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Working through disagreement in deliberative forums



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ABSTRACT

Working through disagreement is a core deliberative activity, yet our knowledge of how disagreement exchanges unfold during deliberation is limited. This study analyzes this issue using eight National Issues Forums and a framework that identifies specific activities related to working through disagreement. Even though deliberators expressed opposing viewpoints during forums, there was minimal “working through” of these differences. Specific points of contention were not articulated clearly, causal logics were not critiqued, the accuracy and relevance of evidence went unexamined, and the relative costs and benefits of proposals were not compared. Even when disagreements were explored at length, the conversations often lacked explicit efforts at working through. These findings suggest that deliberative democracy scholars need to focus greater attention on factors that can promote or inhibit working through disagreements, as well as how participants’ approach to disagreement can influence whether desired deliberative outcomes are realized.

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1. Introduction

Disagreements are inevitable during deliberation, leading many scholars to view the process of working through these disagreements as a core task of deliberative talk (Barber, 1984; Bickford, 1996; Cohen, 1998; Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004; Fishkin, 2009; Mathews, 1999; Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002; Stromer-Galley, 2007). Deliberators need to do more than simply state opposing viewpoints and then vote on them (as aggregative models of democracy allow for). If a participant states an argument, those with contrary opinions should explain why they disagree, with the ensuing discussion exploring the contours of conflict, the logic of arguments made, and the accuracy of evidence offered in support. This process of working through differences, rather than simply accepting them, is one of the characteristics that distinguish deliberative democracy from aggregative forms.

This article examines the conversational dynamics present when disagreements arise during deliberative forums. How do participants approach and work through disagreements during deliberation? This paper brackets out the question of their psychological disposition toward disagreement and focuses instead on the process of working through in an effort to illuminate the mechanisms through which they dealt with disagreement. By doing so, we can gain a better understanding of the conversational dynamics that can stifle working through disagreement and what could be done to alter these patterns.

This examination of eight National Issues Forums indicates that when disagreements arise, they are short and undeveloped; participants rarely work through a disagreement in any meaningful way. In some cases the precise nature of the dispute is never clearly articulated, preventing deliberators from exploring it further. Even when the conflict is clear, participants usually do not critique the causal logic underlying opposing viewpoints, nor do they question the accuracy of evidence presented by others. Tradeoffs inherent in policy choices are often neglected, and even when they are discussed there is little

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back-and-forth examining the relative value of costs and benefits. Given these dynamics, it should not be surprising that there are few efforts at resolving disputes; most disagreements are simply dropped, with deliberators moving on to another topic. Even though there are some examples of working through disagreements during these forums, it is relatively scarce. These findings suggest that some of the assumptions that deliberative theorists make about disagreement are questionable and that the manner in which citizens deal with disagreement may limit the theorized benefits of deliberation.

2. Disagreement and deliberation

Deliberative democrats attach great importance to the process of working through disagreement, stressing that deliberators need to “weigh” choices in a “free” and “open” exchange (Barber, 1984; Bohman, 1996; Burkhalter, Gastil, & Kelshaw, 2002; Cohen, 1998; Fishkin, 2009; Mathews, 1999). For example, Gastil (2008, p. 20) identifies “weigh[ing] the pros, cons, and trade-offs among solutions” as a core activity of deliberation. Gutmann and Thompson (1996), in one of the seminal works in the literature, place disagreement at the center of deliberative practice: when there are moral disagreements over the appropriate course of action, citizens should deliberate on the issue, offer reasons appealing to the public good, and meet principles of fairness. After arguing that a deliberative approach is superior to both procedural and constitutionalist approaches, they develop a theory regarding the appropriate content of arguments during deliberation, contending that deliberators should offer mutually-acceptable reasons grounded in the public good. Thus, their work analyzes why an exchange of reasons over moral disagreements and the preferred content of those reasons should occur. What they neglect to do is take the next step and explore how citizens should exchange reasons. Person A makes a moral argument that comports with Gutmann and Thompson’s criteria but person B disagrees and offers a different argument. What happens then? Presumably there would be an exchange of ideas to work through the issue, but this process is not theorized. Gutmann and Thompson assume that if participants make mutually acceptable arguments, a robust deliberative process will follow. But there are many ways that people can go about discussing moral disagreements, and there is no guarantee that good arguments lead to a good discussion. What is missing is a framework for deliberators to exchange ideas and work through disagreements.

Some empirical literature explores the prevalence, effects, and nature of disagreement in deliberation. One line of inquiry explores attitudes toward disagreement and willingness to engage in disputes. Deliberators may have a predisposition against acknowledging and working through disagreement, preferring to avoid conflict (Mutz, 2006). Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) find the majority of Americans are turned off by conflict and subscribe to a model of politics that assumes there is a “right” way to solve social problems, viewing the pursuit of the common good as the goal of politics and believing there is an objective and obvious common good will create a disposition against airing conflict and working through disagreement

(see Eliasoph (1998) for an alternative explanation for Americans’ avoidance of political conflict). Even if they do not mind it, participants might avoid disagreement because they view deliberation as being more educative rather than confrontational (Button & Mattson, 1999). If deliberation is an exercise in civic learning, it may not be necessary to work through differences; stating ideas will be sufficient. Stromer-Galley and Muhlberger (2009), however, find that high levels of disagreement in deliberative forums does not decrease participant satisfaction or willingness to partake in future deliberative events, suggesting that the preference to avoid conflict may not be as strong, or as universally applicable, as such scholars as Hibbing and Theiss-Morse suggest.

A second line of inquiry employs various ways of documenting the extent of disagreement in an effort to determine whether deliberators were exposed to heterogeneous viewpoints and what effect this exposure has (Black, Burkhalter, Gastil, & Stromer-Galley, 2011; Polletta & Lee, 2006; Stromer-Galley, 2007). Stromer-Galley and Muhlberger (2009) find high levels of disagreement coupled with low levels of agreement, as well as low disagreement coupled with high agreement, leads to increased citizen satisfaction with deliberation and a greater willingness to participate in future deliberative events. Price et al. (2002) find that the more disagreement present the higher the opinion quality; when participants are exposed to opposing viewpoints, they offer more reasons to support their own views. Exposure to divergent viewpoints may also lead participants to alter their opinions (Barabas, 2004). Generally, the literature finds the presence of disagreement to have positive impacts on deliberative outcomes.

A third strand in the literature explores how disagreement is dealt with and managed during deliberation. The Discourse Quality Index (DQI) (Steiner, Bachtiger, Spornelli, & Steenbergen, 2004), one of the most comprehensive empirical studies of deliberation, analyzes how individuals make arguments, how they respond to counterarguments, and whether there are attempts at a constructive resolution (for additional applications of the DQI see Bachtiger & Hangartner, 2010; Steenbergen, Bachtiger, Spornelli, & Steiner, 2003; Steffensmeier & Schenk-Hamlin, 2008). Their coding scheme captures part of the working through process effectively, especially in the context of parliamentary debates, but misses some of the nuances of how individuals may respond to disagreement and the different forms it can take.

This research fits into the last category by examining how disagreements are managed by developing a framework for working through disagreement and applying it to eight forums. I bracket out citizen predispositions toward disagreement, and what impact it may have on deliberative outcomes, focusing instead on the conversational dynamics when disagreements arise. Of course attitudes toward disagreement will influence how individuals deal with them, but we can analyze conversational dynamics without reference to the underlying beliefs that motivate participant behavior. The focus of this analysis is not on why participants evade or welcome disagreements, nor the effects of disagreement on participant attitudes, but

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