

Introduction: Democratic Deliberation and Under-Represented Groups

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Abstract

The key principles of democratic deliberation are the considered judgement and inclusion. However, research shows that not all categories are involved in this process. In particular, the groups that are under-represented in day-to-day politics are also less likely to make their voice heard in deliberation. So far, we know little about if and how deliberation fosters the involvement of under-represented groups. This symposium aims to address this gap in the literature and seeks to generate new ideas on the topic. It brings two contributions to the debate about the involvement of under-represented groups in deliberation: it identifies the means through which various deliberative practices can involve members of under-represented groups and explains how and why members of under-represented groups participate or refuse/are refused participation in deliberation.

Keywords

under-representation, deliberative democracy, inclusion, exclusion

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Research Gap and Aims of the Symposium

Democratic deliberation lies at the core of democratic theory and proposes a shift from a vote-centric to a talk-centric conception of decision-making (Chambers, 2003; Dryzek, 2000; Habermas, 1996). According to this view, the essence of democratic decision-making is no longer the aggregation of fixed preferences but the exchanges of justification that precede this decision. The 2000s have been marked by the multiplication of procedures that seek to involve ordinary citizens in deliberation. These were organized by civil society and public authorities and have taken various forms (Fung, 2006; Smith, 2009).

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The key principles of deliberation are the considered judgement and inclusion (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Gastil and Levine, 2005). Much attention has been paid to how judgement and inclusion are present in practice and how they could have an influence on the content and quality of deliberation (Fishkin, 2011; Reuchamps and Caluwaerts, 2018).

In spite of these principles, research has shown that not all categories are involved in democratic deliberation. In particular, the groups that are under-represented in day-to-day politics are also less likely to make their voice heard in deliberation. Such groups include but are not limited to women, youth, ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, poorly educated people or members of specific social classes (e.g. the poor). To date, we know little about if and how deliberation fosters the involvement of under-represented groups (Wheatley, 2003). Decision-making through inclusive participation is particularly attractive to under-represented groups, which otherwise could be marginalized or even absent from the power-related processes (Bellamy, 2000).

This symposium aims to address this gap in the literature and seeks to generate new ideas on the topic. To this end, it brings two types of contributions. On the one hand, at theoretical level, it seeks to identify the means through which various deliberative practices can involve members of under-represented groups. The articles in the symposium refer to deliberation in relation to constitution-making, community projects, political parties and social movements in local and national politics.

On the other hand, the symposium aims to explain empirically how and why members of under-represented groups participate or refuse/are refused participation in deliberation. The five substantive articles outline a variety of processes ranging from elite control or selective inclusiveness to communication abilities and participants' motivations. The articles are meant to address one another by discussing similarities and differences in the way deliberation facilitates the involvement of under-represented groups.

The topic of this symposium bridges two distinct bodies of literature: under-represented groups/minorities seeking for political representation and democratic deliberation. Scholars in both fields are likely to be interested in the ideas presented here. Moreover, scholars of democratic theory may find relevant the discussion of this symposium for reasons related to the possibilities and challenges occurred in the attempts to overcome the shortcomings of representation.

Deliberation and Under-Represented Groups

Ideally, deliberation means the active participation of all the relevant stakeholders of a decision-making process in such a way that, by granting all the necessary amount of time and by showing good-will to a full extent, consensus is inevitably reached in the end (Habermas, 1996). Accordingly, deliberation is appealing to under-represented groups for two main reasons.

First, it encourages the participation of primarily organized groups, including those who rarely have a relevant voice in the public debates on matters of common interest. The essence of deliberation is to prevent the exclusion or the marginalization of any stakeholder who could ultimately reject the outcome of the deliberative process and hinder the implementation of the resulting policies. Or, given these premises, the under-represented groups find a favourable ground for making their voice heard in a flexibly institutionalized way. The deliberative framework is likely to create the necessary conditions of possibility for the unconstrained participation of any group who has a reasonable interest in

making a point, and this despite the classical restrictive criteria of expertise, representativeness and institutional legitimacy (Bauböck, 2001).

Second, the consensus culture involved by deliberation can accommodate claims of under-represented groups. The claims of the latter are different from those belonging to the rest of society and have few chances to be accepted in a majority-based decision-making system. Some of these claims could often clash with interests of more powerful groups (e.g. the use of the minority groups' language in schools or in the local administration, gender quotas for state employees, specific forms to include young people in decision-making, etc.). Policies favourable to under-represented groups could be perceived as virtually threatening by the majority decision-makers. The consensus promise of the deliberative model opens to the accommodation of diversity in the decision-making processes, encourages the practice of mutual concession and allows for the inclusion in the final compromise of at least some claims (Benhabib, 1996). The risk of isolating and creating hostile groups unhappy with the outcome of the decision-making process is in theory lower in the framework of deliberation compared to majority-based decisions.

Nevertheless, the practice of deliberation has limitations. In their effort to include the relevant actors and to openly make their claims known to the audience, the deliberative processes encounter several risks. The large number of voices and demands paves the way for the more radical opinions to prevail over the moderate ones. Since this can rarely be consensual, the deliberation is likely to result in a deadlock. In such situations, the under-represented groups in deliberation would be unable to express their views or, on the contrary, would be themselves the radical voices to be isolated by other participants. Moreover, there are situations in which consensus is not possible because the matter of disagreement objectively remains intact after the exhaustion of all the reasonably deployable arguments (Dembinska and Montambeault, 2015; Tully, 1995). For instance, when, in spite of all deliberation, the adoption of an amendment allowing the non-heterosexual marriage is not accepted by most participants to a wide and highly representative deliberation process. Thus, in some cases, deliberation could appear as an obstacle and not as a promoter of under-represented stances.

Structure and Content of the Symposium

The symposium includes case studies on five countries in Eastern Europe, Western Europe and Latin America, which ensure a broad territorial coverage: France, Mexico, Portugal, Spain and Romania. The symposium starts with Mokre and Ehs' contribution about the deliberation process initiated in France during the most recent social protests in France, that is, Yellow Vests. The Grand Débat was triggered by the French government and was labelled as a great success by the initiator and as a deception by the protesters. The latter organized the Vrai Débat as a real deliberative alternative to the government's attempt. Mokre analyses both debates with regard to their deliberative qualities and assesses their representative and exclusionary character.

The second article, co-authored by Victoria Stoiciu and Sergiu Gherghina, shifts the focus to intra-party deliberation. It discusses the ways in which a newly emerged political party in Romania sought to include members of under-represented groups in the list for the 2019 European elections. The party aimed to engage women, lower social strata, ethnic minorities and sexual minorities. The article illustrates how this can happen under several circumstances.

The remaining two articles in this symposium focus on local level deliberation. The article of Cruz Ruiz shows how political determination opened the 2016 Constitution-making in Mexico City. In particular, it explains how technology helped include and manage citizens' inputs to constitution. The article reveals the ways in which deliberation can facilitate the inclusion of demands coming from under-represented groups. Finally, Barbosa's article investigates how under-represented young people were challenged to absorb knowledge about common lands and how the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) empowered youth participation. The case study used for analysis is that of a local community initiative in Spain and Portugal.

The contributions to this symposium illustrate how various deliberative models can be inclusive for members of different under-represented groups. Their findings indicate that processes of deliberation mobilize and engage members of such groups in ways that representative democracy fails to do. The evidence covers a variety of social and political processes (community projects, social movements, constitution-making) or even institutions of representation (political parties). At the same time, the debate generated in the symposium critically reflects on the challenges and limitations faced by deliberative practices in the attempt to include the members of under-represented groups.

These observations can be useful points of departure for further research about the relationship between deliberative democracy and under-represented groups. The symposium outlines several key features of this relationship, which encourages a broad research agenda. This can explore the reasons for which under-represented groups engage or refrain from involvement in deliberative democracy or why the later seeks to incorporate voices that are traditionally less heard in society, it can also analyse how deliberation successfully engages the under-represented groups in the decision-making process and with what consequences for. Research conducted in these directions will indicate if deliberative democracy can credibly transform the essence of democratic decision-making into one of considered judgement and inclusion for most members of society.

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