



Conversations
That
Matter



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Referendums and initiatives are strange instruments in a democracy. They present us opportunities for the public to make a decision on a matter of great importance. In some cases they are fundamental to our system of governments. Other times they are so red hot the government simply doesn't want to own the issue.

In each case, you as the voter are asked to make a decision, one that will change laws. So how then do you make an informed decision? Where do you get information that is detailed yet comprehensible? Who can you trust?

Take electoral reform in BC for example, in 2018 it was a mess. The authorship of the options was poorly crafted and it was never appropriately explained and the whole thing was done in a rush. Then the campaigns of interested parties began. The never in a million years side exploited the poor authorship of the question and instilled distrust in the entire process. The level of discourse only went down and the actual merits of electoral reform disappeared as

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opposing sides went tooth and nail. The losers in this titanic battle were voters who were deprived of a balanced and thoughtful exchange of the facts or the merits of the issue.

So what if we could establish a method of examining the facts in a thoughtful and deliberative way? What would that look like? Well, enter deliberative democracy, a communication model that would mirror the process of weighing the facts the way a jury does in a court of law.

Now, it is possible in small groups and it could potentially serve as a guideline for future referendums. We invited John Gastil of Penn State University to join us for a conversation that matters about the way that we could go about creating a structure and process that will allow voters to make informed decisions on referendum questions.

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- Welcome, we're here to talk about deliberative democracy. Before we get to what that is, how do you describe the state of democracy right now in the United States and to a certain extent here in Canada?

- Not so good, in a nutshell.

- Why isn't it so good?

- Well, a few years ago I wrote that there are two basic problems in American politics, one is that people don't feel that the government represents their best interests and the second problem is that they are correct.

- Ah, okay.

- It has only gotten worse since then. And the problem has to do with the nature of the democratic process. It's not that democracy is a bad idea, but democracy has always been a work in progress. And I think we're running into problems, some related to the internet, some just related to cultural change. Problems that democracy isn't quite sure how to handle and so we need to look for ways to make democratic systems better because potentially democracies can undo themselves.

- Well, didn't Socrates foresee this when he said, when you move into truly liberal societies you start to look at the freedoms of expression and ways of life and you start to question, well how is this sustainable? Is it the fact that sometimes we lose sight of the principles that allowed us to develop a democratic environment to begin with?

- Absolutely. Think of it this way, what Socrates was talking about was the possibility that

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maybe we shouldn't let the public govern itself. Maybe we should trust our elders, our esteemed leaders. Of course, the problem quickly became, oh, well who chooses those anyway? And who would they be accountable to? And the answer would be no one. So you wind up looking for ways to improve the public's judgment and one of the great ironies of the last century is as worried as we are about hyper partisanship, people becoming attached to political parties and ideologies, it appears that one of the great remedies for democracy's problems, public education, might be the cause of that.

- How so?

- Well, the more educated you become the more amenable you are to sort of highly abstract ideas and the parties that represent those. So an educated public in some ways can be a more partisan public. And partisanship isn't necessarily bad, hyper partisanship was invented to say, okay, maybe you've gone a little too far. You're a little too obsessed with your tribe and you forgot about the ideas and the debates that might give way to different philosophies.

- Back in the fall U.S. Consolute suggest to me that I have two guest sitting here right where you are, one representing the republican party and the other, the democrats, and giving some kind of an explanation about the socioeconomic forces that were at play leading up to the midterm elections. Two highly intelligent, wonderful people who, by the end of the conversation both agreed the problems is we can't talk to one another. There's so much anger at each other, we can't even talk to one another. That was stunning to me. And that really is where we're at, isn't it?

- Well, there's good research that shows that the polarization we're seeing may be more emotional or affective than ideological. That is, democrats and republicans as average voters aren't that different compared to how they were 30, 40 years ago, but they do to a much greater degree hate each other.

- Gotta get you to hang on for a second while we take a quick commercial break. We'll be right back.

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- You know George Lakoff at UC Berkeley, and he talks about the fact that we've now been able to understand and sort of turn on its head some of the ideas that Aristotle put forward saying, if only we can get emotion out of the way logic will rule the day. Well we've now learned that you can't get that emotion out of the way, you have to start there. And is that part of what we have to understand if we want to move towards a different kind of dialogue?

- Yes and no. Emotion's always gonna have a place, it's a big part of who we are. But when I

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think about emotion in politics and its positive role there's two things it does. One is it makes us care, right. Deliberation itself requires a level of interest and engagement, concern, empathy. And it promotes some of those emotions. The other role for emotion is really to sort of get people to care. So if I want to give you an argument about the nature of poverty and how you can become locked into a community that's gonna have lower levels of economic achievement. I probably shouldn't start with that kind of language. I can start with maybe a story, get your empathy fired up. And in deliberative processes often emotion not only gets you there but it also gets you to listen. Then what follows should be an argument.

- Okay, so is deliberative democracy really a communication model?

- Absolutely, it's a way of communicating both at the small group level and as a society as a whole.

- Okay, so you talk about the fact that the jury system is an ideal small group model. And I was reading this and I was thinking, okay, within the confines of the law somebody has set up the terms on which we are adjudicating the merits of what we've heard. I go, yeah okay, I can see that, because for one, you have to take time to hear the evidence. You have to think your way through it, how does it fit with what you understand? And then you make a ruling. Where I have a little bit of trouble is saying, well how do I take that outside of that realm that has definite boundaries and apply it to the political process?

- I think that's a fair question. That is, the jury was designed to be a deliberative body within a judicial system. What about within a political system, right? Like you said, there's no predefined case. You're not asked, guilty or not guilty. Well the funny thing is, in politics sometimes that is the very nature of the question put to voters. When we have a referendum for example, voters are simply asked, guilty or not guilty? Yes or no, up or down? And in that sense there's an analogy, right, they need to understand both sides, hear the case for both sides. They don't need to think through the full infinite range of possibilities, they're just gonna be asked, up or down? And what's remarkable is when you move from the small group of a jury where you have all this infrastructure, right, you have a judge, you have a courtroom, you have rules of evidence and so on, you now move into the political realm and it's like we forgot all of it.

- None of that.

- Hey everybody, here's a ballot.

- And a free for all discussion that goes before it.

- Well, if there is a discussion, frankly. I mean, really what you're gonna get is some advertising and some incredibly technical language written by the government. And that's not because the government is careless, it's because usually government officials have to give

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priority to neutrality. And so they write and describe things in a technical language, you can't really be accused of partisanship but it can be accused of being impenetrable. In the United States when governments describe a typical initiative or referendum the reading level we found is about first year law school. That's what it takes to understand what they've just written.

- To understand?

- Yeah.

- Wow. Now, and we're talking about the initiative process primarily. So I come forward and I wanna put forward an initiative and we've just done that in British Columbia, we put forward an initiative in essence about electoral reform. Well, the dialogue was muddled and messed up and driven by emotion. So do you say that we need to put rules around that so that it will be easier to know where the boundaries are and make it easier for those of us who have to vote on that initiative to fully understand what the implications of it are?

- Yes and the rules aren't so much about restricting what people say so much as creating another venue for more deliberative reflective information to get to voters. So the process I study in Oregon, the electoral reform they have there, is meant to create a one page summary of the issue written by your fellow citizens who have had a chance to study the issue that you can then quickly read and get a sense for what's really at stake here. That doesn't do away with anything else happening in that election but it puts right in front of voters, in the voter guide sent to every household, some information that you might find credible and you certainly will find useful.

- How do you get people to listen or to pay attention to that though, especially when you got all the other emotional appeals on either side of the issue or maybe multiple sides of the issue at play?

- Well, in the United States you can break down the public, say into three groups. On the one hand you have the hyper partisans, right, and if they party tells them how to vote that's how they're gonna vote. There's not much you can do there. The second group, and this is a plurality of the US public are people who don't identify with either party. It's running at about 40% right now.

- 40%, so they become the major block. The people who will move--

- In a sense.

- Depending on the issue.

- That includes people who lean to the left or lean to the right but on first blush say, I don't

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identify with either party. The third group are people who are just really removed from politics, they're very alienated. It's not just that they don't identify with parties, they don't even vote.

- No participation at all.

- Yeah, that group is very hard to reach but that second group is very reachable and campaigns spend probably more time on mobilizing their base than persuading that middle group and they almost avoid that third group. Only someone who's a real outsider would care about that group 'cause they need entirely new voters. But that middle group often does want information and they are skeptical of advertising and party pronouncements and so on so they're a perfect target group. But you might be surprised how often neither of the political parties takes a strong stance on ballot measures for all kinds of reasons. So a voter not only doesn't have their party cue but then they're looking for information they can trust and so it can be a challenge both for the independent voters and even for the partisans sometimes.

- This is our second break, we'll be back in a moment.

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- You know, I'm just thinking about the electoral reform referendum that we had here in British Columbia and some of the discussions that I had with people who, pretty well informed, and even still emotion was a driving component for them. And part of it was, I don't trust the authors of this. And so you talk about, okay, you get, and authorship becomes so important because it influences the way that it is perceived.

- Well wasn't that part of the point of the British Columbia citizens assembling. So this is the third time this questions of first-past-the-post has been on the ballot in the last 15 years.

- 15 years.

- But that first time there were surveys that showed that a lot of voters in British Columbia who voted for the BC single transferable vote weren't sure what it meant but they understood where it came from and they trusted that.

- And they trusted the process, that's right. Because it was designed by Gordon Gibson who went through the whole process and designed a framework for it and then Jack Blaney moved forward. And I understand Jack Blaney was so non partisan that even today you wouldn't know what side of the issue he was on. And so the process seemed to be outside of the political process. And I think that you're absolutely right, that was an example and it got very close to approval.

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- Half, almost 59% as I recall, but 60% was the threshold. But it passed in almost every writing, which was the other standard, right? So it's a shame in a way, I kind of wish the provincial legislature had said, you know what, that's good enough for us. So it didn't pass in the vote but that doesn't mean we can't enact the law. I'll bet they coulda done that and maybe they didn't want to.

- Well, because partisan politics then start to come into it because you've now taken it out of that contained environment where you're looking at it from, as you point out, almost a jury perspective. Here's the evidence, here's the credibility. Going back to Aristotle, he talks about what is the credibility of the authorship? And in that case it played a very important role. So how long should that process take? If the government is coming forward with an initiative or somebody's bringing it forward how long should that process of setting up the framework and defining the terms take?

- Hard to say. What I would say is, let's think of three stages. Let's think of the authorship of the idea. So where is it coming from. I think you and I can agree that that really matters.

- Very much so.

- Voters want to know that the lay public, every day citizens, had a real hand in shaping that. They don't want to feel like a political party owns it. So if you solve that, with something like a citizens assembly you're off to a good start. Second, what exactly is on the bow and how is it described? This last referendum you had I'm embarrassed to say when I looked at the wording I had to look up, what was it, rural, urban, district, that third option, I had never heard that.

- Neither had anybody else.

- I've been in political science since 1985. Well, apparently nobody else, yeah, so, fail, fail right off the bait because if I'm a voter and I see that, even if I want to remove first-past-the-post I'm worried that the alternative includes something I don't even recognize let alone understand. So step two, let's get the wording right. Let's put a question to the voters that is the right questions. And if it's often the case that the right question for voters is the broad policy direction, not the details.

- Rather than the specifics.

- Exactly, right, so if voters are given a choice about whether they want proportionality in their electoral system, that is, should the election result be district by district or should we make sure that the proportion of votes won by each party is close to their share. If that was a whole question I wonder what the result would've been. And then leave the details for the legislature, and maybe the voters will fret over the details but they've set the broad principle.

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And then third, the quality of the deliberation from that point forward. So once you've got a good authorship, a straight forward question or charge to the voters then pay some attention to what kind of deliberation will happen. You can't control the whole political discussion but you can inject high quality information in a way that voters will trust.

- Third and final break, we'll be right back.

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- You are still gonna have that incredible discourse that these days has become incredibly toxic. If you don't agree with me then you are an idiot. There's a guy here, James Hogan, in British Columbia who wrote a book called I'm Right and You're an Idiot 'cause he recognizes the level of discourse that we have has become so toxic. You mentioned earlier the role of the internet in fueling that, is that really the source that we've given voice to people who can now find an audience?

- It is part of it. And it's not just given voice to people, we're producing so much discourse out of removed from who we are personally. Study after study shows that if my identity on the internet is known, every day person, I will think differently about what I post. That's not to say that people don't with a clear identification on Facebook say things that offend other people but they think about about it. And it changes friendships and sometimes people make a mistake and then think, you know what, I'm not gonna post that kind of thing here. But most of the internet is a free for all and so all kinds of this stuff is getting out there and you get more attention the more buzz worthy your comment is than if you say something like, you know, you have a fine point there, I'll have to reflect on that. That is not getting retweeted, that is not getting upvoted on Reddit.

- It is not even being appreciated for the fact that that's what you want to have in a sane respectful dialogue.

- Now a whole line of research I'm starting is on structuring the incentives for online interaction. So we know that when you get in an Uber you tend to behave yourself and so does the driver because you're gonna rate each other. When you stay at an Airbnb you think about what you're doing because you wanna stay at another Airbnb and so on. These simple incentives for how you rate each other can affect each other and imagine if we had a civic engagement system connected to public consultation in which you got some rewards of different kinds for how you interacted. That is, you might be put into a discussion and other people in the discussion would rate, did you make an original contribution, that is, did you step forward? That's good, we need that, right? We're you respectful to people who disagreed with you? And just those two things, right, did you say something, and were you a jerk? If there are real incentives there and we can think of all kinds of incentives, it might very

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quickly change behavior. Because that's what it comes down to.

- Well, doesn't that happen in normal discourse when you are face to face with somebody? You look them in the eye and you--

- If you have a reputation, right. And if it's someone you're looking in the eye who you're never gonna see again you might still care about your reputation. And jurors tend to be very respectful. But imagine now there's a long term reputation. You're in a community.

- Yes.

- Well that's why people say things like, I'm not crazy about that restaurant but, I'm not gonna say much about it.

- Or that was my experience, it might've been a bad day or whatever.

- Right, you qualify it 'cause you don't want to alienate someone who you're gonna see everyday. Well, if we can simulate conditions like that on the internet, there is a reputation attached to your account. It doesn't really suppress your ability to express yourself. In fact, expressing yourself is one of the things you're rated for doing.

- Right.

- But let me pull it back again to incentives. There's a fascinating line of research called super forecasting. And what it's about is the ability of people to accurately predict what's coming in the future, or at least as accurately as they can given what we know. And one of the most powerful studies they had where you gave a huge prize, big prize, big money, that even a big think tank would care about, even ideological think tanks who participate are more thoughtful about what's going to happen. Say in Israel, Palestine, you might have a political commitment but you want that prize. So you make a point of reading and making a more accurate prediction. So the predictions were aligning across ideological lines toward what was actually a more plausible prediction. Again, it's about incentives, right.

- Okay, but who creates that incentive?

- Well, that's a fair question. The U.S. Department of Defense at one point created a prediction market, is what this is called, for terrorist incidents and it completely backfired. Because the government had asked people, right, to speculate about what's gonna be attacked next? And it freaked people out.

- So, to wrap up, where do you go yourself to find information that is gonna give you a balanced perspective? Because I don't know that you can get it from one source anymore.

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- What I wind up turning to is kind of a loose social network of people. You know, in the US, I don't know if you do it here in Canada, but some people have little voting parties where you sit down with a sample ballot and you actually walk through it. And you've got someone who's a teacher, and they say, well you know, this bond on the school actually was badly written this year, we should vote it down and get a better one next year. And they can give you good reasons because they actually know something about it. And then somebody else knows the person running for attorney general and so on. So it can be really helpful just to get a few people together.

- So pull together your own little jury, go through the facts, and then determine which side you're going to be on.

- And you're pulling on the opinions of other people and organizations you trust and so on and you can make it kind of a social affair but that's pretty exceptional.

- But if we did that, if we looked at it from the initiative perspective you could also then graduate that up to the general election as well.

- Absolutely. We do it for candidates as well as issue. And you really learn things, you'd be surprised how if you get 12 people together how much information there is in that room about candidates you honestly can't tell from each other, especially in the US in a party primary, that's where we worry the most, because there's no party signal. They're all from the same one.

- Fascinating concept, thank you very much for coming in and sharing this.

- A real pleasure, thank you.

- Thank you.