Intrinsic and Instrumental: 
A Critical Introduction to Deliberative Democracy

“I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome direction, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion through education.”

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Deliberative democracy attempts to both ask and answer the question of how spaces can be created “in which citizens can discover their capacity to respond to or generate change?” (qtd. Nabatchi, 2012, p. 1). Ned Crosby, creator of the citizen jury method, answers the question by saying that deliberative democracy is really a simple proposal: “we must adopt methods that will allow Americans to speak with an informed and caring voice about the directions our nation should be going” (Crosby, 2003, p. 1). While Crosby is correct in broad strokes, a cursory review of the deliberative democracy field demonstrates the theoretical and practical diversity of proposed methods, showing that the adoption of deliberative democracy is far from a simple proposal. The first section of this paper will provide a comprehensive overview of the deliberative democracy field and will define the concept, examine its underlying assumptions, review the original motivations for the emergence of the field, and briefly survey the current state of deliberative democracy theory and practice. The second section will critically examine two key claims that represent the broad “intrinsic and instrumental” rationales routinely used to justify deliberative democracy: inclusion and civic education (Nabatchi, 2012). Along with an examination of the strengths and weaknesses of these claims, a quick outline of future directions will consider possible ways the field may reconcile the actuality of current practices with the theoretical ideal. Finally, the paper will conclude by posing the question of whether or not the promises of deliberative democracy are worth the constraints of reality.

Section I: An Introduction to an Expansive Field

Defining Deliberation and Democracy

The concept of deliberative democracy is both self-explanatory and revolutionary. The two key components of the concept are clearly deliberation and democracy. However, upon closer examination it is plain that these two components are by and large forgotten in today’s public decision-making processes and that deliberative democracy is therefore a revolutionary concept. In its dictionary definition, the word deliberation contains three aspects: internal reflection, external discussion, and the
quality of being slow or careful (Merriam-Webster, 2014). Reflection is essential because it demonstrates an individual’s willingness to consider another’s perspective, which is key for decision-making that affects groups of people (Dryzek, 2000). In some regards, internal reflection can be seen in any voting act. Deliberative democracy, however, focuses specifically on the belief that reasoned decision-making should be based on an exchange of ideas among group members (Parkinson, 2006; Weinstock & Kahane, 2010). Reasoning in this setting is about careful consideration rather than bargaining, pandering, manipulating, or coercing (Chappell, 2012; Parkinson, 2006; Dryzek, 2000). In fact, looking at reasoning as calm conversation between people and not just individual thought has prompted some deliberative democracy scholars to advocate for changing the field’s name to “discursive democracy” to better highlight this focus (Dryzek, 2000). Reasoning is also about being informed, in the sense of searching out the best information possible and not simply discounting experienced, traditional, or other non-scientific forms of knowledge (Cavalier, 2011; Corburn, 2002). Although internal reflection and reasoning is essential for participants, the group dynamic of dialogue in deliberation in this context cannot be overemphasized. As proclaimed in an oft-quoted mantra in deliberative democracy, “we think best when we think together” (Cavalier, 2011, p. 11).

The second key component of democracy as used in this field focuses on openness, inclusiveness, and most of all, the nature of public process. Openness refers to all perspectives having a voice in a deliberation. Although all of deliberative democracy highlights the need for inclusivity, it is the “difference democrats” that work most to bring attention to it (Chappell, 2012). As well as being open to all voices, inclusiveness is rooted in a deep belief in equality among citizens that encourages the field to provide disadvantaged and historically marginalized communities with genuine voices. Plurality has a complicated relationship with deliberative democracy, but in terms of inclusiveness, deliberative democracy is pluralistic in the recognition of the necessity “to communicate across difference without erasing difference” (Dryzek, 2000, p. 3).
Finally, and most important to the conception of democracy in the field of deliberative democracy, is the act of moving the locus of political dialogue out of the often private realm of individual voting and into the public sphere of community. Deliberative democracy’s focus on a public process helps to champion “other-regarding” motivations of citizens within a community, moving from a mentality of maximizing private preferences to one of promoting common good (Chappell, 2012; Weinstock & Kahane, 2010). As Cavalier notes, it is a movement from “‘what I want’ to ‘what we ought to do’” (2011, p. 17). In a time when many citizens view voting as the height of political participation in a democracy, deliberative democrats encourage us to reframe democracy as “less as a market for the exchange of private preferences, more as a forum for the creation of public agreements” (Parkinson, 2006, p. 3).

**Assumptions of the Deliberative Democracy Field**

Aside from these two defining pillars, the deliberative democracy field is also built from and continually shaped by a series of foundational assumptions and guiding beliefs. First and most fundamental is the core belief that people should have a genuine say in the making of decisions that directly affect them. This arises from a concern over the legitimacy and democratic extent of policy-making decisions in liberal democracies (Weinstock & Kahane, 2010; Parkinson, 2006). Second, drawing from this principle of mutual determination, deliberative democracy is predicated on an assumption that everyday citizens, regardless of education or income level, have the capacity to make informed judgments about the future of their society powerful enough to directly guide elected decision makers and possibly even result in direct implementation (Crosby, 2003; Simonsen & Robbins, 2000). Essentially, the making of public decisions or an active conception of citizenship, as compared to the more passive role seen with voting, should not be reserved exclusively for political and social elites (Weinstock & Kahane, 2010). Dryzek summarizes this belief in the deliberative power of citizens as “the idea of the public sphere as a reservoir of democratic authenticity” (2000, p. 4).
Expanding on the public aspect of democracy, a third guiding belief is in the value of promoting the civic nature of citizens by creating processes through which citizens can discover their own capacity as change agents and proponents of the common good. Nabatchi centralizes this underpinning direction by advocating that deliberative democracy be seen as one of a handful of concepts under the umbrella term “deliberative civic engagement” (2012). At the heart of civic engagement, she notes, is a belief that “a morally and civically responsible individual recognizes himself or herself as a member of a larger social fabric and therefore considers social problems to be at least partly his or her own; such an individual is willing to see the moral and civic dimensions of issues, to make and justify informed moral and civic judgments, and to take action when appropriate.” (Nabatchi, 2012, p. 7)

A fourth fundamental assumption of the field is that better decisions are crafted when we move away from a process of contestation and toward one of common problem solving (Weinstock & Kahane, 2010). Again, a deep-seated concern for the legitimacy of a majority wins decision-making system underpins this assumption and brings it back full circle with the first core belief that all people should have a genuine say in decisions that directly affect them.

**Practical and Philosophical Motivations for the Deliberative Democracy Field**

These four founding beliefs were generated simultaneously from two motivations that have been steering the course of democracy towards deliberation over the last thirty years. The first is a practical response to the increasingly antagonistic and apathetic political environments seen in European and American democracies. The second is deeply linked to and inspired by the first, but as a theoretical response to liberal political theory comes less from on-the-ground movements and more from academic explorations of democracy.

Many academics and practitioners of deliberative democracy alike would agree that the driving motivation for the field is in response to the “irrationality of mass politics” (Parkinson, 2006, p. 1). This refers to polarization, political efficacy, turnout levels, and the general climate produced from a pendulum swinging between apathy and hyper-partisanship punctuated by “elections fought with
sound-bite rhetoric and political exclusion” (Chappell, 2012, p. 5). Encapsulating this environment is the concept of a “thin democracy” put forward to highlight the lack of political depth and absence of carefully considered decisions in a society (Simonsen & Robbins, 2000). A thin democracy is one that provides democratic essentials like universal suffrage and freedom of press, but “in no way guarantees that the citizens...will see themselves as any more than isolated individuals who periodically vote” with many likely believing their vote doesn’t matter (Cavalier, 2011, p. 9). Simonsen and Robbins reemphasize the narrow definition of political participation many of these “thin” democratic processes provide to citizens:

If citizens sometimes behave irresponsibly in politics, it is the role assigned to them. They have lost any other way to act, any means for influencing the governing process in positive and broad-minded terms... they are either mindless masses heard only through opinion polls or as “special pleaders, defending their own stuff against other aspirants.” (qtd. 2000 p. xiv)

Finally, early deliberative democrats were motivated by a practical recognition that voter apathy and low political efficacy were more predominant among those with less formal education and those less economically well off. This, coupled with an increase in campaign contributions corresponding with policy creation, raises concerns that democracy is a process driven by elites (Crosby, 2003). As political theorist Schattschneider comments, the voice of the people speaks with a “strong upper-class accent” (qtd. Chappell, 2012, p. 6).

Balancing this practical drive, deliberative democracy is also grounded in new ideas about democratic theory developed in the last century. Deliberative democracy academics have challenged liberal political theory by focusing on two elements: aggregative democracy driven by pluralist rival interest groups and the concept of rational choice. A pluralist view of democracy views the political process as an adversarial competition between interest groups with a moral justification of policies (Chappell, 2012; Weinstock & Kahane, 2010). Two key features distinguish the pluralist from the deliberative model of democracy. First, pluralism views democracy as a causal rather than rational process, where the efforts of different interest groups cause the direction of decision making. As
Weinstock and Kahane note, under the causal process “policy outcomes are thought not to emerge, at their best, from an impartial point of view but as the mechanical result of contending forces” (2010, p. 1). Second, there is an assumption that citizens’ interests are “pre-politically formed,” meaning that interests are ideological abstractions of an individual’s preferred understanding of the “good life” and that these interests will both vary little from one policy issue to the next and provide a moral justification for any final policy as passed by a majority (Weinstock & Kahane, 2010). Again Weinstock and Kahane help crystallize this concept by noting that “deliberative democrats have contested the liberal project of identifying moral principles that, once embodied in an appropriate choice situation, can generate governing political principles to which all reasonable citizens can agree” (2010, p. 3). Reasonableness is a central concept in pluralism; it is seen in a belief of rational choice, which purports that citizens act and vote in ways that help to secure their preferred outcomes. However, because of antagonism-laded processes and elite influence, this rational choice unfortunately becomes “a mechanism for removing ‘bad’ officials, rather than a manifestation of the public will” (Chappell, 2012, p. 4). In reviewing practical and philosophical motivations for the development of deliberative democracy, the field is seen as both reactive and proactive, and both pragmatic and idealistic.

**Current Deliberative Democracy Theory and Practice**

The field of deliberative democracy has grown wide and diverse both in theory and in practice from these roots. In looking at the current state of deliberative democracy theory, it is essential to recognize that the field overwhelmingly believes that “deliberative democracy has yet to achieve full theoretical maturity” (Weinstock & Kahane, 2010, p. 5). However young and immature the field may be, two theorists are coming to be recognized as the “fathers of deliberative democracy”: American philosopher John Rawls and German sociologist Jürgen Habermas (Dryzek, 2000). Although the field is recognized for drawing critical attention to the assumptions inherent in a pluralist democracy, Rawls demonstrates that it is also an extension of the liberal project with a fundamental twist in the form of
public or dialogical reason. Dialogical reason is born from the rejection of aggregative models of
democracy and is conceived as a means for process to move from elite interest brokering to a “thicker”
conception of democracy (Dryzek, 2000). As with communicating across differences without erasing
those differences, dialogical reason provides the hope that diverse citizens can deliberate in good faith
and find “creative ways of bridging their differences that could not simply be inferred from placing their
comprehensive doctrines side by side and looking for areas of overlap and compatibility” (Weinstock &
Kahane, 2010, p. 3). At the heart of dialogical reasoning is the giving of reasons, something that is not
easily accomplished in aggregative or antagonistic views of democracy.

Through this framework, Rawls provides a substantive theoretical model balanced by Habermas’
procedural re-envisioning of democratic practices. Habermas advocates for the “liberation of
communication for the emancipation of humanity,” urging designers of democratic processes to expand
the space for citizen participation and re-structure political communication to include reflection,
dialogue, and reason giving (Weinstock & Kahane, 2010, p. 4). To further this, Habermas has developed
a two-track model of deliberative democracy that seeks to pragmatically balance micro- and macro-
deliberation (Chappell, 2012; Parkinson, 2006). Micro-deliberation represents the archetypal form of
deliberative democracy, typically consisting of face-to-face dialogue and exploration of a given public
issue. Conversely, macro-deliberation is the asynchronous, fragmented, and disaggregated discussion
and civic engagement found throughout the public sphere (the proverbial “national conversation”). The
two-track model proposes that micro-deliberation can foster macro-deliberation and that we need to
work to improve mechanisms for transmitting the wisdom of the informal public sphere into the formal
public sphere of representative institutions (Parkinson, 2006).

Current practice can likewise be split into micro- and macro-deliberation. Micro-deliberation is
the more intentional, prescriptive, and formal of the two, as this category of processes includes those
that typically involve specific policy issues, facilitators, face-to-face dialogue, and a pre-arranged group
of people. Examples of micro-deliberation include deliberative polling, citizens’ initiative reviews, citizen juries, and consensus conferences (Chappell, 2012; Nabatchi, 2012). Though this model can occasionally be used as directive democracy to force the adoption of new policy, most of these processes are tied to the macro-deliberation mechanism of a public vote, as many deliberative democrats believe the best way to give a deliberative and trustworthy voice to the people is to tie it to voting (Crosby, 2003). For example, the citizen initiative review and citizen jury systems randomly select groups that are representative (based on age, gender, geographical location, partisanship, and other demographics) of populations impacted by a proposed initiative, referendum, political candidate, or new law (Crosby, 2003; Iaccarino, 2013). These citizens are guided by a neutral facilitator over the course of several days in a joint fact-finding and information-sharing deliberation that includes testimony from experts representing all foreseeable angles of the proposal. Throughout this process, the group is encouraged to think about the community as a whole, rather than just their own individual or ideological preferences (Crosby, 2003; Iaccarino, 2013). At the end, depending on the specifics of the process, the group of ordinary citizens crafts a consensus statement or a series of key findings with the exact number of panelist members in agreement indicated for each statement. These are then included in voter pamphlets or passed directly to legislators (Crosby, 2003; Iaccarino, 2013). Again, each of the dozens of micro-deliberation processes that have been tried in North American and Europe over the last thirty years is different, but each includes a focus on information-gathering, reason, discussion, and providing a final recommendation based on the interests of the common good.

In contrast to micro-deliberation, macro-deliberation takes places in less defined, informal, and overlapping public spheres. Macro-deliberation includes many conventional forms of public political participation, including debates, town halls, committee hearings, direct protest, and public testimony (Parkinson, 2006). The process of voting as traditionally understood is also closely linked to macro-deliberation, especially when discussion of policy options takes place within community groups like the
League of Women Voters (Crosby, 2003). The agenda for deliberative democrats in the macro-portion of the field focuses on creating communication linkages between citizens, enhancing mechanisms by which the public voice can reach decision makers, and fostering groups that develop social capital within communities (Chappell, 2012). The more generalized concept of civic participation is at the heart of macro-deliberation. With studies like Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* (2000), deliberative democrats see evidence of decreased social capital as a call to action to foster new forums for citizens to connect, learn, and be exposed to other points of view (Chappell, 2012). One interesting direction macro-level work has taken is the development of “Deliberative e-Democracy,” which focuses on social capital built on the internet using blogs, open government initiatives, and social media as processes for deliberation (Cavalier, 2011).

Both the theory and practice of deliberative democracy are clearly extensively diverse. However, all share the important common denominator of “respectful and rigorous communication about public problems”, though this can present difficulties for both theorists and practitioners trying to compare, contrast, and evaluate different directions and processes to move the field as a whole forward (Nabatchi, 2012, p. 8). As Nabatchi notes, it is “all but impossible for those interested in deliberative civic engagement to read, process, synthesize, comprehend, and use the full literature, let alone access the accumulated body of practical knowledge as yet unpublished” (2012, p. 5). In approaching the field with any eye for critical analysis, it is important to keep this perspective in mind and to balance both the difficulty of encountering varied and at times contradictory evidence with the organic potential the field provides for exploration and experimentation.

**Section II: An Examination of the Key Claims of Inclusion and Civic Education**

As it is so diverse and far-reaching, it can be difficult to cultivate a common appreciation for and promotion of the field. Regardless of specific processes, theoretical approaches, or venues, there are two broad rationales — intrinsic and instrumental — that advocates for deliberative democracy largely
use (Nabatchi, 2012). The intrinsic or normative value of deliberative democracy states that democracy, participation, and deliberation are socially-positive ends in themselves and that working to integrate them in a meaningful and intentional manner can only enhance the inherently good outcomes of the process (Nabatchi, 2010). Additionally, deliberative democracy has an instrumental value in terms of producing improved results compared to non-deliberative processes (Crosby, 2003; Nabatchi, 2012; Pincock, 2012). Political psychologist Shawn Rosenberg notes that across the range of academics and practitioners there is general consensus that deliberative democracy has both intrinsic and instrumental value as can be seen in its potential to contribute to:

“(a) the making of more effective and just policy decisions, (b) the building of more united communities that embrace group and individual differences, (c) the facilitating of more equal, caring and cooperative social relations, and (d) the fostering of greater levels of cognitive and social development of individual citizens.” (qtd. Pincock, 2012, p. 143)

To facilitate a critical examination of the field, it is helpful to focus on how the two broad rationales hold up to criticism by highlighting two frequently cited examples: inclusion (Rosenberg’s points b and c) as an example of the intrinsic value and civic education (Rosenberg’s point d) as an example of the instrumental value of deliberative democracy. While inclusion and civic education might seem like self-evident benefits of deliberative democracy, a closer and more critical examination demonstrates that even these apparent advantages can be seen as challenges that strike at the heart of the field’s capacity to live up to its own ideals.

**Inclusion: An Intrinsic Benefit**

Inclusion, itself closely connected to equality, is valuable in all theories of democracy because of its ability to ensure process and decision legitimacy (Chappell, 2012). As mentioned previously, the core belief of deliberative democrats is that people should have a say in the decisions that affect them. A process’s outcomes are “legitimate to the extent they receive reflective assent through participation in authentic deliberation by all those subject to the decision in question” (Parkinson, 2006, p. 4). Indeed, there is much to suggest that deliberative democracy does enjoy an intrinsic benefit through inclusion.
First, a common denominator of openness can be seen across the field in the ways that deliberation is framed and defined (Dryzek, 2000). Second, the field’s level of inclusion can be celebrated in comparison to other models such as aggregative representation. Far from being a polarized list of personal preferences with majority rule, deliberative democracy requires that all sides of an issue are brought forth for consideration instead of just sound bites or monolithic ideological stances (Chappell, 2012; Dryzek, 2000; Parkinson, 2006). Finally, deliberative democracy fosters an expansion and encourages an active conception of political participation to counter the historical elite monopoly on politics. In this sense, deliberative democracy recognizes that “the common sense and caring of everyday Americans have been pushed out of the political arena by people and groups with too much power” and instead celebrates and promotes the untapped capacity of all citizens to strengthen public decision-making (Crosby, 2003, p. 2).

In stark contrast, critics from both within and without the field see this claim of inclusion as not only false but actively undermining a truer realization of inclusion. Leading the charge are “difference democrats” whose primary issues are the political implications of structural inequalities and the need for new democratic processes to validate the perspectives of historically-marginalized populations (Chappell, 2012; Dryzek, 2000). Their overarching concern is that deliberative processes repress group differences by glorifying a supposedly universal form of deliberation and provide too much opportunity for situations to be co-opted. Marion Iris Young, one of the most prominent difference democrats, draws attention to the way in which deliberative democracy theory has a “mirror imagery” presupposition that suggests both an interchangeability of participants due to their perceived equality and an expectation of “symmetrical reciprocity” between participants that works to minimize difference (Healy, 2011). Symmetrical reciprocity is the assumption that humans, when fully motivated, can fully appreciate a situation from another’s perspective — the “in their shoes” proposition. Difference democrats, backed by a wide breadth of psychological research, contend that it is impossible to suspend
our own positioning to the extent that we can appreciate all the distinctive features and lived experiences of another’s standpoint (Healy, 2011). Coupled with the use of stereotypes and ideological frameworks and the “‘generalized other’ [is adopted] at the expense of the ‘concrete other,’” perpetuating misconceptions and structural injustice (Healy, 2011, p. 297). According to Healey, it also serves to diminish the cross-cutting innovation the field prides itself on:

In effectively presuming the possibility of mutual identification, it desensitizes us to important differences in standpoint and thereby ‘closes off the creative exchange these differences might produce’ in the interactions between diversely situation others, in the process foreclosing invaluable opportunities for mutual learning. (2011, p. 299)

This assumption of symmetrical reciprocity and mirror image equality thus serves as a foundational logic for additional criticism of the role of inclusion in deliberative democracy and exposes a fundamental rift in the field today.

From this initial assessment, difference democrats key in on practical obstacles to fully adopting inclusion within the field, including co-optation and the nature of deliberation. Despite challenging elite influence in political decision-making, difference democrats demonstrate how deliberative processes can provide an opportunity for co-optation if the process is not carefully facilitated, participants are not recruited with intentionality, or differences are not honored (Nabatchi, 2010). Also disconcerting is the adverse and polarizing effect co-optation can have on communities already fighting to be heard. Young points out that a political activist may choose not to participate and even recommend that others not participate because of the likelihood of it supporting current disenfranchising power structures (Nabatchi, 2010). In this regard, difference democrats see these processes as maintaining the status quo at the expense of the already disadvantaged: “participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless...[it] allows the power holders to claim that all sides were considered, but makes it possible only some of those sides to benefit” (qtd. Nabatchi, 2010, p. 388). In addition, the very nature of deliberation is called into question as being too formal to enable diverse cultural groups to articulate their interests effectively (Healy, 2011). Young comments that “prejudice
and privilege do not emerge in deliberative settings as bad reasons, and they are not countered by good arguments” (qtd. Dryzek, 2000, p. 64). The focus on reason-giving, competing arguments, and truth-seeking all serve to disenfranchise the narrative style and worldview of those who may not share these values or skills (Dryzek, 2000; Healy, 2011; Parkinson, 2006).

**Inclusion: Future Directions**

Difference democrats provide a strong case for questioning the underlying assumption of inclusion as an intrinsic benefit in the deliberative democracy field. Thankfully, difference democrats do not focus solely on critical evaluation and are proactive in offering suggestions to address the role of inclusion. First, to counter the effect of the “mirror imagery” perception of equality, the concept of asymmetrical orientation and moral humility is put forward to ground the practice. As with a public good mindset, difference democrats believe this perspective should be encouraged in all participants to help them prepare to listen to the other by shedding preconceived notions about similar aspirations, experiences, values, and opportunities (Healy, 2011). Difference democrats are also quick to point out that balance is essential, as over-accentuating differences to suggest no common understanding is possible would be undesirable (Healy, 2011). Recognizing that “deliberative norms entail dispassionate speech and that good argument is defined by standards laid down by white male elites,” a second series of recommendations work to address the structural issues of deliberative dialogue (Chappell, 2012, p. 83). Called greeting, narrative, or testimony by various theorists, encouraging storytelling is a key recommendation for ensuring that all participants feel able to contribute (Chappell, 2012; Dryzek, 2000; Healy, 2011; Milot, 2010). Combining concerns for symmetry and for deliberative norms, Healey recommends “dialogical reciprocity,” entailing recognizing a “diversity of discursive styles” and allowing others to articulate their own positions as “real partners” by actual representatives of a community and in their own terms (2011, p. 306). Dialogical reciprocity can result in a “fusion of horizons” through which “we can attain insight into an expanded range of possibilities for thought and action, beyond...
those initially envisaged by any of the participants” (Healy, 2011, p. 302). Finally, beyond the scope of this paper, additional ideas about transformative learning and overlapping consensus provide fertile ground for reforming deliberative democracy practices to be more inclusive.

**Civic Education: An Instrumental Benefit**

The most frequently cited example by proponents of the instrumental rationale is the ability of deliberative democracy processes to “make better citizens” by providing meaningful and enduring opportunities for civic education (Chappell, 2012; Crosby, 2003; Dryzek, 2000; Nabatchi, 2010; Pincock, 2012; Ryfe & Stalsburg, 2012). This claim is supported both by the guiding philosophy of the field and through empirical observations and promising theory. First, drawing on Jefferson’s proposal to educate the citizenry to make them better decision makers and to never take away that power, deliberative democracy fundamentally believes that “the health and stability of a modern democracy depends, not only on the justice of its basic institutions, but also on the qualities and attitudes of its citizens” (Cavalier, 2011, p. 9). Second, there is field-wide acceptance of the circular causal nature of deliberative democracy, that “the more individuals participate, the better able they become to do so” (Nabatchi, 2010, p. 386). Rawls states that public deliberation “lays the foundations of civic friendship and [shapes] the ethos of political culture” (qtd. Pincock, 2012, p. 140). The circular process of deliberation begetting deliberation is thought to be a result of the field’s normative focus on the public good. Though some critics consider this “mere lip service to the common good,” given time and repetition “it becomes psychologically difficult to give public reasons without absorbing these other-regarding considerations” (Pincock, 2012, p. 139).

A third claim of instrumental benefit is the building of social capital within communities using deliberative democracy processes to influence public decision making, supported by studies showing increased participation, diversity of membership, and more active community organizations (Kinney, 2012; Sabel, Fung, & Karkkainen, 2000; Ryfe & Stalsburg, 2012). Kettering Foundation president David
Mathews credits deliberation with the creation of a “civic super-highway” through which citizens can be “knitting together and linking all the civic organizations in their communities and providing a channel for information exchange and priority setting for common and cooperative work” (qtd. Kinney, 2012, p. 163). Finally, harkening back to the intrinsic benefit of inclusion, deliberative democracy processes are seen as an instrumental mechanism for exposure to new perspectives. Even Young acknowledges, “Through the process of public discussion with a plurality of differently opinioned and situated others, people often gain new information, learn of different experiences of their collective problems, or find that their own initial opinions were founded on prejudice or ignorance, or that they have misunderstood the relation of their own interests to others” (qtd. Cavalier, 2011, p. 14)

A deeper appreciation of the richness of community interests and the complexity of a specific issue reinforces the civic education claim of deliberative democracy.

Although not as substantial a group as the difference democrats, there are those who question the very premise of positive civic education through deliberative democracy and an even wider contingent of critics who see large oversights in the field’s belief in its ability to “make better citizens.” The harshest criticisms come from those who believe that deliberative processes can actually be disempowering and further disconnect citizens (Chappell, 2012; Nabatchi, 2010). This can happen in three ways. First, the act of seeing behind the proverbial curtains of public institutions and political bureaucracy can make participants feel like they have less power and political efficacy than before they got involved in the deliberative process (Nabatchi, 2010). Second, deliberative groups may be subject to bandwagon effects creating a groupthink that further inhibits diverse perspectives, particularly those of minorities, from being taken into consideration (Pincock, 2012). Finally, many in the field note that a benefit of deliberative democracy is not only the creation of collaborative recommendations but the ability to increase the clarity of and reasons for an individual’s interests and positions (Chappell, 2012; Pincock, 2012). The flipside is that as individuals become increasingly conscious of their moral differences the process can “indirectly accentuate feelings of division” and can lead to greater
Polarization along partisan and ideological lines (Milot, 2010, p. 26). Through each of these three mechanisms, critics argue that deliberative democracy can hurt citizens rather than making them “better.”

Less extreme criticisms of the civic education claim come from difference democrats, the conflict resolution field, and those calling for additional research. First, the difference democrats raise substantial equity concerns. These include a concern that “squeaky wheels” with time and resources will be the only communities able to host these processes, raising fears in the environmental deliberative democracy movement of perpetuating the Not-In-My-Backyard phenomenon, meaning that those communities unable to facilitate such processes will not enjoy the same rights to clean air and water as those who can (Sabel, Fung, & Karkkainen, 2000, p. 49). This is a concern beyond the environmental real as well as research shows that those with higher education and socioeconomic status are those who overwhelmingly participate in deliberative processes (Dryzek, 2000; Healy, 2011; Milot, 2010; Pincock, 2012; Ryfe & Stalsburg, 2012). A second concern is the role of conflict in deliberative democracy and the ways that this can negatively affect participants. Though seen less in micro-deliberative processes like citizen juries, certain types of deliberation can induce shouting, anger, and fear-mongering. An example of this was the 2009 “summer of the town hall meeting.” While this nationwide adoption should have been a boon for the deliberative field, the level of public animosity displayed at these events ensures that summer is not “remembered for inspiring confidence in the promise of deliberation in the United States” (Pincock, 2012, p. 135). Those concerned about proper recognition of conflict urge deliberative democrats to remember the fire with which they play and to not lose sight of the personal passions within an ideal dream of participatory and deliberative democracy. Finally, the “better citizen” claim is meant to entail changes within the individual as an adoption of public good framing, other-considering interests, community-focused activities, and tolerance of difference. However, most of the research in this area has been focused on evaluating the information
gains and opinion changes of participants (Pincock, 2012). These “opinion track” approaches to research leave aside more central claims about democratic skills and dispositions, and without empirical or even minimal anecdotal evidence many deliberative democrats hesitate to make the civic education claims the field has long held too loudly (Pincock, 2012).

Civic Education: Future Directions

The current lack of research is considered “particularly problematic given the ‘heavy lifting’” the educative claim does to promote the deliberative democratic field, so the key to reconciling the reality of civic education with the ideal is found in a call for more research overall. To address the very real equity concerns of participation, research is needed to examine recruitment methods for various types of processes (Ryfe & Stalsburg, 2012). Although the example given earlier used a very targeted sampling process for participant recruitment in order to ensure diverse representation across socio-economic, age, education, and partisan demographics, not all deliberative democracy practices are this diligent and many use election, random sampling, or self-selection which, while cheaper and easier to implement, have dramatic repercussions for the make-up of participants (Ryfe & Stalsburg, 2012, p. 51). Additionally, it may be time to better encapsulate this wild and wide-ranging field through a comprehensive mapping to pinpoint which practices result in what types of civic participation after deliberation (Pincock, 2012; Ryfe & Stalsburg, 2012). Finally, as there is evidence that deliberation works best for low salience issues and in small groups, the field needs to invest more time into understanding the conditions under which deliberation itself succeeds or fails (Pincock, 2012; Ryfe & Stalsburg, 2012).

Conclusion: Is Deliberative Democracy Worth It?

In both inclusion and civic education, it is plain that “the development of the deliberative democratic personality requires an ambitious educational project” (Weinstock & Kahane, 2010, p. 7). Beyond the scope of this paper, but absolutely central to the future of deliberative democracy is the question of whether or not deliberative democracy can create the type of democracy, the quality of
policy, and the kind of civic-minded citizens needed to facilitate deliberative processes on the scale required to fundamentally change the practice of democracy today. Balancing efficiency and self-determination has been and will continue to be the great dilemmas for democrats of this age (Sabel, Fung, & Karkkainen, 2000). There is a frequently cited “back-of-the-envelope” calculation from Robert Dahl showing that “meaningful deliberative input by all members of a small society on even a fairly uncomplicated item of policy would stretch democracy’s time constraints beyond the breaking point” (Weinstock & Kahane, 2010, p. 7).

However, perhaps a revolutionary transformation of today’s democratic systems is not actually the intent of deliberative democracy. Perhaps we should see the deliberative movement instead as a smaller step to move citizens towards the idea that the public good can be good for all. From an AmericaSpeaks session in Ohio, Robert Cavalier remembers, “Sitting at one of the tables that day, I observed that there were no Republicans or Democrats talking, just people rolling up their sleeves and working on a problem” (2011, p. 16). Coupled with constructive criticism to guide improvement, it will likely be this self-explanatory and humble version of deliberative democracy that will best make the space for citizens to come together to discover shared common ground and a shared capacity to create change.
Works Cited


