The Sociology of Political Representation and Deliberation

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Abstract

The language of democracy and citizenship is infused with a complicated idea: political representation. While political theorists have explored what representation and deliberation should be like, most research on how political discussion actually happens fails directly to address these theoretical standards. This article shows the importance of representation and deliberation to our contemporary ideas about democracy and citizenship. It shows that there is no clear line between deliberation and everyday conversation. Instead, everyday talk constitutes the foundation on top of which citizens build ideas about politics. These, in turn, are the bedrock of democratic representation.

The language of democracy and citizenship is infused with a complicated idea: political representation. If the people (the demos in democracy) are to govern, the people's views must be represented in government. But 'representation' is not a simple concept; it can mean a lot of different things. In this paper, we highlight two main types of representation – literal and creative – and we discuss ways in which they are enacted in American democracy.

At its base, as the democratic theorist Hanna Pitkin (Pitkin 1967, 3) notes, the linguistic roots of 'representation' in Old French suggest 'the literal bringing into presence of something previously absent'. To represent, in this sense, means to take something from one place and put it somewhere else – quite literally, to present it once again. The political theorist Davide Panagia encourages us to question this assumption, calling it a 'poetics of substitution' (Panagia 2006, 121) in which the representative serves as a convenient substitute for the one(s) being represented.

Pitkin’s groundbreaking book, though, reminds us that in 20th century democracy, we do not always think of political representation in quite that way. ‘Making present again’ the public’s views can mean a lot of different things. Something can be ‘made present’ in a symbolic, descriptive, or action-oriented way. We understand representation as a process in which the diffuse ideas, beliefs, and preferences of citizens are distilled, refined, and combined into government policies. Citizens’ preferences can be
literally ‘made present’ through local referenda in which each voter can give a specific ‘yea’ or ‘nay’ decision on a policy initiative. Or they can be creatively ‘made present’ through elected officials in formal legislative action in which officials are entrusted with deciding how best to serve their constituents. Both of these – and all other modes of representation – involve systematically distorting the views of the represented, if only by concentrating or distilling them to a manageable level.

Representation is about ‘speaking for’ as well as about ‘re-presenting’: a distinction explored by cultural critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) in her discussion of Karl Marx’s study of the French Revolution (Marx 1885 [1927]). Indeed, in other fields, we think about representation as a thoroughly creative task. For example, when we discuss whether a particular work of art or a character in a novel represents a concept, an idea, or a historical figure, we do not imagine it being literally made present. Instead, we imagine a creative author or artist whose work intends to cause its audience to think about what is being represented – a different, albeit related, issue (Baudelaire 1859; Frye 1957).

Unfortunately, most studies of democracy and citizenship fail to pay attention to the difference between these two ideas of representation and what each would mean to diagnosing our collective democratic health. In this article, we examine democratic theory for keys to what representation ought to be like, and we introduce the concept of the ‘democratic ladder’ to illustrate it. We then consider one of the most popular prescriptions offered for improving representation: the idea of political deliberation. We examine both the ‘ought’ and the ‘is’ of these concepts: first, the ways democratic theory wants them to work, then the extent to which those ideals are implemented ‘on the ground’. We conclude with ideas for improving both the study and the practice of democratic citizenship.

**The democratic ladder**

America’s founding fathers, suspicious of the authority that had been vested in the king they had just overthrown, were careful to place a high priority on the value of private life. John Adams, for example, viewed his founding work as a necessary evil to allow future generations to pursue private interests:

I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history, naval architecture, navigation, commerce, and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain (Adams 1780).

The French observer Alexis de Tocqueville observed the same thing – the importance of private, communal life to American democracy – but also pointed out an apparent paradox: this nation of unprecedented privacy
was also a ‘nation of joiners’ (Tocqueville 1966). The founders were, as sociologist Michael Schudson has pointed out, ‘embedded in a society that trusted in the local and the particular, a social world in which knowledge worth having came from experience and acquaintance rather than from information and reasoning’ (Schudson 1998, 82).

Because of this social grounding, the idea of representation the founders worked with was something like that presented in Figure 1. Citizens – essentially private and local in character – formed ideas and preferences organically, out of their own lives. These ideas and preferences were to climb what we term the ‘democratic ladder’ – the mechanism by which they ascend from private desires to public policies.

Several properties of these private desires are worth noting. First, they are essentially private and automatic; people have preferences based on who they are, not necessarily what they believe. Second, the way these preferences are combined to make public policy is fairly simple; with certain limits at the margins, the preferences of the majority of a geographically-defined community are what should be represented (Guinier 1994; Walzer 1983). Third, this community of geographically bounded citizens is assumed to be relatively stable over time as well as space; simple preferences, simply aggregated, can be represented in an orderly fashion with periodic elections (Perrin et al. 2006).

By the early 20th century, each of these assumptions had grown problematic. Tocqueville’s personal, organic preferences seemed naïve, and they were replaced by assumptions that politics was driven by self-interest, class division, and party machines. The dignified stability of aggregated private opinions became, first, a raucous, public kind of politics that was, at the same time, engaging and inspiring to citizens and remarkably corrupt,
riddled with patronage, personalist politics, and urban machines (Schudson 1998). As the century turned, the emerging sense of scientific progress and rational efficiency made the corruption seem more important than the inspiration.

As a corrective to this situation, the Progressive movement sought to bring modern, systematic, objective techniques to the field of politics. Among the innovations was the introduction of the so-called Australian Ballot: a secret ballot, printed by the government and filled out by each voter in enforced isolation (Fredman 1968; Perrin 2006, 27; Schudson 1998, 168–173; Valelly 1999). This reform, in combination with the introduction of civil service regulations and other bureaucratic steps, ushered in a new political era that was demonstrably fairer and less corrupt than the prior had been.

The Progressive reforms were also a key example of the ‘unanticipated consequences of purposive action’ (Merton 1936), or what Perrin and Lee refer to as the ‘paradox of reform’ (Perrin and Lee 2007; see also Cherkaoui 2007). By moving elections inside, insulating the act of voting from friends, family, and neighbors and removing it from its social environment, the reforms also dramatically reduced voter turnout largely because they ‘made voting much less of a collective enterprise, turning it into a solitary rite’ (Valelly 1999).

To modern ears, of course, this all seems like ancient history. Of course, the secret ballot is more democratic than public voting. Of course, voter registration is a reasonable mode of avoiding voter fraud. Of course, an informed voter should follow the issues, the race, and the polls and cast a reasoned, educated vote in isolation, although through a ritual of self-expression that political scientist Danielle S. Allen credits with helping us periodically re-imagine ourselves as part of a polity (Allen 2004, 16–17). These things seem obvious to us because the new technical process of voting conjured up other technical processes for thinking of public opinion – most prominent among them the public opinion poll (Igo 2007) – which, in turn, helped produce the kind of citizen we now take for granted in the USA. But what now seems ‘of course’ is the product of the political ideas that have gone before; in the rest of the article, we take up the question of how these ‘of course’ ideas help and hinder democratic citizenship and what might be done about it.

**Deliberation and the modern citizen**

The way we conceive of good citizenship is a product of these historical and technical developments. Citizens are relatively unlikely to vote, particularly in elections for local and state officials (Patterson 2002). Indeed, citizens often think they need to justify having strong views about right and wrong by couching these ideas in terms of their own self-interest or that of their children or local community (Eliasoph 1998). Citizens learn
about political life from public policy, and they use a variety of sources – news media, conversations with friends and family, religious and civic influences, and more – to evaluate important political issues and determine their views and preferences about them. In short, the modern citizen works in an environment more like the ladder in Figure 2 than that in Figure 1 (Perrin 2006). Two important things make this conception more subtle and more accurate than Figure 1. First, the arrows go both directions: citizens’ preferences influence public policy (see, e.g., Erikson et al. 2002), but public policies also influence citizens’ ideas of politics (Valelly 1993). Second, the ladder is made up of institutions that serve both to represent each end of the ladder to the other and to distort that representation. We represent these as a cloud because the list is constantly changing and hard to pin down.

What can be done to improve America’s civic health? The most popular set of proposals has to do with improving deliberation in one way or another. The idea, in a nutshell: a citizenry that discusses issues in public will be better than a citizenry that does not. Better in what way, and discussing how, are open questions. In his groundbreaking work on political deliberation, German social theorist Jürgen Habermas argues that an ideal public sphere is one in which deliberation is open to all parties and in which all parties argue rationally (Habermas 1962, 1988). That is, they commit to respecting opponents and both arguing and judging argument based on reasonable criteria. The implication is that if citizens adhere to these rules, the group’s final decision will be the overall best one.

There are numerous good critiques of this vision of deliberation as an ideal of society-wide political talk. Feminist thinkers like Nancy Fraser, Seyla Benhabib, and Iris Marion Young have pointed out that it privileges

Figure 2. The democratic ladder, updated.
the ‘disembodied voice’ of pure rationality over feeling, experience, and emotion, which may be more natural ways of thinking for women and other groups (Benhabib 1992; Fraser 1989; Young 2000). Conflict theorists, similarly, argue that deliberation’s presumption of a commonly supported outcome is often neither possible nor desirable (see, e.g., Allen 2004). Indeed, some see it as positively pernicious (Tucker 2007). Similarly, Michael Schudson has pointed out that the concept of ‘conversation’, which many American thinkers have connected with deliberation, avoids what many view as the most important element of honest politics: frank conflict between people who disagree (Schudson 1997). Perhaps most important, though, is the question of the process vs. the outcome of deliberation: is serious political talk a good citizenship practice in itself, or is it only good if the outcome is better or less controversial? We do not offer answers to these questions; rather, we note that there is ongoing debate over what political deliberation ought to look like:

1. Rational vs. emotional
2. Outcome-driven vs. process-driven
3. Inclusive vs. exclusive
4. Direct vs. mediated (Perrin 2006)

Deliberation in the real world

Now that we have the ‘ought’ of deliberation (along with its critiques), what about the ‘is’? In a nutshell, Habermas’s model is not and, in fact, cannot be satisfactorily enacted in large-scale modern democracies for the simple reason that so many people cannot be gathered in one room. Recognizing this, research on real-world deliberation goes in four strands. In the first strand, scholars describe the challenges to enacting formal deliberation and the development of the American system of representative democracy with a bias toward literal representation in the form of strong public opinion. In the second strand, researchers explore creative representation by describing ways that Americans do discuss politics, if not in the Habermas’ ideal model, in a way that is more informal but meets many conditions to be considered deliberative. Delli Carpini et al. (2004) sum up this strand by commenting that, ‘talking about public issues, though perhaps not meeting the expectations of democratic theory, is fairly widespread among the American public, rivaling other forms of civic and political engagement in frequency (p. 324).’

In the third strand, scholars investigate the group processes of deliberation, looking at juries and experimental groups to determine both the potential and the challenges to the process of talking things out in a group. Fourth, others explore the actual result of deliberation, both for its participants and for the larger society, giving a ‘reality check’ for our expectations of creative representation through deliberation. Habermas (1989 [1962])
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suggested that an active public sphere would represent a power to rival that of the government; research on deliberative groups shows what effect, if any, these groups have.

The first challenge to formal deliberative efforts is simply getting them off the ground. As the Founders envisioned it, the people would elect representatives who would then deliberate and decide important issues for them, but deliberative democrats critique this type of representation, calling for more direct forms of government (Fishkin 1995; Gastil and Keith 2005). The downside, however, is that without this elite deliberation, there is often no effective deliberation of public issues. This is concerning because people work out opinions differently in a group than on their own, actually forming, changing, or strengthening opinions through the process of talking about them (Fishkin 1995; Perrin 2006). As the democratic ladder has failed to satisfy, Americans have changed their system to allow for more literal and, consequently, less creative representation.

Despite this downturn in creative representation, however, many note that there is increasing interest and effort put into bringing about formal deliberation through community-based citizen forums and national deliberative polls (Fishkin 1995; Fung and Wright 2001; Gastil and Keith 2005; Gastil and Weiser 2006). Most recently, news analysts pointed at a presidential primary debate in which citizens submitted questions through the video-sharing website YouTube as a possible innovation in public debate.

One main issue with formal deliberations has been that they are unlikely to represent the population accurately. Most deliberative efforts result in 20–30 people in face-to-face interaction that are found through self-selection or recruitment. Self-selection is easiest but tends to result in homogenous groups, which are not ideal for deliberation and can result in groups skewed toward the upper range of education and socioeconomic status. Diversity is better for fruitful discussion because more ideas are heard, but people have to be open-minded; homogenous groups privilege more intimate, non-political talk. Random selection is hard because of practical barriers (time, money) to participation for many and motivation, and with all this, one still can’t guarantee that it is representative (Ryfe 2005). The deliberative poll, a model created and implemented by the scholar James Fishkin, seeks to bring together diverse people representative of the population to discuss issue over 3 days. Observers note, however, the considerable money and effort involved in bringing about this diversity (Ryfe 2005).

As noted previously, there are also cultural barriers to public deliberation. Eliasoph (1998) showed that people actually avoid deliberation in public through an informal etiquette that proscribes being too ‘political’. This has been associated with people’s lack of political knowledge, motivating them to stay quiet during public discussions (Koch 1994). Eliasoph (1998) goes slightly further in saying that the reason many lack political knowledge is that they are not motivated to gain it. In contrast, though, Katherine
Cramer Walsh’s study of informal political conversation shows that, given a comfortable environment, citizens can build political thought on the seemingly trivial base of everyday conversation (Walsh 2004).

Ryfe (2005) agrees, saying that people in general are ‘cognitive misers’; presented with a wealth of information each day, we are forced to filter what we will and will not pay attention to. Because people perceive little effective use of political knowledge, it is rational for most to ignore this information in favor of other, more immediate concerns (Fishkin 1995; Ryfe 2005). Another finding suggests that even when people may be motivated to discuss politics; it is more for social reasons than expressly to deliberate ideas (Conover et al. 2002). That is, people may simply not feel motivated to deliberate for its own sake, a factor not anticipated by Habermas (Mendelberg 2002). Furthermore, in contemporary societies, the public sphere is heavily mediated; most people learn and discuss about their political worlds through the mass media, which themselves are a crucial element in setting the agenda and framing the terms of discussion (Clayman 2004; Perrin and Vaisey 2006; Schudson 2002).

There are, then, both practical and cultural challenges to enacting the ideal of deliberation. Literal representation, in which each citizen is asked her or his opinion on an issue and this directly determines public policy, is in many ways easiest, but it fails to satisfy. The second strand of deliberation research shows many ways that Americans are engaged in active, creative discussion of politics. The 2004 General Social Survey reported that 16% of US adults said they discussed politics with friends, family, or coworkers ‘often’, and 37% said they do ‘sometimes’ (GSS 2007). Keeter et al. (2002) reported that that 60% of Americans said they talk ‘very often’ about ‘current events or things you have heard on the news with your family and friends’, and another 32% ‘said they discuss these sometimes’.

In another study, Conover et al. (2002) distinguished between political discussions in public settings (places that are open to all members of society, such as bars or churches) and those that take place in private settings (places to which individuals can control access, such as their homes). Their results show more political discussion than found in other surveys, with 18.4% of respondents reporting a high rate of discussion in both public and private settings and nearly half (49.8%) saying they have many political conversations in private but not in public. One third (30.4%) of those surveyed reported a low level of public and private conversations, and almost none (1.4%) said they discuss politics often in public but rarely in private.

This suggests that there is both a healthy level of political discussion going on in the USA, and that private discussions can be seen as a ‘primer’ to public discussions (Conover et al. 2002). Furthermore, the authors argue that, ‘While access to formal deliberation is often controlled politically, entry into informal political discussions is determined socially by the availability of discussion partners, making true equality of opportunity impossible for
most of the everyday discussions of citizens’ (Conover et al. 2002, 41). Literal representation through referenda on policy issues fail to satisfy because they do not account for this creative element of discussion.

These authors and others have investigated how ‘deliberative’ informal political discussions are. That is, to what degree do they meet formal requirements for deliberation? One requirement is that discussions be open to alternative viewpoints. Conover et al. (2002) reported that a large majority of Americans (78%) had discussions in which they encountered political disagreement. Furthermore, Price et al. (2002) found that encountering disagreement contributes to one’s ability to understand others’ perspectives. Political scientists have noted as well that most Americans have access to people they disagree with through their social networks – that is, if they were seeking to discuss an issue with someone who disagreed, they could find such a person (Huckfeldt et al. 2004). Respondents in the Price, Cappella, and Nir study were able to find reasons that others would disagree with them. In a third study, presidential campaigns were found to increase the quality of deliberation by motivating citizens to consider public issues and develop their opinions, often in discussion with others (Huckfeldt et al. 2000).

For another requirement of deliberation – equality – results are not so positive. Even informal conversations depend on individuals’ having the capacity, motivation, and connections (people to talk with), all of which vary by socioeconomic status, education, and gender (Conover et al. 2002; Moy and Gastil 2006). Conover et al. (2002) found that disadvantaged groups (such as those who are poorer, older, and/or female) were less likely to participate in both public and private discussions, although the disparities were greater for public conversations. Others, however, find greater openness in political discussion, putting a greater emphasis on political interest and media use, regardless of age or gender (Kim et al. 1999). While in general people tend to talk to like-minded peers, Pan et al. (2006) note that they tend to push the boundaries of their immediate sphere when selecting political discussion partners, talking to more different kinds of people than in other situations. Overall, though, those who discuss politics also tend to be those who participate in other ways, all of which have been found to be unequal portions of the population (Pan et al. 2006; Verba et al. 1995).

Research from social psychology helps us to make sense of these results. An important sociological tenet is that individuals’ actions often depend on the group with whom they interact (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2002; Perrin 2005). Despite the Habermasian norm of cold rationality, deliberation is not just about sharing rational views; it is about groups working things out together and frankly coming to terms with emotional and even unconscious concerns. To allow for creativity, a number of important group processes therefore come into play. In a review article, Mendelberg (2002) summarizes relevant social psychological literature. A concern of skeptics of deliberation
is that groups may have a tendency to polarize; rather than coming together to form consensus, the majority will become more extreme and solidified in their view and the minority will become an entrenched opposition (Sunstein 2000). However, a social norm of cooperation may lead a group to consensus, as individuals forfeit self-interest for the good of the group (Noelle-Neumann 1993). Experimental research shows that face-to-face interaction encourages this compromise, and that group consensus leads to actual cooperative behavior. Even if a group ends up supporting the opinion of the majority, through discussion, they will consider the arguments of the minority so that deliberation can be seen produce better quality opinion than had it not taken place (Mendelberg 2002).

These social psychological studies show that effective deliberation rests on group processes such as norms and pressure to conform, as much as pure rationality, but that it is indeed possible to share information and work out solutions in a group. Social psychological literature confirms, then, what we have suspected: literal representation can’t be the whole of political representation; a creative element must apply as well. Citizens need to work out solutions together in an interactive, creative process. In a study more specifically focused on political talk, Perrin (2006) argues that citizens actually form their opinions through the process of interacting with others, and shows that they are capable of finding creative solutions to problems when given the opportunity of deliberating them together. In another, Druckman and Nelson (2003) show that deliberation may lessen the influence of information presented by the mass media. When groups in their experimental groups had opportunity to converse, they worked through the given frame and its influence would wane.

Studies of more formal deliberative forums have shown positive results for those who participate. Gastil (2000) found that participants in forums in Tennessee and Oregon were more likely to feel increased efficacy and community identity, be more interested and informed about politics, and could make their political conversations outside of the forums more deliberative. Similarly, in another study, citizens who participated in forums were more informed, trusted others who participated, and were more likely to agree with the final policy result (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997).

The picture we get from those who study the outcomes of deliberation is that it has the potential to produce more informed, engaged citizens, but that this doesn’t always happen in practice (Merkle 1996). Merkle (1996) reported a short-term rise in participants’ knowledge of politics and ability to understand and engage in political discussion, concluding that ‘deliberation may not change the public’s mind as much as it sharpens the debate’ (p. 20).

However, these positive outcomes are not automatic. Mendelberg and Oleske (2000) showed that they rest, for one, on a shared meaning of the situation being discussed. When participants bring with them opposite interpretations, they may essentially talk past one another, fostering
frustration rather than cooperation. Analysts following in Habermas’s footsteps often assume a deliberative discussion should rest on calm, sincere speech in its search for consensus and rationality; however, as Danielle S. Allen points out, if all citizens were calm and sincere, we would have little to disagree about to begin with (Allen 2004)! Elizabeth Markovits goes further, noting that the requirement of sincerity unacceptably writes important citizens out of the debate (Markovits 2006).

Another threat to deliberation is its potential to unsettle those who participate. When presented with alternative views, individuals run the risk of becoming confused about the issue at hand, and some deliberations can result in a sense that an issue cannot be reasonably resolved (Ryfe 2005). Finally, Moy and Gastil (2006) claim that it is not enough to simply discuss issues, participants must be reasonably informed for such discussion to be productive; otherwise, it is mere chatter. However, it is unclear where the line should be drawn – in some circumstances, mere chatter may form the background for political thinking (Eliasoph 1999; Perrin 2006).

The most negative conclusion comes from Delli Carpini et al.: ‘Put simply, countering the optimism of proponents of deliberative democracy is a strong and persistent suspicion that public deliberation is so infrequent, unrepresentative, subject to conscious manipulation and unconscious bias, and disconnected from actual decision making as to make it at best an impractical mechanism for determining the public will, and at worst misleading or dangerous’ (2004, 321). This assessment rests on the assumption that deliberation is meant to inform government policy, an assumption shared by many deliberative groups themselves (Ryfe 2002). Others, including Habermas, reject this notion, saying that deliberation is about producing citizens with increased political sophistication so that they serve as an active foil to government power.

**Directions for future theory and research**

Americans maintain a fascination with the idea of direct democracy, rooted perhaps in our growing mistrust of politicians (Hetherington 2005). Creative representation always involves a trade-off with literal representation. Merely by coming together in a group to deliberate, we must be willing to sacrifice some of our strongly held opinions in favor of compromise. It is unsurprising, then, that calls for more literal representation keep coming up. In 1992, the third-party presidential candidate and billionaire H. Ross Perot popularized the idea of the ‘electronic town meeting’ (Grosswiler 1998). Using high-tech communications and an electronic ‘vote’, citizens could bypass the inefficiency of their representatives and choose policy directly through what amounts to a series of national referenda (Kelly 1992). Again in 2007, long-shot presidential candidate Mike Gravel’s advocacy of national referenda was a centerpiece of his campaign. This hearkens back to what political scientist Frank Bryan has called ‘real
democracy’: the New England town meeting, in which the whole town, or what passes for it, assembles to decide matters of concern to the town (Bryan 2004; see also Mansbridge 1980).

This historical vision is memorialized in Norman Rockwell’s famous painting, ‘Town Meeting’ (Herbst 2004; Perrin and Jarkko 2005). In the painting, an apparently working-class man is standing at a rail in some sort of public forum. He is disheveled but determined; respectful yet confident. Hat in hand, he looks up, grasping the rail, while a cadre of more respectable-looking folk, sitting down, gaze up at him as he prepares to make a point. The speaker’s mouth, along with those of everyone else portrayed in the painting, is closed, presumably in deference to an authority located outside the painting.

In this image, representation is understood as a necessary evil. Of course, citizens cannot be directly engaged in every decision made in government; the sheer size of the polity would make that impossible. Maybe the next best thing would be a representative system in which representatives listen to their constituents. But forgetting about people as representatives, it’s important to recognize that any democracy is representative – not just for reasons of convenience, but because democracy is, at its core, representative. Beyond the impracticality of direct democracy in a large polity, it is crucial to recognize that any mechanism for translating preferences into policy must systematically distort, refract, magnify, and distill those preferences in various ways. Consider, again, Figure 2, the complicated democratic ladder. This ladder, like the other, is best when policy represents the preferences of the citizenry. Thus, even in an imaginary world where citizens make policy directly, the way we can tell if they are successful is about representation – how well does the top of the ladder represent its bottom?

That is not a simple question, as Davide Panagia (2006) eloquently reminds us. To represent the citizens’ views is not a simple matter of transparency or ‘making present again’. It is a matter of creativity, even artistry – painting an image of the public from the disparate elements that make it up.

If representation is about creativity, then deliberation should offer those elements to form government’s behavior. Indeed, many of the institutions and processes that reside in the cloud in Figure 2 are about talk and communication. Deliberative participation happens best when ordinary citizens engage with the institutions of government and communicate in both directions. Like the working-class speaker in Rockwell’s painting, they say their piece, be it rational or emotional, personal, or public-minded. But like the participants in Habermas’s ideal public sphere, they pay attention, listening to the ideas, concerns, and realities other citizens and institutions put forward. Deliberation and citizenship are creative acts, patterned on the acts of others but not limited to them. It is in that creativity that the possibility of ever-better democratic representation lies.
If we take this creativity principle seriously, we have to recognize that neither public opinion polling nor intentionally contrived deliberation offers a magic bullet to get at what political scientist John Zaller (1992) calls ‘latent public opinion’: the ideas and beliefs citizens hold authentically. What people think in their most private moments is not only an impossible question to answer: it is also the wrong question to ask! Any interaction in which a citizen expresses or hears opinions and ideas distorts those ideas and opinions. But in just the same way that distortions of the original make a Picasso or Van Gogh painting, or a Faulkner essay, a better representation of that original (see, for example, Fabijancic 2003), thinking about citizenship as creativity requires us to embrace that very distortion, analyze its operation, and understand it as part and parcel of the democratic process.

Recognizing the usefulness of creativity – and, therefore, of what we have often thought of as distortion – solves an ongoing problem in the theory of public opinion and deliberation. Both public opinion research and deliberative theory have run up against the brick wall of trying to peer into the brain of the unfettered citizen, taking for granted that this essentially private individual is more real, more authentic, than citizens tainted by the experience of conversation and sociability. But if we recognize creativity as the essence of democratic representation, we can overcome that hurdle. Instead of trying to factor out distortion, we should work instead to understand the ways that distortion works and how different actors and groups work with it.

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Short Biographies

Andrew J. Perrin’s research focuses on the cultural and social underpinnings of modern democratic citizenship. He has published papers on these questions in Social Forces, Sociological Perspectives, Political Psychology, and Sociological Theory, among others. His 2006 book, Citizen Speak: The Democratic Imagination in American Life, shows that democratic citizenship should be understood as a creative, communicative task, not a series of specific activities to be checked off a list. He is currently working on two major projects. The first uses published and unpublished letters to the editor to understand how citizens try to address the public sphere in modern, technological democracy. The second travels back in time to 1949, when the Frankfurt School conducted a novel set of public opinion experiments in post-war Germany; he is translating and introducing this theoretically rich public opinion research for the American audience. Perrin holds a BA from Swarthmore College and MA and PhD from the
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