

Democracy, Partisanship, and Deliberation

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What you think citizens should do depends on what you think democracies are for. One prominent democratic theory, which we might call *competitive democracy*, holds that the point of democracy is to settle who will govern through “a competitive struggle for the people’s vote” (Joseph Schumpeter’s famous formulation). Richard Posner, Ian Shapiro and others have explicitly revived the Schumpeterian position combined with skepticism about public will formation. On this view, democracy does not aspire to represent the will of the people, but just to use political competition to settle the question of who is in charge. The virtue of partisanship clearly has a role in this theory of democracy. It is through partisanship that teams of potential office holders compete.

A second influential theory of democracy might be called *participatory democracy*. Here the point is to get ordinary citizens participating. Political participation offers a kind of token for the collective consent of the governed. Sometimes this participation is also instrumentally valued for its “educative function” but the point is to get people to vote (and to participate more broadly as well.) The virtue of partisanship clearly has a role in this theory of democracy. It is through partisanship that large numbers can best be mobilized to participate.

Nancy Rosenblum mentions these considerations in explaining the virtues she sees in partisanship. The aspects of partisanship she advocates seem to be rationalized on the basis that they will help parties win elections and they will help people get mobilized to participate. She advocates “inclusiveness” because of its connection to competitiveness in elections. “At its most basic, partisanship is identification with Democrats from Florida to California and *with political competition at every level of government*” (emphasis added). Part of the rationale is that partisans “are ambitious to be in the majority.” Her second element “comprehensiveness” — “telling a comprehensive public story” about what is to be done, would be called “ideology” by some. In any case, it is about having a coherent account of what is to be done that serves both affiliation and mobilization, presumably to win elections. Her third element, “compromisingness” is about building effective coalitions, again a rationale about competitiveness and mobilization.

Democratic theories congenial to partisanship are focused on competitiveness and participation. No doubt, they identify important aspects of the role of citizens. However, they leave out a central element of democratic theory, now widely discussed under the heading of deliberation. On this view, democracies are not just about winning elections or participating in them or feeling a sense of affiliation with one’s political team. They are ultimately about collective will formation. And of the many ways in which collective will formation can take place, some primacy needs to be given to those that permit competing arguments to be considered in a context of good information.

There are two versions of this deliberative democratic theory. The strategy of “indirect filtration” advocated by James Madison in his original design for the constitution focused on representatives who would “refine and enlarge the public views by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens” (*Federalist* 10). This version, which I would characterize as *elite deliberation*, was central to Publius’s view of the Senate, the Constitutional and Ratifying Conventions, even the Electoral College in its original form. It was soon challenged by Rhode Island, a hot bed of Anti-Federalist activity, which proposed to consider the Constitution in a referendum, getting views directly from the people. The Federalists challenged the appropriateness of consulting the people in this way on grounds of insufficient deliberation. The battle between elite deliberation approaches and participatory democracy was joined. With the later rise of Progressive reforms, institutional designs such as the referendum, initiative, recall, direct election of Senators, and expansion of the franchise all moved the democratic process in the direction of more direct consultation.

Yet the theoretical possibility of *deliberative democracy*, practiced not just by representatives but also by the people themselves, was largely inchoate. The modern interest in deliberative democracy has focused on deliberative microcosms of one sort or another. The point of these microcosms is that they combine some claim to representativeness with good conditions for deliberation. [1] [My own work has focused on what I call Deliberative Polling](#), in which scientific random samples are surveyed and then recruited with incentives to participate for an extended period, say a weekend, in both small group discussions and plenary sessions with competing experts and policymakers. These Deliberative Polls have been conducted in a number of countries around the world

and have been used to bring wind power to Texas (eight projects there led directly to Texas now being the leading state in wind power), sewage treatment plants to China (where DPs have been used for local decision making, including budgeting), a resolution to a budget crisis in Rome (where a DP was held for the *Regione* or state government) and new policies toward the Roma in Bulgaria (following a national DP). These projects were not partisan. They were not party-driven and involved representative samples of ordinary citizens making judgments as to what they thought should be done.

Thus far we have mentioned four democratic theories — competitive democracy, participatory democracy, elite deliberation and deliberative democracy (the latter with deliberation by the people themselves rather than just by elites). Elsewhere I have broken these four theories down into component parts and argued that the sixteen theoretically possible positions can usefully be boiled down to these four (see my *When the People Speak*, Oxford University Press, 2009, forthcoming, which also offers a detailed account of Deliberative Polling). If we take this range of alternatives seriously, why should we be more interested in one of the deliberative possibilities? Why deliberative democracy rather than just the participatory or competitive versions?

We live in a political world that has made the transition from Madison to Madison Avenue, from a concern for thinking about what would be best, to a concern for manipulating and mobilizing public opinion in the interest of winning elections. A great deal of money and sophisticated technology is deployed to present one sided arguments, strategically incomplete information, misinformation and spin-doctored messages all designed to mold opinion to advantage. In this environment defined by the perpetual campaign, partisan identities do not themselves contribute to thoughtful collective will formation. Consider the recent overview of party ID by Donald Green, Bradley Palmquist and Eric Schickler (in their important book *Partisan Hearts and Minds*). They note that party identifications can best be compared to religious affiliations. Adherents are usually born into them, they are remarkably persistent, and they do not contribute to rational evaluations of the options (religious or political). They are stable and have an extraordinarily powerful effect on behavior. If one is concerned just about a sense of identification, then as Rosenblum notes, such identities are “weighty.” But if one is concerned about some minimally rational process of collective will formation, the impact of party ID is to make voting and policy choice predictable, not to make them thoughtful.

A thoughtful process of collective will formation, whether by elites (representatives) or the mass public themselves, requires a disposition not to make a partisan judgment, but an independent judgment about the public interest. Of course, real world judgments reflect some mix of partisan interests and independent judgment. But to the extent one is just focusing on what will serve one’s party, what will contribute to electoral competitiveness and effective mobilization, one is not acting on the disposition that will assist deliberation in the public interest. Competitive elections can be won by misleading the public, by demobilizing it with negative ads (as my colleague Shanto Iyengar has demonstrated) by the MAD politics of the trivial but sensational sound bite — a politics of Mutually Assured Distraction. These techniques win elections and mobilize participation, but they do not add up to any collective weighing of substantive arguments about what should be done. Rather they add up to pseudo-mandates and a very thin form of democracy.

In my view we do not need to make a virtue of partisanship. Partisan interests will effectively motivate partisan behavior. We need to make a virtue of all citizens, whether partisans or independents, making a judgment about the public interest, even when those judgments may not serve their party interests. Supplementing partisan decisions with deliberative mechanisms can help. Progress on deliberative democracy does not depend on getting rid of parties, but on instilling deliberation about the public interest within — and with supplements to — existing institutions. It is not the independent voter who must be cultivated, but the independence in all voters and all representatives. To the extent such a disposition is cultivated, voters are not behaving as partisans but as part of “We the People.” Institutional experimentation, an enterprise very much in the spirit of Madison (who had to create a whole political science to support his design of the U.S. Constitution) should be furthered. But to make an ethic of partisan behavior rather than independent judgment is to settle for forms of democracy that would deaden rather than enhance collective will formation.

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[1] My own work has focused on what I call Deliberative Polling: <http://cdd.stanford.edu>