◀◼ INTERVIEW ◼▶

Deliberative Democracy: Taking Stock and Looking Ahead

Selen A. Ercan with André Bächtiger

▶▶ **Abstract:** Deliberative democracy is a growing branch of democratic theory. It suggests understanding and assessing democracy in terms of the quality of communication among citizens, politicians, as well as between citizens and politicians. In this interview, drawing on his extensive research on deliberative practice within and beyond parliaments, André Bächtiger reflects on the development of the field over the last two decades, the relationship between normative theory and empirical research, and the prospects for practicing deliberation in populist times.

▶▶ **Keywords:** deliberation, deliberative quality index, democracy, empirical, populism

Ercan: How do you define democracy?

Bächtiger: Let me give you a brief background and history before I answer the question. For quite some time, there was a standard way of defining democracy in political science: a minimal and aggregative definition, suggesting that democracy is about elite competition and institutional rules specifying how fixed preferences of actors are aggregated. I always found this definition – and vision of democracy – fairly limited and narrow. The deliberative model offered an alternative way of defining democracy: a more republican understanding of democracy, where actors do not only aggregate but also justify their preferences, listen to each other with respect, and engage in constructive and creative dialogues to solve matters of common concern. The goal of many "deliberationists" was to emphasize that there is more to democracy than competition and aggregation. And they got support for this vision from mainstream democracy researchers: in their influential article "Conceptualizing and

Measuring Democracy: A New Approach," Michael Coppedge and John Gerring (2011) suggested abandoning the search for *the* correct definition of democracy; rather, we should accept that there are different models of democracy, including a deliberative one. Initially, I found this "model" approach to democracy very convincing and appealing, not the least because it lifted deliberative democracy to a "mainstream" (and not only utopian) model of democracy. These days, however, I find the "model" approach less convincing. Mark Warren has published a seminal article in the *American Political Science Review,* in which he suggests moving beyond *models* of democracy and instead defining (and understanding) democracy in terms of various key functions, namely empowered inclusion, collective will-making, and collective decision-making (Warren 2017). Warren claims that the "model" approach tends to overgeneralize if not exaggerate the place and functions of ideal typical practices of democracy, such as deliberation or voting. Voting, for instance, is a very valuable democratic practice when it comes to collective decision-making, but it may be less valuable when it comes to collective will-formation (since it provides a low information signal); to achieve this democratic function, you may need deliberation and the provision of robust arguments. To make a long story short, I would oppose defining democracy in a strict way, but rather ask which democratic practices fulfill which democratic functions in "optimal" ways. I do know, however, that many people still vie for a clear-cut definition of democracy. But I think that this has shipwrecked if one takes a functional and problem-based perspective seriously.

Ercan: So are you suggesting that when thinking about democracy, we should avoid separating between different "models" in a rigid way and focus rather on the problems on the ground and see what solutions different models offer, and how these solutions can be combined, perhaps in a more creative way?

Bächtiger: Yes, absolutely. In my new book with John Parkinson, *Mapping and Measuring Deliberation* (2019), we are moving to a similar position regarding deliberation. Rather than searching for the correct definition of deliberation, our problem-oriented perspective understands deliberation as *contingent,* dependent on different contexts and goals. Different contexts and goals may require different forms of deliberation and communication. For instance, if you want to achieve epistemic advancement, you might need something like rational argument; but if you want to achieve ethical goals of deliberation (such as more common understanding), then utterances of respect or sharing experiences via story-telling might be more important than "rational argument." So depending on what goals

and contexts we are interested in, the *forms* of deliberation might look very differently. And it might lead to a "blending" of different communication modes: for instance, to make reason-giving effective, abstract reasoning might need to be combined with stories and rhetoric to make new information accessible and persuasive.

Ercan: I think the problem-driven approach and the idea to blend different "models" to speak to particular problems is a very attractive one, but I am trying to understand what exactly it adds to democratic practice. In some sense, one could say that the democratic practice has always been about blending different tools and approaches to democracy and decision-making. Your work, for instance, comes to my mind, as an example. You have looked at the quality of deliberation in the conventional institutions of representative democracy, rather than saying, "Here is a deliberative model, we are going to replace every other model with this one." What I want to say is that you already blend approaches when you look for deliberation in the existing institutions of representative democracy.

Bächtiger: Yes, but the blending came with "strings attached." It is true that you can have classic forms of deliberation such as high justification rationality and respectful exchanges in legislatures. But not only does this occur under rare institutional conditions (namely in second chambers of consensus systems with low party discipline), high-quality deliberation may also collide with democratic goals. Gerry Mackie (2012) has made an excellent point about this problem. All institutional conditions that make deliberation work in a classic sense produce a challenge for the democratic goods of accountability and responsiveness. If MPs change their minds frequently, this may perhaps be half-tolerable for very sophisticated voters who might possess the same knowledge and experience as their representatives and would therefore come to similar conclusions if they were in "their shoes" (see Bessette 1994: 105–106). But for most other voters, this is not what they would see as "good" representation. We do know from survey research that a majority of citizens prefer strong government responsiveness. Hence, high-quality deliberation may not automatically conduce to high-quality democracy. And there may be situations where we can have too much deliberation. . .

As a side note, when I started examining the deliberative quality of parliamentary debates, I did not set out to test deliberative theory. Rather, I wanted to make a contribution to institutional theory and comparative politics, showing that different institutional settings can lead to higher-quality deliberation and more creative politics.

But this attempt largely failed, in the sense that institutionalists and comparativists were not really interested in the findings. In their view, my findings had some analytical traction, but since deliberation in legislatures turned out to be a rare event, they considered my findings important neither from a theoretical nor from a democratic vantage point. Put differently, if deliberation in legislatures is possible only when systems are more consensual, not bound by strong party discipline and if issues are not fully polarized, then deliberation is *not* a major and overlooked logic of action in the realm of legislatures.

Ercan: Your work on deliberation in parliaments has been very influential in the field as it offered a way of translating normative political theory into empirical social science. You take the normative standards of deliberation as a starting point and operationalize them in the context of parliamentary debates. Since the publication of your co-authored book *Deliberative Politics in Action* (Steiner et al. 2004) there has been other empirical work, following a similar path and operationalizing the normative standards in various settings, including the broader public sphere. Can you tell us about the background of this approach? How come that you decided to look at the parliaments, what is the rationale behind the measurement tool you developed, and how has it been evolving since its first inception over the last 14 years?

Bächtiger: I start with the measurement tool, the Discourse Quality Index (DQI). The goal was to develop a measurement instrument that could satisfy the expectations of mainstream scholars in political and social science. This meant that it had to be quantitative and it had to satisfy psychometric standards, at least in approximation. The DQI measures the quality of deliberation with five standards: participation equality, justification rationality, common good orientation, respect (towards groups, demands, and counter-arguments), and constructive politics. To develop the index, we involved a political psychologist, Marco Steenbergen. Drawing from standard approaches in psychometrics, he came up with the idea of developing deliberative quality as a uni-dimensional construct. This means that the various standards – justification rationality, common good orientation, respect, and constructivity – should hang together. So, for instance if you have more justification in your speech, the more respectful you should be and so on. If uni-dimensionality exists, then the aggregation of the various components is easy (you just count them together) and you get a very powerful measurement instrument yielding results that can be interpreted in a straightforward way (the higher the score on the index, the better).

Focusing on parliaments was in some way a natural choice. If you want to compare political institutions – consensus vs competitive systems, presidentialism vs parliamentarism, and so on – and their effects on deliberative quality, parliaments offer a fabulous opportunity to do this in a controlled way. For instance, parliaments enable researchers to observe policy negotiations in closed-door committees in a consensus system with lower party discipline (such as Switzerland) and compare them to policy "negotiations" in closed-door committees in a government opposition setting with strong party discipline (such as Germany). And if you know under what institutional conditions high-quality deliberation can be produced, then you can say a lot of how to reform institutions in more deliberative directions! However, as my empirical research shows, it is not only institutions but also actors and their motivations or strategies that matter for the quality of deliberation in parliaments. For instance, government or opposition status of parties matters a lot whether you are respectful in legislative interaction or not. Or, there are politicians with more deliberative mindsets than others. Actually, it is an old question whether it is structure or character, institutions or virtue, that make a better political world (Waldron 2013). My research shows that it is both, but that also means that there are clear limits of the effects of institutional designing.

Ercan: So, in your view the deliberative quality depends a lot on the actors, what they do and how they perform deliberation. Is that right?

Bächtiger: Yes, but their motivations can be quite complex. I had a student, Evelyne Wild, who did in-depth interviews with Swiss senators to find out how they perceive deliberative quality themselves (Wild 2014). She confronted a number of senators with speech samples from other MPs, and asked them to code the samples according to the DQI standards as well as to give further information on their judgments. One striking result is that in the context of the Swiss second chambers, deliberative standards such as a high justification rationality and respect are part of appropriate, even strategic behavior. One senator said: if you treat other senators in disrespectful ways, this will backfire and disrespectful behavior will decrease your capacity for being politically successful in this venue. In other words, deliberation and deliberative quality can also be seen as "scripts" or "practices" performed in a specific venue; and this, of course, blurs any attempt to strictly separate between communicative and strategic action. On the other hand, another student of mine – Andrea May (2005) – found on the basis of in-depth interviews with Swiss MPs that politicians' own deliberative behavior can be linked to different

visions of how politics should (ideally) function. Those actors who scored high on the DQI saw politics as generating creative solutions above party lines; those who scored low saw politics as a spectacle, with simulated confrontations being a legitimate way of democratic practice.

Ercan: It's all much more dynamic and informed by the practice. I guess this has also been the case with the DQI you had developed with your colleagues. You started with a sort of a set of criteria, but then this has evolved over time. What were the key changes?

Bächtiger: The changes came step-wise. For instance, we were never able to make a proper distinction between strategic and communicative action (to use Jürgen Habermas's formulation). From a theoretical vantage point, this posed an enormous discrimination problem: you cannot make a compelling argument for rational choice scholars that deliberation has taken place, since deliberative action in the form of explicitly respectful utterances might represent nothing more than sophisticated rhetorical action (Schimmelfennig 2001). But since we are not able to look into actors' heads, we will never be in a position to draw clear-cut lines between strategic and communicative action. The new approach that I have developed with John Parkinson (Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019) "circumvents" the authenticity or sincerity problématique by understanding deliberation as a cultural practice or script. Understanding deliberation as a practice or a script helps to address that tension, since a practice or a script is about *appropriate* rather than *authentic* behavior. Or, I have begun to incorporate alternative forms of communication, such as story-telling or different forms of bargaining, into the conceptual apparatus of the DQI (see, e.g., Gerber et al. 2018) in order to align it with developments in deliberative theory (such as the concept of "deliberative negotiation"; Warren et al. 2013).

Ercan: That's right, I think deliberative democracy has been one of those fields where theory and practice stand in a dynamic relationship and keep on shaping and informing each other. This brings me to my next question, about the new book you co-edited, the *Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy* (2018), which I think seeks to capture some of these developments and ways of thinking. Can you tell us a bit about this book?

Bächtiger: The idea of a Handbook goes back to a conversation between John Dryzek and me in Canberra in February 2014, when John declared: "We are a field. We have produced more than enough to show it to the world." And this is what this Handbook is about, showing the enormous

growth of the deliberative field over the past few decades in size and importance. During the process of putting the Handbook together, the editorial team learnt a lot. For instance, none of us were aware of the full dimensions of the plural origins of the deliberative approach. As Antonio Floridia (2018) sketches in his Handbook chapter on the origins of deliberative democracy, there is no "linear" history of evolution of the deliberative paradigm; rather, what we now recognize as a "field" had plural starting points which then merged into a more "synthetic" program in the 1990s. Nonetheless, the diverse starting points are also tied to ongoing disagreements in deliberative theory. A good example are the persisting differences in defining deliberation. For those whose starting point was the "wild public sphere," good deliberation is not only about rational argument but includes stories, personal experiences, and emotions; for others whose starting point was formal institutions in the representative system, good deliberation is "rational critical debate" with an emphasis on well-justified and evidence-based arguments.

Ercan: I understand that one of the highlights of the *Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy* is the interview with Jürgen Habermas. Can you tell us a bit about this experience?

Bächtiger: Habermas did not want to write a whole chapter, but he was willing to give us an interview. The editorial team then sat together and said, "Let us ask him all the questions we always wanted him to ask him." For instance, "What is the place of consensus in deliberative theory and practice?" Or, "What do you think of incorporating narratives, emotions, and rhetoric in deliberation?"

The interview has many highlights. I would like to highlight two of them. One is Habermas's clarification of the ideal speech situation. He writes that there has been a "persistent misunderstanding" about the concept of the "ideal speech situation." In his view, the ideal speech situation is not something to aim for or something that represents a blueprint for action; rather, it is a pragmatic condition which actors must presuppose when entering into a discourse: "From the observer perspective one will find that rational discourses rarely occur in pure form. However, this in no way alters the fact that, from the participant perspective, we must assume those presuppositions that are constitutive of the cooperative search for truth. This is shown, among other things, by the fact that we criticize a mere pretence of engaging in discourse or an agreement reached by dubious means by appealing to these very standards." (Habermas 2018: 871-72)

The other highlight is his partly contextualized view of deliberation. We asked him about the role of deliberation in deeply divided or highly

polarized societies. His answer is that under such conditions, "the gentle style of mutual understanding is the message." (ibid. p. 880). In other words, what matters here is the way we interact with each other rather than the substance or the sophistication of the argument.

Ercan: You also had the opportunity to meet with Habermas last year, as part of the workshop you organized at Stuttgart University. Can you tell us how this experience was, and what key insights Habermas shared in this workshop?

Bächtiger: It was a fabulous experience, in all regards! He was enormously generous, not only providing us beforehand with eight pages of comments on a number of Handbook chapters, but also making very long oral contributions during the workshop.

There were a number of important clarifications but also some interesting "disagreements." Regarding definitional questions, Habermas partly contested a minimal (and pluralistic) conception of deliberative democracy, defining deliberation as "mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values and interests regarding matters of common concern" (Introduction to the Handbook). According to Habermas, such a minimal definition may be "too liberal" and "individualistic," underestimating the importance of an inclusive and intersubjectively shared argumentative process, where participants develop consensual and binding norms together. Another "disagreement" concerned the epistemic dimensions of deliberative action. In a fascinating exchange between Jürgen Habermas and Hélène Landemore, two visions of epistemic deliberation emerged: a strong proceduralist vision of epistemic advancement where participants develop epistemically better answers in the deliberative process in a "co-creative" process (Habermas); and a more procedure-independent vision of epistemic advancement, where "truth" is given externally and is "discovered" by the participants in the deliberative process (Landemore).

Ercan: Now, I want to ask some questions about your other new book. In addition to the *Oxford Handbook,* you have just published another book recently with John Parkinson. Can you tell us about this book and its contribution to the field?

Bächtiger: The book began with a conversation between Jane Mansbridge and me during the ECPR [European Consortium of Political Research] Joint Sessions in 2011 in St. Gallen, when Jenny said: why don't you systematize everything that you have learnt in 10 years of working with the Discourse

Quality Index? I began to think about writing a method book, giving both an overview of what we know about measuring deliberation plus some practical recommendations of how to study deliberation empirically. But I soon realized that a pure method book would not be good enough, especially in the wake of the deliberative systems approach which required broader thinking about deliberation's functioning in society and politics. So, I asked John Parkinson to join forces and to broaden the perspective; he immediately and enthusiastically agreed. At the end of the day, we have written a conceptual rather than a methodological book.

The starting point of the book is a criticism of how many researchers and practitioners have understood (and understand) deliberation, namely as a fixed and unitary construct that quasi-automatically supports and strengthens democracy. As I mentioned before, we take a problem-oriented perspective and understand deliberation as *contingent,* dependent on different contexts and goals. Moreover, our new approach also understands deliberation as *performative,* as a creative activity in which deliberative elements mingle with other forms of communication. Finally, we understand deliberation as *distributed*: deliberative qualities are not concentrated in one location or at one moment, but are dispersed over space and time, also at the micro level.

On this basis, we aim at re-politicizing deliberation. For a long time, deliberative scholars have focused on "ideal" institutions, such as deliberative mini-publics or institutional settings in politics that promote the classic deliberative core. We think that the search for "ideal" institutions is seriously misguided. As I said before, "ideal" institutions in politics reduce deliberation to a rare event; and a focus on deliberative mini-publics means focusing on events that very few people have a chance to experience. Therefore, research needs to broaden the analytical lens and study deliberative action in all kinds of sites of a democratic system. For instance, we need to track the variegated deliberative activities of citizens in competitive and partisan-structured communicative environments, without assuming that elements of deliberation simply will not be found there. A research project by Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck (2016) looks into the deliberative capacities of citizens in everyday talk before elections. Rather than declaring that everyday talk is non-deliberative by definition, his project understands everyday talk as having some deliberative features and functions, even if it does not meet all the criteria of the classic core.

On the methodological front, we declare the search for a grand, unified index of deliberative quality as over. When deliberative goods such as reason-giving or listening are contingent on goals and contexts or can be distributed across space and time, then "measuring" deliberative quality

cannot be done on the basis of an index which aggregates fixed deliberative standards found in a communicative sequence of a single forum. This requires new thinking, and we try to sketch out first ideas in our book. And we have a lot to say on how we should evaluate the quality of deliberative systems. . .

Ercan: Thank you for these valuable insights on both books. They both seem to advance and celebrate the field of deliberative democracy in important ways. In the remaining time, I want to ask you about the prospects for deliberative democracy in the current political context, which is characterized by the rise of populism across the globe. As Nicole Curato and Lucy Parry (2018) note in their recent article, there are many reasons to consider populist rhetoric as opposite of deliberative reason. What role, if any, can deliberation play in this context?

Bächtiger: I would say that it plays a complex role. High justification rationality and argumentative complexity can be exclusive and undemocratic, whereas a simplified style of arguing – as is typical for populists – may be more accessible and more inclusive. In their new book, Nicole Curato, Marit Hammond, and John Min (2018) also stress the inclusive dimension of populist language for "silenced rationalities": populists may act as discursive and descriptive representatives, making certain constituencies visible. On the other hand, robust (but not philosophical) reasoning is necessary for democratic accountability (Shapiro 2017). Moreover, if increasing policy complexity is not matched by argumentative complexity, this may lead to false democratic expectations about the possibilities of policy change. Finally, persistent disrespect and exclusionary language can create a trust problem in that citizens develop negative and cynical attitudes towards democratic institutions and practices (Mutz and Reeves 2005). Using a term by Simon Tormey (2017), populism can be seen as a *pharmakon*: "a toxic substance used to make someone better, but which might also kill them." I nonetheless hope that populism is an "intermediate" stage before getting to a more deliberative version of democracy. Indeed, the more simplified and disrespectful political language becomes, the higher the demand for classic deliberative virtues might eventually get . . . but this may be just a shallow hope of a deliberative democrat.

Ercan: What do you think are the biggest challenges democracy faces today then?

Bächtiger: As a deliberative democrat, I would say we are confronting the problem of "communicative plenty," what you mention in your

recent article (Ercan et al. 2019). We simply may have too much communication going on. Surely, it is fair to say that people nowadays have more opportunities to air their opinions and thus to contribute to democratic discourse, but the sheer amount of communication may be too high in order to receive in-depth listening, one of deliberation's key elements. A related challenge of democracy is the issue of transmission and coupling between the representative sphere and the citizenry. In their new book *Directly Representative Democracy for a 21st Century Republic,* Michael Neblo, Kevin Esterling, and David Lazer (2018) argue that it is high time to renew representative democracy by creating more direct exchanges between representatives and the represented. They do so by bringing Congresspersons and constituents together, engaging them in a common deliberative forum on pressing issues of public policy.

Restoring communicative bonds between representatives and citizens may also be crucial to address a burning problem in current democracies: the fact that some citizens increasingly address politics with an attitude of "corrosive cynicism" rather than "healthy skepticism" (Flinders 2012). My hope is that more intensive bonds between representatives and the represented help citizens to see that many politicians work very hard to make good policies, or to find smart solutions and compromises in the face of policy complexity. This is also the message that John Dryzek and I (and many other pioneers of deliberative research) have made in a recent article in *Science* (Dryzek et al. 2019).

Ercan: One final question. Considering the development of deliberative democracy research over the last two decades, where do you think the field is heading? What are the key theoretical and empirical questions that the field needs to pay attention to in future?

Bächtiger: The field is heading towards an understanding of democratic systems (rather than deliberative systems only). Such an understanding requires not only that we investigate under which conditions democratic systems fulfill various deliberative and democratic ideals, but also that we are aware of potential trade-offs between deliberative and democratic goods – such as the one between high-quality deliberation and responsiveness that I have described for representative politics. It also requires thinking about new methodological strategies: when we adopt a problem-based and systemic perspective, a simple "indexing" of high and low deliberative quality is misguided. What we need are more sophisticated empirical strategies: strategies that take elements of the goal- and context-dependency of deliberative forms into account; that capture the distribution of deliberative acts across space and time;

and strategies that focus on "balancing" moments between deliberative and democratic qualities. And last but not least, I also do hope for a full reconciliation of micro and macro research. With the advent of the systemic approach, micro research has been side-tracked a bit. But there is a place for micro research; take deliberative mini-publics, for instance: why should I ever trust or follow a recommendation of a mini-public if I know that the discussion process was biased, that some people dominated, that the advantaged influenced the less advantaged? And last but not least, I hope that the increasing methodological sophistication of micro approaches – both at a quantitative and qualitative level – also translates to macro studies.

Acknowledgments

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