

Symposium on

« Epistemic Democracy, Self-Interest, and the Common Good »

SOPHA 2012

PRESENTATION OF THE SYMPOSIUM

Epistemic conceptions of democracy ground (at least partially) political legitimacy on the aptitude of democratic processes to produce good outcomes (Estlund, 2011). While it cannot be expected that democratic decisions be always entirely “right” (that is, depending on the favored criteria of rightness, just, efficient, etc.), democratic authority rests on the assumption that they tend to produce often enough decisions that are good enough. The plausibility of such a claim, however, depends on the aim assigned to democratic decision-making, and, correlatively, on the chosen criteria of rightness. What exactly should democratic decision-making aim at?

Contemporary deliberative conceptions of democracy argue that it should try to identify and promote the common good and that, as a consequence, public deliberation foster democracy’s epistemic quality. Not only does deliberation treat citizens respectfully by giving each one a “fair say” in the democratic process, but it is assumed to be, by contrast with bargaining, random selection or mere voting, the best way to identify the common good (Elster 1986, Cohen 1989, Fishkin and Ackerman, 2002). Invoking various psychological and social mechanisms, deliberative democrats have long asserted that the public exchange of reasons in support and against available options (among citizens enjoying equal status) tend to make participants more able to identify the common good and more willing to vote in a way that promotes it.

However, this influent conception has faced several challenges. On the one hand, the appeal to a common good is suspected of dissimulating a systematic bias in favor of specific self-interests (Young, 2002). If citizens’ self-interests are divergent and irreconcilable, the common good is an ill-suited aim for democratic deliberation. On the other hand, the claim according to which deliberation can promote the identification of a common good is accused of confusing a moral challenge (converting the self-interested consumer into a civic-minded citizen) with an epistemic one (discovering the common good). If the problem is not that the common good is unknown but that it is undesired, deliberation’s epistemic promises are founded on a naïve moral psychology (Elster, 2004).

The criticisms addressed to the common good’s prominent place in classical accounts of deliberative democracy have led to recent reformulations, that suggest giving self-interests a more important role in the democratic process by recognizing that they should also be promoted by democratic deliberation (Mansbridge and al., 2010). If accepted, such proposals make it necessary to revise the fundamental assumptions of deliberative theory. While the concept of deliberation was originally defined in opposition with negotiation aimed at the satisfaction of self-interests, it should now be extended so as to include specific forms of negotiation. In a recent paper, Mansbridge and al. thus speak of “deliberative negotiation” (Ibid.).

It is nonetheless difficult to make sense of such a conceptual reconfiguration. To put it to the test, this symposium will reexamine the exact relationship between the common good and self-interests in an epistemic deliberative context. Is the concept of a common good still necessary if specific self-interests can be recognized as legitimate aims for public

deliberation? Can the alleged epistemic efficacy of public deliberation be justified when it focuses on partial interests? What should deliberation finally aim at?

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ABSTRACTS

Abstract 1 : « The Common Good as Equal Promotion of all Individual Interests »

The classical understanding of modern democracy as *self-government among equals* implies two constitutive democratic principles: the pursuit of political autonomy and the pursuit of the common good. The latter has long been denounced by “minimalist” critics, but also, more recently, by some deliberative democrats. According to the *false common good* criticism, the common good does not exist: because there are only divergent self-interests that cannot be reconciled, to invoke the common good is to invoke an illusion. According to the *moral conversion*, while something like the common good might exist, it cannot be reached, because individuals are primarily motivated by their self-interest and cannot agree to put them aside in order to promote the common good. An epistemic conception of deliberative democracy needs to respond to both challenges.

This paper argues that i) the common good is best understood as the equal promotion of all individual self-interests ; and that ii) given this definition, both criticisms can be refuted.

To do so, it elaborates a conceptual distinction between one's *individual self-interest* and one's *specific interests*, drawing on Barry's analysis of interest. It criticizes Barry's (and Pettit's) definition of the common good as the set of interests that are shared by all citizens *qua* citizens. Such a definition implies excluding from the common good *particular interests* of which the satisfaction is deemed legitimate (for instance certain interests shared only by women, the elderly, etc.). Even if the interests that are shared by all are defined *ex ante* or *ex ignorantia*, the Barry/Pettit strategy cannot secure all legitimate particular interests. However, such interests can be included in the perimeter of the common good if it is defined as the equal promotion of all individual (vs. specific) interests.

This concept helps to take up the false common good and the moral conversion challenges. On the one hand, to assert that a common good does not exist is to misunderstand the concept, which does not refer to a transcending good, nor to the overlapping of *fixed* context-independent sets of actions and policies. On the other hand, to assume that public deliberation should realize a moral conversion is to overestimate the separation between the common good and self-interests, and to misinterpret the epistemic task that should be imposed on public deliberation.

Abstract 2: « Democratic Bargaining: Dealing with Self-Interest or Promoting the Common Good? »

A just society has to identify and promote the common good. One of the most powerful justifications of democracy that has been provided in the recent decades claims that democracy is legitimate and fair because it more likely than other institutional systems pursues the common good. According to this epistemic justification of democracy however, to achieve this aim citizens do not have to aggregate their preferences by voting or negotiate over their interested proposals, but they have to deliberate. Deliberation should, ideally, be open to all those affected by the decision. The participants should have equal opportunity to influence the process, they should listen to one another and give reasons to one another that they think the others can comprehend and accept. These requirements rule out the exercise of power, propaganda, expression of mere self-interest, and threats (of the sort that characterize bargaining).

In this paper I will challenge the traditional contraposition between common good and self-interest and I will argue that an epistemic account of deliberative democracy cannot exclude self-interest and some forms of negotiation from the deliberative sphere. To sustain this claim I will analyse what the common good of a polity means. Firstly, I will distinguish the debate on constitutional essentials from the public policies' debate and I will argue that though the exclusion of self-interest from the former is acceptable, it does not hold in the latter case. Within the public policy debate, in fact, people cannot identify the common good if they do not take into account their self-interest and demand that the whole polity acknowledges the legitimacy of their interested proposals. To pursue the common good, a democracy has to legitimise some forms of negotiation (democratic bargaining) that could deal with interested claims without undermining fairness.

Since an account of democratic bargaining will more likely identify and promote the common good than the traditional account of deliberative democracy, I will conclude that it is not only a legitimate and fair alternative to deliberation but, at least from an epistemic point of view, a better democratic procedure.

Abstract 3: «Who (and how) knows what's the right thing to do politically: on the epistemic dimension of deliberative democratic decision-making»

It is common to justify democracy as the system of government most respectful with substantive moral values, such as human dignity, political equality and autonomy. This is not all what we care about, though. The idea of democracy is connected with certain procedures of collective decision-making. If these procedures are intrinsically good because they respect those substantive values, that's good. But we all have a legitimate interest in having the best decisions possible from the substantive point of view. We want our collective decisions to be democratic, but we also want them to be correct, whatever it means.

Deliberative democracy comes to bridge these two central concerns: the intrinsic value of democracy as expression of equal autonomy and basic dignity and its instrumental value as being capable of driving us to make correct political decisions. This paper examines the roots for the epistemic value of deliberative democracy. It clarifies the relevant epistemic questions connected to it: what it is to be known to make correct political decisions; who is the appropriate knower; how this knower may come to know what is to be known. The paper intends to show why deliberative democracy may reasonably satisfy our demand for correction in democratic decisions, while resisting the elitist trend. And it ends by clarifying one crucial point that has generated some misguided criticism in the most recent literature: the ideal nature of the epistemic deliberative democracy, which relates to the kind of practical reasons that democratic decisions may generate according to the epistemic argument.

Abstract 4: « Against Incorporating Self-Interest in the Deliberative Ideal »

In the development and refinement of the theory of deliberative democracy over the last two decades, it has become evident that self-interests cannot and should not be excluded from the political process. It is an important aspect of the political process, also as understood by deliberative democrats, that citizens have the opportunity to clarify and express their interests in order that political decisions do not favor the interests of some groups over the interest of other groups. Indeed, one aim of deliberation is to learn what is "in the equal interest of all" (Habermas). But does this mean that self-interest should be included in the deliberative ideal? In order to answer this question we need to understand that deliberative democracy is a complex theory of democracy that involves four dimensions: A social theoretical dimension, a justificatory dimension, an epistemic dimension, and a procedural dimension. This paper argues that these dimensions of deliberative democracy cannot be as easily maintained as part of deliberative democracy, as is assumed by those theorists – such as Jane Mansbridge – who suggest awarding self-interest intrinsic value and making it part of the regulative ideal of deliberative democracy. The argument for including self-interest in deliberative democracy needs to more fully consider the consequences for the dimensions that make up the complex theory of deliberative democracy. If it cannot be shown that self-interest is compatible with a proper understanding of these dimensions of deliberative democracy, then there are good reasons *against* incorporating self-interest in the deliberative ideal. The conclusion of the paper is that what we need is not integration of self-interest and deliberative democracy into one unified ideal. Rather, we should maintain an ideal of deliberative democracy that stands apart from the politics of self-interest.