



ROLE OF PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES IN DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

Modern democracy is as much about 'deliberations' as it is about 'voting'. Many theorists of democracy believe that decisions taken by voting preceded by good deliberations are better than decisions taken by voting alone (without prior deliberations), as the former are more informed than the latter. However, not all theorists agree. One school of thought beginning with Rousseau takes preferences as given. Democracy, on this view, is mostly about aggregation of preferences. It is in aggregation of preferences that the 'general will' is expressed. For them, there is real danger of votes being influenced by rhetoric, agenda setting, lobbying etc. when voting is preceded by deliberation. Moreover, they also point out, there is little consensus regarding the 'meaning' of deliberation itself. There are several other questions on which theorists of 'deliberative democracy' themselves are divided such as: where such deliberation should take place; whether it should be site specific (parliament, mini-publics) or dispersed in institutions of civil society and the state; what is the appropriate speech form for such deliberation; and, whether it can address the questions of inclusion and fairness etc.



But despite such difference of views, parliaments and assemblies are considered as 'core sites' of deliberative democracy by most theorists. They believe that if parliament becomes more deliberative, it would have a wholesome cascading effect on the rest of the political system. Since debates are the primary way in which parliaments deliberate, political discourse of parliamentary debates is an important indicator of 'deliberativeness' of parliament, having a bearing on democracy at large. This paper makes an attempt to theoretically explain the role of parliamentary debates in 'deliberative democracy'.

KEYWORDS: Democracy, Deliberative Democracy, Debates and Parliament.

INTRODUCTION

Today, Democracy is considered as the most acceptable form of government, so much so that any other form of government is seen as an aberration. Common people as citizens are seen as central to functioning of a democratic government. But this was not the case always. Though Athenian democracy is sometimes considered to be an example of 'direct democracy', it was not democracy in the sense we understand it today. It excluded women and slaves. Even this limited democracy was lost when Athenian democracy came to an end in 322 BC, and with it the idea of democracy was lost till it

was again revived only in the eighteenth Century.ⁱ Deliberative democracy is essentially a ‘democracy by discussion’. In a democracy, free and equal citizens express their preferences either verbally in debates and discussions or through votes in an election. These two kinds of citizens’ expressions are not mutually exclusive but supplement each other by fulfilling two different needs of democratic public life. While the first is a good ‘discovery procedure’, it needs to be followed by the second (vote), which is the most practical and widely practiced ‘decision procedure’. Hence emerges the principle of Goodin: ‘first talk then vote’.ⁱⁱ

While there is little debate about democracy needing both talk (the discovery procedure) and vote (the decision procedure), much of the debate in political theory has happened around relative primacy of each. One school of thought beginning with Rousseau takes preferences as given. Democracy, on this view, is mostly about aggregation of preferences. It is in aggregation of preferences that the ‘general will’ is expressed.ⁱⁱⁱ The other school of thought finds this idea of democracy grossly inadequate. For it, democracy is much more than a simple aggregation of preferences. It is an educative process in which the citizenry takes control of its own political life. Democracy therefore, on this view, is largely about transformation rather than simple aggregation of preferences. In contemporary political theory, this view is largely inspired by the writings of German thinker Jurgen Habermas. Several theorists see this shift in theory of democracy from ‘vote centric’ models to ‘talk centric models’ as democracy’s ‘deliberative turn’.^{iv}

EVOLUTION OF DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Despite the fact that democracy could not take root after the demise of Athenian democracy in 322 B.C. till the eighteenth century when it got revived, political theory at least since Machiavelli, has given significant importance to common people while analyzing the dynamics of power. The three revolutions namely English, American, and French revolution mark the beginning and strengthening of the role of general public in national politics and the world has witnessed unprecedented growth of democracy cutting across nations. However, despite recognizing common people as a political force, a lot of skepticism regarding their self-governability keeps surfacing up in contemporary political theory.^v The roots of this skepticism can be traced back to ‘different conceptions’ of society for different theorists. Some, acknowledging the ‘plurality of interests in society and the potential for civil strife’ on that count, recommend a ‘rights based society’ with individuals having guaranteed pre-political rights that cannot be taken away by any kind of democratic deliberation or any other democratic mechanism. Others who are optimistic about civil harmony based on ‘shared interests, values and traditions’ repose their faith in the ultimate wisdom of the people expressed through democratic mechanisms. The former group is that of liberals such as Hobbes, Locke etc. while the latter is of civic republicans such as Harrington and Rousseau.^{vi}

This question became the main preoccupation of theories of democracy in the middle part of the twentieth century. These theories had three frameworks: the elite, the economic and the pluralist. Elite theories have their roots in the sociological theory of Vilfred Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, and Robert Michel. All of them shared the belief that masses are incapable of governing themselves and self-governance of the masses is self-destructive and dangerous. Theorists such as J. A. Schumpeter, Harold Laswell and Abraham Kaplan were of the opinion that the general people are passive and open to manipulation by the elite.^{vii} Schumpeter on the basis of his findings suggested that citizens in modern democracies were ‘uninformed, indifferent and open to manipulation’^{viii}.

The economic theory of democracy of Anthony Downs is inspired by the market model. It maps “empirical and sociological observations about peoples’ socioeconomic preferences with an economic model of rational behavior” based on rational-choice assumptions.^{ix} As a consequence, in his theory all political activity is reduced to consumer behavior and citizens to utility maximizers. The third framework is that of Robert A. Dahl’s pluralist theory of democracy (polyarchy) which primarily views democracy as competition between various interest groups.

Though not as elitist and anti-popular as the elite theories, it nevertheless stop much short of the ideal of democratic participation of common people. On this conception, only interests exist and any effort to artificially create a common good would only lead to majoritarianism.

Though different, yet all three frameworks have the following commonalities: first, they believe that reaching a common good is an impossibility; second, politics is all about amicably resolving conflicts between different interest groups and private interests which are in competition with each other; and third, the mechanisms of voting and interest aggregation is the primary way in which such conflicts could be resolved.^x

Such an intellectual and social climate was obviously not conducive for blossoming of public deliberation. Although Dewey and Hannah Arendt tried to swim against this wave of democratic cynicism in post war years, but it was only towards the end of 1960s that this trend started losing its steam. This was the result of “dissatisfaction with the debacles and anonymity of liberal government”.^{xi} Soon, interest in participatory form of democracy revived and liberal democracy came under a scathing theoretical attack in the 70s.

The dissatisfaction with liberal and elite democratic theory has given rise to the two schools of civic republicanism and deliberative democracy. Civic pursuit of common good and participation of common people in the political process are commitments common to both the schools. The idea of deliberative democracy slowly developed in the 1980s.^{xii} The phrase was coined by Joseph Bassette (1980) and popularised by Bernard Manin (1987) and Joshua Cohen (1989).^{xiii} Theorist like them challenged the basic assumptions of the economic and pluralist models of democracy that defended the competitive model of society. They also questioned the rational-choice frameworks for decision-making, the idea of minimal governments and democracy’s reduction to negative rights and periodic voting etc. They argued for much more public participation in the collective affairs of the society.^{xiv}

Democracy took a strong deliberative turn in the final decade of second millennium. Democratic legitimacy now came to be increasingly defined and gauged through citizens’ participation in collective decision making. The essence of democracy on this conception is in deliberation “as opposed to voting, interest aggregation, constitutional rights or even self-government”.^{xv}

SPHERE AND SITES OF DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Deliberative democrats generally agree that governmental institutions responsible for making laws should deliberate but there is no consensus regarding applying deliberative principles outside these institutions to civil society, for instance. Habermas recommends limiting deliberation to core institutions of democracy given by constitution such as parliament and assemblies, while other deliberative democrats such as Joshua Cohen and Jane Mansbridge are of the view that it should also take place in different civic and political associations such as corporations, labour unions, residential associations so on and so forth. Restrictionists like Habermas and Rawls feel that it would be too much for citizens to be asked to deliberate mandatorily. The citizens are free to experiment with the way of associating. A thoroughly and mandatorily deliberating society is not a free society. Habermas feels that an unstructured society is necessary for free-will formation. However, Gutmann and Thompson like Cohen and Mansbridge believe that deliberation should not remain restricted to government institutions.^{xvi}

DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY AND PARLIAMENT

With the rise of representative democracy, political deliberation emerged as an area of interest in the writings of two British thinkers Edmund Burke and John Stuart Mill. Both believed that deliberation was necessary for arriving at better decisions in Parliament and Assemblies. However, they advocated that this deliberation should take place among the educated and the elected. Masses need not be part of such deliberations. This elitist element in the model of deliberation proposed by Burke and Mill has no takers among the deliberative democrats today, as the very idea of limiting deliberations to any kind of elites defeats the very purpose of institutionalizing deliberative democracy.^{xvii} Parliaments and assemblies are considered as 'core sites' of deliberative democracy by most theorists. They believe

that if parliament becomes more deliberative, it would have a wholesome cascading effect on the rest of the political system. Parliaments have a unique advantage of combining elements of aggregation and deliberation which can lead to higher political legitimacy.

DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY, POLITICAL DISCOURSE AND PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

Language plays a central role in politics. It is so fundamental to politics that it is impossible to do politics without the strategic use of language. Language is not only the vehicle that expresses the legality of political institutions such as the legislature, the executive and the judiciary and defines their respective powers and limits through symbolic representation, but it also creates such institutions. For example, according to Chilton “swearing an oath is a specific institution, because it is a specific speech act, and it is a specific speech act because it is a specific institution”.^{xviii} Language in this context is not a mere form of daily communication for social interaction, but an instrument to organize political activity through processing and conveying political messages. It is a particular form of linguistic activity- a discourse.

It would be pertinent here to note that Philosophy in twentieth century took a ‘linguistic turn’ whereby the idea of language changed from being a medium to express meanings that pre-existed linguistic formulation to a system that manufactures meanings by itself. On this view language precedes and shapes reality rather than the other way round. This is so because meaning is now believed to be socially constructed and historically and culturally situated rather than eternal, absolute and essential.^{xix} The ‘deliberative turn’ that democracy has taken in last few decades is largely because of renewed emphasis on the importance of ‘deliberation’ in democratic theory and practice. ‘First talk then vote’ seems to be the new mantra for functioning of a healthy democracy. Deliberation, therefore, is an inter subjective activity of social nature. It is not a personal reflection or private discussion. It is a public discourse. For Habermas, human emancipation is not to be found in class struggle but in the communicative structures of the social world that sustain it. Problems arise when these communicative structures break down and require ‘repair’. Such ‘repair’ can only be done through a particular form of ‘democratic deliberation’ known as discourse. A ‘discourse’ is a particular form of communication in which justifications are given to prove validity of one’s claim. Such discourses should be democratic in order to be genuine guaranteeing equality of access, opportunity and status to the participants.^{xx}

A discourse therefore is a free, fair and dispassionate exchange of arguments based on rational justifications between equal participants to reach an ‘ideal speech situation’ in which the ‘unforced force of the better argument’ wins. According to Habermas, the appropriate ‘speech form’ for politics is ‘argument based discourse’. The conflict in society, according to Habermas, can be addressed by democracy through ‘democratic deliberations’ by means of ‘discourse’. Parliament being the main instrument of democracy, therefore, needs to be deliberative. Since debates are the primary way in which parliaments deliberate, and also since such deliberations are particular forms of political discourses, such discourse need to be analyzed in order to measure the deliberative content, ultimately having a bearing on democracy at large.

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

Parliamentary debate is often seen from a strategic-partisan lens, intended to influence the electorate outside rather than the opposition inside the House. But despite the fact that parliamentary debate is shaped by the electoral and party system, it is still considered as important for the democratic and law making process. It is an important link between the constituents and the representatives and a crucial bridge to align local interests with national interests. Ideally speaking, in a democracy the ultimate sovereignty lies with the people with the State and its agencies only giving a concrete expression of the same. This essentially means that there is a delegation of power from people to representatives. The representatives are therefore entrusted with the responsibility to espouse the cause of their constituents, and parliamentary debates provide a chance to representatives to publicly demonstrate that they are doing the same. Parliamentary debates are therefore an important tool of communication between the Member of Parliament (MPs), their parties and electorate at large.

Parliamentary debate is of deliberative genre that differs from oratorical speeches of ancient assemblies as the focus has shifted from oratorical quality of individual speeches to rule based debating pro et contra.^{xxi} And since there are no united pre-parliamentary people, parliament becomes a representative stage for different social groups with diverse cultural, social and religious identities. Parliamentary politics acknowledges such polarities in society and seek to overcome them through procedural and rhetorical practices. This requires a much larger role on part of representatives than just being 'ambassadors of their constituencies', 'delegates of their respective parties' or 'ratification devices of governments'.

Parliamentary debates offer opportunities to MPs to present and reflect on a rich pool of perspectives on a question or motion presented to the House. Parliamentary rules and procedure provides for deliberation pro et contra which is why parliament can do what administration cannot i.e. thoroughly deliberate. Rules of procedures of parliamentary politics allow the politics of dissensus by allowing contestation between opposed perspectives, leading to a thorough understanding of the question.^{xxii} The dissensus between perspectives increases the likelihood of a thorough debate on a motion.

Parliamentary debates have either been looked from the prism of Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Austin who saw words as inextricably linked to deed's (Austin's Speech Acts) or, from the opposite side of the spectrum, as rhetorical in a negative sense of empty words. Critics of the anti-rhetorical school find parliamentary debates as inadequate and as mere assisting moves to the final 'deed' of voting. But, as stated above, the verbal character of politics is essential to keep out politics of violence. As Harold Laski famously said: 'The alternative to the "talking-shop" is the concentration camp'.^{xxiii} This self-pacification process of resolving political conflict by deliberation, dialogue and discussion without resorting to violence is undoubtedly one of the greatest achievement of parliamentary politics.^{xxiv} This process of self-pacification is not achieved by blocking inconvenient political voices but by their institutional cooption in parliamentary politics. Parliamentary debates play a major role in this exercise.

CONCLUSION

Habermas laid the philosophical foundations of deliberative democracy. As mentioned above, for him human emancipation is not to be found in class struggle but in the communicative structures of the social world that sustain it. Problems arise when these communicative structures break down and require 'repair'. Such 'repair' can only be done through a particular form of 'democratic deliberation' known as discourse. A 'discourse' is a particular form of communication in which justifications are given to prove validity of one's claim. Such discourses should be democratic in order to be genuine guaranteeing equality of access, opportunity and status to the participants. A discourse therefore is a free, fair and dispassionate exchange of arguments based on rational justifications between equal participants to reach an 'ideal speech situation' in which the 'unforced force of the better argument' wins. Thus, the appropriate 'speech form' for politics is 'argument based discourse'.

The conflict in society, according to Habermas, can be addressed by democracy through 'democratic deliberations' by means of 'discourse'. Parliament, being the core institution of deliberative democracy, has the unique opportunity of deliberating on issues of national importance. Moreover, it is not just a deliberating body but also an ultimate decision maker for society as a whole. Legislations passed by it form the 'law of the land' that binds the whole society.

The idea that such decisions should be well deliberated upon, therefore, cannot be overemphasized. Debates are the primary way in which parliaments deliberates. They are complex speech acts having several layers. Their multi-layered texture comprises not just of strategic-partisan/rhetorical elements, but also deliberative ones that need careful examination to gauge the depth and richness of parliamentary deliberations. They form an extremely important public resource for delineating the 'deliberative culture' of society as a whole, as they are reflective of the democratic mores of society in general and representative institutions, like parliament, in particular.

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