

Deliberating Deliberation

by Peter Levine

The following is a list of 18 debates that can be identified in the current literature about deliberation. In each case, I present a pair of opposed views (“a” versus “b”), to prompt thought and perhaps research.

I. Is Deliberation Real?

- 1.a. Deliberation changes opinions and preferences in rational ways.
- 1.b. Deliberation is largely illusory because preferences arise from self-interest, *or* preferences are fixed and static, *or* values are subjective and not amenable to rational discussion.
- 2.a. By defending proposals in general moral terms—and by giving reasons for our positions—we participate in a process that leads to better outcomes.
- 2.b. Speeches that cite lofty moral principles are really moves in a strategic game. Their function is (for example) to signal the speaker’s seriousness, to hint at a willingness to bargain, or to give opponents a way to back down without losing face.
- 3.a. Deliberation imposes a constraint on participants: they cannot make overtly self-interested claims. This constraint is beneficial, because the Public Good emerges from arguments in which everyone is forced to offer general reasons.
- 3.b. It is hypocritical to give moral rationales for selfish goals. The last thing we want is to encourage such hypocrisy. Besides, openly pursuing one’s own interests is a valid part of politics.

II. Deliberation versus Strategic Interaction

- 4.a. In general, deliberation is the best part of politics, because it lends force to moral ideals. Deliberation is usually preferable to negotiation, which is unprincipled and merely reflects the existing balance of power.
- 4.b. What we call “deliberation” is the worst part of politics, because it creates deep divisions. Invoking ideals can even lead people to hate others. Negotiation is generally safer, since negotiators split the difference and get along.
- 5.a. A good policy is one that satisfies as many individual preferences as possible (perhaps weighted in various ways).
- 5.b. Some preferences should not be satisfied, but rather *changed* through rational persuasion.
- 6.a. Politics should be a process of negotiation and compromise among many interest groups of roughly equal power, each with fixed goals and identifiable memberships. The function of government is to facilitate safe and predictable negotiations among such groups.
- 6.b. The best kind of politics aims at discovering the Public Good, which transcends the aims of most narrow groups. The Public Good becomes obscure when politics is reduced to negotiation among groups with fixed goals.

III. Deliberation and Institutions

- 7.a. The best policies will result when most people deliberate about the Public Good, so this behavior should be encouraged.
- 7.b. The best policies will result when people pursue narrow interests, but under appropriate conditions.
- 8.a. True democracies are highly deliberative societies, because the public can only govern itself by engaging in broad discussions. Democracy means deliberation by all.
- 8.b. Democracy simply means majority-rule, or some variant of it. Democracy can function without deliberation (and vice-versa).

9.a. Political institutions can operate deliberatively, but markets cannot. Therefore, we need a large, democratic, transparent public sector with supremacy over the private sector.

9.b. The private sector should be protected because it is a deliberative space (or for other reasons).

10.a. Because of the benefits of public deliberation, we should concentrate power in deliberative bodies such as legislatures and courts. Giving discretion to expert managers undermines deliberation and is dangerous.

10.b. Some issues should be deliberated, but many other matters are best handled by skilled administrators.

11.a. Although universal consent is impossible to achieve in any given time, deliberative consensus is an ideal outcome, and decision-making procedures should approximate it.

11.b. Consensus about a position does not prove that it is correct, and widespread agreement may even be a bad sign.

12.a. We would like to see all citizens discuss the merits of proposals with as much information as possible, attempting to determine the best public policy together.

12.b. Any single model of the “good citizen” is too restrictive. A diverse society makes room for many styles of participation, including non-deliberative ones; it also permits non-participation.

13.a. All institutions and social sectors that have political functions should act deliberatively. For example, the only valid *political* purpose of the arts is to persuade other rational citizens.

13.b. There are valid forms of political engagement that are not deliberative: e.g., art that is intended to shock.

IV. The Ethics of Deliberation

14.a. We should minimize disagreements and seek common ground where possible.

14.b. It is legitimate to dramatize the differences with one’s opponents by emphasizing points of disagreement.

15.a. “Deliberation” simply means an effort to persuade other people. Any rhetorical moves that prove persuasive are acceptable. Discussions should not be constrained—not even by voluntary norms.

15.b. Deliberation involves only those arguments that promote *rational* judgment. *Ad hominem* attacks, appeals to authority or faith, and logrolling proposals are not “deliberative.” We should forbid these arguments in certain contexts (e.g., courts and legislatures), and never use them ourselves if we aspire to be good citizens.

V. Preconditions for Deliberating

16.a. Deliberating about the kinds of issues that come before a modern state requires a great deal of expertise; most people are not equipped to participate.

16.b. We need (and can have) public deliberation that involves everyone.

17.a. We are morally obliged to treat our fellow citizens as rational agents capable of being persuaded by good arguments. (An extreme example: even *punishments* should be designed to make educational points to criminals and others.)

17.b. Many of our fellow citizens are neither rational nor reasonable, and should not be treated as such.

18.a. Equality of education, status, access to the mass media, and political power are preconditions for deliberation. Discussions that occur under conditions of inequality are badly flawed; their outcomes should not be heeded.

18.b. People who lack capital and education can still deliberate; to assume otherwise is patronizing as well as false. Treating equality as a precondition for deliberation is just a way to promote a particular model of social justice that most actual citizens may reject.