

12-11-2015

## Review of Deliberation, Democracy, and Civic Forums: Improving Equality and Publicity by Christopher F. Karpowitz and Chad Raphael (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Raymie E. McKerrow

Ohio University - Main Campus, mckerrow@ohio.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd>

---

### Recommended Citation

McKerrow, Raymie E. (2015) "Review of Deliberation, Democracy, and Civic Forums: Improving Equality and Publicity by Christopher F. Karpowitz and Chad Raphael (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014).," *Journal of Public Deliberation*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol11/iss2/art9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Public Deliberation. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Public Deliberation by an authorized editor of Public Deliberation.

---

Review of Deliberation, Democracy, and Civic Forums: Improving Equality and Publicity by Christopher F. Karpowitz and Chad Raphael (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

**Abstract**

Review of Deliberation, Democracy, and Civic Forums: Improving Equality and Publicity by Christopher F. Karpowitz and Chad Raphael (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

**Keywords**

Civic Forums, Enclave Deliberation, Deliberative Publicity, Argumentation, Transparency

*Deliberation, Democracy, and Civic Forums* provides a clearly articulated, solidly evidenced argument across two dimensions that are familiar to deliberative theorists and practitioners. The first is the role of equality with respect to who participates, how well their contribution is valued, and their ability to operate autonomously in deliberating with others about issues that a specific sponsor or organizer has asked that they consider. The second dimension is “publicity,” with a primary focus on how transparent the report is in re-presenting the results of the deliberation. In a sense, this entails writing about two seemingly separate issues within a single text. The authors do an admirable job of linking the two arguments while offering precise recommendations for improving both the deliberative outcome and the manner in which it is communicated to external audiences.

The first issue tackles a seemingly intractable complication in ensuring equal participation across all sectors of the population—the effective inclusion of underserved or otherwise marginalized citizens—those least likely to believe that the privileged have any need or use for their potential contribution in resolving issues that inevitably affect their lives. Given the diversity of deliberative bodies that have been created, the authors narrow the field to civic forums, and further narrow this to a select few illustrative examples of prior deliberative forums, including one the authors were directly involved with. While their general goal is to interrogate the conditions under which civic forums might establish and maintain their legitimacy within a socio-political community, their more precise argument focuses on the advantage that can be gained by asking how citizens, perceived to be the “least powerful” – those most marginalized by virtue of race, class, education, access to services – might contribute meaningfully in affecting the way in which they are governed. In the most extreme cases, this reflects a concern for what Jacque Rancière terms “the part of those who have no part” (1999, p. 30).

As a prelude to the more detailed consideration of how the otherwise dispossessed might be considered contributors, the authors provide an overview of contemporary deliberative theory and how their own view both adheres to and differs from the mainstream. In particular, they are willing to violate “the principle that all citizens’ voices should count equally in assessments of public opinion” (p. 2), in arguing that their purpose is not to make every forum exactly representative of the local, regional, or national population, depending on the nature of the forum’s need to be inclusive. Rather, they argue for the possibility those considered outside the mainstream might be asked to participate in an “enclave deliberation” – a specially selected group from among the dispossessed that can deliberate among themselves, and then, via a variety of mechanisms, have their recommendations carried forward to those who would normally be involved in deliberating about the respective issue. That they recognize the possible drawbacks of this position is to their credit, as their purpose is to illustrate the workability of this approach to “equal participation.”

The argument for “enclave deliberation” recognizes that “enclaves” exist everywhere—people naturally group together along lines of similar interest. In this instance, the goal is to ensure the possibility that those politically, situationally, and/or deliberatively disempowered have an opportunity for their voice to be heard. In the process the authors

create a space for alternative deliberative structures that can be perceived as legitimate. They are correct in observing that marginalization, in and of itself, is not a reason to believe that the dispossessed are neither interested in participating nor capable of contributing if given the opportunity. While it is possible that such groups would be prone to groupthink or polarization, the authors clearly demonstrated that is not a necessary outcome. As they illustrate, actual enclave deliberation has proven capable of offering quality recommendations that go beyond the enclave's self-interest. In an extended analysis, the authors focus on a 2006 Consensus Conference centered on the role of government agencies in building broadband networks, with a specific interest in how to provide digital access in "underserved communities" (p. 159). Their analysis provides clear support for their claim that "structured enclave deliberation among the less powerful" in a community works better than one might think, as the marginalized "can deliberate on equal terms" (p. 193). In noting earlier that a singular focus on consensus is untenable, the authors provide a clear justification for the role of dissensus (though one might wish they went further in arguing for the priority of dissensus as the key element sustaining democratic deliberation).

The argument for a reassessment of the nature and quality of "deliberative publicity" also is well-crafted. The analysis of select reports from civic forums provides a compelling outline of both the positive and negative features of re-presentations of deliberative events. The typology they provide in assessing reports is of immense value – as they outline key elements in assessing how well the report covers the arguments that occurred, and how transparent the report is with respect to how the event was constructed and how well its deliberation is represented. Throughout the text, the elements of argumentation (conclusions-reasons-evidence-norms-opposing claims) are explored in detail, with well-chosen examples from past deliberative events. In addition, the elements of transparency (control, design, influence, evaluation, fidelity) are covered with the same attention to clarity and precision.

In bringing the arguments together in the final chapter, the authors offer a series of reasonable recommendations for improving both the quality of deliberative encounters and the resulting attempt to communicate the decisions and recommendations that may flow from the group's consideration of the issues they were brought together to discuss. Overall, their contribution to the conversation about the best way to ensure quality deliberation, particularly with attention to those most often ignored or maligned as incapable of being invited to the table, is of immense value. As their listing of potential research topics illustrates, there is much more work to be done in understanding how deliberation works, and how to ensure voices that should be heard are in fact not only heard but heeded.

This is not to say, however, that the text's argument is flawless, nor is it to say that their position is not open to critical assessment. In what follows, I hope to be read as a sympathetic critic, as I am in general agreement with their goal, and believe that their argument is reasonable and well supported. As a rhetorical scholar, I am most disappointed by their consideration of "deliberative rhetoric" and their use of "rhetorical

persuasion” as a counter to “rational argument.” They cite a single source in their discussion of rhetoric’s nature—one that is unfortunately committed to a Platonic perception of rhetoric’s nature. Equally unfortunate is that the authors are not alone among deliberative theorists in not examining literature beyond their own domain. Consequently, their narrow sense of rhetoric, even though there is growing appreciation for its role, constrains the analysis that could be provided. As they note, Dryzek’s change in attitude allows for a focus on what language *does* rather than what it *is*. Their discussion of framing would be much more effective in recognizing, especially in the context of determining how to communicate a deliberative event’s conclusions, the impact that choosing how to ‘name’ an event may make all the difference in perceiving its utility. A second consideration is the sense that “if we know ‘x’ we will be able to predict ‘y.’” From a rhetorical perspective, the only rule is that there are no rules. One cannot know in advance which strategy will work best. While one can argue that “more is better” in being forthcoming in a report and including oppositional arguments that were considered, one cannot know if that is, in fact, the best choice the report’s author could make. What works in one deliberative event may be a guide to how one might approach another, but that does not insure that it will work in a second similar event. In essence, a broader conception of rhetoric would underline the indeterminacy that is inherent in any deliberative encounter. It would also permit a much more nuanced understanding of how deliberative interaction may occur—it is not the case that “equal talk time” will translate automatically into “equal influence.” If one recognizes the role of language, an otherwise silent member may speak only once in an event, yet carry more weight with that expression than its “talk time” would imply.

While more along these lines could be noted, this critique is not intended to diminish Karpowitz and Raphael’s contribution to deliberative literature. Their typology of argumentation and publicity, by itself, has heuristic potential in moving toward more precise assessment of deliberative enactments.

## References

Rancière, J. (1999). *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.