

Can Deliberation Neutralize Power?

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Abstract: Most democratic theorists agree that concentrations of wealth and power tend to distort the functioning of democracy, and ought to be countered wherever possible. Deliberative democrats are no exception: though not its only potential value, the capacity of deliberation to “neutralize power” is often regarded as “fundamental” to deliberative theory. Power may be neutralized, according to many deliberative democrats, if citizens can be induced to commit more fully to the deliberative resolution of common problems. If they do, they will be unable to get away with inconsistencies and bad or private reasons, thereby mitigating the illegitimate influence of power. I argue, however, that the means by which power inflects political disagreement is far more subtle than this model suggests, and cannot be countered so simply. As a wealth of recent research in political psychology demonstrates, human beings persistently exhibit “motivated reasoning,” meaning that even when we are sincerely committed to the deliberative resolution of common problems, and even when we are exposed to the same reasons and evidence, we still disagree strongly about what “fair cooperation” entails. Motivated reasoning can be counteracted, but only under exceptional circumstances such as those that enable modern science, which cannot be reliably replicated in our society at large. My analysis suggests that in democratic politics – which rules out the kind of anti-democratic practices available to scientists – we should not expect deliberation to reliably neutralize power.

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It may be true that the cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy. But can the same be said of deliberation? Many of the widely-acknowledged ailments of contemporary democratic deliberation, of course, are attributable to the underlying distribution of power (Knight and Johnson, 1997). Like nearly all democratic theorists, therefore, deliberative democrats advocate concrete measures to “neutralize” concentrated power – such as reducing the outsized influence of money in politics and increasing the participation of under-represented groups – sometimes even by non-deliberative means (Fung, 2005; Mansbridge et al., 2010; Young, 2001). The innovation of *deliberative* democracy over competing theories of democracy such as elite competition, populism, or interest-group pluralism, however, was to propose reasonable deliberation *itself* as a potentially effective weapon against power. For most deliberative democrats, therefore, “the idea that deliberation helps to neutralize power is fundamental” to the project of deliberative democracy (Cohen and Rogers, 2003: 242). Deliberative democrats view high quality deliberation not merely as a *symptom* of a healthy democracy – a byproduct of deeper structural changes – but as a distinct *agent* of change and a strategic political priority; not only as the theoretical, idealized *end* of the fight against concentrated power, but also as a primary *means* of waging that war (Chambers, 2009; Fung and Wright, 2003a).

The practical intuition motivating deliberative democracy is that when people are induced to engage in the practice of reasonable deliberation – defined here as exchanges of argument and evidence adhering to specific norms of reasonable discourse such as consistency, publicity, evidence, explicitness, and justification – many of them will come to renounce selfish concerns and bad arguments. As a result, either those with concentrated power will decide spontaneously to give it up, or their self-justifying arguments will be exposed to others as flawed, weakening the political alliances which sustain their power. Though they are rare, of course, individuals do

experience such “deliberative conversions” from time to time. It is widely supposed, therefore, that if citizens in general were *more* committed to reasonable deliberation, we would witness such power-neutralizing conversions more often. Thus, despite their disagreements on questions such as whether citizen “commitment” to deliberation must be sincere (Markovits, 2006), and whether our primary focus should be crafting especially reasonable “mini-publics” or improving deliberation in the broader public sphere (Lafont, 2014), most deliberative democrats agree that strengthening deliberative norms in some capacity should be a central political priority.

In what follows, however, I argue that we should be skeptical of this intuitive picture, which mistakes the reason for the relative rarity of deliberative conversions. The problem is not primarily that citizens are insufficiently committed to deliberation, either in spirit or in practice; rather, the problem is what psychologists call “motivated reasoning” – the fact that we humans perceive and assimilate new information in ways that are unintentionally biased to protect our prior commitments and social identities. Most deliberative theorists would likely accept the “motivated” character of reasoning in theory, of course, but few appreciate its significance. Even when citizens *are* committed to deliberative norms, it turns out, they are still highly unlikely to change their minds as a result of deliberation. Accordingly, strengthening the enforcement of deliberative norms is unlikely to be a particularly effective weapon against concentrated power. Whatever the value of deliberation as an idealized *end*, in other words, we should cease prioritizing it as a *means* in the struggle for justice.

What does it mean to neutralize power? The tasks ahead

Can deliberation neutralize power? Our first challenge is to interpret this question such that it is genuinely *controversial*. Few would deny, for example, that mass collective action, media rhetoric, and cultural narratives deeply influence public opinion and can sometimes serve to

neutralize power (Alexander, 2006). Accordingly, the critique which follows does not apply to certain recent work on “deliberative systems,” insofar as it emphasizes explicitly *non-deliberative* social action as the primary mechanism by which supposedly “deliberative” goals are to be achieved (Parkinson and Mansbridge, 2012). The problem with such methods for achieving citizen conversions, of course, is that they are not properly subject to the discipline of reason, and many deliberative democrats have therefore deemed them unreliable allies in the fight against concentrated power. While most deliberative democrats admit that certain injustices warrant *specific* non-deliberative responses, they have sought to identify and promote those procedures that are trustworthy *in general*, due to their accountability to reason. The proper criticism of “deliberative systems” theory, therefore – as has already been observed (Owen and Smith, 2015) – is not that it is empirically implausible, but that it has strayed too far from the mechanism of *reasonable* discourse to be considered distinctively “deliberative.”

The controversial question at stake is not whether any public discourse whatsoever can change minds and neutralize power, but whether explicitly deliberative methods, grounded in intersubjective reason, can achieve these results. Henceforth, therefore, we will be interested specifically in reasonable deliberation, defined as exchanges of argument and evidence adhering to norms of consistency, publicity, evidence, explicitness, and justification. Though the line between “deliberative” and “non-deliberative” methods probably cannot be drawn with complete precision, we can say with confidence that reasonable deliberation includes any presentation or rebuttal of arguments and evidence within a public forum, while excluding primarily narrative or rhetorical forms of speech as well as material threats and incentives – be they physical, economic, emotional, or otherwise. Difficult borderline cases are to be expected, but they do not make the distinction untenable.

Similarly, it is clear that explicitly deliberative mechanisms *do* raise the costs of selfish claims and bad arguments, and can therefore be said to “neutralize” power in some respect. We observe this phenomenon whenever anyone crafts a public statement so as not to run afoul of the deliberative norms they expect to be policed by the media. As should be obvious, however, this sort of thing happens regularly already, and we cannot simply infer from the benefits of existing deliberation the conclusion that higher quality deliberation would yield proportionally greater rewards. Neither is it clear how such “higher quality” deliberation could even be achieved, without simply assuming away the problems – such as inequalities of power – which we are trying to solve in the first place. Insofar as they seek to generate practical political recommendations rather than thought experiments, therefore, it is incumbent upon deliberative democrats to show that some *intermediate* strategy to improve deliberation – namely, stronger enforcement of deliberative norms – could have a substantial impact on power relations above and beyond these commonplace constraints.

We must also be careful, however, not to bias the argument in the other direction, building our skeptical conclusions about deliberation into assumptions about reason and power that are rejected by most deliberative theorists.¹ Many critics of deliberative democracy have already pointed out, for example, that if “reason” provides no escape from power *even in the ideal*, then “reasonable” deliberative procedures will simply serve to legitimize relations of power rather than neutralizing them.² Such skeptics, however, need not be convinced that deliberation cannot neutralize power, and so the argument which follows is addressed primarily to those deliberative democrats who

¹ Restrictive definitions tend to identify power as the possession of individuals, which they may use to further their own ends, while more expansive or radical views understand power as transcending individuals and even “producing” them. For an excellent review of debates on the nature of power, as well as a distinctive position within them, see Hayward (2000).

² Explicit critiques of deliberative democracy from this angle include those of William Connolly (1999, 2002) and Chantal Mouffe (2000), and in general the so-called “Foucault-Habermas debate” centers largely on this issue (Benhabib et al., 1995; Fraser, 1989; Kelly, 1994; Young, 1990).

have *not* found such theoretical considerations conclusive, including a growing cadre of social scientists, policy advocates, and government officials. Rather than returning to longstanding disputes over the definition of power in the abstract, I engage deliberative democrats on their own terms by evaluating their concrete proposals. In lieu of a general *concept* of power, my argument draws upon specific *examples* of the sorts of concentrated power deliberative democrats seek to contest, assessing the likelihood that they will succeed in doing so.³ My central contribution to the study of power, then, is my analysis of one mechanism by which such concentrations of power are perpetuated *over time*, in spite of deliberative attempts to neutralize them, which is independent of any particular view of what power fundamentally *is*.⁴

This mechanism is popularly known as “motivated reasoning” (Kunda, 1990), and it has been the subject of a great deal of research across several fields of cognitive science in the last few decades. The basic contention of this research is that human reason is always shaped by hidden social and biological motivations over which we cannot exercise control. As such, our reasoning is biased – unintentionally – in ways that often turn out to be self-serving or protective of our social identities. Thus, even given maximally optimistic levels of deliberative norm enforcement in mini-publics and the broader public sphere, we are unlikely to achieve power-neutralizing deliberative conversions with substantially greater regularity than we already observe. Powerful citizens are unlikely to recognize their agendas as “selfish,” or as illegitimately perpetuating their own concentrated power at the expense of others. Nor will their allies recognize this, so long as that alliance is grounded in their own forms of social identification. Because our “reason” is

³ This orientation also distinguishes the argument from various “realist” critiques of deliberative democracy which decry its overly idealistic or utopian aims (Galston, 2010). My primary targets are not those typical of realist scholarship – theorists of *abstract* deliberative ideals – but rather those who take deliberation to be a *practical* imperative in modern democratic societies.

⁴ Nonetheless, it is not entirely neutral between such views: one of my aims here is to render some of the challenges posed for deliberation by proponents of expansive views of power, in terms that may be more amenable to those, like most deliberative democrats, who tend to assume a more “restrictive” conception of power.

constitutively shaped by our identity, much of the “selfishness” we exhibit is *unintentional* and even *invisible* to us; unconsciously woven into the fabric of our moral experience.

The lesson for deliberation is simple: power corrupts, but not in the way we often assume – not, that is, by inducing us to become selfish or evil and thereby undermining our commitment to common goals. If it did, deliberation could counteract these effects, by convincing the powerful to retain their solidaristic commitments, or by persuading their allies to abandon them. Instead, power corrupts by changing the way we perceive the world; by altering what we recognize *as* selfish or evil. As we gain power, we inhabit a new cultural context, acquire new habits, and develop a new social identity – and this is how power enters our deliberations. However we conceive of the *nature* of power, in other words, we should recognize motivated reasoning as an important *mechanism* of its perpetuation over time. This is bad news for those who have hoped to neutralize power by enforcing deliberative norms and thereby convincing the powerful or their allies to change their minds. Though motivated reasoning does not make such deliberative conversions impossible, it makes them quite a bit more expensive than deliberative democrats have assumed.

I explore just how expensive such conversions are by examining a remarkably successful system for achieving them. The methodical resolution of disagreements within the scientific community over time shows that motivated reasoning *can* be counteracted deliberatively, though always in an imperfect way and – more importantly – only under exceptional circumstances that cannot be reliably replicated in our society at large. My interpretation of scientific progress suggests that in order for the enforcement of deliberative norms to yield major shifts in public opinion – and thereby to successfully neutralize power – deliberators require not only an extraordinary degree of sustained focus over time, but also extensive agreement about the precise *meaning* of deliberative norms. Unfortunately, neither of these conditions could ever plausibly

characterize mass democratic politics. Without the extraordinary advantages available to science in virtue of its internally anti-democratic practices, we should not expect deliberation to reliably neutralize power.

To summarize: in asking whether deliberation can meaningfully neutralize power, we are seeking to evaluate the *distinctive* political claims of deliberative democrats. Therefore, we are not asking whether non-deliberative means of shifting public opinion can neutralize power; nor whether reasonable deliberation *ever* has this effect – both claims are true but uncontroversial. Neither, finally, are we asking whether reasonable discourse could ever be free of power *in the ideal*. Though this question remains philosophically controversial, we need not answer it here – instead, we grant that certain forms of reasonable discourse, such as is undertaken by scientific communities, *can* produce the sort of progressive, methodical dispute-resolution that deliberative democrats seek to replicate in politics as a way of reliably achieving power-neutralizing conversions. In other words, we need not be skeptical of all forms of deliberative reason in order to question the wisdom of deliberative democracy as a political project. Instead, the question at stake is whether deliberative norms ought to be seen as particularly effective weapons against the sorts of concentrated power which threaten modern democracies, such as wealth, racism, and sexism. If we prioritize stronger enforcement of deliberative norms when allocating our limited political resources, within societies which already possess basic democratic guarantees, will this *significantly weaken* the influence over democratic politics that is clearly still enjoyed by such concentrations of power? Given this interpretation of the central question of the paper, then – which focuses our attention squarely on the practical implications of deliberative theory – the simple answer is “no.”

Deliberative failure as a commitment problem

We can begin our study of deliberation as a political strategy by recalling its origins in the mid-to-late 20th century as a rejection of the “polyarchic” conceptions of democracy popular at the time, which ranged from the elite competition proposed by Joseph Schumpeter (1942) to the interest-group pluralism of Robert Dahl (1956). What such polyarchic conceptions of democracy had in common – and what many deliberative democrats sought to escape – was an acceptance of democratic politics as a competition between various strategic interests.⁵ From its first formulations, the virtue of a deliberative conception has often been seen as its refusal to accept the inevitability of competitive, *strategic* action, and its focus instead on promoting cooperative, *communicative* action (Habermas, 1984). Democracy as genuine “self-rule,” rather than a crude balance of power, emerges only “when citizens are convinced in a free and equal conversation that the limits placed upon them are not chains but self-imposed limits for good reasons” (Chambers, 1996: 8). Above and beyond the security provided by basic democratic rights and institutions, deliberation promises to counteract the hegemony of interests and power with a process of decision-making that is grounded in reason, argument, and moral purpose. In order to achieve its goals, then, deliberative reason must serve to effectively *discipline* power (Cohen, 2007: 220).

Given that ostensibly deliberative forums are already prevalent in most modern democratic societies, it is clear that their mere existence is not sufficient to neutralize power in the way deliberative democrats have imagined. In order to remedy our contemporary deliberative failures,

⁵ According to Dennis Thompson, for example, deliberative democrats “agree in rejecting conceptions of democracy that base politics only on power or interest, aggregation of preferences, and competitive theories in the tradition of writers such as Schumpeter and Downs” (Thompson, 2008: 498). Though some have cast *aggregation* as the primary antagonist of deliberation (Knight and Johnson, 1994), I have followed Bohman and Rehg (1997: xii) in adopting Dahl’s more expansive term “polyarchy.” Jane Mansbridge (1980) uses the term “adversary democracy” and Thomas Spragens (1990: 2–3) the term “pluralism” in similar capacities. Nonetheless, I do not mean to imply that this is the only history of deliberative democracy that can be told. Contemporary deliberative theory has origins as diverse as radical participatory democracy (Pateman, 1976), American pragmatism (Dewey, 1927), and Rawlsian analytic liberalism (Rawls, 1993).

then, deliberative democrats have focused their attention on improving the quality of deliberation, and here the burden ultimately falls on citizens. According to Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, for example, citizens must be willing to offer one another fair terms of cooperation; to give reasons for proposed policies and principles that are accessible and acceptable to others (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004: 13). “If citizens do not possess this willingness,” Simone Chambers adds, “then no matter how well designed institutional arrangements are for the purposes of discourse, discourse will not take place” (Chambers, 1996: 195). For many deliberative democrats, in other words, the success of deliberation depends upon widespread citizen commitment to the deliberative process. Accordingly, deliberative failure represents a kind of *commitment problem* which must be solved in order for deliberation to further neutralize power.

In some cases, the necessary commitment has been understood to entail a particular motivation. If so, citizens must deliberate sincerely (Cohen, 1997: 76), or at least “overcome” the “egocentric viewpoint” (Habermas, 1988: 45) – a commitment that could plausibly develop naturally within explicitly deliberative forums.⁶ If citizens encountered one another in such forums more often, it is thought, such consistent interaction could *create* the necessary motivations. Perhaps moved unexpectedly by the arguments and appeals of others, people would voluntarily relinquish their self-serving pursuits. If this happened frequently enough, such that those with concentrated power often found themselves willing to surrender it, we will have solved the motivational commitment problem and successfully neutralized power. While this causal sequence is no doubt realized on occasion, however, it is unlikely to be reliable, and especially given the difficulty of detecting sincerity, we cannot know when it has been operative (Markovits, 2006, 2008). When we cannot

⁶ Though I cast it here as a position that has largely been surpassed, many still maintain that citizen sincerity is required by deliberative democracy as well as its close relative, public reason, and there has been considerable debate in recent years about exactly this question (Kadlac, 2014; Lenard, 2008; Markovits, 2006; Schwartzman, 2011; Warren, 2006).

observe the motivations of others, as William Riker (1982) famously pointed out, we cannot know whether they are behaving strategically or not, and therefore, collective or social choice procedures such as voting and deliberation cannot be trusted as true expressions of the popular will.

Instead of requiring sincere motivation, therefore, most deliberative democrats with a practical political focus have proposed that we should be satisfied with an understanding of commitment as demonstrated by observable behaviors, which may then be cooperatively monitored. If people are *forced* to obey deliberative norms, it is argued – giving and receiving the right sorts of public or reciprocal reasons – we may succeed in neutralizing power. In responding to Riker’s claims, for example, Gerry Mackie (1998, 2003) proposes just such a mechanism for enforcing an observable commitment to the deliberative resolution of political problems. Mackie admits that we may not be able to tell with certainty when anyone’s motivations are sincere, but we may still hold others accountable when we are involved in repeated interactions and individuals may build a reputation. We can threaten others with punishment, for instance, if they lie or use inconsistent forms of reasoning from one case to another, giving them a strong incentive against such behaviors.

Chambers fleshes out this insight in more detail, recommending that we monitor deliberators’ consistency and coherence across different contexts:

Consistency in speech is intended to indicate when people hold moral positions out of conviction rather than for reasons of political advantage or instrumental benefit. If, for example, someone defends one position in one situation with one set of interlocutors and then defends another in another situation with another set of interlocutors, we would have grounds for doubting his sincerity. Consistency in speech and action implies that speakers should act in ways consistent with their professed beliefs... We cannot always live up to our principles...nevertheless, we

can doubt the sincerity of those whose behavior consistently or repeatedly violates their professed moral principles. Coherence refers to a broader sense of consistency.

We might question the sincerity of a speaker who... refuses to see the broader implications of her views for other issues or debates (Chambers, 1996: 208).

If we simply keep account of their speeches and actions over time, Chambers argues, we can effectively hold others accountable to deliberative norms.

Similar proposals abound in the deliberative literature. Andrew Knops locates several “emancipatory mechanisms,” for example, in the “explicitness in language” that deliberators may require of one another (Knops, 2006: 595). A demand for consistency, he argues, “is important for the powerless, as in any society those in power are more likely to get away without such inconsistencies being challenged and exposed” (Knops, 2006: 606). Frank Schimmelfennig discusses the phenomenon of “rhetorical traps,” in which a strategic argument given for one proposal commits an actor to certain principles from which it may be difficult to withdraw (Schimmelfennig, 2001). Elizabeth Markovits praises “formal mechanisms of questioning and performance review” for institutionalizing such accountability (Markovits, 2008: 212). Finally, Jon Elster points to the “*civilizing force of hypocrisy*” as exemplified by the French and the American constitutional assemblies of 1789-1791, whose participants were “forced or induced to substitute the language of impartial argument for the language of self-interest” (Elster, 2000: 349). Though clever hypocrites can still advocate for their own interests in a deliberative forum by crafting supposedly “impartial” arguments, their advocacy is obstructed by the expectation that they will abide by deliberative norms.

None of these “emancipatory mechanisms” requires that powerful citizens acquire altruistic motivations or embrace the arguments of their opponents. Rather, the goal is for public opinion to

be mobilized against them, and their allies convinced to abandon their coalition. This objective, of course, is shared by anyone who seeks to neutralize power through peaceful collective decision procedures – that is, it is shared by nearly anyone who could plausibly be called a democrat. *Deliberative* democrats are distinctive, at least on our working definition, only in the strategy they adopt towards achieving that goal; that is, strengthening the enforcement of deliberative norms of reason such as consistency, publicity, explicitness, evidence, and justification. Regardless of whether citizens are committed in *spirit* to the project of deliberation, deliberative democrats claim, those who are forced by such norms to be committed in *practice* to reasonable exchanges of argument and evidence will – eventually, and on the margins – uncover the selfishness, falsehoods, and bad arguments which support illegitimate concentrations of power. As a result, the alliances and coalitions which support those concentrations of power will collapse. For many deliberative democrats, in other words, the relative infrequency of such deliberative conversions in contemporary democratic societies represents a certain kind of practical *commitment* problem, which may be alleviated by strengthening the enforcement of deliberative norms.

Deliberative failure as a conversion problem

But is there such a problem? Consider that in practice, we *already* ask deliberators in public forums to be consistent, focus on the public good, make their claims explicit, provide supporting evidence, and give sound justifications for all political proposals. Journalists call attention to the broken promises of politicians and other public figures across the political spectrum, while opinion leaders subject their arguments to critical public scrutiny, and non-partisan fact-checking services provide scrupulous analysis of their factual claims. Especially in the digital age, we can be sure that nearly every time a public figure violates deliberative norms, someone somewhere has captured and memorialized it, pointing out the blunder for all to see. To the extent that this publicization of

deliberative violations itself adheres to the norms of reasonable deliberation, it counts as a contribution to public “deliberation” on our definition from above. We can even be quite generous in counting “borderline” cases involving some “narrative” or “rhetoric” and observe nonetheless that this process of subjecting arguments to public deliberative scrutiny rarely induces citizens to change their minds about substantive issues.

What, then, do deliberative democrats hope to change about the situation of contemporary democracies, in order to foster more power-neutralizing conversions? As we explored above, their solution cannot simply be to encourage more *non*-deliberative social action. On the one hand, many deliberative theorists have argued that non-deliberative action is an unreliable ally *in general* because it is undisciplined by intersubjective reason; while on the other hand, deliberative democrats are hardly unique in calling for *specific* power-neutralizing collective action such as protests or strikes. Their unique contribution is to advocate explicitly deliberative procedures – those subject to the discipline of reason – as a *general* solution to political problems. However, it is difficult to see what could be done in the broader public sphere to improve deliberative norm enforcement, without simply assuming away the problems like polarization and inequality that we are trying to solve. Deliberative norms are already policed with great vigor, both by mass media and individual citizens – the problem is that not everyone agrees about which *purported* violations are truly problematic. Because of these underlying differences in perception, simply bringing *more attention* to such violations, across a wider audience, will not substantially increase the rate of deliberative conversions.

Many scholars and advocates of deliberative democracy have responded to this difficulty by turning their attention from improving *macro*-deliberation to creating effective *micro*-deliberation in specially crafted “mini-publics” (Fung, 2003). These mini-publics – such as deliberative polls,

citizens' juries, citizens' councils, community policing boards, participatory budgeting committees, and so on – provide ample time and space for deliberations to proceed in a cooperative environment, without the distracting influences of special interest groups or constituent pressure that standard parliamentary bodies face. Setting aside worries that such mini-publics lack the proper democratic legitimacy (Chambers, 2009; Dryzek, 2010; Lafont, 2014), we might view them as a possible solution to the obvious difficulties with enforcing deliberative norms in macro-deliberative forums, or at least as a model to follow in such broader contexts (Goodin and Dryzek, 2006; Niemeyer, 2011). If we can achieve high quality deliberation in these mini-publics and thereby induce a higher rate of power-neutralizing deliberative conversions, then perhaps we could reap the benefits on a larger scale, either by empowering those mini-publics themselves or replicating their deliberative conditions in the broader public sphere. Certainly the converse is true: if we *cannot* reliably induce power-neutralizing deliberative conversions in the relatively favorable conditions of mini-publics, we should not expect to achieve them in the far more unruly discursive environments of mass democratic societies.

So far, the evidence from a number of empirical studies of mini-publics is mixed at best.⁷ Some find evidence of salutary change (Fishkin, 1991; Ryfe, 2005) while others find that deliberation actually makes matters worse (Rosenberg, 2007b; Sunstein, 2000), though all can agree that context matters (Cohen, 2007: 234). Much of this variation depends on what is being measured as “success” in the first place. While some tests measure “higher quality” discourse as an end in itself, others require that it actually produce broader agreement, and still others test for specific, substantively just outcomes. Complicating matters further, certain of these goals can work at cross purposes, especially when deliberation takes place under the “non-ideal” conditions of unequal

⁷ For helpful reviews of this literature, see Fung and Wright (2003b), Delli Carpini et al. (2004), Rosenberg (2007a), Thompson (2008), and Kahane et al. (2010).

power relations. Radical activists have consistently pointed out that civility, discourse quality, and even consensus can be inimical to justice, especially when those in power are allowed to set the tone and agenda of deliberation (Sanders, 1997; Young, 2001). Thus, even if the deliberation is declared successful on such metrics, it may yet fail to neutralize power – and as far as this goal is concerned, the empirical results are not particularly encouraging. People change their minds infrequently (Mackie, 2006), and when they do, it is usually because they have incorporated new factual information and not because they have reversed course on a basic normative question (Goodin and Niemeyer, 2003; Luskin et al., 2002). Deliberations are most effective when they concern less polarized issues and when obvious power dynamics do not lurk in the background (Bächtiger et al., 2007). The more we *need* a deliberative resolution, in other words, the less likely we are to reach one.

It seems to me that deliberative theorists are in a bind. If they conceive of the commitment problem as a *motivational* problem, then they face difficult, likely unanswerable questions about how to monitor and enforce the sincere internal motivations of citizens in practice. If they adopt a *practical* view of the commitment problem along with most contemporary deliberative democrats, however, then they must explain why such a practical commitment, where it already exists, fails to significantly neutralize power. Given this dilemma, I propose, deliberative failure is better seen as a *conversion* problem than a commitment problem. Even when people are committed to the deliberative cause, in spirit *or* in practice, they rarely experience power-neutralizing deliberative conversions. It is unlikely, therefore, that stronger and more pervasive enforcement of deliberative norms would succeed in converting either the powerful or their allies. Without such conversions, no amount of higher quality discourse could create the shifts in public opinion required for neutralizing power.

Understanding deliberative failure as a *conversion problem* casts new light on the obstacles to neutralizing power, as well as the available solutions. The difference between conversion and commitment is that conversion is quite a bit more expensive. But as we have seen, commitment without conversion is both commonplace and insufficient for neutralizing power. Why is deliberative conversion so expensive? Consider Chambers' description, quoted above, of what it would take to effectively challenge the agenda of a fellow deliberator (Chambers, 1996: 208). We must catalogue not only the many principles she invokes with all of her different interlocutors, but also how these statements correspond with her actions, and finally how all of her different positions cohere, more generally. Once we have this intimate knowledge of the deliberator under examination, we can then *begin* to probe the consistency and coherence of her beliefs. Except in the most egregious of cases, of course, it will not be obvious whether she has actually violated deliberative norms. She must have a chance to defend herself – perhaps she has changed her mind, or perhaps we have missed a crucial distinction that accounts for an apparent inconsistency. She will likely have ready explanations to fend off exactly those criticisms we have leveled at her. If her words and actions really are inconsistent, then at some point she may come off looking evasive and may even recant. But deliberative norms can be interpreted in many ways, and what counts as consistency, publicity, evidence, explicitness, and justification is always itself up for debate.

Deliberative conversions are expensive, in other words, because the enforcement of deliberative norms is not a fixed or straightforward procedure; rather, it must be negotiated between concrete interlocutors with significantly different perspectives. Even if we agree in theory about the norms in question, we will often disagree in practice about what counts as a violation, and must reach an understanding before deliberation can proceed. This is why it is such a fragile process, which takes a great deal of time and patience on the part of all involved, and also why it

is necessarily *interactive*. Passive observers will be converted even more infrequently, since their particular perspectives cannot be directly addressed. Deliberative conversions certainly happen, but a simple commitment to deliberative procedures is not enough to generate them with any reliability.

Motivated reasoning and deliberative conversions

None of this is surprising from the perspective of contemporary cognitive psychology, where it is well known that that people reason about social controversies in systematically biased ways (Brighton and Todd, 2009; Hassin et al., 2007). Specifically, I would like to interpret our results so far in light of the well-documented phenomenon of “motivated reasoning” – the ineradicable human tendency to reason in ways that are unintentionally self-serving or self-protective (Kunda, 1990). Researchers have found that from the beginning of the process of “reasoning” to the end, we reliably insulate our beliefs and values from potential challenges, unconsciously undermining and discrediting threatening information before it even appears to us as such (Lodge and Taber, 2013; Nyhan and Reifler, 2010). The imperative to protect our prior commitments – especially those central to our social identity – inevitably biases the way we seek out, perceive, and assimilate new information, which is why “motivated reasoning” has also been called “identity-protective cognition” (Kahan et al., 2007). This research usefully contextualizes the observation from empirical studies of mini-publics that when people do change their minds, it is much more likely to be on a non-polarized issue, since non-polarized issues generally have a weaker connection to identity (Bartels, 2002). It also helps to explain the finding that we are more likely to change our mind in response to new *facts* than we are in response to new *moral* arguments, as moral beliefs tend to have a stronger identity component (Greene, 2013).

When people do have a strong connection to their beliefs, it turns out, deliberation can even be counterproductive. Raising a question as a moral or political one – rather than as a non-partisan factual issue of some kind – induces people to associate it with social identities and partisan loyalties (Kahan et al., 2011; Nyhan et al., 2013). For example, presenting a case *for* vaccinations can actually drive *down* support among those who already have some doubts (Nyhan et al., 2014). Rather than moderating our prior commitments, therefore, exposure to contradictory information can simply entrench them as we find reasons to reject the new information and protect our identity. Two groups in particular stand out for their tendency to *increase* polarization in response to information that challenges their beliefs: those who already have a strong opinion on the topic, and, counterintuitively perhaps, those who are well-informed about it (Lodge and Taber, 2013: 168). Both factors, independently, seem to strengthen our penchant for resistance when we encounter threats to our identity.

It is important to note that “motivated reasoning” is *unintentional*, so it cannot be blamed on a bad conscience or a desire to behave strategically. Neither can it be fully counteracted, even by an explicit motivation to do otherwise (Lodge and Taber, 2013: 227). We can try to seek out contrasting perspectives, but we cannot determine how we will perceive and evaluate them (Gollust et al., 2009; McKee and Stuckler, 2010). As we emphasized above, deliberative norms can be interpreted in many ways, and what counts as consistency, publicity, evidence, explicitness, and justification is always itself up for debate. We cannot help understanding these norms in a particular way, and perceiving violations of them differently (Westen et al., 2006). Thus, the research on motivated reasoning confirms that commitment problems are not the central reason for deliberative failure, and explains why conversions are so expensive. The powerful and their

allies may be fully *committed* to the deliberative resolution of political problems – motivationally and/or practically – yet nonetheless defend concentrated power in the name of the common good.

Power corrupts, in other words, but not primarily by tempting citizens to pursue their selfish interests at the expense of the common good. Rather, power frustrates deliberative attempts to neutralize it by shifting our view of the common good itself; or, more subtly, by shaping the sorts of reasons that could count as valid considerations in the first place; or, more subtly still, by guiding our perception of the deliberative norms of consistency, publicity, evidence, explicitness, and justification. On this view, even the clearest and most dangerous cases of moral and political folly – such as climate denial – would not necessarily benefit from a greater commitment to public justification or fair terms of cooperation (Kahan and Braman, 2006). In fact, too much “commitment” can be part of the problem, because “the very passions that motivate our civic action drive biases and polarization” (Lodge and Taber, 2013: 168). The Koch brothers and other oligarchs providing massive funding of climate denial are probably not *evil*, in other words – blithely hastening the apocalypse – just powerful and wrong.⁸

Motivated reasoning thus makes power-neutralizing deliberative conversions very expensive. Importantly, however, it does not make them impossible. Such a result would likely indicate not that we had made a particularly convincing argument against some plausible and genuinely controversial version of deliberative democracy, but rather that we had adopted a particularly uncharitable account of its claims. This is why it is crucial to point out that there are contexts in which deliberative norms *can* be efficacious in maintaining remarkably consistent shifts in opinion over time, despite the challenges of motivated reasoning and identity-protective cognition – including, most notably, in modern scientific inquiry. At the same time, however, an analysis of

⁸ Billionaire brothers Charles and David Koch are notorious in the United States for funding climate denial through political campaigns as well as foundations such as the Heartland Institute.

the conditions under which such efficacy is achieved reveals that we should not be hopeful about the prospects for political deliberation in democratic societies. In order to explore just how expensive significant shifts in opinion turn out to be, therefore, in the next section I examine scientific discipline as a best-case scenario for deliberative conversions: a “realistic utopia” with abundant deliberative forums, where deliberative norms seem to operate with maximum plausible effectiveness in marginalizing the impact of motivated reasoning and encouraging progressive opinion change. I then take moral philosophy as a test case of *normative* reasoning with similarly thorough enforcement of deliberative norms.

When (and how) are deliberative conversions possible? Two “best case scenarios”

Science depends on a technical, narrowly focused, hierarchical, and exclusive process of scrutiny. Scientists develop highly specific jargon in which to discuss their findings, without which it would be impossible to hold one another accountable to deliberative norms. This is because science gains traction by drastically limiting the scope of its questions to those that are answerable using certain specific methods on which there is already widespread agreement — at least among those in the scientific club. Indeed, scientists must exclude the contributions of those who do not share a wide range of assumptions – such as astrologers, homeopaths, and “creation scientists” – as well as those who for other reasons cannot gain access to the prestigious institutions where science is conducted. This is in fact only a small part of the process of “peer” review: a hierarchical structure that heavily weights expertise, experience, and ability. I do not mean to criticize these procedures – far from it. Together, they allow for the methodical resolution of disagreements within the scientific community, producing deliberative conversions with astonishing regularity, which is what we would call scientific progress.⁹

⁹ I make no claims about the epistemological status of this “progress,” only observing that scientists see it as such.

Even given all of these advantages, however, science still operates at a glacial pace compared with politics, since it takes time and sustained attention for the scientific community to effectively enforce deliberative norms. As Kuhn (1962) showed, paradigm shifts in science happen over generations, when older researchers retire and the next generation gradually adopts different habits. So the enforcement of deliberative norms does trend in a coherent direction, but it does not do so instantaneously, as soon as a “more rational” paradigm appears. Rather, defenders of the old paradigm often still see their own work as superior on metrics of consistency, evidence, and justification, no matter how sincerely committed they are to the truth, and no matter how much time others devote to discussing the issues with them.

The research about motivated reasoning helps us understand this well-known Kuhnian process – both its moderate pace and its eventual success at achieving deliberative conversions among most of its practitioners. Consider that at least since the scientific revolution, practicing scientists have typically been the only people whose identity is linked with the success of any particular scientific theory.¹⁰ Thus, they are the only ones with a particularly strong cognitive framework for assimilating new evidence. Uncommitted scientists just growing into a discipline are equally subject to motivated reasoning and identity-protective cognition in many ways, of course, but these do not usually point them in the direction of any particular scientific theory. When this is false, we get blunders like the “scientific” racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism which have taken far too long to unravel, and of which there are still too many traces in contemporary science.

The same holds for most ordinary people too, most of the time, who have no attachments to any particular account of electron levels or volcanic eruptions. Again, the exceptions to this

¹⁰ Before and during the scientific revolution, of course, this was certainly not the case. See Shapin and Shaffer (1985) for an exploration of the conflictual social identities involved in sparking and sustaining the scientific revolution.

generalization – such as Darwinian evolution and climate science – prove the rule. Those whose identity is tied up with rejecting either will find ways of defending their beliefs, which – at least to others with similar commitments – do sincerely seem to meet the deliberative criteria of consistency, publicity, explicitness, evidence, and justification. They may define these criteria differently than mainstream scientists, but this is exactly the point. Rather than making room for them at the table, treating their issues as still worthy of serious discussion, scientists simply exclude them from the scientific discourse altogether, thereby ensuring a community with relatively stable assumptions which can resolve its internal disagreements efficiently and authoritatively. This is a luxury we do not have in democratic politics.

So far, science and democracy have maintained a fruitful, if tenuous, alliance, despite the fact that the success of science is dependent upon maintaining certain internal practices that are decidedly anti-democratic.¹¹ However, the widespread cultural acceptance of scientific results is dependent – ever more precariously – upon its insulation from identity categories. Where this barrier has started to erode, we see large swaths of scientific findings – the results of thoroughly enforced deliberative norms – simply rejected by whole identity groups. This close connection between deliberative positions and identity categories, while still the exception in science, is unfortunately the norm in political debates. Whereas accomplished scientists are typically the only people who have an identity commitment to particular scientific theories, *all* people come to democratic deliberations with pre-existing political commitments and social identities to protect. Unlike scientists, who come into their field relatively neutral between particular scientific theories, as citizens we simply cannot enter the moral and political world in this way.

¹¹ Though science does tend to flourish when the overall conditions of society are democratic – allowing freedom of expression, for example, and fluid social orders – science itself must be practiced hierarchically and not democratically.

Nonetheless, we do not simply throw up our hands when it comes to systematic discussion of moral and political issues – rather, people have also developed various methods for engaging in normative discourse, one of which has become known as (analytic) moral philosophy. I will set aside doubts about whether this is indeed a success story in order to ask whether its methods for securing agreement – which centrally involve deliberative norms of consistency, publicity, explicitness, evidence, and justification – could be a model for democratic forums tackling similarly normative issues. Just like science, moral philosophy gains whatever traction it does thanks to a technical, narrowly focused, hierarchical, and exclusive process of scrutiny. Philosophers differentiate their discourse from ordinary moral talk by using precise language and by focusing careful attention on highly specific examples and delicately worded principles. They also depend on hierarchical peer review and exclusion, even to the point of excluding most other scholars in the humanities. In order to sustain what they see as a “progressive” enterprise, analytic philosophers simply cannot admit to the conversation those whose assumptions about consistency, publicity, evidence, explicitness, and justification differ too radically from their own. It should not be controversial to observe, for example, that those admitted to top graduate programs in philosophy possess a certain analytical *style* that is not simply reducible to intelligence. The result is a great deal of agreement about the basic assumptions of inquiry.

I make no judgment either way about the validity or progressivity of this enterprise. In the case of science, exclusive procedures were instrumental for progress, and the same may be true for moral philosophy. We must admit that disagreements in ethics tend to last far longer than those in science, of course, but this is hardly a fair criticism given what we know about motivated reasoning: as expected, it is more difficult to achieve opinion change through the application of deliberative norms when the issues under deliberation are explicitly *normative*. This may have

something to do with the nature of the subject itself, but it is likely that motivated reasoning also plays some role in the explanation. Even if they agree quite precisely on the meaning of deliberative norms, no one – not even a moral philosopher – enters normative deliberations with *no* conception of what they believe about morality and politics, and how it relates to their identity.¹²

That said, of course, the intensity of those commitments will vary, and this observation prompts an instructive objection. Those with weaker attachment to particular political positions will exhibit lower levels of motivated reasoning, and thus may stand in relation to political deliberation much as new scientists stand in relation to the discourse of their field. If we conceive of deliberation as directed not at the most devoted political partisans but at these uncommitted people on the margins, then, we might expect their conversions to be quite a bit less expensive. While this supposition has merit in a limited number of cases, however, it does not warrant broader optimism about the prospects of deliberative conversions. First, on those issues where significant changes in relations of power are at stake, it is unlikely that those who benefit from the threatened concentrations of power will by and large remain unmotivated. In Upton Sinclair’s famous words, “it is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it.”

Second, because everyone belongs to multiple salient identity groups, even those who do not have a *material* interest in maintaining relations of power can often be induced to defend concentrated power in the name of one or another of those identities. Political elites throughout history – such as wealthy American Southerners who manipulated white identity to ensure the support of poor whites throughout the 19th and 20th centuries – have not needed experimental psychologists to inform them that racializing, moralizing, or otherwise *politicizing* issues is a potent tactic for defending their power from potential challenges. By explicitly or implicitly

¹² Indeed, research shows that trained philosophers cannot reliably rid themselves even of less deep-seated cognitive biases such as framing effects (Schwitzgebel and Cushman, 2015).

linking positions on particular public questions to pre-existing racial, religious, ethnic, national, regional, ideological, or cultural identities, powerful public figures can pressure initially uncommitted citizens to choose sides. Contemporary political parties across the political spectrum, for example, often make use of this sort of politicization to build and strengthen coalitions (Hochschild and Einstein, 2015).¹³

There are, of course, individual citizens whose party identification is weak or unstable, and political contexts in which parties are weaker in general (Wren and McElwain, 2009), but this does not mean these citizens are immune to politicization. Parties are only the most explicit of the many identity-related means by which political and media elites may reliably build coalitions for the defense of concentrated power. I do not mean to imply, of course, that this happens in *every* case. Coalitions maintaining concentrated power do break down from time to time, for a variety of reasons, and as I have emphasized throughout, deliberative conversions occur in spite of motivated reasoning. All I have argued here is that those whose concentrated power is at stake will, in general, be motivated to defend it; and that when they are, they are often able to gain coalitional support by politicizing those issues along a number of different axes, linking the defense of that power with whichever forms of identity are most salient to their current or prospective allies. What this means is that on those issues where deliberation is needed most to neutralize power, citizens will be least likely to remain uncommitted, and deliberation will be least likely to shift public opinion.

With the examples of science and moral philosophy, I have tried to show just how expensive deliberative conversions really are. Both achieve significant opinion change not simply by strengthening the enforcement of deliberative norms, but by creating people who share a great

¹³ While there is lively debate about the *relative* causal significance of party identification – which was famously introduced as an explanatory variable by Campbell et al. (1960) – there is little dispute that it is, indeed, a significant “mover” of many beliefs and behaviors (Bartels, 2010; Holmberg, 2007).

number of assumptions about exactly what those deliberative norms *mean*. In both fields, this rare and delicate achievement involves self-selection as well as years of training and socialization, and the results are still fragile and painfully slow at best. Academics have a professional license to conduct disagreements at their leisure, gradually making their claims more explicit, exposing inconsistencies where others have seen none, and marshalling evidence to their cause. Even in a community with widely shared assumptions, this process takes a great deal of time – and its progress is both slower and more dubious when the issues under discussion are normative. Compared with these “best-case scenarios,” then, conversion of citizens in democratic deliberations is triply disadvantaged. In the first place, individuals will never be able to approach political deliberation with the sustained focus exhibited by professional scientists and philosophers, who spend their entire professional lives working through a very limited set of issues. Second, even if we could approximate this focus in some sort of mini-public, we still could not reproduce the sort of widespread agreement about deliberative assumptions upon which disciplinary progress is based. Finally, the salient normative dimension of political choices cannot be eliminated, meaning that the special burdens of motivated reasoning about moral issues are here to stay. Despite their role in scientific progress, in other words, and despite their legitimate theoretical attraction, deliberative conversions are likely too expensive to play a central role in the fight against concentrated power.

Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that deliberation cannot meaningfully neutralize power to the extent that it vindicates the distinctive political claims of deliberative democrats. We must do more, first of all, than proliferating deliberative forums and expecting our fellow citizens to engage in them sincerely. Many have sought instead to police their observable behavior by strengthening the

enforcement of deliberative norms; however, most of those norms are already enforced as well as can be expected in plural and diverse societies. Where there are deficiencies in enforcement, this is not primarily because we lack a commitment to fair terms of cooperation. The problem is not, in other words, that we do not hear enough paeans to the national interest or the public good, nor that these are insincere. The problem is not even that we lack the *capacity* to detect violations of norms such as consistency, publicity, explicitness, evidence, and justification. Good journalists and fact-checkers exist, and their deliberative interventions are available to those who seek them out. Rather, the problem is that that we perceive these sources differently. Positions that seem inconsistent to one observer will seem perfectly consistent to another. Thus, even if we are forced to hear the same reasons and evidence, we will nonetheless reach different conclusions. We may be selfish or closed-minded, but if so, these defects are typically unintentional, and so they cannot be counteracted simply by means of greater moral commitment or more persistent monitoring. We do not often find ourselves to have been inconsistent or unjustifiably self-centered – at least on issues of major concern to us – without a great deal of time and effort both from others and ourselves. This process is difficult enough to undertake with friends, family, or psychiatrists; we cannot rely upon it in the political realm. The obstacles to deliberative conversions, it seems, lie deep within our cognitive architecture, and they are not easily uprooted.

Democratic theory should not *abjure* deliberation, which in any case is hardly a live possibility. The broader “deliberative system,” which includes various kinds of non-deliberative collective action and rhetorical discourse, certainly has the capacity to neutralize power; indeed, concerted social pressure using these techniques is one of the only things that *can* undermine concentrated power. Even on a narrower view of what counts, however, deliberation may also perform many important functions, such as assembling information, fostering single-peaked preferences, and

providing a forum for integrative negotiation. Indeed, recent evidence suggests that deliberation can improve outcomes – largely for these reasons – in explicitly anti-democratic contexts (Chandra and Rudra, 2015). Though none of these mechanisms do so directly, the practice of deliberation can even limit the exercise of power as well. Democratic politicians cannot usually get away with telling blatant lies, for example, or taking clearly contradictory positions from one day to the next, or justifying tax breaks as a personal favor to cronies. Mackie is correct that our reputations matter to us a great deal, and this makes discussion both meaningful and important (Nyhan and Reifler, 2014).

All of these mechanisms, however, which are already operative in most contemporary democratic societies, exhibit diminishing marginal returns, especially when it comes to neutralizing power. Due to the stubborn pervasiveness of motivated reasoning, people with power will not typically be induced to give it up by reasonable argument and evidence presented in deliberative forums, no matter how committed they are to the deliberative resolution of political conflicts. Neither will their allies – whose identities will have become linked with those powerful interests – often be persuaded in that manner. Strengthening the enforcement of deliberative norms, in other words, is unlikely on its own to neutralize power. As a result, we would do well to rethink the centrality we give deliberative mechanisms of democratization, focusing less on what is *said* and more on what is *done*. Perhaps we can achieve the shifts in public opinion required for power-neutralizing legislation through non-deliberative means, or perhaps we must turn to more direct ways of neutralizing power. As a purportedly non-partisan process, enhancing the quality of deliberation may be an easier tonic to swallow than mass collective action and other traditional means of resistance, but it is a poor substitute in practice for bringing *real* power to the powerless.

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