

The Spirit and Practice of Deliberative Democracy

John Gastil

[Original English version of Gastil, J. (2009). Spirito e prassi della deliberazione. (The spirit and practice of deliberative democracy.) *Deliberativo*, 112 (March/April), 69-73.]

I came to believe in deliberative democracy in the course of a life that began with an unusual religious upbringing. My parents raised me Quaker, an unusual variant of Christianity that began in England in the 1600s and influenced early American history.

As a teenager, I found inspiring the story of one particular Quaker, John Woolman, who worked for the abolition of slavery in the mid-1700s. Following a distinctly Quaker tradition, Woolman traveled from one Quaker Meeting to another across the country, striving to convince the members to disentangle themselves from the slave trade. Quakers believed that each person had “that of God” within them, and by that logic, their Meetings could only reach decisions when the entire membership came to consensus. Remarkably, Woolman and his fellow abolitionists accomplished this remarkable feat, and Quakers appealed to the U.S. Congress to end slavery in 1790, a full seventy years before the Civil War would tear apart the American union on this issue.¹

I continued to learn the consensus tradition at Swarthmore College, a former Quaker institution. During my graduate studies, I lived in a fourteen-person house that also made decisions in this spirit, and I did my first ethnographic study of a grocery co-operative that set all its policies using this method. That led to my first book, *Democracy in Small Groups* (New Society Publishers, 1993), in which I explained what it means for a group to be democratic and showed what obstacles groups face when trying to make decisions democratically. I found that small groups achieve democratic *moments* but that it was impossible to establish fully democratic practices. The co-op I studied was remarkable in its ability to listen carefully and respectfully to each staff member, but it did not always make the best decision possible.

Gradually, this led me to become more concerned about the *deliberative* quality of decision making, both in small groups and large nations. This shift in my scholarly interest paralleled a personal transformation, as I moved away from my Quaker religious upbringing and discovered that I had become an atheist. My training as a social scientist had nurtured an interest in the power of reason, argument, and evidence, and I grew skeptical of dialogues and discussions that followed democratic norms but lacked substance and the clash of ideas.

Thus, my research shifted away from democratic equality and respect and toward rigorous problem analysis and decision-making. I began to explore the variety of processes for promoting more thoughtful, informed, and reflective decisions, and in 2000, I advocated reform to improve American elections in *By Popular Demand: Revitalizing Representative Democracy through Deliberative Elections* (University of California). This book showed how small group discussions, which I called Citizen Panels, could be integrated into the electoral process to help the mass public make more careful choices when voting.

Integrating Democracy and Deliberation

¹ The *Journal of John Woolman* provides a first-hand account of his experiences, and its full text is available online at <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/WooJour.html>.

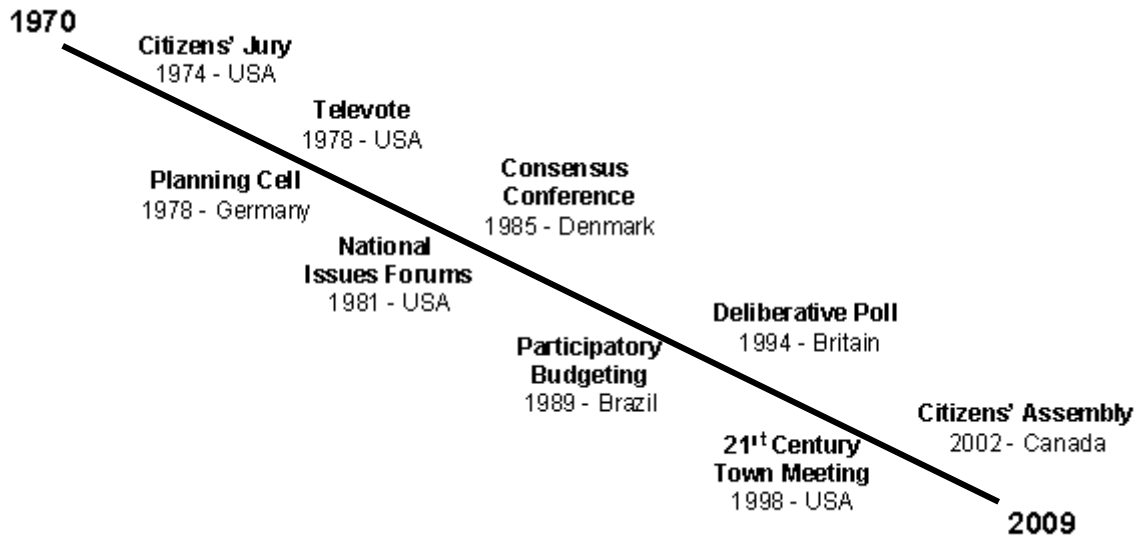
When I pulled together these different strands, I began working with a model of public discussion that recognized it both as a democratic or *social process* and a deliberative *analytic process*. Public talk needs to be democratic by giving each participant adequately speaking opportunities, ensuring participants can understand each other, and by giving each other due consideration and respect. Such talk needs to be deliberative in that it establishes a solid information base, prioritizes the key values at stake, identifies a broad range of solutions, looks carefully at the advantages, disadvantages, and tradeoffs among choices, and ultimately makes the best judgment.²

Far from an abstract ideal, this conception of deliberation fit with a variety of collective decision-making procedures that political theorist Peter Levine and I compiled in *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook: Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the Twenty-First Century* (Jossey-Bass, 2005). This book brought together the experiences of activists, non-profit organization leaders, and scholars to understand how the most promising and innovative methods of citizen deliberation can fit into existing political cultures and institutions.

Peter and I wrote the *Handbook* to begin to catalogue the sheer variety of deliberative processes that had emerged since the 1970s is impressive. In the 1970s, innovators in the United States and Germany created small group deliberation methods designed to get a representative cross-section of the public to reason together on complex policy issues, and the Televote created a related process that could engage large random samples on an issue. Other processes in the US, Denmark, and Brazil in the 1980s promoted widespread civic education through issues forums, more refined problem analysis in Consensus Conferences, and legally empowered stakeholder deliberation in Brazilian Participatory Budgeting, a process that now has adherents across the globe. The years since then introduced the Deliberative Poll, which has attracted the most global interest, as well as 21st Century Town Meetings that used new communication technology to facilitate deliberation among ever-larger face-to-face publics. Most recently, the Citizens Assembly designed in Canada shows the clearest path to institutionalizing high-quality deliberation through a months-long process whereby randomly selected citizens draft legislation for popular ratification.

Figure 1. A Timeline of Selected Modern Deliberative Practices

² An early version of this definition appears in Stephanie Burkhalter, John Gastil, and Todd Kelshaw, "A conceptual definition and theoretical model of public deliberation in small face-to-face groups," *Communication Theory* 12 (2002), 398-422.



One line of research I have conducted has looked carefully at one of these processes, the National Issues Forums. Created by the Kettering Foundation in Dayton, Ohio, the Forums provide a popular discussion format for bringing together community members, adult basic literacy students, and a range of social groups and professional organizations. When the first Deliberative Poll was held in the United States in 1996, the moderators from National Issues Forums facilitated much of the small-group deliberation.

Advocates of these Forums believe that participating in deliberation can transform private individuals with unreflective opinions into public citizens capable of making informed judgments. My research on the forums has borne out some—but not all—of the Foundation's claims. Issues forums do effectively teach deliberative skills and dispositions,³ but they have complex effects on public opinion. The Foundation's aim was to encourage nuanced, non-ideological thinking through discussion, but one of the clearest effects I found is that deliberation can strengthen the ideological *clarity* of one's views. If one goes into a forum on energy policy with somewhat liberal views, one is most likely to come out with more consistently liberal (and anti-conservative) views.⁴

As I have explained these findings to the Foundation, this does not mean a person has become ideologically rigid across a range of issues; rather, deliberation promotes clear and consistent beliefs on a given topic, which is more likely a sign of attitudinal sophistication more than rigidity. A replication of this finding also made clear, though, that the more deliberative the discussion—and the more conscientious and extraverted the participants—the more likely a group is to converge on shared attitudes. Moreover, the patterns of increased agreement and disagreement varied by issue, which suggests that deliberation's effects might vary tremendously depending on the context.⁵

A Variety of Deliberative Contexts

³ John Gastil, "Adult civic education through the National Issues Forums: A study of how adults develop civic skills and dispositions through public deliberation," *Adult Education Quarterly* 54 (2004), 308-328.

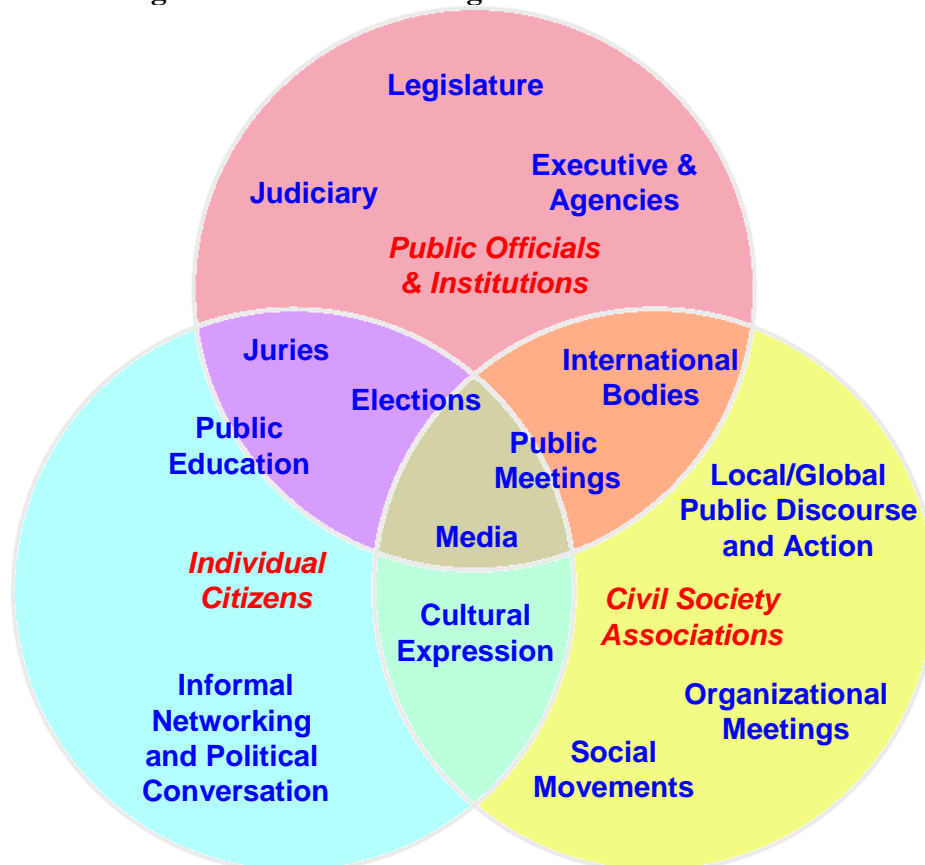
⁴ John Gastil and James Price Dillard, "Increasing political sophistication through public deliberation," *Political Communication* 16 (1999), 3-23.

⁵ John Gastil, Laura Black, and Kara Moscovitz, "Ideology, attitude change, and deliberation in small face-to-face groups," *Political Communication* 25 (2008), 23-46.

Deliberative processes like the National Issues Forums and those described in the *Handbook*, however, still represent exceptional events. These are special occasions wherein a microcosm of the public comes together to work on specific issues. Much of my research has tried to extend the spirit of deliberative democracy more widely, to consider deliberation as it occurs in a wider range of settings. In my most recent book, *Political Communication and Deliberation* (Sage, 2008), I argue that the deliberative democratic ideal has relevance to the behavior of public officials and institutions, civil society associations, individual citizens, and the many intersections among these.

Conversations and group discussions are the simplest and most familiar forms of deliberation, but we can also think in terms of mediated deliberation by examining how the mass media shape public opinion and could, ideally, facilitate a kind of mass-level dialogue on current issues. Conversations, public discussions, and media can combine to facilitate a large-scale deliberative electoral process. Then, those who win public elections—along with those whom elected officials appoint—can be scrutinized to see if they deliberate once they take office. Taken together, this describes the role of deliberation in a representative democracy—from opinion formation to elite decision making. Given the condition of modern society, the deliberative framework is more of a critical lens than it is an apt description of this process, but as a lens it shows how the various defects in existing practices and institutions add up to serious system-wide deficiencies. This is not to say that there are not deliberative features or moments in modern public life, but the deliberative project is more often about effective criticism of the status quo than it is about self-congratulation.

Figure 2. The Wider Range of Deliberative Contexts



Deliberation can be applied to other contexts as well, from jury decision making to community life, from citizen-government relations to international deliberation. To get a sense for how deliberative theory extends beyond explicitly deliberative venues, one of my recent studies shows how political conversations can develop issue-specific knowledge to the extent they are deliberative (respectful, balanced) exchanges. Even when talking about a very controversial issue that divides their community—the actions of a nearby nuclear laboratory—citizens can increase their relevant basic knowledge (about radiation, the environment, etc.) so long as their conversations have an essentially *deliberative* character.⁶ Another study examines how deliberative conversational habits grow out of other forms of political engagement and civic attitudes. One striking finding was that reading the newspaper regularly tended to promote more deliberative conversational habits, whereas watching television news led, instead, to less reasonableness in one's own arguments and less inclination to listen carefully to others' views.⁷ It remains to be seen whether online media have the same medicinal benefits of newspapers or if, like television news, they tend to decrease our deliberative inclinations.

The bulk of my recent group research, however, has focused on the experience of jury service in the United States. Colleagues at the University of Colorado, New Jersey Institute of Technology, and I have launched the Jury and Democracy Project. The heart of this project is a pair of large-scale studies completed in 2005. One was a three-wave panel survey of over 6,000 jurors from one particular county in the Northwestern United. The other was a national sample of court and voting records from over 23,000 jurors from seven states.⁸

Our central finding is that jury service promotes higher levels of civic engagement. For instance, persons who deliberate on a criminal jury who are previously less politically active become more likely to vote in future elections as a result of participating in jury deliberation. We discovered this result initially in a study of Thurston County jurors, and on the strength of that pilot study we obtained the funds necessary to replicate and extend those findings with the national study.⁹ Combined with the panel study results, we can now see even more clearly the interplay of specific jury experiences and subsequent attitudes and behaviors.¹⁰ For example, one important trigger of future civic engagement is having a jury experience that exceeded one's expectations: those who were disappointed by their experience at the courthouse went away without the civic boost that other jurors received.¹¹

⁶ John Gastil, "How balanced discussion shapes knowledge, public perceptions, and attitudes: a case study of deliberation on the Los Alamos National Laboratory," *Journal of Public Deliberation* 2 (2006), 1-39.

⁷ Patricia Moy and John Gastil, "Predicting Deliberative Conversation: The Impact of Discussion Networks, Media Use, and Political Cognitions," *Political Communication* 23 (2006), 443-360.

⁸ To learn more about this project, visit <http://www.jurydemocracy.org>. On the remarkably deliberative quality of these juries, see John Gastil, Stephanie Burkhalter, and Laura W. Black, "Do juries deliberate? A study of deliberation, individual difference, and group member satisfaction at a municipal courthouse," *Small Group Research* 38 (2007), 337-359.

⁹ John Gastil, E. Pierre Dees, Phil Weiser, and Jordan Meade, "Jury service and electoral participation: A test of the participation hypothesis," *The Journal of Politics* 70 (2008), 1-16.

¹⁰ The most complex connections between jury deliberation and attitude change are documented in path analyses in John Gastil, Laura W. Black, E. Pierre Dees, and Jay Leichter, "From group member to democratic citizen: How deliberating with fellow jurors reshapes civic attitudes," *Human Communication Research* 34 (2008), 137-169.

¹¹ John Gastil and Phillip J. Weiser, "Jury service as an invitation to citizenship: Assessing the civic value of institutionalized deliberation," *The Policy Studies Journal* 34 (2006), 605-627. We will expand on these and related findings in the book, *The jury and democracy: How jury deliberation promotes civic engagement and political participation* (forthcoming from Oxford University Press), co-authored by John Gastil, E. Pierre Dees, Phillip J. Weiser, and Cynthia Simmons.

In terms of academic publishing, the culmination of this project will be a book, *Civic Awakening: What the Jury Teaches America*. The book will advance the understanding of political behavior in the academic, legal, and political spheres. By providing an empirical basis for longstanding philosophical claims about the civic educational impact of the jury, this work will give jury research a more central place in communication, sociology, political science, and legal research.

My other lines of study on deliberation look at the challenges of deliberating across lines of cultural difference and among mass publics, especially during elections. Working with another team of colleagues at Yale University, George Washington University, and elsewhere, I have helped to develop the Cultural Cognition Project to better understand how cultural orientations help citizens orient themselves in a politically complex world.¹² One of our first publications from the Cultural Cognition Project juxtaposes our cultural perspective against a prominent view of risk assessment. In that article, we argue that deliberation on controversial public policies involving risk can produce optimal public judgments when designed to recognize—and accommodate—cultural worldviews.¹³ In particular, deliberative processes must welcome moral conflict and hope that we can find solutions to our most vexing social problems that hold meaning for even people of opposing cultural orientations. In part, this may come through cultural leaders who surprise their own followers and explain how, for instance, free market principles can be used to combat global warming or how the permission of gay marriage can re-affirm the strength of loving family bonds.¹⁴

Building a Deliberative Democracy

As I continue to pursue my research on juries and cultural cognition, I will simultaneously work to pull the various strands of my research together to develop a comprehensive portrait of deliberative democracy. To do so requires thinking about deliberation across many different levels of analysis and social contexts. The figure below, adapted from *Political Communication and Deliberation*, shows how I connect the essential elements of democratic deliberation with diverse public institutions, practices, habits, and attitudes. Everyone has a stake in deliberation—from the artists to educators, from journalists to neighbors.

Figure 3. Key Institutions and Practices in a Deliberative Democracy

<i>Analytic (Deliberative) Process</i>	
Create a solid information base.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public journalism to help the public identify and understand its challenges • Public infrastructure for research • Strong institutional and public memory

¹² To learn more about the project, visit <http://research.yale.edu/culturalcognition>.

¹³ Dan Kahan, Paul Slovic, Don Braman, and John Gastil, “Fear of democracy: A cultural evaluation of Sunstein on risk,” *Harvard Law Review* 119 (2006), 1071-1109.

¹⁴ John Gastil, Dan Kahan, and Don Braman, “Ending polarization: The good news about the culture wars.” *Boston Review* (March/April, 2006). Available at <http://bostonreview.net/BR31.2/gastilkahanbraman.html>.

<p>Prioritize the key values at stake.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public dialogues with broad participation • Artistic community actively confronting contemporary issues
<p>Identify a broad range of solutions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Innovative public policy think tanks • Multiple influential political associations representing a diversity of views
<p>Weigh the pros, cons, and trade-offs among solutions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliberative electoral processes • Representative and influential citizen deliberation on policy • Rigorous governmental deliberation (legislative, executive, judicial, and jury)
<p>Make the best decision possible.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elected officials confident in the political wisdom of enacting sound public policy • Public committed to implementation

Figure 3. (cont.) Key Institutions and Practices in a Deliberative Democracy

<i>Social (Democratic) Process</i>	
Adequately distribute speaking opportunities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constitutionally secure freedom of speech and association • Publicly sponsored issues forums • Numerous social ties facilitating conversation
Ensure mutual comprehension.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outstanding public education system teaching language and communication skills • Adult civic educational opportunities
Consider other ideas and experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social and political connections across prominent socioeconomic differences • Appreciation of art, drama, and literature
Respect other participants.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Celebration of cultural diversity • Strong trust in neighbors, fellow citizens • Respect for legitimate public institutions and their officials

Moving forward, the challenge for us is to discover which of our current practices best embodies the deliberative democratic ideal, then bolster those practices. If a community already has a tradition of issues forums, those programs should be celebrated and elevated in stature. We must also seek to rediscover and reinvigorate those deliberative practices we have set aside or neglected. In the United States, for instance, indigenous traditions of consensus decision making may help us navigate our way through our current cultural conflicts.¹⁵ To these, we should then strategically add the most advanced deliberative procedures, from Citizen Assemblies to Deliberative Polls, which can have specific functions and, ultimately, degrees of legal authority. By working at all these levels simultaneously, we can aspire not merely to achieve deliberative moments but to *establish* a new tradition of deliberative institutions and practices.

¹⁵ Thanks for this insight go to University of Washington Native Voices student Cetan Wanli Williams.