Small Group Research

A Definition of Small Group Democracy
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This article clarifies the conceptual relationship between democracy and small group processes by providing a definition of small group democracy. A small democratic group is (a) powerful and (b) inclusive, with (c) a membership that is committed to the democratic process. A fully democratic group (d) maintains healthy, democratic relationships and (e) practices a democratic form of deliberation, including equal and adequate speaking opportunities and both comprehension and consideration. The concluding section makes recommendations for future research, including the suggestion that researchers integrate theories of small group behavior with theories of democratic social change.

A DEFINITION OF
SMALL GROUP DEMOCRACY

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Why do we study small group interaction? The standard answer is that some group processes and outcomes are better than others and we can achieve better group discussions and decisions if we improve our understanding of them. To this end, researchers have typically studied desirable outcomes, such as productivity, cohesion, and member satisfaction. A casual examination of recent volumes of *Small Group Research* shows the prominence of these variables (e.g., C. Evans & Dion, 1991). Widely used small group textbooks (e.g., Brilhart & Galanes, 1989; Jensen & Chilberg, 1991) and research monographs (e.g., Hirokawa & Poole, 1986;

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Phillips & Wood, 1984) also focus on these variables, particularly decision quality or productivity.

Undoubtedly, these are important variables, yet there is another variable of equal or greater importance that has been sorely neglected. Theory and research on small group behavior has rarely examined democracy, yet practitioners often hold this factor in high esteem. People often expect their small decision-making groups to conduct themselves democratically—so often, in fact, that the democratic process is sometimes taken for granted. In fact, democracy has become increasingly applicable to ostensibly apolitical small group settings. One can now speak of democratic workplaces (Benello, 1992; Lappe, 1989), democratic classrooms (Gutman, 1987), democratic clubs and organizations (S. Evans & Boyte, 1986), and even democratic families (Okin, 1989; Pateman, 1983).

Many citizens have high democratic aspirations today, but it was over half a century ago that Kurt Lewin and his colleagues first suggested that social scientists turn their attention to small group democracy (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939; White & Lippitt, 1960). Sporadic theory and research on the subject followed, including investigations of democratic leadership (e.g., Haiman, 1951; Maier, 1952; for reviews, see Bass, 1990; Gastil, 1992a) and democratic "group work" in social work settings (e.g., Coyle, 1947; Glassman & Kates, 1990).

Unfortunately, these scattered studies and theoretical commentaries have not provided us with an understanding of small democratic groups. In fact, we lack the preliminary groundwork necessary for developing a clear and meaningful definition of small group democracy. There exists an abundance of definitions of democracy (e.g., Barber, 1984; Dahl, 1989), but these do not focus on the small group. There also exist writings on small groups that discuss democratic procedures and norms (e.g., Coover, Deacon, Esser, & Moore, 1978; Glassman & Kates, 1990), but these do not ground their definitions in democratic theory.

Research linking democracy and small group behavior will continue to make limited progress until a clear definition of the key

term is developed. After all, defining central concepts is a crucial step in any social scientific research program (Chaffee, 1991; Hempel, 1952). To address this problem, this article aims to define democracy in the small group context, reviewing the conceptual work of modern democratic theorists and developing a definition of democracy applicable to small, face-to-face decision-making groups. This article, however, does not constitute a complete explication: In particular, the correspondence rules between theoretical terms and observable behaviors are not fully specified herein. Instead, this article focuses on the establishment of a thorough and philosophically grounded theoretical (as opposed to operational) definition of small group democracy.

MODERN THEORIES OF THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

A multitude of activists, philosophers, social critics, and political scientists have given us insight into the meaning of democracy. A few of these theorists have ideas that are particularly useful for our purposes. Robert Dahl (1989), Carol Gould (1988), John Dewey (1888, 1927), Jurgen Habermas (1973/1975, 1979), Jane Mansbridge (1983, 1990a, 1990b, 1992), and Benjamin Barber (1984, 1988)—all have identified general features of democracy that help us understand its meaning for small groups. Their work provides us with patches that we can sew together, making a quilt displaying the essential features of an ideal democratic group.

It is necessary to begin by noting two characteristics of modern democratic theories. Democratic theorists often speak of a *demos*. This is a useful shorthand term for a body of citizens who govern themselves democratically. Herein, it refers to small democratic groups. Democratic theorists also typically define democracy by specifying features of an ideal demos. A group can never become fully democratic, but we might call it more or less democratic, depending on its distance from the ideal.

Dahl (1989) works from such an ideal when he defines democracy and identifies a fundamental assumption of democratic theory.

First, Dahl establishes a set of criteria for the democratic process, specifying that a democracy must have (a) equal and adequate opportunities for member participation, (b) voting equality, (c) opportunities for members to develop their views on public issues, (d) member control of the public agenda, and (e) a membership including all adults directly affected by its decisions. Second, Dahl (1989) argues that democracy is based upon a "strong principle of equality." Each member of the demos must assume that the other members are the best representatives of their own interests. It becomes difficult to justify or sustain democracy without this assumption.

The strong principle of equality reveals that democracy is, in part, about how we relate to one another. Gould's (1988) work focuses on these relational features of democracy. She argues that our individuality is embedded in our social identities and relationships. A member of a demos is an individual, yet the individual's identity as a *member* comes from social relations—from membership in the group. As a consequence, we require "reciprocal recognition" to establish our individuality. As Rucinski (1991) argues in an extension of Gould's work, the members of the demos must all reciprocally recognize one another's membership in order for any to identify themselves as a part of the demos.

The writings of philosopher John Dewey also discuss individual development as taking place "in community—with the contact of fellow people. The best social system for such communion is democracy, in the largest sense. Dewey saw democracy not as a mere 'form of government' but a way of being, relating, living" (Peters, 1989, p. 218). Thus democracy involves both the development of an individual identity and the formation of mutual bonds among individuals. This is the ideal form of democracy, and Dewey (1888) argues that the "degree in which [society] realizes this ideal" is the best measure of its quality (p. 249).

Habermas (1973/1975, 1979) focuses, not on relationships, but on formal procedures and structures. He argues that although we have never seen one, we all have an unconscious vision of an "ideal speech situation," a setting that ensures just and reasonable deci-

sion making. In this ideal situation, all group members "have, in principle, at least the chance to participate in . . . deliberation" (Habermas, 1973/1975, p. 108). Decisions reached should "meet the unforced agreement of all those involved," and all must "participate, as free and equal" in discussion and decision making (Habermas, 1979, p. 186). Essentially, the ideal speech situation consists of persons with equal and adequate communication skills seeking mutual understanding through open, informed, egalitarian, and participatory discussion.

Unlike the previous authors, Mansbridge (1983) does not provide a definition of democracy; instead, she gives us two. She identifies opposing but complementary types of democratic theory and practice, the adversarial and unitary modes of democracy. Adversarial democracy entails competition, agreement upon procedures but not issues, and majority rule. By contrast, unitary democracy involves cooperation, common ground, friendship, and consensus. When the interests of the members of the demos seriously conflict, as is inevitable in heterogeneous, large-scale democracies, an adversarial mode of democracy is in order. A more unitary mode is appropriate for a demos with relatively harmonious interests; the Quaker meeting may be its archetype. An ideal demos should be capable of practicing either adversarial or unitary democracy, shifting with changes in the relative harmony of members' interests (Mansbridge, 1990a, 1990b, 1992).

Finally, Barber (1984) discusses the nature of democratic talk more explicitly than any other modern theorist. For Barber, talk is the heart of any strong democracy, serving nine functions: (a) articulation, (b) persuasion, (c) agenda setting, (d) exploring mutuality, (e) affiliation and affection, (f) maintaining autonomy, (g) witness and self-expression, (h) reformulation and reconceptualization, and (i) community building. In more general terms, Barber argues that traditional, liberal theories of democracy have focused only on speaking, thinking, and reflecting. Fully democratic discourse has these features, but it complements them with listening, feeling, and acting.

TABLE 1:   A Definition of Small Group Democracy

I.   Group power
    A. Sovereignty
    B. Equal final authority
II.   Inclusiveness
III. Commitment to the democratic process
IV.   Democratic relationships
    A. Acknowledgment of individuality
    B. Affirmation of competence
    C. Recognition of mutuality
    D. Congeniality
V.   Democratic deliberation
    A. Equal and adequate opportunities to speak
        1. Agenda setting
        2. Reformulation
        3. Articulation
        4. Persuasion
        5. Voting
        6. Dissent
    B. Listening
        1. Comprehension
        2. Consideration

A DEFINITION OF SMALL GROUP DEMOCRACY

By reframing and integrating these modern theories of de-mocracy, we can create a coherent definition of small group de-mocracy. Table 1 presents this definition in outline form, and the remainder of this article brings meaning to this outline, discussing group power, inclusiveness, commitment, member relationships, and democratic deliberation. Each of these features is briefly de-fined, discussed, and related to observational methods (on estab-lishing a qualitative observational method, see Gastil, 1991).

GROUP POWER

Democratic groups must have power: Their influence or juris-diction must encompass the items appearing on their agendas. Democracy, after all, is self-government, and meaningful gover-

nance requires power. "In a democracy the people must have the final say, or must be sovereign" (Dahl, 1989, p. 133). A group with no power may be egalitarian or whatever, but it is not democratic.

It is not enough, however, for a democratic group to have power. The demos must distribute its power among the membership. Every member of a small democratic group must have some form of influence or control, and all members must ultimately have equal power with regard to group policies. As an example, a teachers' union might give day-to-day authority over dues collection to a treasurer or finance committee yet still retain its jurisdiction over that and every other union policy. The union would always have the power to overturn decisions made by the single member or committee.

One might examine the distribution of power within groups by focusing on their procedures (e.g., decision rules). Formal group bylaws might prove adequate in some cases, but actual practices will often reinterpret or deviate from these official guidelines. Moreover, the subtle forms that power can take in groups might require an investigation of communication networks and perceived hierarchies (see Mansbridge, 1983; Poole, Siebold, & McPhee, 1985).

INCLUSIVENESS

The union example leads to the next component of our definition. Assume for the moment that the union members have equal final authority. If untenured teachers are excluded, is the group democratic? If the union makes decisions that do not affect the untenured faculty, it may well be democratic. On the other hand, if untenured teachers must pay whatever dues the union decrees, can we really say that the union's dues are set democratically?

This is a question of inclusiveness, Dahl's (1989) fifth criterion for the democratic process. Those significantly affected by the decisions of a demos ought to have full membership within the demos. This simple criterion presents a paradox: Which comes first, the scope of the demos' power or its membership? If a group agrees

to make decisions that affect only its members, it avoids this problem, but most groups, like our hypothetical union, make decisions that directly and indirectly affect numerous outsiders. For the vast majority of groups, there is no easy solution to this problem; they can only meet the criterion by degree. Perhaps we should require democratic groups to include those *significantly* affected by decisions, invite those *noticeably* affected, and at least acknowledge the views of those *marginally* affected by decisions.

There is an important exception to the inclusiveness criterion (Dahl, 1989). In special circumstances, a democratic group can justify excluding people who are clearly incapable of making sound decisions on their own behalf or as a member of the group. This includes only infants, young children (in some cases), and people with grave mental disabilities (e.g., insanity). Obviously, a heavy burden of proof lies with those who would exclude any person from the group on these grounds.

To measure a group's degree of inclusiveness, one can begin by examining the composition of its membership. Groups sometimes keep lists of members, and many distinguish between different levels of membership. Researchers should also find out who has left (or been thrown out of) the group. In addition, it will be necessary to gauge the degree to which the group has actively invited people who have not yet chosen to join the group. Conversely, it will be useful to ask members and nonmembers if any efforts have been made to turn away people who claim to be interested in joining.

COMMITMENT

Anyone who has been in a very inclusive small group is familiar with the problem of uncommitted group members. Here, we are interested in a particularly important kind of commitment—a commitment to democracy itself. If a small group is fully democratic, its members have no interest in subverting the democratic process (J. Cohen, 1989). A group can develop bylaws and group norms that protect it against undemocratic members, but its procedures are

always vulnerable to manipulation and abuse if its members do not value democracy.

Besides internalizing democratic values, this criterion requires respect for decisions that the group arrives at democratically. Although the two share much in common, democracy is not anarchy: In a democracy, if group members accept group procedures, they must respect group decisions that faithfully follow those procedures. If a group member does not like a group decision, the member must go along with the decision, challenge the procedures used to arrive at the decision, accept some form of penalty for refusing to follow the decision (this is similar to civil disobedience), or volunteer to withdraw from the group. This requirement effectively guards against those group members who claim democratic convictions only because they expect to agree with all of the group's decisions.

Measuring commitment will require self-reports, probing group members' attitudes toward and understanding of the democratic process (see Binford, 1983; Gastil, 1992b; Rosenberg, Ward, & Chilton, 1988). If actions speak louder than words, researchers should also take note of members' behaviors in critical situations, such as those that pit democracy against a member's other values or desires. In the absence of such situations, group members can be asked to describe how they would respond to hypothetical dilemmas.

MEMBER RELATIONSHIPS

The members of a small democratic group should also enjoy a special kind of relationship with each other, a way of relating that is consistent with and conducive to the democratic process. These relationships will form over time, through actions and words carrying relational implications (see Ruesch & Bateson, 1951; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967).

We should establish two criteria for determining the degree to which a small group's relationships are democratic. First, following Dewey (1888), we might use an absolute standard: A group's rela-

tionships should sufficiently acknowledge the individuality and affirm the competence of each member of the demos. The words and deeds of group members should also, on balance, recognize the existence of mutuality among group members and foster a congenial atmosphere. Second, Mansbridge's (1983) work suggests that when there is a relative conflict of interests among the members of the demos, mutuality and congeniality should play a more minor role. Groups with contradictory interests might place less emphasis upon these forms of relationship, because in these groups, there is a greater potential for using mutuality and friendliness to manipulate members with different interests.

Employing these criteria in research requires careful attention to the verbal and nonverbal behavior of group members, both inside and outside group meetings. The greatest difficulty is specifying the boundaries that identify and distinguish the different forms of relational communication. Research on politeness may be helpful in this regard; the various forms of politeness parallel the types of relationship discussed below (see fellowship, competence, and autonomy face, as defined by Lim & Bowers, 1991; friendliness, as defined by Lakoff, 1973).

We can now consider the four facets of democratic relationships in more detail, describing them and explaining their roles in small group democracy. For the most part, each manifests itself in the form of verbal and nonverbal communication, so we will consider each as a form of talk. To make them more concrete, each form of relational communication will have an example, most of which are taken from the verbatim transcript of a series of meetings at a small cooperative workplace (Gastil, 1991).

Acknowledgment of individuality. Recognizing a person's individuality, in its most basic form, amounts to differentiating a member from the group as a whole. When we acknowledge group members' individuality, we both address them as individuals and explicitly affirm their individual identities or interests in relation to those of the group. One can even acknowledge one's own individuality: "That's all I can give right now while I'm a student, and that's the choice I've made, and that's okay with me."

The opposite is the denial of a member's individuality, suggesting that the member's identity and interests are or should be subordinate to those of the group as a whole. For instance, at one group meeting, a member insisted that her personal needs were paramount at the moment—that she had chosen to act according to her own interests. To this another member responded, "A collective is not where everybody can do what they want and get their needs met, and struggle for their needs, but rather what a collective needs to be is a unit that works for the collective."

Gould (1988) explains why it is important that a democratic group have a mutual acknowledgment of members' individuality. Democracy can be "fully effective only if . . . people generally relate to each other as equals and with respect for each other's individual differences and interests" (p. 257). Thus the failure to acknowledge one another's individuality seriously limits the potential for democratic deliberation.

Affirmation of competence. In small democratic groups, members also affirm one another's ability to represent their own interests and those of the group as a whole. If, as a member of a demos, one accepts Dahl's (1989) strong principle of equality, one must assume that no person is likely to be better than oneself at judging what is in one's best interests. One must also assume that what holds for oneself generally holds for the other members of the demos. "You know yourself better than I do" is a clear affirmation, whereas "Maybe I should decide for you" questions this form of competence.

It seems reasonable to go a step further, assuming that all group members are capable of judging what is best for the group. All members may misjudge the group's best interests—and even their own—but no member is so superior at such judgment that other members should be deemed incompetent. As Chai Ling, a student leader of the Chinese prodemocracy movement, explains, "Each must have simple faith in other people's intelligence and ability to choose. . . . That's the basis for democracy" (quoted in Morgan, 1990). A group member could affirm others' competence with the follow-

ing words: "I think we should hear from everyone on this, because we all have different visions of the future of this organization."

Recognition of mutuality. Members of the small demos must take care to affirm individuality and competence, but they must not dwell on these at the cost of mutualistic bonds. Recognizing mutuality is a positive act; it is not the same as a disavowal of a member's individuality. Members must, when appropriate, recognize one another's identities as group members—as parts of the whole. Referring to others as "the group" and "the team" or even simply "us" or "we" can constitute a recognition of mutuality. Of course, one can be more direct: "We need as a group, as a collective, to figure out a way to get beyond the resentment that taints future negotiations about those same things." Here, the speaker asks the group members to think and act, for a time, as a group.

As Barber (1988, pp. 200-201) explains, mutuality moves individuals beyond their own narrow perspectives:

> The most important fact about citizens is that they are defined by membership in a political community and enact their civic identities only to the extent that they interact with other citizens in a mutualistic and common manner. . . . *I* cannot judge politically, only *we* can judge politically; in assuming the mantle of citizenship the I becomes a We.

Congeniality. As defined herein, congeniality is the development and preservation of what group members consider positive emotional relationships. Congeniality includes expressions of kindness, empathy, sympathy, praise, and so forth; its opposite is talk that is hostile, disdainful, belittling, and the like. Congeniality may be the best word, because it covers a wide spectrum, from formal cordiality to intimate companionship.

Congeniality can amount to a simple expression of humor, such as when a member of the aforementioned co-op joked about the cleanliness of the cellar: "I still think we should just give everybody a shovel and start digging out the basement." Congeniality can also take a more direct form, such as when another group member

remarked, "I'm just ever so grateful that [they] put in the time that they did to get us to this point."

Congeniality aids small group democracy as a lubricant serves gears, soothing irreconcilable conflicts of interest and moving individual group members toward a common vision. In fact, Mansbridge (1983) considers unitary democracy akin to the political extension of friendship.

DEMOCRATIC DELIBERATION

Healthy relationships provide the earth out of which good decisions might grow. The procedural roots that flourish in this soil are open and constructive deliberation. *Webster's Dictionary* defines deliberation as "a discussion and consideration by a number of persons of the reasons for and against a measure." Simply put, deliberation is careful, intelligent decision making. Deliberation becomes democratic when group members speak and listen to one another in a particular way. In this section, we define this distinctively democratic style of deliberation.

When we think about democratic groups, we may imagine that the members of such groups speak in roughly equal amounts. But is it important that all 10 members of a writer's collective speak the same amount, or is it essential that they have equal opportunities to speak? It is probably true that if one person speaks far more than any other, there is a problem. The problem, however, is that this speaker is taking away others' opportunities—not simply that the speaker is talking the most. Similarly, if a group member rarely speaks, we do not know whether this silence derives from having nothing to say or having no chance to say it. It is the presence or absence of opportunities—not the volubility or silence—that is at issue.

Opportunities should be readily apparent to each member of the demos. They should be "manifest" or "displayed," so that all members of the demos recognize the existence of their opportunities (J. Cohen, 1989). For opportunities to be meaningful, members must also have at least minimal levels of communication skills. If

some members cannot speak in the group's language, dialect, or jargon, their opportunities to speak are meaningless.

Like anything, this notion of equal opportunities can be taken too far. We would not want every group member to be able to speak at every point in time. We all learned in kindergarten that we take turns to speak, and democratic groups remember this admonition. In addition, we must all be able to speak, but we must be cogent. In the words of George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, we should let our words be "few and savory."

Finally, what if no member has the opportunity to say even just a few savory sentences? In this scenario, opportunities may be equal, but they are inadequate. In a true demos, the chances to speak must be both equal and adequate. If there are insufficient opportunities to communicate with one another, deliberation—careful and thorough discussion—is impossible. Under such conditions, a small group might choose to vote in a democratic manner, but the constraints on deliberation would move it far from the democratic ideal.

Measuring opportunities ultimately requires reliance upon some form of self-report, using questionnaires or interviews to assess members' perceptions of speaking opportunities. Nevertheless, there comes a point at which a member's claim of inadequate opportunities becomes suspect. For instance, if analyses of transcribed meetings show that a person is regularly speaking at great length, we might question this member's claim that she or he lacks speaking opportunities. In sum, analyses of speaking opportunities should rely both upon self-reports and actual verbal data.

The equality and adequacy of opportunities applies to at least six distinct forms of speech, including agenda setting, reformulation, articulation, persuasion, voting, and dissent. Below, each of these is defined and related to other aspects of the democratic process.

Agenda setting. Broadly defined, the agenda is the set of issues that a group discusses during a meeting. Members can set the agenda by attempting to place items on it, remove items from it, or alter the priority of its items. For instance, a group member might

ask the group to postpone an issue for a future meeting. More subtly, one can influence the pace at which the group moves through one or more agenda items. Suggesting that the group devote an hour to a given agenda item might lead the group to consider that issue carefully and, as a consequence, give little or no attention to items at the end of the agenda.

Agenda setting is a vital form of talk, for there can be no debate until an issue is deemed debatable. Agenda setting is the means by which the demos decides what issues are of concern. If the full membership of the group is not involved in setting the agenda, the concerns of some members will be ignored during subsequent (undemocratic) deliberations.

Reformulation. This is the redefinition or reframing of an issue that is already on the agenda and under discussion. Reformulation includes both semantic alteration of an issue (e.g., the introduction of new terminology or novel phrasing) and actual changes in the content of an issue (e.g., combining two issues into one or making an amendment). For example, a speaker might reformulate an issue by redefining the nature of a problem such that two members' competing solutions can be integrated and adopted simultaneously.

When it moves the group toward a common vision, reformulation can spring from a recognition of mutuality. Reformulation is important to democracy for this very reason; it can transform seemingly insoluble, divisive issues into opportunities for demonstrating the resolve and common ground that a group shares.

Articulation. This is the expression of one's perspective with regard to an issue on the agenda, without clear persuasive purpose and before a vote has been taken on the issue. When articulating, speakers are presenting their opinions, interests, and ideas. For example, in a community group's strategy session, some speakers might tell the other group members that they dislike demonstrations. If these speakers give no reason for this view, it may constitute an articulation of their opinion. If they choose to explain why they hold this opinion, their words may constitute an attempt to persuade others to adopt their view.

Articulation derives from a sense of individuality and compe-
tence, as speakers confidently present their personal views to the
rest of the demos. We should not take the ability to articulate for
granted, because a person does not always have a personal perspec-
tive. Many of us must learn to form our own opinions and recognize
our interests. Articulation also relates to comprehension, because
understanding others' views and ideas facilitates the development
and articulation of one's own perspective. In general, articulation
serves democracy by bringing forward both minority and majority
views and filling the well of ideas from which the demos draws.

Articulation, however, amounts to more than just the statement
of one's opinion. Mansbridge (1990b, p. 136) suggests that demo-
cratic deliberation must also include a form of articulation analo-
gous to thinking out loud:

> Preferences themselves, let alone interests, are not given. They must
> be tentatively voiced, tested, examined against the causes that
> produced them, explored, and finally made one's own. Good delib-
> eration must rest on institutions that foster dissent and on images of
> appropriate behavior that allow for fumbling and changing one's
> mind, that respect the tentativeness of this process. Only such
> safeguards can help participants find where they want themselves
> to go.

Thus articulation presents a speaker's views, but it can also play a
vital role in the formation of these views.

Persuasion. When we think of a democratic group, many of us
imagine debate or persuasive dialogue. Indeed, persuasion is a
familiar and frequent form of democratic talk. As defined herein,
persuasive speech is intended to influence the views of other
members of the demos with regard to an item on the agenda. It aims
to create, reinforce, and change other members' opinions, attitudes,
and beliefs about an issue (Miller, 1980). (In this sense, agenda
setting and reformulation are similar to persuasion; the difference
is that they set and rearrange the stage for debate on the agenda's
items.) For instance, a member of a religious planning group might
suggest that the group invite one speaker instead of another, pre-

senting an argument designed to persuade other members to change their preferences.

The development of mutuality and congeniality facilitates the presentation and consideration of persuasive messages. If members of the demos are comfortable with one another and perceive a spirit of common interests or mutual respect, it is more likely that they will carefully consider the persuasive messages of the speaker. Persuasion is vital for democracy, because it is often the means whereby minds are changed. If group members remain closed to others' persuasive messages, deliberation becomes a charade—a meaningless prelude to voting.

In an ideal democratic group, we should ask for more than mere persuasion. After all, persuasion can be manipulative, deceptive, or otherwise destructive. Democracy needs persuasion that is honest and forthright, appealing to rather than bypassing critical thinking. Following the work of J. Cohen (1989), we might require that "deliberation is reasoned in that the parties to it are required to state their reasons for advancing proposals, supporting them or critiquing them" (p. 22). Without denying the importance of feelings, we might ask that speakers try to acknowledge the degree to which their arguments draw upon intuition and emotion. Persuasive speakers in small democratic groups should refrain from polishing their words so well that they might persuade regardless of the quality of their arguments (see Gastil, in press).

Voting. Although rarely described as a form of communication, voting is simply a formal means of expressing preferences with regard to a set of alternative positions on an issue. This includes preliminary tallies and final, decisive votes, as well as both anonymous and public forms of expression (e.g., secret ballot vs. roll call votes). This definition is rather broad, permitting a variety of methods, such as consensus, majority rule, and proportional outcome schemes (Mansbridge, 1983).

Decisive voting is all but the final act of democratic deliberation, often signaling the end of discussion for the near future. Voting is the only form of democratic talk that democratic theorists univer-

sally recognize as essential, because without the vote, all other forms of deliberation become virtually meaningless.

Dissent. Although usually defined in a broader sense, for the purposes of this discussion, dissent is simply articulating one's preference for a position that lost in a decisive vote. It is an opportunity for a group member to express a dissenting point of view after the fact. We might choose, for example, to remind group members that we voted against a proposal after it has passed.

The final form of democratic talk allows unsuccessful minorities to put their formal dissent on record, for future reference. It has been underappreciated by those who hold that articulation is significant only prior to the decisive stage of voting. This is unfortunate, for as Barber (1984) explains, "It is in the aftermath of a vote that dissenters may feel the greatest need to speak their pain." The dissenter says, " 'I am part of the community, I participated in the talk and deliberation leading to the decision, and so I regard myself as bound; but let it be known that I do not think we have made the right decision.' " This does not change the decision, but it does "bear witness to another point of view" and thereby keeps the issue, at least informally, on the agenda (pp. 192, 193).

LISTENING

Clearly, all six forms of talk are essential, but without listening, they amount to little more than self-absorbed chatter. Democratic group members must be able to comprehend one another, and they must all be willing to consider what others have to say (Osborn & Osborn, 1991). Imagine a planning group in which the treasurer talks over everyone's head. The other members are missing out on information that they may need to make a fully informed decision. Alternately, if one group member refuses to listen to the treasurer's arguments, the group will have undue difficulty arriving at anything close to a consensus.

As with speaking, researchers might combine self-reports with analyses of transcribed speech to measure the degree to which

group members listen to one another. The transcripts, however, become less important, as a verbal record has only scattered and subtle traces of listening. Those possessing ample time and resources might employ a nonverbal coding scheme to assess listening behavior. Others might use interviews or focus groups to probe group members' understandings of each other's utterances. Whatever the method employed, researchers will have to distinguish between two forms of listening, recognizing the different roles of comprehension and consideration in small group democracy.

Comprehension. Comprehension is defined as understanding the speech of another member of the demos. In an ideal demos, the listener must be able to follow the speaker's words, the various ideas the speaker is presenting, and the gist of the speaker's message. Comprehension is essential for the democratic process, because it is the means whereby one comes to know others' (and one's own) views. It is also a necessary element in the discovery of common ground.

Although it might seem counterintuitive at first, comprehension can be viewed as a right. The members of a demos must have equal and adequate opportunities to comprehend what others say. If we are unable to do so, we are doubly deprived: It becomes more difficult to enlarge our perspectives—to function as a part of the whole—and we fail to receive information and insight that could help us develop our own individual point of view. We must have a right, then, to understand the language of the demos—a right to be spoken to in intelligible terms.

Consideration. It is more common to think of listening as a responsibility. In small group democracies, we must try to consider what others have to say when they wish to set the agenda, reformulate an agenda item, articulate their views, or persuade us to change our views. Such consideration can amount to passive listening, as we sit and attentively take in what another member says. It can also take a more active form. We can request information or ask probing questions to clarify a speaker's statements, and we can restate what

the speaker said to make sure we understand. These active forms of consideration are particularly valuable when the listener is unsure of what the speaker is trying to say.

Due consideration is tantamount to careful, quiet reflection. Without such reflection, "there is only the babble of raucous interests and insistent rights vying for the deaf ears of impatient adversaries" (Barber, 1984, p. 175). Consideration transforms democratic decision making from the mere summation of preferences into the practice of deliberation. At the same time, it is important to distinguish active consideration from passive capitulation. Consideration must be reciprocal, and it need not result in agreement with the speaker (Mansbridge, 1990b).

CONCLUSION

To summarize, a small democratic group is a (a) powerful and (b) inclusive group, with (c) a membership that is committed to the democratic process. A fully democratic group (d) maintains healthy, democratic relationships and (e) practices a democratic form of deliberation, including equal and adequate speaking opportunities and both comprehension and consideration. Any group that fits within this broad definition is democratic, allowing for a variety of memberships and procedures. For instance, some democratic groups may use majority rule, some may opt for consensus, and others may use some combination of the two.

Working with this definition, future research should examine its relevance to existing small groups. The categories of democratic talk, for instance, may or may not readily correspond to actual speech, and distinguishing them in practice may be easy or impossible. Similarly, this ideal definition might prove useful for evaluating existing groups, or it might be too demanding, making all groups appear indistinguishably undemocratic (see Gastil, 1991).

If the ideal is found meaningful, future research might then turn to empirical questions regarding the practice of small group democracy. Following the advice of Poole et al. (1985; see also Poole,

Siebold, Mcphee, 1986), researchers could use structuration theory as a framework for analysis (I. Cohen, 1989; Giddens, 1979, 1984). Framing small group democracy in structurational terms, one views it as a threefold structure of meanings, power, and norms that exists within finite boundaries of time and space. Structuration theory emphasizes the fact that small democratic groups share their social space with preexisting and evolving social, economic, and political structures that both enable and constrain agents' attempts to make decisions democratically. Researchers can identify which of the many existing structures facilitate and obstruct the pursuit of small group democracy, and they can specify which forms of social and system integration effectively transform these structures. We must ask, What obstacles stand in the way of groups that wish to move closer to the democratic ideal? How might groups confront or overcome these obstacles?

Finally, those who seek to understand the dynamics of large-scale democratic social change might explore the relationship between small group democracies and larger social movements. In structurational terms, small democratic groups could establish microstructures within themselves via social integration, and through system integration, they might develop increasingly expansive systems of democratic norms and behaviors.

S. Evans and Boyte (1986) have argued that given the right historical conditions, relatively small groups can, in fact, fuel democratic social change. In their view, democratic voluntary associations—what they call "free spaces"—have been instrumental in every movement for democratic change in American history. The authors substantiate this claim by demonstrating the role of free spaces in the African-American resistance to slavery, the civil rights struggle, American working-class protest, the suffragist and Equal Rights Amendment movements, and the populist movement of the 1880s. In small-scale democracies, people develop self-esteem, learn democratic and cooperative norms, and become skilled at organizing, speaking, and listening. These people then apply their skills and visions outside the free spaces; when organized into an

expanding network, their efforts amount to so- cial movements pursuing democratic change (e.g., Benello, 1992; Sapiro, 1990).

If one adopts this view, one strategy for democratic social change is strengthening and developing small group democracies. Theorists and researchers could aid in the development of such a strategy, seeking to understand the mechanisms whereby a relatively small group transforms itself into a free space, making itself increasingly democratic. In this way, we might reach a better understanding of the inner workings of small group democracy and the role of the small group in democratic social change.

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