**Deliberation and Sustainability**

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The relationship between deliberation and sustainability is contested. One prominent articulation of the relationship sees deliberation as an established policy instrument in the sustainability governance toolbox (Bäckstrand et al. 2010). Policy makers, practitioners, activists and academics commonly articulate the virtues of deliberation in improving policy making for sustainability. Deliberative technologies such as citizens’ panels, juries and assemblies, consensus conferences, and forms of stakeholder engagement and the like are celebrated as ways of realising deliberation within the policy process (Voß 2016). Deliberation is taken to improve decision making and build political legitimacy by enhancing reflection on the diversity of environmental values and knowledge. Sustainability is a major social problem; deliberation a method of improved problem-solving.

While this is an important development, it reflects a partial story of the relationship between deliberation and sustainability. The focus on deliberation as policy instrument neglects the origin of deliberative democracy as a critical social theory that challenges broader systemic injustices. While deliberation may have significant problem-solving capacities, the emancipatory ambition of deliberative democracy is more extensive, aiming to recast established expressions of social and economic power. Democratic communication is a broader social phenomenon, not just a means to an end. Combine this with a recognition of sustainability as on ongoing process, then deliberation can be understood as a key property of social systems that enable forms of democratic reflexivity; a foundation for more reflexive, adaptable, and ecologically attuned societies.

The first section of this chapter explains the nature of deliberation and its attraction for those concerned about sustainability. It brings into focus the difference between deliberation as sustainability governance instrument and its more radical interpretation as critical social theory that offers a more systemic approach to the sustainability challenges we face. The second section explains the emergence of deliberative democracy, how it lost its emancipatory impulse and the dangers that the focus on a more instrumental reading of deliberation may undermine more radical democratic change and thus the capacity to embrace more inclusive and emancipatory conceptions of sustainability. The final section of the chapter explores how recovering the original emancipatory understanding of deliberation points us towards broader considerations of the role of institutions, culture and democratic systems in our endless search for sustainability.

**Deliberation as a policy instrument or emancipatory theory?**

Deliberation is a particular way of ordering and doing things. It is a form of communication that is fair, reasoned, inclusive, public, and free from the distortions that emerge from the exercise of social and economic power. Deliberation is ‘authentic’ to the extent that it induces reflection in a non-coercive manner (Dryzek 2000). This sets the bar for legitimacy much higher than typical political discourse, whether in governments, parliaments, civil society or the media. For genuine deliberation to occur, participants must have equal standing, justify their positions to others through reason, commit to being open to changing their own views in light of others’ arguments, and be sincere and orientated to the common-good. Manipulation and the maximisation of self-interest over common concerns have no place (Dryzek 2000; Benhabib 1996). Deliberation has an equalising function – redressing forms of political domination such as the undue influence of resources, status, background and structural biases. With this ambitious normative core, deliberation rests on the inclusion of otherwise marginalised voices, restricting opportunities to bypass democratic processes or capitalise on powerful social positions (Curato et al. 2018).

Why the interest in deliberation amongst those committed to sustainability? Concern for sustainability often places advocates in opposition to entrenched social norms, practices and interests that perpetuate unsustainability (Jordan et al 2010: 4; Hanson 2018). Deliberation offers a way of challenging established norms, practices and interests by embedding ‘ecological rationality’ (Dryzek 1990) – ensuring that the full range of ecological values and different types of ecological knowledge are expressed, justified and considered (Baber and Bartlett 2018). Advocates of deliberation draw on both theoretical and empirical evidence to suggest that self-interested motives that often drive unsustainability are difficult to justify under the scrutiny of free and fair deliberation (Mackenzie 2019; Smith 2003). As Offe and Preuss (1991) argue, deliberation is fact-regarding, other-regarding and future-regarding. Sustainability brings alternative perspectives and interests into conflict, including within the environmental movement itself (think, for example of the worldviews of conservationists and preservationists; radicals and reformers). Deliberation does not wish away this conflict, but rather creates the conditions for political judgements that take into consideration different perspectives on the non-human world (Smith 2003: 53). Deliberation provides the space to challenge embedded assumptions about endless economic growth and technological solutionism.

It is these characteristics of deliberation that have captured attention within sustainability governance. When faced with entrenched social and economic power, deliberation promises a way of opening up decision making in a more inclusive and democratic manner. Over recent years, deliberation has emerged as an increasingly important instrument in the sustainability governance toolbox. The promise is better and more legitimate decision making (Newig et al 2018). Better in the sense that policy will be made that reflects the plurality of environmental values and situated knowledges. More legitimate because participants and the broader public will recognise the process of deliberation as being inclusive, free and fair. In some ways this resonates with the long-standing political commitment to stakeholder participation that is common amongst advocates of sustainable development, not least official UN agreements such as Agenda 21 (Meadowcroft 2004). The difference for deliberative democrats, however, is that it is not just a question of who is at the table (all affected stakeholders), but the mode of interaction and the forms of social power that this expresses (democratic deliberation).

In practice, this means a great deal of interest and experimentation in creating conditions under which participants in the policy process can engage in more deliberative exchanges. A range of deliberative designs have emerged that bring together and facilitate varying combinations and types of stakeholders, citizens, scientists and policy makers. Whole industries have developed to deliver this new approach to participatory technologies. Just one example is the range of processes that fall under the umbrella of ‘deliberative mini-publics’, such as citizens’ juries, citizen assemblies, planning cells and consensus conferences (Setälä and Smith 2018). These highly facilitated bodies bring together a random selection of citizens to work on a particular policy challenge. Participants hear from and question a range of experts and interest groups, deliberate amongst themselves and come to recommendations. Random selection ensures a broad diversity of perspectives on the issue under consideration; facilitation ensures fairness in the deliberative process.

Such mini-publics have been used across a range of sustainability issues at varying levels of governance. Organisations such as MASS LBP (Canada)[[1]](#footnote-1), NewDemocracy (Australia)[[2]](#footnote-2) and the Jefferson Center (US)[[3]](#footnote-3) have run citizens’ juries and panels on, for example, urban planning, rural climate challenges and nuclear waste disposal. The Danish Board of Technology (DBT) has a long record of organising consensus conferences as a means of incorporating the perspectives of the lay public within the assessment of new scientific and technological developments that raise significant social and ethical concerns.[[4]](#footnote-4) The DBT was the coordinator of the World Wide Views project which in 2009 engaged over 4,000 citizens in 38 countries to deliberate on the future of climate policy (Rask et al 2012). Deliberative polls have been used to bring large numbers of people together to deliberate on a range of issues, including regional planning for Texas utility companies (Fishkin 2009).[[5]](#footnote-5) In Poland, citizens’ assemblies have been organised at municipal level on climate change and flood prevention.[[6]](#footnote-6) The Irish Citizens’ Assembly, famous for its recommendation to liberalise the constitutional status of abortion, which was then supported by a national referendum, also spent a couple of weekends considering and making recommendations on how to strengthen Irish climate policy.[[7]](#footnote-7) The recent French Citizens’ Convention on Climate commissioned by President Macron,[[8]](#footnote-8) the Climate Assembly UK commissioned by six parliamentary select committees[[9]](#footnote-9) and Scotland’s Climate Assembly promised in Scotland’s Climate Change Act (2019)[[10]](#footnote-10) indicate the extent to which this model of deliberative engagement has entered the mainstream.[[11]](#footnote-11) Evidence from these experiments with mini-publics suggests that citizens are willing and able to deliberate on highly complex and controversial issues; and that they reach judgements that are sensitive to ecological and social concerns. The case for deliberation as a way of promoting reflection and consideration on sustainability is strong.

Deliberation in this context is very much a problem-solving method (Wironen et al 2019). Deliberation offers a solution to the problem of how to create the conditions under which values and knowledge claims that are typically given short shrift are considered in the policy making process. Deliberation promises to provide a space in which often marginalised ecological values and knowledge are heard and given fair consideration.

But this ‘problem-solving’ perspective on deliberation has shortcomings. The rhetorical influence of deliberation within the policy process far outpaces its actual impact. Deliberative workshops and forums have proliferated, but the extent of policy effect is rather limited. These initiatives are only one part of the policy process and only one input into decision making; inserted often as a one-off shot. The deliberations from these processes have recommendatory force: the assumption is that the quality of the process and recommendations will influence decision makers (Fishkin 2019). The quality of deliberative engagement may be high, but it has to fare against the rest of the policy process that has non-deliberative characteristics: electoral-party motivations and the power of interest groups win out too often at the expense of deliberation. Critics worry that the timing, framing and impacts of deliberative mini-publics are too influenced by power struggles in the conventional policy process (Lafont 2015; Böker 2017). The very forces that undermine sustainability, such as powerful vested interests, undermine deliberation. One answer to the question of impact is to empower deliberative processes. This is what we have seen in Poland, for example, where municipal mayors have agreed to implement recommendations from citizens’ assemblies where they realise at least 80 percent support amongst participants (Gerwin 2018).[[12]](#footnote-12) In Gdansk, a more effective flood defence system has been implemented on this basis. But political elites are typically suspicious of empowering deliberation to this extent, not least because of the loss of power on their part. Facilitated citizen deliberation is recognised as a useful ingredient to add; but it is not seen as the whole cake.

A more fundamental critique questions the celebration of deliberation as policy instrument – as a sophisticated approach to problem solving. The tendency to consider deliberation as the property of mini-publics (or some other deliberative method) inserted into the policy process loses sight of the emancipatory potential of deliberative democracy as a critical social theory (Böker 2017). Deliberation definitely has problem-solving and coordination capacities, but it is also the basis of an emancipatory theory that aims to structurally recast established expressions of social and economic power. Deliberation is a broader mode of social and political communication on which a fairer democratic society should be ordered. Deliberative democracy thus emerges as a critique of existing democratic practices; as a response to the contemporary crises of democracy, whether this be conceptualised as the impact of speculative capitalism, authoritarian populism or institutional racism (Curato et al. 2018; White 2017). The idea of deliberation as a policy instrument to be exploited in an otherwise technocratic policy process undersells its potential as a force for social change, not least for sustainability.

But just as deliberation is ‘radicalised’, so too sustainability. The policy instrument approach assumes a set of fairly-well defined outcomes to be achieved. The Sustainable Development Goals are the most obvious global expression of this technocratic perspective. Instead, a more political interpretation recognises that sustainability is not an end state that can be defined clearly, but is rather a site of confrontation, contestation and negotiation about different ways of living in relation to the nonhuman world. Coordination of social action in such a context requires high levels of reflexivity and capacities to adapt, characteristics of political systems that are poorly served by current democratic practices. For deliberative democrats, deliberation is a key property of social systems that will enable forms of democratic reflexivity and adaptation: an ongoing inclusive social process of coordination and conflict over potential futures. The dual crises of unsustainability and democratic practice require more than deliberation as policy instrument.

**How did we get here?**

These different approaches to understanding the potential of deliberation reflect the evolution of the theory of deliberative democracy and its relationship with environmental politics. The move from critical social theory with ambitions of systemic change to policy instrument occurred as deliberative democracy established itself in the mainstream. Tracing the evolution of the theory helps put current practice into its wider theoretical context and direct renewed attention to broader systemic change.

Democratic theorists do not always advocate for social change. In the 1950s and 60s, theorists such as Joseph Schumpeter, Anthony Downs and William Riker used economic methods to justify minimal forms of liberal democracy, in which the role of citizens is little more than voting for competing governing elites – hence the term democratic or competitive elitism. This limited conception of democracy appeals to those, including some prominent scientists, who believe that a more technocratic and centralised approach is necessary to deliver sustainability (Lovelock 2010; Maxton and Randers 2016). Yet such an articulation of democracy is problematic on a number of fronts. First, reducing participation to regular elections limits democratic principles of inclusiveness and empowerment to their bare minimum. Second, such a technocratic approach assumes that sustainability can be shorn of its normative core; that the diversity of perspectives and significant social conflicts over what sustainability entails can simply be ignored. And third, competitive elitism severely overestimates the capacity of central control to realise the reflexivity and social coordination necessary for responding to sustainability challenges in a complex society.

The social movements of the 1960s, such as the civil rights, environmental, feminist and peace movements, paved the way for new theorising on democracy that challenged the stranglehold of competitive elitism’s conservative account of democracy. Theorists were inspired by the participatory politics of that era and its demands for empowerment of marginalised social groups. Participatory democrats challenged authority in all realms of life – not just the traditional political realm, but also the economic, social and even personal – arguing that citizens should be empowered to govern their own lives. The negative perception of the apathetic and politically incompetent citizens cast by democratic elitists was replaced by that of citizens learning to govern their lives through participating collectively in political, economic and social organisations (Pateman 1970; Barber 1980). For many, the politics of sustainability took on a participatory hue. For example, Ostrom’s (1990) influential account of governing the commons explicitly articulated the centrality of community control over non-renewable resources. Communities have the local knowledge and motivation to ensure sustainability that distant bureaucrats and officials lack.

Emerging in the 1980s and 90s, deliberative democracy draws on the insights of participatory democrats, but with a more explicit account of the structural barriers to emancipation and more stringent normative criteria of the conditions for emancipation. Jürgen Habermas (1984) provides an extensive analysis of how a pernicious ‘instrumental rationality’ has taken hold of liberal societies to the detriment of ‘communicative rationality’ through which citizens can freely and fairly negotiate social conflicts. Deliberative democracy thus cast itself in opposition to entrenched economic and social power structures that reduce the scope for communication. Many green political theorists found themselves inspired by deliberative democracy. John Dryzek was an early pioneer, arguing that instrumental rationality is the source of much ecological destruction. In contrast, communicative rationality is necessarily ‘ecologically rational’ in the sense that it presupposes the basic ecological conditions for human life (Dryzek 1987). This focus on forms of rationality has led to differences of emphasis within deliberative democracy between a central focus on the emancipation of citizens through their active participation in deliberative processes and a broader concern about the articulation of competing discourses across the public sphere and their transmission into political decision making (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008; Owen and Smith 2015). Our own tendency is towards the former. As Amy Gutmann argues: ‘the legitimate exercise of political authority requires justification to those people who are bound by it, and decision-making by deliberation among free and equal citizens is the most defensible justification anyone has to offer for provisionally settling controversial issues’ (Gutmann 1996: 344).

Often highly philosophical and abstract in its analysis, an ‘institutional turn’ has looked to make deliberative democracy more practically relevant through a search for the institutions through which deliberative democratic ideals might be realised – or at least approximated. This turn to institutions focused on how the design of institutions enables or disables deliberation. For example, studies of parliaments show how different party systems, architectures and parliamentary practices affect the deliberative quality of proceedings (Steiner et al. 2009). Mini-publics became a particular fascination. Practical work with mini-publics had emerged in the 1970s. Deliberative democracy scholars saw in the application of random selection and facilitation a means of ameliorating the impact of broader social and economic power imbalances and a space within which ordinary citizens are willing and capable of deliberating on highly complex policy problems (Setälä and Smith 2018). A sophisticated research agenda has emerged, one that suggests that mini-publics are helpful in resolving political stalemate and enhancing inclusion (Beauvais and Warren 2019) in ways that are both ‘extremely useful to policy-makers’ (Delap 2001: 39) and welcomed by citizens (Jacquet 2019).

The attraction of getting things done in the here-and-now meant that many academics and practitioners came to view mini-publics as the standard bearers of deliberative democracy. This emerging research and practice agenda can be interpreted in two ways: mini-publics and other participatory processes are instrumentally valuable for making better policy; or such participatory institutions are an expression of an altogether different way of doing politics, recalling the earlier principles of participatory democracy. The more deliberation became a professionalised and commercialised practice of interest to public authorities (Hendriks and Carson 2008), the more the problem-solving approach and thus the instrumental use of deliberation have tended to dominate, particularly in relation to sustainability governance. In a couple of decades, the weight of research moved from deliberative democracy as emancipatory social theory to how to design deliberative processes that are more informed and reflective to help solve concrete political problems – not least sustainability concerns.

The problem-solving function of deliberation is important to responding to the crisis of unsustainability, but given that the crisis is systemic, dangers exist that attention is focused on particular policy gains with less attention to broader and more critical engagement across society at large. The danger is that mini-publics and the like help stabilise or even reinforce outdated structures and practices of policy-making rather than transforming these processes in ways that are necessary for sustainability. In the name of deliberative democracy and sustainability, deliberative policy instruments are integrated into existing institutions in ways that legitimate the very structures that have driven us to into the crises of democracy and unsustainability in the first place. We patch up failing institutions rather than recognise the need for transformation.

A more recent ‘systems’ turn in deliberative democracy has restored attention to questions of deliberation at scale rather than the characteristics of individual institutions, but still not necessarily recovered the theory’s original critical ethos. To enable sustainability, systems considerations must bring into focus questions of whether and how deliberation can inform, induce reflection, and mediate across divides, but importantly also channel critical contestation, not only within mini-publics and other carefully designed institutions, but scaled up to societies as a whole (Niemeyer 2014; Curato and Böker 2016; Owen and Smith 2015). Our attention needs to turn to the question of what deliberation looks like not just inside highly orchestrated, designed spaces, but in the messy and imperfect, but often less constrained, public sphere (Chambers 2009).

**Where next for deliberation and sustainability?**

The theoretical and empirical connection between deliberation and sustainability is well established. The research agenda on how particular institutions, such as deliberative mini-publics, are able to deal with sustainability issues is equally advanced – as is the practice on the ground. But if we are to take the emancipatory and sustainability potential of deliberative democracy seriously, the next step in the research agenda will need to be more critical and systemic in its ambitions. It will need to return to the earlier theoretical endeavours, but ask what does this mean in practice? It is one thing to argue for a more systemic approach to deliberation; another entirely to work out the cultural and institutional implications. One danger is that it becomes too speculative – unlike the analysis of single mini-publics, thinking systemically is harder to ground empirically. But the reality of unsustainability demands that we take what Erik Olin Wright (2010) terms a ‘real utopias’ approach: laying the foundations for a set of concrete, emancipatory alternatives to business as usual. This will necessarily take us beyond mini-publics to questions of how to restructure entrenched political, economic, social – and even familial – institutions and practices such that they embed the inclusiveness and reflexivity necessary for the collective search for, and action towards, sustainability.

We can only begin to offer a sketch of what this challenging intellectual and practical agenda might look like.

Taking a more systemic approach to deliberative democracy certainly does not mean abandoning interest in mini-publics and other participatory institutions that create protected spaces for citizen deliberation. But it means thinking more radically about how they might be integrated into the broader political system. Extinction Rebellion (XR) in the UK offers one such proposition. Not only is it demanding that the British government declare a climate emergency and act immediately to halt biodiversity loss and reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2025, but that government must establish and be led by the decisions of a Citizens’ Assembly on Climate and Ecological Justice.[[13]](#footnote-13) XR makes the case that system change is necessary. An empowered citizens’ assembly needs to be at the centre of political governance, given the inability of political elites to respond to the climate and ecological emergency. Whatever we think of this demand, it takes us beyond deliberation as policy instrument. Debates have also turned to the question of whether legislative chambers should be sortition-based: Michael MacKenzie, for example, makes a sustained argument for why a randomly-selected second chamber would promote and defend the interests of future generations through the institutionalisation of deliberation (MacKenzie 2017). Others contend that simply changing the composition of the legislature is not enough and more radical restructuring of the body and surrounding institutions is necessary if the practice of sortition and rotation is to become an established part of our governing institutions (Owen and Smith 2019). The idea of empowering sortition-based institutions in this way is not comfortable for some deliberative democrats, who are concerned about the loss of well-established forms of electoral accountability. The sustainability crisis requires us to confront and carefully consider our well-entrenched perspectives on what makes for legitimate democratic design.

Relatively novel institutions such as independent offices for future generations are also deserving of attention and consideration (Smith 2019; 2021). In principle, such offices have the capacity to facilitate critical reflexivity within polities given that they are not subject to electoral cycles or the nefarious influence of powerful sectional interests that motivate short-termism within established political institutions. It is telling that the first two such offices in Israel and Hungary were abolished and had their power curtailed respectively. This suggests they made the life of elected officials uncomfortable. The recent creation of and international interest in the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales indicates that this institutional form may still have an important role to play within democratic systems.[[14]](#footnote-14) The requirement under the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act for the Commissioner to promote public involvement in its own activities and the work of other public bodies suggests a recognition of the importance of public dialogue in developing and implementing long-term policy and ensuring its broader public legitimacy. Such bodies may become important focal points for critical reflection on sustainability within and across political systems.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Our analytical gaze must also confront actions and activities within the economic realm, too often ignored by democratic theorists. Long established (cooperatives, mutuals) and newer (social enterprises, B-corps) forms of economic enterprise are structured to promote deliberation within and beyond the confines of the legal entity and have become important actors within sustainability niches that deliver economic returns without compromising social and environmental concerns. But the regulatory and legal context within which they operate systemically privileges economic enterprises that are accountable primarily to shareholders (Smith and Teasdale 2012). Attention to such regulatory and legal frameworks may not be the usual focus of deliberative democrats, but their impact is critical to embedding a set of economic practices that support a broader deliberative culture within which sustainability is a primary driver.

Deliberative culture – understood as the norms of fairness, inclusiveness, and open communication – is not simply a product of orchestration and facilitation by the state (Böker 2017). More organic and informal, citizen-led and dispersed public deliberation on visions for the future is critical (Hammond 2019, 2020). Such developments connect with the adoption of ‘prefigurative politics’ by many environmentalists who aim to build alternative forms of production and consumption: concrete projects such as alternative food systems or community energy initiatives (Yates 2015). The ambition is to realise solutions in the here-and-now: seeking ‘to create the new society “in the shell of the old” by developing counterhegemonic institutions and modes of interaction that embody the desired transformation’ (Leach 2013: 1). Rooted in communities, the question is how such activities can be scaled up in ways that foster deliberation and critical reflection on the necessary social and economic changes for sustainability.

What these reflections on different institutional forms and social practices points to is the need to think both about the ways in which institutions across political, social and economic realms enable a ‘deliberative stance’ amongst citizens (Owen and Smith 2015), such that they are in a position to critically reflect on alternative futures, and to consider what it means to embed a ‘deliberative culture’ (Böker 2017) more systemically within and across political systems.

**Conclusion**

Deliberation has many virtues for those wishing to promote sustainability. Its significance can be traced through the growing number of deliberative initiatives that are integrated into policy processes to deal with particular sustainability challenges. While examples exist of where such deliberative interventions have made a difference to policy outcomes, most of the time the impact of such initiatives is unclear. The concern is that deliberation is used as window dressing for the politics as usual. This is an uncomfortable situation when we consider that the origins of deliberative democracy are as an emancipatory social theory, one which promises to challenge entrenched interests and the patterns of unsustainability caused by the instrumentalization of the environment. A return to the more emancipatory roots of deliberative democracy entails an expansion of our vision of deliberation beyond policy instrument to the foundation of a more reflexive, socially just and ecologically sustainable society. This is a ridiculously challenging research agenda – and an even more challenging political one. But simply crafting occasional opportunities for citizens to deliberate within established policy processes is a long way from the emancipatory agenda that is necessary if we are to come to terms with the evermore pressing sustainability challenges we face now and in the future.

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1. https://www.masslbp.com/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.newdemocracy.com.au [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://jefferson-center.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://tekno.dk/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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6. https://climateassemblies.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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11. https://theconversation.com/citizens-assemblies-how-to-bring-the-wisdom-of-the-public-to-bear-on-the-climate-emergency-119117 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. https://climateassemblies.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. https://rebellion.earth/the-truth/demands/ [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. https://futuregenerations.wales/ [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. A broader literature on how to design democratic institutions for the long-term has emerged in recent years. See, for example, Iñigo González-Ricoy and Axel Gosseries (2017); Boston (2016); Smith (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)