THE CONVERSATIONS OF DEMOCRACY

Linking Citizens to American Government

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The Conversations of Democracy

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ONE

Politics and Democracy as Conversation

> Each person's life is lived in a series of conversations.
>
> —*Deborah Tannen*[1]

In the most basic sense, politics is a set of conversations in which proponents of one position or candidate attempt to secure support from opponents and/or the undecided. Conversations flow from the public to policy-makers, between policy-makers, and from policy-makers to the public. Those engaged in initiating, framing, and carrying out these conversations have a significant effect on the policy and personnel of government. At best, the conversations lead to consensus; at worst, to deadlock, where participants do little more than to agree to disagree. Most often the result is a temporary compromise that generates further rounds of conversations.

The conversation model for politics is particularly useful because all of us engage in nonpolitical conversations and readily recognize the behaviors and strategies that either move or frustrate us. Just as importantly, this model allows us to build on the robust research and logic from sociology, psychology, and linguistics that, although seldom focusing on politics, offer useful insights into political conversations. Setting and participants make a difference, but the general character of conversations varies little. We can learn a lot about

conversation among the general public by looking at what happens among leaders, and vice versa.

The conversational perspective naturally generates the image of the town square or general store cracker barrel, with everyone having a say in a rational dialogue.

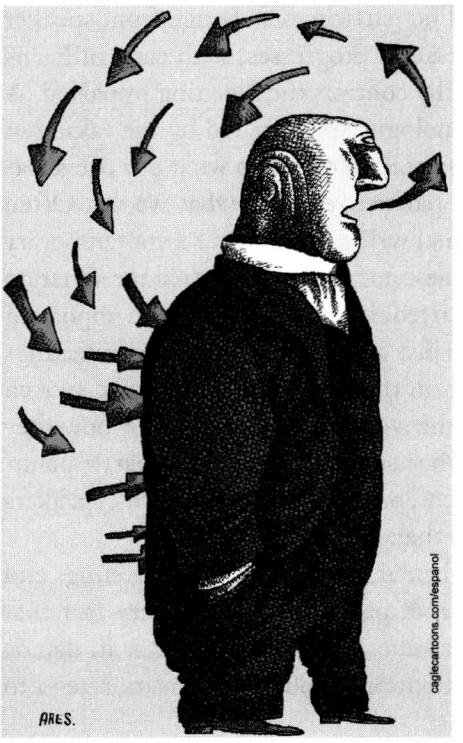
Although this comforting image supports the ideals of direct democracy, it would be naïve to see the contemporary political conversation in such terms. Not all conversations involve equal partners, nor are they based on logical deliberation. Some conversations are virtually dictated from the top. Emotion and illogical content often carry the day. Just because conversations fail our standards for the logical application of facts to a well-defined problem resulting in a reasonable set of actions, these shortcomings do not undermine their basic characteristics as conversations.

Envisioning politics as a conversation has deep roots in both political theory and practice. Theorists such as Jürgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt argue that in a democracy decisions should be "reached through public dialogues in which participants draw equally from a common pool of information."[2] Although not all policy decisions measure up to those criteria, some do and others approach it. Most observers believe that the existence of robust conversation is a worthy yardstick for evaluation of the democratic policy process.

WHAT MAKES A CONVERSATION?

The modern use of the word *conversation* has narrowed significantly to refer to oral interchanges between individuals. Originally, it implied a much closer relationship, stemming from the Latin *conversationem,* "the act of living together." The word later took on the meaning of "having dealings with others" and even more intimately was used as a synonym for "sexual intercourse," with *criminal conversation* serving as the legal term for adultery into the late eighteenth century.[3]

Conversations have three basic characteristics. First, they involve reciprocal actions engaging two or more individuals in the process of explicitly and intentionally exchanging questions, answers, and comments. *Talk* implies unfocused verbal expressions with no particular goal. *Monologue* (a speech, lecture, or written position paper) might stimulate conversation, but it is not a conversation in and of itself. In Martin Buber's description, conversation



Conversations are not one-way monologues lacking audience involvement. (Copyright © 2008 Ares. All Rights Reserved. www.caglecartoons.com)

requires that "each of the participants really has in mind the other or others ... and turns to them ... with the intention of establishing a living mutual relationship between himself and them."[4] *Debate* implies an artificially regulated process with clear rules and score being kept. *Negotiation* assumes that participants arrive with fixed positions and give in on points only for strategic purposes.[5] Unlike an *interview* or *interrogation,* where a situational superior controls the episode and specific prompts and responses are expected, conversations involve more freewheeling interaction. If the ground rules are "I ask the question and you give the answer," the interchange fails the test as a conversation.

Second, in a conversation participants possess relatively equal rights to speak, ask questions, and respond, with the expectation of taking turns controlling the "floor." Conversations involve social "cooperation," operating together.[6] In effective conversations, all participants develop a sense of joint ownership. Conversations are relational, with meanings created jointly by at

least one presenter and one "hearer." The participants change from speaker to hearer and back again as the conversation progresses, with each fully engaged in his or her role. Neither one fully controls the meaning imparted. A true conversation is not a series of monologues punctuated by the taking of turns.[7] In face-to-face conversations, we react not only to what our conversation partner says, but also to how our partner reacts to what we say. Often an analysis of "great speeches" or seminal writings can leave a contemporary reader cold because such analyses lack the context that electrified the situation in which the original message was imparted. In reconstructing the important conversations of our own lives, we are just as likely to describe our feelings and the reactions of others as focusing on the exact words that were spoken (see Box 1.1). When we do remember the words, it is often to show how they perfectly countered or complemented the assertion of the other participants. Even when the intended audience is silent, or even physically absent, speakers modify what they say "in light of who they are talking to."[8]

Third, conversations tend to be informal, unplanned, freewheeling, and open to changes in topic and inclusion of participants.[9] The very fact that people are talking about something becomes an important factor in democratic politics. Topics lacking public attention through conversation tend to fall by the wayside.

Constraining the Analogy

A number of political analysts begin with conversations as a key element of democracy. Their definitions of useful conversations establish benchmarks for evaluation.

Rational choice theorists challenge the assumption that citizens are only marginally competent to choose between a restrictive set of candidates at election

Box 1.1 A Little Conversational Test

For those who are married, can you repeat verbatim what you said to each other when the proposal was made? For others, can you repeat exactly what your parents said to you on your graduation? My bet is that you can dredge up the scene and recall the emotions but not the exact words. The conversation served its purpose, which you can still recall, whereas the words themselves have probably faded. If you still think you know exactly what was said, compare your recollections with the other person and see if you both agree.

time and should leave governing largely to the elected. These theorists view citizens as having clear preferences that are ordered in priorities, that can be linked to policy choices through communications with officials, and that can be modified in relation to the political realities embodied in the competing preferences of others. In the rational choice model, citizens stand ready to engage themselves in the political process, hoping to win in the battle over preferences, but willing to abide by the outcome because accepting today's winner sets up the condition that their hope for a win in the future will be accepted by the losers at that time. Rational choice conceives of the world in terms of competitive teams forming and reforming to create majorities and minorities. Conversation become a means by which citizens identify allies, create acceptable compromises, plan strategy, celebrate wins, bolster each other after losses, and plan to stay in touch for the next round of battles.

Advocates of *deliberative democracy* add an additional burden on citizens. Not only must they have ordered preferences, but also they must be open to the perspectives of others, willing to sublimate their own initial preferences when justice demands.[10] The very process of deliberation expands the perspectives of the participants, making them more informed, logical, understanding of the perspectives of others, and oriented toward the common good more than the personal good.[11] In the deliberative view, "an individual is not only a rational actor who makes choices and acts to satisfy personal interests, she is also an ethical moral agent who reflects and collaborates.... [In] a consideration of the interests of others and an understanding of the common good, she is able to reorder existing interests and create new ones.... The process is facilitated by constructive conversation."[12]

Utilizing a structured set of deliberation procedures designed to get citizens to think logically about public problems pursues the goal of consensus. Although face-to-face deliberation is preferred, attempts at computer-mediated deliberation fall within this scope.[13] In order for deliberation to be legitimate, it must be inclusive and public and its results binding on all those involved.[14] Without a clear demonstrable outcome (contract, law, action plan, agreement, etc.), deliberation is a failure. Deliberating individuals develop social and psychological bonds, creating empathy, a sense of community, and the goodwill needed to accept the perspectives of others as valuable.

Dissatisfaction with political conversation in America often comes from setting the bar too high. Limiting useful conversation to formal deliberation carried out by fully informed individuals, under formal rules designed to

facilitate the introduction of all perspectives, and designed to result in a formal decision makes such activity rare.[15] Proponents of deliberative democracy react to rational choice advocates,[16] who, in their minds, endorse the great advantage of random and uninformed talk, informed by little and leading to less. Observers such as Michael Schudson and Michael Oakeshott assert that conversations are little more than idle chatter because they have no clear beginning or end; they are like the gambler who cares little about winning or losing but enjoys the wagering.[17] Schudson and others see the important, and perhaps only real, value of conversation occurring when it faces up to a problem and solves it. Habermas stakes out a middle ground, accepting as legitimate conversations that are not specifically directed toward making public decisions but that require participants to inform themselves and discuss issues in a rational and open-minded way. Such conversation may "guide the discussion toward and optimal solution for the commonwealth."[18]

An Expansive View

The discussion of political conversation is muddied by the various conceptions of what it is composed of. Theorists who define meaningful conversation as comprising only formal deliberation structured to result in a decision are describing a very rare activity indeed, usually carried out in an experimental setting. When they reject all other conversation as "mere talk," with little more importance than gabbing about the weather, they are missing an important human activity. Ordinary conversation can be substantive, meaningful, and transformative. Conversation helps participants define themselves and their perspectives, understand the perspectives of others, gather new information, and develop confidence to act on their preferences.[19]

"*Casual* political talk—talk that is not organized for the sake of decision-making—has received far less attention and has almost always been investigated in settings manufactured by the researchers, such as through focus groups or in-depth interviews."[20] Some of the most interesting findings have come through an in-depth participant-observation study of a number of ongoing informal groups, such as a coffee group or craft league.

Even though my conception of conversation is less formal and less outcome oriented than the deliberative model, it shares most of that model's requirements. It is both inclusive and public. Conversations are natural phenomena between individuals who have generally created a social and emotional tie. Only

rarely do we strike up conversations with complete strangers. Just try raising a political issue in an elevator filled with strangers and see the reaction. Unlike contrived deliberation exercises where rapport needs to be built, conversations usually begin with a modicum of social capital. As free agents, we usually avoid conversations with those we fear or distrust and seldom repeat an experience with an unsatisfactory conversation partner. Following the "burned once, your fault, burned twice, my fault" tenet, we either avoid such conversation partners or constrain conversation topics when thrown together with them more than once. Avoiding conflicting points of view does limit the educative capacity of conversations, insulating us from useful perspectives. In the ideal world, we would charge fearlessly into the snake pit of competing values and opinions to test our views against the most cogent challenges to our outlooks, accepting the dictum that "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." In reality, words are vicious, if not fatal, weapons.

My concern is not primarily with the high-intensity conversations associated with deliberative democracy. Although we may be able to develop generalizations from structured involvement in highly specified conversation protocols, our main concern is with the mass citizenry. Only a miniscule proportion of them engage in regulated activities such as citizen juries and focus groups.

In discussing political applications, we loosen the definition a bit to include attempts by candidates to spark a conversation and to simulate interactive conversations while speaking to mass audiences. We also deal with conversations between officeholders and attempts by decision-makers to communicate to their publics. Whereas conversations once dealt only with face-to-face interactions, new technologies and lifestyles allow technology-media conversations rich in content and influence. To be sure, political activists see the enhanced utility to interact with every relevant individual in a face-to-face manner, but such conversations occupy a smaller and smaller part of our modern lives.

There is a temptation to limit our means of expression too narrowly to include only the familiar and commonplace. This leaves no room for emerging technologies and creative applications. By defining conversation functionally to include any intentional attempt to engage others in an exchange of information and opinions, we better capture the political process. Wearing a campaign button, putting a bumper sticker on the car, and displaying a lawn sign all "say" something to friends and neighbors. The Supreme Court expressed inclusiveness in *Buckley v. Valeo* when it defined campaign contributions as a form of expression.[21] Elisabeth Noell-Neuman goes a step further,

arguing that keeping quiet even though your friends know your position gives meaning to the phrase "Silence speaks volumes."[22]

Although there is some danger in broadening the concept of conversation to include both talking to others and talking things through in one's own mind, introspection can be an important—albeit limited—way of organizing one's thoughts and applying new information.[23] It is easy to dredge up the image of the local idiot having a long, pleasant, and incoherent conversation with himself. The glaring shortcoming of *intra*personal conversation for developing better understanding stems from the limited likelihood of challenges and restricted potential for new information. In many cases, our intrapersonal conversations serve as rehearsals for what we might say when engaged in an *inter*personal conversation. Not wanting to sound foolish among those we hope to impress, we try out different content and presentational styles.

Taking a conversational approach to understanding politics does not require us to envision little groups of people incessantly involved in deep and substantive political exchanges. Such a straw man would doom our analysis to irrelevancy. Life is too complex for politics to constantly invade our consciousness. Just because only some of the citizens are engaged only some of the time does not mean their involvement has no importance.

While all models miss some aspect of reality, comparing politics to a conversation provides both analytical and strategic insights. In everyday life, conversation remains one of the primary social demands on our time and a significant way in which we gather information.

The results of conversations are more distant than deliberation that seeks a clear decision between or among options. Conversations are more ongoing. They raise issues that public officials ignore at their peril. At times conversations outline acceptable and unacceptable alternatives, circumscribing the available options. They inform the participants about the perspectives of others, about the issue, about the options for actions, and about the likely consequences of each action.

There is a lot we don't know about political conversation. It is not clear what motivates people to enter a conversation or to leave it. It would be useful to determine how expandable the pool of potential participants might be and the most effective methods of expanding (or contracting) it. We have yet to discover whether variations in involvement are based on (or only correlated with) demographics. We know little about differences in conversational style and impact across various demographic and subculture groups. To the degree

that conversations change participants, we know little about the range and nature of these changes and their durability. Involvement in political conversations could be limited to changing discrete opinions, affecting broader attitudes about related policies or candidates, or changing a citizen's evaluation of the political system.[24] Our lack of knowledge about elements of political conversations stand not as a deterrent, but as a challenge to continue the intellectual conversation about what the conversation analogy might alert us to.

CONVERSATION AND DEMOCRACY

Democracies start from the premise that policy decisions are not predetermined by some natural law or affixed set of immutable principles. Rather, they are the result of discussion, accommodation, and compromise. Political conversations are the means by which reliance on force is avoided and decisions the majority can live with emerge.

Politics deals with those preferences and policy options over which reasonable people can, and should, disagree. A wide variety of authors have come to similar conclusions that "democracy is governance through talk,"[25] and "dialogue is the first obligation of citizenship."[26] Conflicting points of view are part and parcel of the political process. Even though you may have your own "right" answer, there is seldom a societal "right answer" for how policy should proceed. If a right answer is so apparent that virtually everyone can see and agree to it, it can be handled in a bureaucratic way.

Recognizing inherent conflict in preferences and conceptions as to how problems should be alleviated, the potential of conversation lies in its ability to narrow the gap between individuals, identify potential compatriots and outline ways in which a coalition can be created, and move the process forward. A "good" decision in politics is one in which the participants accept the decision-making process and the largest coalition of supporters can champion the decision. In a coalition, not everyone involved agrees on the goals or methods, but everyone can accept the decision to act.

Master coalition builder Lyndon Johnson's favorite quote was from Adlai Stevenson's introduction to one of Johnson's own speeches: "Come now, and let us reason together."[27] For Johnson, reasoning was not running roughshod over opposing opinions, but rather was finding areas of agreement and capitalizing on them. Although Johnson saw this more as an activity of

top-level negotiators working on behalf of the people, the idea of expanding the pool of those included in the reasoning process to the broader society remains part and parcel of greater democracy. The central assumption of democracy is that, even though its members may initially have conflicting preferences about a given issue, goodwill, mutual understanding, and enlightened preferences can lead to the emergence of a common enlightened preference that is good for everyone.[28]

Democracy is the recurrent suspicion that more than half the people are right more than half the time. If you believe that members of the public are ultimately fools, and that all politicians degenerate into knaves, you might as well nip off this conversation in the bud, for what follows will sound like the foolish ranting of a Pollyanna. We do not have to believe that all is well with our democratic ideal to believe that it does often work, even if in fits and starts. Also, this discussion hopefully gives readers a target toward which to aim our attempts at improvement.

James Madison championed the idea that rule by the people could result if initiatives were proposed by a process that would "refine and enlarge the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens."[29] The shift from direct democracy to representative democracy was not so much a defeat of democracy as it was a practical solution to the reality that most citizens lacked the time and interest to delve into the details, although they may well have had strong feeling about how specific proposals affected them personally. Representative democracy does not relieve representatives from seeking and giving guidance to citizens as they re-present (present a second time) the broad interests and specific implications of those they are charged to take into account.

Much analysis of American politics is "voting centric," ignoring the decision-making process that precedes and follows the vote and limiting public involvement to the voting booth. Such an approach sees parties and candidates appealing to individuals with fixed preferences and aggregating them in election to office and the promotion of public policies.[30] The analysis presented in these pages, however, also focuses on the exchange of information that precedes voting and the development of the capabilities by which citizens can become actively engaged in the policy process after the polls close. Even though the vote is important, conversation stands as the most feasible way for many citizens to engage in the political process. Even a vote-oriented scholar such as Bernard Berelson asserts in his classic study of voting, "If there is

one characteristic of a democratic system (besides the ballot itself) that is theoretically required, it is the capacity for and the practice of discussion."[31]

Democracies legitimize their existence by purportedly basing public opinion on the "will of the people." Pinpointing "the people" is often difficult. We seek those issues with enough salience to engage a broad enough segment of society to represent a public issue. In a large society, the public is "a group of strangers that gathers to discuss the news."[32] In practical terms, it is often difficult to determine that will precisely. On many issues, there is no real "public" opinion, if that means a universally held outlook. On many issues, large portions of the public are either uninformed or uninterested. Even when an issue generates widespread awareness and interest, there is no consensus as to whether government should react to all opinions equally, to those most deeply interested, or to the loudest voices. Reliance on public opinion polls immediately raises questions of methodological accuracy. For any poll, we must ask: "Who was asked?" "When were they asked?" and "What were they asked?" Concerns over the size and randomness of samples intermingle with concerns over question wording and ordering. Considering democratic responsiveness more broadly as a conversation allows a more inclusive set of components of which public opinion polls are an important, but not exclusive, part. Poll results enter the conversation as one more data point, with no inherent right to trump other inputs.

Expanding democracy beyond "simple" vote counting or mechanical reliance on public opinion polls adds significant complexity and ambiguity.

> Effective deliberation in a participatory democracy demands that citizens are able to have a voice in the discussion, that they are able to consider the voices of others, and that they can recognize the many subtle forces that impact on how those voices are communicated in our mediated and technological world.... The public voice is made up of many competing voices: a never-ending, turbulent, competitive, euphonious cacophony of debating perspectives contributing to some semblance of a marketplace of ideas.[33]

Both media and politicians often degrade citizens by ignoring their role as active members of a civil community and viewing them as market segments that are there to be sold, bartered, and/or delivered. Marketers think in terms of "them," whereas those being marketed hope to emphasize "me" and "my" needs. Democracy resounds with the sounds of "we" and "us" working together to produce results at least minimally acceptable to many of us.[34]

"The history of liberal thought can be read as a series of efforts to provide conversational models that would enable political participants to talk to one another in an appropriately neutral way."[35] For much of American history, the actual functioning of democracy has emphasized a top-down conversation. "We the people" gave our passive consent to be governed and flitted in and out of the political arena at election time to legitimize or replace teams of serious players. Political parties and interest groups seeking to protect the interests of their supporters, and using their public support to justify why their voice should be heard, dominated the conversation. The limited number of media voices facilitated high-level conversations among top-level players and parceled out *the* news to the mass public.

The present-day explosion of information sources and communications capabilities offers the potential for a more horizontal set of conversations in which problems and alternative solutions bubble up from the bottom more than being set forth from the top. Bill Moyers has become one of the key nonacademic proponents of improving the public conversation, arguing, "People care deeply about public life and civic culture—they just need to be invited into the conversation."[36] He invites us to speculate, "Suppose we acted as if the public was no fiction and we actually treated democracy as a two-way conversation?"[37] He reminds us that the taverns, inns, street corners, and public greens of the colonial period served as sites for public conversation that facilitated the Revolution because they "made it possible to quickly gather militia companies, to form effective committees of correspondence and of inspection, and to organize and to manage town meetings."[38] In towns such as Annapolis, patriots met under "liberty trees" to assure spies could not listen into their conversations. They recognized how revolutionary conversation could be. Even though the new sites for political conversation have moved from the taverns and greens to the water cooler and the blogosphere, the democratic aspiration remains the same.

Bruce Ackerman goes beyond seeing conversation as an opportunity; he identifies it as a responsibility by proclaiming conversation (dialogue) "the first obligation of citizenship.... A responsible citizen *cannot* ... cut herself off from political dialogue."[39] If two people disagree about a basic issue in politics, "the only way we stand half a chance of solving our problems in coexistence in a way both of us find reasonable is by talking to one another about them."[40]