



Deliberation Gateway

ORIGIN SERIES

002

ESSAY II

Deliberative Democracy Defined

A history of deliberative democracy

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ABSTRACT

Deliberative democracy is the idea that legitimacy comes from reasoned public discussion among those affected, rather than from the aggregation of preferences alone. This is the definition, the distinction from voting and from consultation, and the history — from Athenian sortition through the mid-century revival to the citizens' assemblies of the last twenty years, and the questions still open.

Working draft. The shape of the history is right, but every date, name and attribution below needs a citation pass before this is treated as a reference — House Rule 5 gates release on that, and it has not yet been done.

The definition

Deliberative democracy holds that a political decision is legitimate to the extent that it survives reasoned discussion among the people it affects.

That is a claim about where authority comes from. In the ordinary account, a decision is legitimate because more people preferred it — you count preferences and the larger number wins. In the deliberative account, counting is not enough on its own, because it takes preferences as given. What matters is whether the reasons for a decision could be defended, in public, to the people who have to live with it.

The consequence is practical rather than philosophical: if reasons matter, then the conditions under which people form them matter, and a system that never creates those conditions is not doing the thing it claims to do.

Three things that are not the same

Much of the confusion in this field comes from collapsing three distinct activities.

Voting aggregates preferences that already exist. It is fast, legitimate, and low-bandwidth. It does not ask anyone to change their mind, and it is not designed to.

Consultation gathers opinions on a proposal that has usually been written. It can be genuine. It can also be, and often is, a procedural box: the response is collected, noted, and has no defined power over the outcome.

Deliberation puts a group in a position to form a considered judgement: time, evidence, access to opposing arguments and to the people responsible, and a question that is still open. The output is not a tally of what people thought on arrival. It is what they concluded.

The test that separates the third from the second is simple, and it is the one this imprint applies: *could the answer have changed the decision?* If not, it was consultation wearing a costume.

Athens, and the thing that was lost

Classical Athens is usually invoked for the assembly — the *ekklesia*, where citizens voted directly. The more interesting institution for our purposes is the *boule*, the Council of Five Hundred, which set the assembly's agenda and was filled **by lot** from among the citizen body, in rotation, with strict limits on repeat service. Juries were filled the same way, and were large.

Two features are worth taking seriously. Selection by lot was regarded as the democratic method and election as the aristocratic one — the reasoning being that election reliably returns the notable, the wealthy and the well-connected, which is a defensible way to pick a government but not a democratic one. And the institutions were built to *rotate*: the point

was that ordinary people would in fact serve, not that they theoretically could.

Athenian democracy also excluded women, resident foreigners and an enslaved population that was very large. The mechanism is worth recovering; the franchise it operated on is not a model of anything.

Sortition then largely disappears from the story of Western government for two thousand years, surviving in fragments — the Venetian and Florentine lot-based procedures, the criminal jury — while election became so thoroughly identified with democracy that the substitution stopped being visible as a choice.

The mid-century revival

The modern strand begins as political theory rather than practice.

Jürgen Habermas's work on the public sphere in the early 1960s, and later on communicative action, supplied the underlying claim: that legitimacy is generated in communication, under conditions where the better argument rather than the stronger party can prevail. John Rawls's work on public reason approached a related problem from a different direction.

The phrase itself is generally credited to Joseph Bessette, writing at the start of the 1980s and arguing that the American constitutional design was meant to be deliberative rather than merely majoritarian.

Through the 1990s this became what Dryzek later called the **deliberative turn** — the point at which a substantial part of democratic theory stopped treating democracy as preference aggregation and started treating it as reasoned public judgement.

The practitioners

Theory and practice developed in parallel, and mostly separately.

- **Citizens' juries** were developed by Ned Crosby and the Jefferson Center in the United States from the early 1970s: a small randomly selected panel, expert witnesses, cross-examination, a published verdict.
- **Consensus conferences** were developed in Denmark, through the Danish Board of Technology, from the late 1980s — lay panels convened to reach a public position on contested technologies.
- **Deliberative polling**, from James Fishkin at the end of the 1980s, added the measurement that the field badly needed: poll a representative sample, deliberate, poll again, and report the difference. The finding that opinions move, substantially and in no single ideological direction, is one of the more robust results in the area.

Assemblies with real power

The last twenty years are the interesting part, because the processes stopped being demonstrations.

- **British Columbia, 2004.** A citizens' assembly on electoral reform, selected by lot, which deliberated for most of a year and put a recommendation directly to a provincial referendum. It won a clear

majority and fell short of the supermajority threshold set for it — which is itself the most instructive detail.

- **Ireland, 2012 onward.** A Constitutional Convention and then a Citizens' Assembly mixed randomly selected citizens with structured evidence on questions the political system had been unable to resolve. The Assembly's work on the Eighth Amendment fed directly into the 2018 referendum. This is the case most often cited, and fairly: it is the clearest instance of deliberation resolving something that ordinary politics had jammed on for decades.
- **Ostbelgien, 2019.** The German-speaking Community of Belgium established a **permanent** citizens' council, drawn by lot and rotating, with the standing power to set the agenda for citizens' assemblies. This is the first move from event to institution, and it is the model the sector assembly is closest to in spirit.
- **France, 2019–2020.** The Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat convened 150 citizens by lot on climate policy. Its afterlife — the gap between what it proposed and what was enacted — is the standard cautionary example, and the reason this imprint insists on a published response as part of the design.
- **The wave.** The OECD's survey of the field at the start of the 2020s catalogued several hundred cases across member countries, and gave the phenomenon its usual name: the deliberative wave.

What is still open

Anyone claiming this is settled is overselling it. The honest list of unresolved problems:

- **Power.** Almost all of these bodies are advisory. When the recommendation is inconvenient, it can be absorbed and ignored — and often is. Nobody has a general answer to what a citizens' assembly should be able to *compel*.
- **Scale.** Deliberation is expensive in the one resource nobody has, which is time. A hundred people can deliberate. Forty million cannot, and the relationship between the small deliberating body and the large non-deliberating public is genuinely unresolved.
- **Capture.** Whoever sets the question, selects the evidence and chairs the room has a great deal of influence over the outcome, and the field has no settled defence against it beyond transparency.
- **Durability.** Almost every case above is an event. Ostbelgien is the exception, and it is small and recent.

Where the sector assembly sits

This imprint's contribution is a bet on the fourth problem, approached through the first.

A sector assembly is not convened for a topic; it is attached to a **sector** and to the implementation of a national strategy within it. That gives it something most assemblies lack: a standing job, a defined counterpart obliged to respond, and a reason to exist next year as well as this one.

Whether that is enough to turn a good event into a durable institution is exactly the open question, and it is the question the rest of this canon is trying to answer.