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Deliberative democracy is a political theory that requires legitimate decision making to be based on deliberation among citizens. The theory is often contrasted with the purely aggregative voting methods used in many democratic societies, as well as the self-interested bargaining typified in economics. Deliberative democracy is compatible with science and technology communication theory in that both broad theories promote participation, engagement, and accessible knowledge for all people, not just for the powerful or elite. In contrast to methods of public engagement with science and technology such as *cafés scientifique* (or science *cafés*), deliberative procedures are generally more focused on outcomes and decisions rather than on purely discussions. While enhanced knowledge and participation are benefits in both types of activity, deliberative processes typically involve a definitive conclusion of some sort. Consensus conferences typically seek this type of conclusion, as do citizen juries and deliberative polls.

Controversial issues such as stem cell research, nuclear technology, and genetic modification have been the subject of deliberative democracy initiatives in attempts to ensure that political decisions reflect people's interests and preferences and thereby justify and legitimize policy. Deliberative democracy is associated with fairer decision making because it is assumed that when contributing to a public discussion, people consider the common good, not just their own interests.

Whereas when voting privately, people may be inclined to make decisions for their own benefit, without considering impacts on others, discussing views publicly encourages people to reflect on the rationality of their perspective and on how others will perceive it. Considering an issue from different perspectives could lead to a change in attitude, which could be more aligned with the public good. Through deliberation, it is expected that citizens and their representatives will arrive at decisions that all can find acceptable, even though individuals' reasons for accepting a decision might be different. In addition, public discussion and deliberation allows people to gather more information, which can lead to fairer opinions coupled with greater education. This knowledge transfer, although perhaps less significant for political theorists, has significant appeal for science and technology communicators. Because deliberation allows time and resources for listening to different perspectives and because it encourages consideration of rational arguments, it often promotes public understanding of science and technology, given the likelihood that aspects of science and technology are often present in contentious policy issues.

How deliberative democracy should happen is the subject of deliberation itself. Some authors argue that rationality should not be a rigid condition of deliberative participation. Indeed, some argue that rhetorical or emotional arguments can have a valid place in deliberation and should not be excluded from decision-making processes, as long as such persuasive techniques do not involve coercion or undermine processes of collective decision making.

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Some take issue with the perceived superiority of expert opinions and claimed objectivity of science. Particularly when used to justify and inform political decisions, value judgments behind science should also be considered.

Deliberative theorists are divided on whether the public has inherently different interests and desires; deliberation involves conflict unless there is harmony in people's values and desires, which will lead to consensus. Either way, respect for others' contributions is an important condition of effective deliberation. Since deliberation does not guarantee that consensus around a decision will be reached, the process can include better representation of different views and better engagement with a range of people; if an ultimate decision is not compatible with some perspectives, however, the benefits of engagement can be lost if people feel their opinions are not reflected in the outcome. For this reason, it is essential that deliberation procedures and eventual decision making are transparent so that people can see how their contribution and perspective fit into the broader picture.

Transparency also guards against manipulation. Persuasive groups or individuals with more power or better communication skills can sway deliberative processes. It is not guaranteed that after discussion, the perspective that best reflects public good will dominate. Political equality is a concern for deliberative theorists; although it is unrealistic to expect everyone to participate in deliberative processes, it is important that every person capable of rational communication has the right to participate and that deliberative methods are focused on accessibility for different types of people.

The term deliberative democracy first appeared in 1980, in a book chapter by Joseph M. Bessette called "Deliberative Democracy: The Majority Principle in Republican Government." The idea originated as part of a discussion on constitutional democracy. Many deliberative democracy theorists are focused on the idea's application in political settings; however, in science and technology communication, deliberative processes are used by organizations with other focuses as well. Deliberative democracy is increasingly a part of decision making in health sciences, where organizational policies are sometimes made in consultation with patients and caregivers.

See also

Citizens Jury, Consensus Conference, Deliberative Polling, Science Café, Upstream Engagement

Further Readings

Elster, J. (Ed.). (1998). *Deliberative democracy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

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