when enough information and knowledge are provided to them (Ibid: 146–159).

Lafont’s arguments are persuasive especially in identifying how various models of democracy endorse shortcuts that compromise the ideal of self-government. There is, however, a missed opportunity in Lafont’s work, which is to engage in developments in deliberative democracy beyond the study of minipublics. In the next section, I propose a pluralistic concept of self-government by contextualizing this concept to various sites of deliberation.

2. Pluralizing the Concept of Self-government

One taken-for-granted assumption in Lafont’s work is about the different sites where democracy unfolds. Throughout the book, Lafont assumes that democracy takes place in institutions of the state and government, thereby limiting her conceptualization of what self-government means in democratic life. Such focus of analysis has blind spots. For decades, democratic theorists and empirical social scientists have drawn their attention to extra-institutional sites of democratic practice where decisions and possible manifestations of blind deference are manifest (Ercan, Hendriks, and Boswell 2018; Felicetti 2018; Mendonça and Ercan 2015; Nishiyama 2019; Rowe 2018).

In my critique, I particularly focus on the many *sites* of deliberative democracy. Scholars of deliberative democracy have long acknowledged that ‘deliberation occurs in multiple and partly overlapping sites’ (Ercan and Dryzek 2015: 242). Debates over the ‘all affected principle’ and the ‘all subjected principle’ emphasize the non-obviousness of sites of democracy (Goodin 2007; Fraser 2008: Chapter 4). While Lafont certainly examines the shortcuts in self-government in various democratic conceptions, the question of where democracy is located is hardly discussed.

To be fair, Lafont is aware of this problem. She states that ‘a participatory concept of participatory democracy’ proposed in her book ‘necessarily aims at achieving higher levels of citizen participation in direct political action’ and that ‘it may also welcome proposals for extending democracy to the workplace, the family, and so on’ (Lafont 2019: 29). This recognition, however, only comes in a footnote.

However, as with the question of political activism, the proper extension of democracy beyond the political system is an open question that participatory conceptions of deliberative democracy may answer *in different ways*. Addressing this complex question is beyond the scope of this book. (Ibid: 29, note 22, emphasis mine)

There are obviously good reasons why a book needs to limit the scope of the study. In this case, Lafont decides to set the parameters of her discussion to democracy within the political system. This, I argue, is a critical flaw. For a book that makes a case for the participatory conception of democracy, it is essential to recognize that participation takes place beyond the political system. Limiting the discussion of shortcuts and blind deference within the political system, in other words, is too narrow to develop a participatory conception of deliberative democracy.

Let me elaborate on this argument. I support Lafont's view that blind deference to the decisions of others is a violation of self-government and therefore a threat to democratic control. However, the problem to be considered here is the scope of 'decision of others.' By stating that '[t]he proper extension of democracy beyond the political system' is 'beyond the scope of this book,' she implicitly assumes that 'decision of others' is made only at the 'political system' level. However, we can re-examine the decision of others as something made in multiple layers of power dynamics surrounding us; for example, decision by community members in one's area of residence, decision by colleagues in the workplace, decision by classmates in schools, decision by football teammates in community events, and even decision by family members. All of these are 'decisions of others' on issues related to different sites where one belongs. Citizens are then exposed to a variety of 'decision of others' in various settings and may therefore 'blindly defer to the decisions of others' in diverse sites. Deference, therefore, is pluralized.¹ When Lafont uses the term of political system, the state or government is probably assumed to be the 'system.' However, there can be more than one political system, and therefore the possibility of our 'blind deference to the decisions of others' exists in multiple dimensions.

These considerations lead us to radicalize the concept of self-government which is the key normative criterion in Lafont's book. If the ideal of self-government 'to ensure that all citizens can equally own and identify with institutions, laws, and policies to which they are subject' is fundamental to democracy, its scope should not be limited to 'institutions, laws, and policies' in the state or government dimension (Lafont 2019: 3). Almost all of them are not only at the state or government but also at any other sites and locations related to us should be subject to self-government. The public sphere, for example, is not only a site for better opinion formation whose transmission to decision-making at the state or government is expected, but also should be examined as a site of decision-making on issues appearing among people there. This investigation finally leads to self-government in the private sphere, which includes family and friendship. The private sphere is not only a site for opinion formation and political socialization but also a site for decision-making. Decisions made in the home are not limited in the intimate sphere but expand to other spheres of life including economy, society, and policy. Thus, the radicalization of self-government means understanding the sites and objects of self-government as more pluralized and multi-layered.

3. Multiple Self-governments and Nested Deliberative Systems

It should be emphasized that such arguments in the previous section are not necessarily far-fetched in research into deliberative democracy, especially with the 'systemic turn' in deliberative democracy (Dryzek 2010; Elstub *et al.* 2018; Parkinson 2006; Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012).² Two key points are significant here. The first is that the systemic approach tells us that focusing on individual institutions and/or practices is not sufficient for deliberative democracy research. What we have to look at and examine is the *connection* between various institutions and practices including non-deliberative ones as a system. This is the reason why a study focusing exclusively on a minipublic is criticized by the deliberative systems approach. Studying minipublics is still important but its focus should be on the connection of such citizen fora with other institutions, spheres, and practices.³

The second point of the systemic approach, particularly important for this article, is its theoretical concern in relativizing the state-government centric conception of deliberative democracy. A *system* is not necessarily conceptualized only at the state or government level. The components of a deliberative system, such as public space, empowered space, transmission, and accountability, are not necessarily what are familiar to us at the state or governmental level (Dryzek 2010). Indeed, a transnational deliberative system is an example of this system (Stevenson and Dryzek 2014).⁴ This concept can be applied not only to sites beyond the state but also to sites *below* the state. This, I argue, is an important intervention in the development of deliberative systems research. The 'systemic turn' has brought substantive developments in deliberative democracy research and has broadened the scope of deliberation beyond minipublics. However, its tendency to focus on the large or mass scale might lead to lose sight of the opportunity to understand various *small* sites other than institutionalized minipublics as sites for deliberative democracy to take a participatory character. Rethinking the previous focus on small-scale institutions does not necessarily mean to turn to the large scale; attention to the small-scale, not formally institutionalized spaces is possible. We can apply the concept of deliberation system to the private spheres such as family, friendship and intimate relationships as well as to the national and transnational levels (Tamura 2014). We know that Jane Mansbridge's proposition of the concept of deliberative systems focused on 'everyday talk' in the private sphere (Mansbridge 1999).⁵ Even in the case of family and friends, in order to resolve disagreements and conflicts, members will have to make decisions in a way that is reasonably acceptable to each other even if it includes moments of conflict. If the process leading to this decision is seen as *deliberative*, it can be examined in terms of the systemic perspective. The private sphere can be conceptualized as a part of the *nested* deliberative systems where it is not only a component of the macro-deliberative system but also a system by itself where opinion formation and decision making would be done in a manner similar to those at the macro-level system even

without formal political institutions (Tamura 2014; 2017: Chapter 8). Conceptualizing the family as a deliberative system at a micro-level means that we can examine even institutions and spaces *outside* a family in the usual sense as components of the family which is a deliberative system (Tamura 2019). Therefore, the boundary of the family as a deliberative system does not necessarily coincide with that of the family in the usual sense.⁶

How can we examine the family as a deliberative system by using concepts of the deliberative systems approach? I sketch it out here relying on the conceptualization of components of a deliberative system by Dryzek and colleagues (Dryzek *et al.* 2019: Chapter 6; Stevenson and Dryzek 2014; Dryzek 2010). *Empowered space* is necessary because there are conflicts and confrontations even in family, and family members have to resolve them through making decisions. Ideally, they are expected to engage with their issues and make decisions through deliberation. An important point is that the boundary of the *public space* in the system does not necessarily coincide with that of a family in the usual sense. The public space as a component of the family as a deliberative system can extend beyond the boundary of a family in the usual sense: the 'subaltern counter-public' suggested by Nancy Fraser is brought to mind (Fraser 1997). Due to the strong norm of gender division of labor, women may not be able to understand their situation appropriately and talk critically. The role of subaltern counter-public outside the family in the usual sense is important; it will be able to offer opportunities for women to meet new and possibly oppositional ideas and discourses on family matters and then can encourage them so that they can deliberate with family members. Furthermore, even the parliament or assembly, which is usually supposed as the empowered space for a macro-deliberative system, can be examined as a public space of the family as a deliberative system because parliamentary debates and decisions can be sources of new knowledge and perspectives for family members engaging with deliberative decision making at the empowered space in the family. The relationship between government and family is reversed here. In case of a deliberative system in commonly supposed sense family is a part of public space and parliament is empowered space on the one hand, parliament is a part of public space and empowered space is found in the deliberative system as a family on the other hand. How does *transmission* occur in a deliberative system as the family? Women empowered in public spaces are understood as one of the actors of transmission connecting the public space outside the family in the usual sense and empowered space inside it. The *accountability* of empowered space to the public space, including the subaltern counter-public, should be secured. However, it might be more difficult to figure out both transmission and accountability in the family as a deliberative system than other (more macro-level) deliberative systems because it might not rely on any representative institutions; it might be a more direct democratic system. Finally, *reflexivity* means that the reconstruction of the family as a system should be deliberative. The structure of the family as a deliberative

system is not static. Its comprehensive transformation, including divorce, is feasible. Reflexivity is important when we seek to avoid static, structural-functionalist examination in the deliberative systems approach (Curato *et al.* 2018; Mansbridge *et al.* 2012; Tamura 2014). The form and boundary of the family as a deliberative system can be seen as *performative* (Bächtiger and Parkinson 2018),⁷ and it is *contingent* which practice, rule, or (informal) institution can perform which function of the deliberative system. These are tentative, still insufficient, but show that the systemic approach can deal with multiple self-governments at multiple sites.

Components and their descriptions of the family as a deliberative system.

Components	Their Descriptions in the Family as a Deliberative System
Empowered space	Decision making by the family members
Public space	Venues and forums located outside the family in the usual sense, from 'subaltern counter-publics' to even the state, can be included.
Transmission and accountability	Transmission can be performed by women empowered at the public space can take it. Accountability must be ensured. But family as a deliberative system might be direct-democratic.
Reflexivity	Reconstruction and even deconstruction (e.g. divorce) of the family should be deliberative.

With these two points in mind, how can we evaluate Lafont's original arguments on democracy without shortcuts? First, it is true that her arguments contain a systemic perspective to some extent. She considers the possible forms of connection between actual policymaking, actual public opinion, and considered public opinion (Lafont 2019: Chapter 5). The question is how we can envisage the 'alternative uses of minipublics that could help improve the quality of public deliberation such that the citizenry can reach a considered opinion on the political decisions to which they are subject' (Ibid: 146). As mentioned earlier, she proposes three types of alternative uses of minipublics and examines them; contestatory, vigilant, and anticipatory. This kind of consideration is systemic. The role and significance of minipublics should be considered in terms of their connection with other components in a society, actual policymaking in the empowered space, actual public opinion in the public space, and transmission between them.

Second, the extent of her systemic analysis is, however, still insufficient. The systemic connection between different components in her case is supposed only between state or government and society. Her concern is a political system in the usual sense. Looking for other 'political systems' in various sites and examining them in terms of the deliberative systemic perspective are crucial

for multiplying the democratic ideal of self-government proposed by Lafont. This reconceptualization will contribute to the complete decoupling of the deliberative system approach from methodological statism, where the research of democracy is conducted explicitly or implicitly on the premise of the state or something like the state.⁸ While some deliberative democrats attempt to conceptualize a system not as a space but as a network or connection (see Ercan *et al.* 2018), I think it is still uncertain if such attempts will be able to completely overcome methodological statism. For that purpose, returning our focus to sites which are separated from the state and conceptualizing them as political (and deliberative) systems by themselves are needed.

Conclusion

This article reviewed Lafont's key normative concept of self-government and showed its usefulness in assessing existing democratic theories. I pointed out the narrowness of her conception of self-government, particularly focusing on the sites-problem of democratic theory. The location of the site of democracy is not self-evident. Therefore, with reference to the deliberative systems approach, I proposed a conception of deliberative democracy based on a pluralized understanding of both self-government and sites of democracy. Another way for defending and deepening the democratic ideal of self-government is possible.

Notes

- ¹ In the circumstance of pluralized deference to the decisions of others, the risk of blind deference might increase because some sites of deference will not be equipped with democratic mechanism as we know it such as parliament and political parties. However, it is not so serious a problem as democracy is not necessarily electoral-representative democracy, or liberal democracy in this sense. The idea of *deliberative* democracy becomes important as it does not necessarily presuppose electoral-representative institutions as we know them; it is not necessarily liberal democratic (Dryzek 2000; 2010; Landemore 2017; Tamura 2017). Democratic legitimacy and accountability can be secured through deliberation. Deliberative democracy might flourish in different cultural contexts where electoral-representative institutions are not necessarily premised (Sass 2018; Wedeen 2008). About different consideration based on the idea of nonelectoral representation with authorization and accountability, see Montanaro (2012).
- ² Using the word 'Approach' might be insufficient. Nicole Curato and her co-authors viewed the deliberative system also as an 'emancipatory *political* project' (Curato *et al.* 2019: 119ff.).
- ³ See, for example, Curato and Böker (2016) for the distinction of the 'internal' and 'external' qualities of minipublics based on a comparative analysis of four cases of Canada, Australia, France, and Italy. See also a reflection on a possible connection between minipublics and protest movements from a Japanese case in Tang *et al.* (2018).

⁴ See also Ercan *et al.* (2019) on another interesting reflection on 'communicative plenty' beyond national boundaries from the systemic perspective.

⁵ However, even Mansbridge's conceptualization of 'everyday talk' and 'societal decisions' in her later work (Mansbridge *et al.* 2012: 8–9) is still insufficient. See Tamura (2014; 2017: Chapter 8).

⁶ William Smith (2018) reminds us of the significance of the boundary problem for the deliberative systems approach.

⁷ The study by Bächtiger and Parkinson (2018) is very useful when we take the functionalist problem seriously, although my usage of the concept of contingency might be different from theirs.

⁸ See for example Bartelson (2001) and Little and Macdonald (2013) to understand how persistent the tendency of methodological statism is even among scholars whose primary concern is to overcome the state/government centric conception of politics and democracy.

Acknowledgements

I appreciate helpful and constructive comments from two anonymous reviewers and appropriate assistance by editors.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Tamura, T. (2020). Another Way for Deepening Democracy Without Shortcuts. *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*, 16(2), pp. 89–95. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.377>

Submitted: 15 February 2020 **Accepted:** 21 May 2020 **Published:** 14 October 2020

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