

10-2013

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Recommended Citation

Johnston, Lauren (2013) "The Foundations of Deliberative Democracy: Empirical Research and Normative Implications," *International Dialogue*: Vol. 3, Article 27.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.ID.3.1.1076>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/id-journal/vol3/iss1/27>

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Review

The Foundations of Deliberative Democracy: Empirical Research and Normative Implications

Jürg Steiner. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 288pp.

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As the theory of deliberative democracy developed in the late-1980s and 1990s much of the focus was on its normative foundations. However, for the last decade there has been a greater focus on practice and institutionalization, accompanied by a wealth of empirical evidence on deliberative democracy. Therefore, there is now a need to return to these normative debates in light of this empirical evidence. Jürg Steiner's book aims to contribute to this endeavour by concentrating on the "interplay between normative and empirical aspects of deliberation" (1). In undertaking this goal he acknowledges that he is not a professional philosopher, but rather writing as an empiricist taking the perspective of an engaged citizen. The introduction says very little that is new or innovative in relation to deliberative democracy. It mainly sets out Steiner's core aims of the book and his position. For Steiner a viable democracy includes competitive elections, strategic bargaining,

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aggregative voting, and street protests combined with deliberation. Deliberative democracy is, therefore, not an alternative model for Steiner but one which can work within representative democracy. In the introduction Steiner relates to other deliberative democrats, such as Michael Neblo and Simon Niemeyer, by noting that deliberative democracy has come of age enabling the theoretical model to be empirically investigated (Bohman 1998). Hence the empirical stance he takes throughout the book. Steiner argues that the book will show how “empirical research can provoke reflection on normative values” (2). This is in essence what the book does. In agreement with Steiner, he insists that there is always a tension between deliberative ideals and putting these ideals into practice; this is core to the book.

Steiner begins by aligning himself towards theorists such as Jane Mansbridge, Immanuel Kant and Jürgen Habermas who acknowledge that deliberative democracy is a “regulative” model, unachievable in its full theoretical state but is indeed a model which we should move closer towards. Addressing the problems with deliberative democracy, Steiner notes that there is an issue with the terminology of deliberation. As the model has “come of age” the term ‘deliberation’ has become fluid and because of this there are disagreements on the exact definition of deliberation. Steiner outlines these disagreements in the introduction and include concerns such as “whether all arguments must refer to the public interest or whether arguments referring to self-interest or group interests also count” (10) and “how strongly ordinary citizens should be involved in the deliberative process” (9). These are important questions which are explored in subsequent chapters. Steiner notes that he prefers to use “deliberation in a generic form and then to verbally characterise the forums in which deliberation occurs” (8).

As a founder of the Deliberative Quality Index (DQI), it is not surprising that Steiner applies this as an empirical and quantitative measure in the studies throughout the book. The DQI was originally designed to measure the deliberative quality of parliamentary debates, against a number of criteria derived from Habermas’s discourse theory. In this book, the DQI is applied to debates amongst ordinary citizens and, therefore, had to be modified and adapted. It is exciting to read more about the DQI and how it can be applied to a range of empirical phenomena and many will find this adaption and the newest version of the DQI helpful for practical research. The studies clearly widen the evidence base for the DQI and include experiments in deliberation undertaken in Columbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Belgium, Finland, and the EU. However, there are

criticisms associated with the DQI and these are acknowledged and accepted by Steiner at the very beginning. The DQI is a measurement which is not objective and is subject to interpretation. It is important that Steiner recognises this criticism. Steiner also importantly states that the DQI is considered as a flexible measurement tool that should be adapted to specific research projects. An experimental approach is adopted in various test cases throughout the book and Steiner offers his justification for doing this by outlining the associated downfalls of other methods like surveys. Providing a justification for the methods applied is important in empirical research so that the research can be replicated. The research design for each test case is also outlined at the beginning of the book.

It has been hotly debated amongst deliberative democrats whether story-telling has a place in deliberative democracy and whether stories or testimonies count as a viable justification. This is a contested issue in the deliberative democratic field. Indeed, Claudio Landwehr calls for “further empirical evidence” to find out “what the effects of storytelling are” (59). Steiner responds to this request and argues through empirical evidence that “story-telling is compatible and even helpful for the values postulated by the deliberative model” (84). This chapter is a valuable contribution to the debate.

Steiner points out that Habermas excludes narratives and views them as inferior discourses. However, as there is now more emphasis on the involvement of the service user, patient and carer groups in healthcare for example, we need to address the fact that discursive boundaries might need to become more relaxed. Steiner relates to Mansbridge and John Dryzek who suggest that story-telling, rhetoric, testimony and humour should have space in a deliberative model. However, Steiner rightly addresses the counter-arguments by drawing upon Michael Morrell (2010), who argues that “personal stories are only relevant for deliberation if they are connected to general issues” (59). There is some sense in this argument given the fact that common-good is a core deliberative norm. The original DQI did not account for story-telling, however, Steiner notes that the parliamentary data which the DQI was first applied to was revisited in Steiner et al. (2005) confirming that story-telling does occur but is dependent on the issue under discussion. Interestingly, Steiner notes that in the parliamentary debate study personal stories were “more often told in the public arena of plenary sessions than behind the closed doors in committee meetings” (66). Having addressed story-telling in parliamentary debates, Steiner turns to the level of the ordinary citizen. Similar to parliamentary debates, story-telling does occur but is dependent on the topic of discussion. Steiner discusses a number

of different studies which demonstrate this finding. Steiner acknowledges that it is “difficult to distinguish in a reliable and valid way categories of deliberative and non-deliberative stories” (72). For this reason, he had not yet coded stories on this basis and so was not included in the chapter. It would have been helpful to have seen the DQI being applied to story-telling. Steiner, however, includes a number of studies to analyse story-telling in deliberation. Steiner’s literature review on rationality and stories in deliberation found that “not all stories have deliberative character” (75). This was supported by Maria Clara Jaramillo, who also found that stories can act as a “deliberation stopper” (75). The inclusion of personal stories can derail, confuse and shock other participants involved in deliberation. This is an interesting finding and one which should be acknowledged.

Steiner concludes the chapter by outlining the normative implications of the empirical results. Story-telling happens at both “elite and mass level” in order to “justify arguments” (84). Story-telling can also increase interaction as “stories encourage the give and take” in discussion (84). This is not only Steiner’s perspective, but it is supported by others mentioned in the chapter. In line with Young, Steiner argues that story-telling helps the socially disadvantaged to get a better voice. This is important. Many organisations, particularly in the healthcare field, encourage lay citizen involvement in their decision making processes. Lay citizens are therefore required to engage with scientists, experts and clinicians and so forth. For the purposes of inclusion, it is therefore crucial that individuals can engage and use discourse that they feel comfortable using. Story-telling is a normal part of every-day life. The empirical evidence however cannot be ignored. Story-telling can be problematic; it can be used to manipulate public opinion and can steer deliberation off the topic at hand. Both positions cannot be ignored and Steiner recognises this himself by taking a “middle-ground” on the issue. Steiner recommends that moderators in mini-publics are aware of the findings in this chapter. This is sound advice for anyone looking at the inclusion of story-telling in deliberative democracy. Steiner further recommends that story-telling is encouraged at the “beginning of discussions” and that not all “issues are equally suitable for story-telling” (86). In agreement with Landwehr and Steiner we should “not let the deliberative model drift too far into story-telling” (86). However, it does need to be recognised which this chapter illustrates.

Further chapters explore the inclusion of other norms such as self-interest, which Steiner recognises is still also a largely contested issue in deliberative democracy. Mansbridge et al.’s (2010) exploration of self-interest is reviewed by Steiner and is a

useful contribution. On the topic of including self-interest in deliberation, Steiner positions himself by stating that in “good deliberation people should be encouraged to put their interests on the table” (102) and should be part of the “definition of deliberation” (248). Steiner clearly supports an adaptive model of deliberative democracy that has moved from the original core norms. This because he views deliberation as something which is important for any democracy and to encourage more “deliberation both at the elite level and at the level of ordinary citizens (248) other norms need to be included in the deliberative democratic model.

This book is particularly helpful in demonstrating the interplay between the normative and empirical aspects of the deliberative model of democracy. It explores all of the core normative aspects of the model (common good, respect, openness, force of better argument) in an empirical way and addresses the inclusion of other norms. The book is a helpful contribution to the deliberative democratic field and is extremely relevant because it clearly explores empirical evidence and pits this against the normative debates in deliberative democracy. Steiner concludes the book with useful recommendations for practitioners to organise and moderate discussions. Steiner calls for a “deliberative culture” to be developed and that this should ultimately begin in school; teachers should be “trained and supervised to instil deliberative skills in their students and to encourage them to use these skills outside class” (267). This is a thought-provoking conclusion and one which might merit further research. The great strength of the book is the inclusion of the newest version of the DQI and the empirical evidence that Steiner presents and engages with. Steiner is setting the agenda for deliberative democrats to apply the DQI in different forums and to and adapt the DQI. The book proves that deliberative democracy is ever evolving and the debates surrounding the normative elements of deliberative democracy are far from closed.

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