

Deliberative Democracy Basics

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Author's Notes

This guide examines the core tenets of deliberative democracy by examining a number of different iterations of the theory. The page numbers are for citation purposes only and may not coincide exactly with printed versions of this guide. If you enjoyed this ebook, look out for *Jürgen Habermas and Deliberative Democracy*, *John Dryzek and Deliberative Democracy*, *John Dryzek and Deliberative Democracy*, and *Deliberative Democracy Essentials*. All of which are available through Amazon, The iBookstore, Smashwords, and all good ebooks vendors.

Deliberative Democracy

To label a democratic theory as 'deliberative' is to say that it has, at its core, the exercise of public reason through the political deliberations of citizens. This is because deliberative theories of democracy focus on communication rather than preference aggregation, which is not to say that these theories abandon voting and elections all together. Rather, a deliberative democracy is a democracy in which citizens make decisions and solve political problems through some sort of deliberative process, which may or may not involve elections and voting.

Most theories of deliberative democracy would have deliberative elements introduced to an existing political system, utilising existing social and political institutions such as churches, corporations, unions, parties, lobby groups, courts, and parliaments. This would mean that rather than simply counting votes, citizens would be encouraged to participate in public deliberation in order to solve political problems (Stokes, 2002, p. 40), and most theories of deliberative democracy associate legitimacy of the law with the exercise of public reason. The following review considers the various starting points and problems addressed by diverse theories of deliberative democracy, concludes on the similarities and differences between them, and constructs a spectrum of issues addressed by theories of deliberative democracy.

John Rawls is a well-known proponent of liberal thought, who has set out a deliberative theory in his book *The Law of Peoples* (Rawls, 1999). He articulates his theory of deliberation in order to try to solve problems of legitimacy in law by equating the legislative process with public deliberation on matters of political import. He uses the idea of public reason as the focus of his theory, arguing that ‘...in public reason comprehensive doctrines of truth or right [are] replaced by an idea of the politically reasonable addressed to citizens as citizens’ (Rawls, 1999, p. 132). He argues that there are three elements of deliberative democracy: the idea of public reason; a framework of constitutional institutions; and a general willingness by citizens to realise the ideal of public reason (1999, p. 139). His theory restricts political deliberation to political elites, such as elected officials and judges on constitutional courts, as well as confining public deliberation to a subsection of the public sphere.

Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson present an alternate liberal conception of deliberative democracy. Their iteration of deliberative democracy sets out to solve the problem of ruling elites making political decisions that have serious ramifications for the state but that have not been through a process of legitimisation by the polity. They start from an observation that in many liberal-democratic countries there is an increasing cynicism about politics and politicians among citizens who feel less represented by elites who are less accountable for their decisions. They base their theory of deliberative democracy on the assumption that citizens are not passive individuals or subjects of government. Rather, they are autonomous agents capable of taking part in the governance of their society (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 3). They outline four characteristics of a deliberative democracy:

1. Reasons for acting need to be justifiable, and should be acceptable by free and reasonable people seeking fair terms of co-operation