

Is Face-to-Face Citizen Deliberation a Luxury or a Necessity for Democracy?

John Gastil
Department of Speech Communication
University of Washington
Box 353415
Seattle, WA 98195
jgastil@u.washington.edu

Paper prepared for
University of Washington

Workshop on Communication and Civic Engagement

May 19-20, 2000

Ten years ago, one was likely to hear the term "deliberation" only when conversing with an obscure political philosopher, a jury researcher, a parliamentarian, and or a devotee of C-Span. Today, however, the word has become ubiquitous. Within academia, the term is now commonly used by political philosophers (Bohman, 1996; Cohen, 1997; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996), public opinion researchers (Page, 1996; Yankelovich, 1991), communication scholars (McLeod et al., 1999; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997), public policy analysts (Disch, 1996; Roberts, 1997), and small group researchers (Gastil, 1993). Deliberation is also at the heart of modern public discussion programs, such as citizen juries (Crosby, 1995), study circles (Leighninger & McCoy, 1998), the National Issues Forums (Mathews, 1994; Gastil & Dillard, 1999a), the 1996 National Issues Convention (Fishkin, 1995; Fishkin & Luskin, 1999), and a wide range of other programs (Burton & Mattson, 1999; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997; Ryfe, 1999). The term has even surfaced in the popular press, particularly during the impeachment trial of President Clinton.

Though deliberation has its advocates, it remains unclear exactly what forms of deliberation are essential. Some democratic theorists argue that only deliberation among officeholders is necessary in a representative democracy. Bessette (1994) summarizes this view: "The wise and virtuous, freely chosen by the community, rule through the exercise of their independent and superior political judgment, disconnected from popular judgment" (p. 2).

Other theorists believe that deliberation must also take place outside of government, but the public plays the role of observer, rather than participant. Thus, Page (1996) argues that "deliberation is essential to democracy . . . In modern societies, however, public deliberation is (and probably must be) largely *mediated*, with professional

communicators rather than ordinary citizens talking to each other and to the public through mass media of communications" (p. 1).

Finally, some theorists who advocate direct public involvement in the deliberative process assume that deliberation could be conducted entirely through interactive electronic media, such as the Internet. If deliberation is defined broadly enough to encompass such interaction, or if deliberation is judged solely by its outcomes, then electronic deliberation may be a viable alternative to face-to-face meetings among citizens (see Barber, Mattson, & Peterson, 1997; Dahl, 1989; London, 1993).

In sum, a broad range of democratic theorists recognize deliberation as a central feature of the democratic process, but only a minority argue that such deliberation must take place among citizens in a face-to-face setting. Advocates of face-to-face citizen deliberation will remain the minority in the debate on deliberation unless they can make a convincing argument for its necessity. First, it must be demonstrated that deliberation among citizens contributes to democratic governance above and beyond the deliberation conducted by officeholders and professional communicators. Second, face-to-face politics will appear increasingly quaint as populations continue to expand, international bodies continue to grow in power, and the Internet continues to widen its reach and improve its features. If research can not identify any special virtues of face-to-face deliberation, it is hard to justify its expense and inconvenience relative to computer-mediated citizen discussion.

The Impact of Citizen Deliberation

Proponents of citizen deliberation argue that participation in deliberative forums, conventions, and panels has a positive impact on citizens' attitudes and behaviors. The potential benefits of deliberation include more informed and reflective judgments, a greater sense of political efficacy, and an increase in the frequency of political action (Bohman, 1996; Cohen, 1997; Fishkin, 1995; Gastil, 2000; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Mathews, 1994; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997).

Does deliberation have these effects? Denver, Hands, & Jones (1995) found relatively little change in the attitudes of participants in the Granada 500, a British public debate program using face-to-face deliberation. Fishkin and Luskin (1999), however, found many significant attitude changes and considerable increases in political knowledge among participants in the 1996 National Issues Convention (NIC), which brought together a random sample of Americans for three days of face-to-face discussions. Gastil and Dillard (1999b) found considerable individual-level attitude changes at public forums—even in the midst of negligible aggregate attitude change. Though they observed only slight overall attitude changes in each of seven studies on different political issues, they found a consistent pattern of ideological polarization. After face-to-face discussion of each issue, liberal and conservative participants had become more ideologically consistent in their respective views.

In addition to these information and opinion shifts, researchers have found changes in participants' sense of political efficacy. Answering a standard set of political efficacy questions, NIC participants showed increased confidence in their political knowledge, judgment, and influence after deliberating. Participants also expressed greater trust in politicians and elected officials (Fishkin & Luskin, 1999). Similar results have been obtained through both qualitative and quantitative research on small deliberative forums held across the U.S. (Gastil & Dillard, 1999a). However, Gastil (1999) found that participation in deliberative forums could increase political self-efficacy while reducing *group* efficacy. In other words, participants might leave a challenging forum more confident in their own ability to take effective individual action but more skeptical of the efficacy of group-based political action. This study also found that deliberation's impact depends on the nature of forum participants' experiences. Those who engaged in relatively successful forums—with well-prepared participants, clear guidelines, effective forum facilitators, and adequate deliberation—reported greater attitudinal changes.

Does successful citizen deliberation also have an effect on political behavior? Past research has shown clear links between various forms of political efficacy and political action (e.g., Pollock, 1983; Wolfsfeld, 1986); therefore, if deliberation can boost participants' sense of political efficacy, it may also spur greater political engagement. Gastil, Deess, and Weiser (2000) found evidence consistent with this hypothesized link. The authors created a dataset of over 1,000 jurors by merging official voting records with jury lists extracted from 1994-1996 case files at the Thurston County (Wash.) courthouse. They found that citizens who served on a jury that reached a verdict were more likely to vote in subsequent elections than were those who served as alternates or sat on criminal juries that were dismissed or deadlocked. The hypothesized causal direction was supported by the absence of a relationship between jury service and voting in *previous* elections.

Face-to-Face vs. Computer-Mediated Deliberation

One might argue, however, that these same changes in knowledge, opinions, attitudes, and behaviors would also result from computer-mediated deliberation. To this author's knowledge, no research has systematically compared face-to-face and computer-mediated political deliberation in this way. Similar studies have been done, however, outside of a political context, and it is useful to consider their findings.

Scott (1999) provides a review of the past five years of research on communication in face-to-face and computer-mediated groups. He found that "recent research has not resolved past criticisms concerning mixed and inconclusive findings" on the benefits of computer-mediated group decision making (Scott, 1999, p. 459). Nonetheless, Scott squeezes some tentative generalizations from the literature. In the studies reviewed, face-to-face groups tended to be more efficient, more cohesive, and better at handling complex problems that required qualitative judgments. Computer-mediated groups often made better quantitative judgments, sometimes reduced the influence of individual participants' social/professional status on the discussion, and usually resulted in comparable—if not greater—levels of participant satisfaction.

I draw three implications from these studies. First, face-to-face deliberation may be more appropriate in the political arena because of the nature of political decisions. Political deliberation involves complex issues, moral conflict, and an inescapable uncertainty about the wisdom of final judgments. Just as complex tasks lend themselves to more democratic methods of group discussion (Gastil, 1994), they might also be better suited to the natural flow of face-to-face interaction. Second, political deliberation usually involves a diverse and unacquainted set of participants. Difficult political decisions often require a degree of compromise and negotiation, which a modest level of group cohesion can facilitate (Gully, Devine, & Whitney, 1995). Previous deliberative forums may have succeeded in this respect only because their face-to-face settings allowed the rapid development of group cohesion. Third, if computer-mediated interaction can consistently reduce the independent influence of social status, it will have a powerful advantage over face-to-face deliberation (see Sanders, 1997). As past research suggests, however, status cues can surface even in anonymous settings through participant self-descriptions, discourse styles, and other means.

In conclusion, past research suggests that democratic systems benefit from the regular practice of deliberation among citizens. Such interaction develops political knowledge, the sophistication of public judgments, political efficacy, and stronger habits of civic participation. Because of these benefits (and others), some theorists have argued that deliberative forums should be institutionalized (e.g., Fishkin, 1995; Gastil, 2000; Threlkeld, 1998). Frequent and complex forums, however, could result in high taxpayer bills or place a heavy burden on the nonprofit sector. Given the lower cost of computer-mediated deliberation, future research should examine whether the same benefits might come from computer-mediated forums.

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