

Review

James S Fishkin (21st June 2018) *Democracy When the People are Thinking: Revitalising our Politics through Public Deliberation*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, Hardback, 272 pages, ISBN 9780198820291, £22.99

The UK has been subjected to years of political uncertainty and turmoil as a consequence of the majority public decision to leave the European Union in the 2016 Referendum. ‘Brexit’ is described by politicians as ‘the will of the peopleⁱ.’ It would, politicians argue, undermine democracy not to deliver this decision. Do we really know the will of the people, however, when the public is subject to hugely expensive campaigns of persuasion which promote false information and are funded by individuals who have an interest in the outcome of the vote; when they are denied access to robustly-researched, accurate information; and when a fully representative public have not properly deliberated the reasons for and against the competing alternatives in conditions which ensure everyone’s views can be meaningfully expressed and equally counted?

A number of commentators, drawing on Gramsci, have highlighted this era as an *interregnum* when the old is dying - in the sense that capitalism supported by neoliberal democracy is proving unsustainable (not least for all forms of life on the planet) - but the new is yet to be bornⁱⁱ. Can we then create the social conditions for a new form of democracy which more accurately represents the will, and indeed the interests of, the people?

In this book, James Fishkin aims to offer a model of democracy which more effectively fulfils its core component principles: political equality, (mass) participation, deliberation, and avoiding the tyranny of the majority. He critiques the current system of competitive democracy and deliberation by an elected elite, on the basis that this system creates incentives for politicians to engage in manipulation, and creates the conditions for political behaviour based on party loyalty rather than public interest.

Arguing that participatory democracy has problems of scale - in that all people cannot be expected to be fully-versed in all the arguments about a wide range of issues and be sure that their voices are heard - Fishkin makes the case for deliberative democracy. Borrowing from the ancient Greeks, this is an Athenian model which relied on a random sample of the population, regularly rotated, deliberating on issues, with checks and balances in place to avoid 'irresponsible demagogues' turning assemblies to their will. The findings of this group of citizens would shape social policy and offer guidance to the wider voting public.

Using practical examples from developed and developing countries, Fishkin critically considers how key elements of deliberative democracy have worked in practice. In particular, he considers whether the sample of the population is representative (i.e. demographically, attitudinally and in size); and whether the conditions in which an issue was considered in depth were good (i.e. were people given the opportunity to engage policy arguments for and against proposals for action in an evidence-based manner?; did participants gain knowledge?; did participant opinions change?; were distortions in the dialogue avoided - such as some people having more voice than others?; were there considered reasons for judgement after deliberation?). Using data from these practice examples, he sets out to address criticisms of the approach, such as the challenge that inequalities in wider society would influence deliberation amongst the representative sample; that people might adopt polarised positions; that people would be influenced by social comparison, by peer influence, a wish to fit in; that citizens lack competence; that there is a gap between mini-publics and wider society; and that there may be no consensus. Fishkin's examples - from as far afield as California, Mongolia, Europe and Uganda, where deliberative democratic approaches have been specifically implemented - offer substantive evidence that these concerns have not necessarily been played out in practice.

He points out that the current system is very imperfect and 'if we believe in democracy why not believe in a democracy of considered judgements rather than a democracy of mere impressions, of soundbites and headlines?' (P148).

Fishkin discusses the influential theories of John Rawls and Jurgen Habermas. He argues that Rawls' Theory of Justice pre-empts debate by not envisaging wider deliberation by the public beyond his hypothetical original position which, Fishkin maintains, relies on a hypothetical scenario located in existing structures of deliberation. Habermas, in contrast, places a central importance on public deliberation, and critiques Rawls for not offering the public any scope for debating and influencing societal structures once his hypothetical 'veil of ignorance' is lifted. However, Fishkin argues, Habermas is frustratingly vague on the institutional structures that might create the conditions for public deliberation to take place.

Fishkin's book is worthwhile in that it is trying to answer this question of how we might begin to create the conditions for a different, more democratic, kind of democracy. In the context of a widespread disillusionment with (what has become neo-) liberal democracy's ability to adequately serve public interests in the context of burgeoning social inequality, books like this which move beyond theoretical critique to research practical models aiming to enhance democracy are useful.

Both Fishkin and, incidentally, Tina Nabatchi et al's 2012 book *Democracy in Motion: Evaluating the Practice and Impact of Deliberative Civic Engagement* illustrate a proliferation of deliberative civic engagement strategies across the world as politicians, policy makers and service providers seek to involve publics in, and gain legitimacy for, decision making.

Fishkin's book does acknowledge that criticisms of deliberative democracy need to be taken seriously, and addressed, and that more research on what works is needed. He also provides evidence, however, of a groundswell of public interest across the world in debating and influencing the issues that concern them. In this era of uncertainty, when cynicism with current structures of democracy could leave publics persuaded by the soundbite analysis and socially divisive solutions offered by powerful leaders serving only their own interests, it would seem important that we have some positive models of democracy to offer. Fishkin's book could be criticised for focusing on formal contexts where the public is invited to deliberate – rather than publics claiming spaces

of their own to deliberate on issues of concern. However, Kathleen Blee's (2012) three-year study assessing grassroots activism in Pittsburgh as a democratising force in US society illustrates that while 'activism can broaden people's sense of political engagement[...] activist groups can become mired in dysfunctional and undemocratic patterns that their members may dislike but don't know how to change.' She highlights that, while social movements have an important role in democratic renewal, they can be subject to the same internal tendency to become oligarchical over time.

Researching the models of deliberative democracy that most effectively create the conditions for power sharing and representative public influence is, then, important work. When there are growing representative samples of the public that have had a positive experience of deliberative democracy, of being heard and making a difference to social policy through collective endeavour, this could begin to restore faith in the project of democracy and, importantly, challenge the socially divisive ideas that support the current neoliberal hegemony.

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ⁱ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/election-2017-40140983/may-delivering-on-will-of-the-people>

ⁱⁱ E.g. [Nancy Fraser](#) with [Bhaskar Sunkara](#) (2019) *The Old Is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born: From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond*, Verso Pamphlet

Wolfgang Streek (2016) *How will Capitalism End: Essays on a Failed System*, Verso

References

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