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# Public Participation as Public Debate: A Deliberative Turn in Natural Resource Management

## JOHN R. PARKINS

Social Science Research Group, Canadian Forest Service,
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

## ROSS E. MITCHELL

Department of Rural Economy, University of Alberta,
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

*This article examines some key similarities and differences between two leading perspectives on public participation: the natural resource management literature and deliberative democratic theory. We assert that contemporary deliberative democratic theory, as proposed by Habermas and others, provides important theoretical and applied insights that are often unexamined in the natural resource literature. Specifically, deliberative democratic theory maintains a focus on the value of public deliberation (dialogue and debate), attention to internal as well as external forms of exclusion, and constructive forms of distrust. The article demonstrates that a deliberative democratic perspective on public participation may serve to challenge some established traditions within the natural resource literature and lead to new ways of conducting and evaluating public participation.*

**Keywords** deliberative democratic theory, evaluation research, public participation, public sphere

Scholarly and applied interest in public participation and natural resource management has proliferated in recent years. This has paralleled a broader wave of interest in situations where citizens come together and communicate with each other about matters of public concern. Fueled by increasing scientific complexity and uncertainty, along with a lack of social consensus about how natural resources should be managed, demand for and academic interest in public participation appear to be relentless. Writers have theorized and studied how ''deliberative spaces'' (defined as virtual and real sites where meaningful public dialogue and debate can occur) have emerged and how they play a crucial role in generating ideas and information that can improve knowledge, improve understanding, and enhance the quality of decisions.

Writers have also examined the ways in which these deliberative spaces become systematically distorted through manipulation, coercion, and misinformation. One important source of scholarly work in this vein has emerged from critical theory, or, more specifically, the empirical and historical orientation of critical theory (Forester 1985; Morrow 1994). This particular stream of critical theory, attributed generally to Habermas (1964; 1989), focuses considerable attention on the social and cultural functions that are served by these deliberative spaces. Within this theoretical tradition, deliberative spaces are considered to be an ideal kind of social environment—namely, one where citizens can discuss and debate common concerns, access a wide range of information, and reflect and revise their understanding of issues.

As an extension of this scholarly tradition in critical theory, democratic theorists have incorporated these ideas into the political sciences. The "deliberative turn" in democratic theory (what is now commonly known as deliberative democratic theory) is based on criticisms of more episodic forms of democratic participation, where involvement is limited to voting and where public deliberation is severely limited to issue "sound bites" and popularity contests. In contrast, deliberative democratic theory is concerned with "debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinion in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants" (Chambers 2003, 309). Since the early 1990s, deliberative democratic theory has flourished into an influential body of work. Key contributions to the literature are contained in several volumes (Dryzek 1990; Calhoun 1992; Benhabib 1996; Chambers 1996; Bohman and Rehg 1997; Elster 1998; Dryzek 2000). Major subthemes within deliberative democratic theory can also be found in many books and journals. For example, a great deal of recent work addresses the difficult relationship between the increasing diversity of public values and the appropriate design of institutions for public deliberation (Phillips 1995; Bohman 1996; Williams 1998; Young 2000). Also, authors actively discuss difficulties associated with the language-based orientation of public deliberation and the challenge of integrating nonlinguistic modes of communication from the natural world (Vogel 1996; Skollerhorn 1998; Eckersley 1999; Torgerson 1999; Dryzek 2000).

In spite of this substantial theoretical and empirical work, a striking feature of the natural resource literature is a general lack of reference to deliberative democratic theory (for exceptions, see Tuler and Webler 1999; Smith and McDonough 2001). This article seeks to remedy this disconnect, first by providing a general introduction to deliberative democratic theory, and second, by comparing deliberative democratic and natural resource perspectives on public participation. We discuss and draw out key distinctions among three major dimensions of public participation that are shared by these literatures, and draw out what appear to be important distinctions. The first dimension deals with an emphasis on process (communication and understanding) within deliberative democratic theory, and an emphasis on outcomes (optimal decision making) within the natural resource literature. The second dimension addresses the issue of representation and internal versus external forms of exclusion. The third dimension explores the issue of institutional versus interpersonal forms of trust and proposes a functional role for distrust within deliberative settings. The conclusion offers some immediate implications for research and practice.

## Distinctions Between Process and Outcomes

### Emphasis on Outcomes

Deliberative democrats and natural resource sociologists are both intensely interested in decisions that result from public participation. In the natural resource literature, we observe a persistent orientation toward improvements to decisions as a key facet of public participation, and general levels of satisfaction appear to increase when deliberations and outcomes are clearly linked (Shindler and Neburka 1997; Smith and McDonough 2001; McCool and Guthrie 2001). This emphasis on decision making is consistent with "ladder approaches" to public participation, where "higher rung" participatory processes, characterized by collaboration or comanagement, are clearly preferred over "lower rung" processes, characterized by placation or information sharing (Arnstein 1969). Throughout the natural resource literature, this emphasis on shared decision making and shared control forms the basis for empowerment and local control (Knopp and Caldbeck 1990; Gray, Enzer, and Kusel 2001).

Moreover, the emphasis on outcomes in the natural resources literature functions on a logic that understands *public participation as a procedure to improve decision making*. Within a historical context, these procedures associated with resource management decision making have gone through several phases. The pre-World War II period was marked by a high degree of optimism about scientific expertise and the merits of technology that would eventually lead to improvements in efficiency, environmental quality, and quality of life. This highly scientific approach to decision making left little room for public participation, since such activities were viewed as unnecessary roadblocks to technological progress. During the post-World War II period, enthusiasm for broader public involvement in decision making began to gain some momentum, hitting a feverish pitch with the expansion of the environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s. This movement tapped into growing popular concern for human and industrial expansion into the North American heartland. The social consensus regarding natural resource use began to disintegrate in the face of more diverse and often conflicting public values. In turn, resource managers scrambled to respond to a growing public appetite for access to decision-making processes through high-profile events such as the MacKenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry in northern Canada during the mid-1970s (Berger 1977). These extensive public engagement processes were designed to bring large numbers of people directly into the decision-making process.

In recent years, scholars have again pushed our understanding of the value of local (and traditional) knowledge and citizen science (Lee 1993; Fischer 2000). They have helped us to critically examine scientific and technical information, and to value a broader array of knowledge that can assist in decision making. Reflecting this growing appetite for local knowledge, several market-driven governance systems have positioned public participation activities at the center of their decision-making processes. Forest certification initiatives such as the Forest Stewardship Council and the Canadian Standards Association provide a case in point. These processes have developed quite elaborate mechanisms for ongoing dialogue between laypeople, research managers, and the scientific community (Auld and Bull 2003).

In echoing some of this history, Lawrence, Daniels, and Stankey (1997) state that "the overwhelming emphasis in the natural resource literature has been on

improving outcomes as the conceptual basis for public involvement . . . the literature and practice have been primarily concerned with the effects of [public] involvement on decisions (p. 581).'' Some natural resource scholars have focused on deliberative processes (Daniels and Walker 2001; Lawrence et al. 1997), but this analysis remains somewhat detached from deliberative democratic theory. The literature here is primarily focused on multistakeholder involvement, where optimal solutions are derived from extensive discussion and debate that favors some form of consensus decision making. Optimal decisions are therefore understood in the context of balancing competing interests, where all parties who are engaged in the process have a fair chance of influencing the final outcome.

### Emphasis on Process

Procedures that improve decision making are also key issues in deliberative democratic theory. There is recognition that the public will not maintain an active interest without hope of influencing a decision or changing a situation. Such expectations may be aided by fair and consistent procedures that can be agreed on by group members. For instance, in defining the important elements of public deliberation, Dryzek (1990) suggests that those involved should identify some sort of decision-making procedure, and this procedure should be oriented around consensus formation. The general emphasis in deliberative democratic theory, however, is not on the outcomes of deliberation but instead on the deliberation itself. Rather than on public participation to improve decision-making, deliberative democratic theory functions on a logic that understands *public participation as an opportunity for public debate, personal reflection, and informed public opinion*. Although largely untapped by the natural resource literature, these ideas around public debate and public opinion formation appear highly relevant within the natural resource management context, where issues are often highly complex and deeply contested.

To understand the basis of this interest in public engagement and debate requires a brief return to the historical and theoretical origins of the public sphere. As a historical ideal, the public sphere has come to be understood as a place where private citizens meet together in public ways to discuss, debate, and challenge the rules and norms that govern society (Calhoun 1992). Through the generation of knowledge and its influence on public opinion, the 17th-century European public sphere challenged the authority of church and state in new, provocative ways. The powers of the day were not particularly keen on these new populist sources of knowledge and influence. Still, they provided places for citizens to serve as a counterweight to governing institutions through forms of influence that were until then undeveloped.

Emerging from this historical precedent, some deliberative democrats make a distinction between ''strong'' and ''weak'' public spheres. Strong public spheres are characterized by public deliberation along with decision-making authority, such as legislative and parliamentary institutions. Weak public spheres, on the other hand, are much more ubiquitous and also more amorphous networks and coalitions that form around issues of public concern, and are characterized by deliberation without decision-making authority (Fraser 1990). Unlike the ladder approach to public participation, deliberative democrats value these weak forms of the public sphere because they provide invaluable opportunities for public deliberation that can translate into important sources of influence on decision makers and the general

public. In Canada, for instance, an unorganized network of local citizen committees provides information and advice to public land managers, but most of these committees possess no decision-making authority (Parkins 2002). In their ideal form, this weak mode of the public sphere offers considerable utility as a form of influence on decision makers and on public opinion.

In this context, deliberative democratic theory is concerned with the cultivation and maintenance of public deliberation irrespective of its proximity to stronger spheres of decision making. In an ideal world, these deliberative spaces function under conditions that allow for free-flowing dialogue aimed at producing reasonable and well-informed opinions. Instead of focusing on specific decision-making procedures, deliberative democrats are interested in deliberative spaces where the primary emphasis is "understanding between individuals rather than success in achieving predefined individual goals" (Dryzek 1990, 22). This literature often refers to notions of "free and public reasoning among equals" (Cohen 1996, 99), or "communication that induces reflection upon preferences in a non-coercive fashion" (Dryzek 2000, 2). Furthermore, one of the overarching goals for deliberative democratic theory is to establish the conditions under which private values and private opinions can be transformed into (or at least, made to appreciate) public values and public opinions.

## Distinctions Between Representation and Inclusion

### Emphasis on Interest-Based Representation

The issue of representation is central to both natural resource and deliberative democratic views of public participation. Natural resource scholars and practitioners who are interested in public engagement often refer to concepts such as *representation*, *participation*, or *involvement*, whereas democratic theorists often refer to the term *inclusion*. These terms may have overlapping meanings, depending on the circumstance, but some distinct differences remain. The natural resource approach to representation can be characterized in several ways. First, the natural resource literature is concerned with several practical issues, not the least of which is the practical matter of getting people to the table, or hoping that enough of the expected stakeholders show up. The fear is that inadequate representation of the given population could weaken the process. For example, in a participatory process of public land decision making, the authors ask, "Do the participants represent all significant sectors of the community?" (Carr and Halvorsen 2001, 110). In addition, scholars have addressed issues of local versus nonlocal participation, lay versus expert participation, and diffuse versus concentrated interests (Mascarenhas and Scarce 2004; Overdevest 2000). Second, the concept of representation in the natural resource literature is often limited to a reduced set of interests, usually comprised of those with both a stake in and knowledge of natural resource management (e.g., Hull et al. 2001). Those involved tend to be male citizens with above-average education and incomes (McComas 2001; McFarlane and Boxall 2002), and often with previous forest-related training (Jabbour and Balsillie 2003).

On this last point, representation in the natural resource literature is more commonly limited to those deemed to be stakeholders (e.g., Knopp and Caldbeck 1990; Grimble and Chan 1995; Martin, Wise-Bender, and Shields 2000; Hull, Robertson, and Kendra 2001; Leach 2002; Ravnborg and Westermann 2002). In the broader sense, stakeholders are "all those who affect, and/or are affected by, the policies,

decisions and actions of the system; they can be individuals, communities, social groups, or institutions of any size, aggregation or level in society'' (Grimble and Chan 1995, 114). Resource managers often consider stakeholders as partners in a collaborative process, or as ''people whose personal or professional welfare depends substantially upon the outcomes of [a given] partnership'' (Leach 2002, 642). Participants may be selected because their opinions are deemed relevant to local decision making. Hence, they are influential in local planning and decision-making processes, but ''may not be statistically representative of the larger community'' (Hull, Robertson, and Kendra 2001, 329).

### Emphasis on Internal Forms of Exclusion

Much like the authors just cited, deliberative democratic theorists have made a conscious effort to deal with the question of representation as a principal area of scholarly inquiry. Some authors maintain that a critical test to deliberative democracy in contemporary society is the profound and inescapable challenge of cultural pluralism (Pateman 1970; Walzer 1983; Williams 1998; Mouffe 2000; Young 2000). Akin to the natural resource literature, this work is focused on capturing the growing diversity of public values within a deliberative process. At this juncture, however, deliberative democratic theory takes on some additional challenges.

In response to feminist criticisms of deliberative democratic theory, scholars have focused a great deal of attention on what it means to be a representative—to be actively included within a deliberative process. Ideally, all concerned citizens would have opportunities to participate in setting environmental policy by joining the efforts of scientists, technicians, and government officials within a deliberative setting. This idea is a foundational aspect of participatory democratic processes. As Young puts it, ''The normative legitimacy of a democratic decision depends on the degree to which those affected by it have been included in the decision-making process and have had the opportunity to influence the outcomes'' (Young 2000, 5–6). Yet as feminist theorists have successfully argued, the process of including people, and the circumstances that enable them to engage meaningfully in debate, are not easily achieved.

Forms of exclusion can be considered in at least two ways. ''External exclusion'' refers to those forms ''that keep some individuals or groups out of the fora of debate or processes of decision-making, or which allow some individuals or groups dominative control over what happens in them'' (Young 2000, 52). Ways to remedy external exclusion involve providing for multiply deliberative sites, equal access, and increased opportunities for an interested public (Gunderson 2000, 247–257). This area of concern is highly compatible with the natural resource literature already described. Conversely, less noticeable forms of ''internal exclusion'' may arise ''even when individuals and groups are *nominally* included'' (Young 2000, 53; emphasis added). Such situations occur when opportunities for discussion are limited to certain key spokespersons and specific kinds of arguments. This may result from cultural factors (i.e., language difficulties or protocol may prevent certain individuals from speaking out; likewise, Western scientific arguments may exclude other forms of knowledge), procedural impediments (such as when allotted time for discussion and debate is limited), or strategic motives (inadequate communication and information sharing may be used to group advantage). As a partial remedy to these internal forms of exclusion, Young argues for a rad-

ical expansion of allowable modes of communication: that is, beyond ratio-nal/logical forms of public argument and debate to dynamic, cross-cultural forms of greeting, rhetoric, and narrative. She describes how such practices may ''make possible understanding across structural and cultural difference, and motivate acceptance and action'' (Young 2000, 57).

## Distinctions Between Interpersonal and Institutional Trust

### Emphasis on Individual Trust

In the natural resource literature, trust is often associated with forms of interperso-nal relationships, or trust in face-to-face relationships and individual associations. Some of the early review articles in the natural resource literature identify a clear relationship between trust and successful participatory processes, and this trust fac-tor is repeatedly articulated at the interpersonal level. Several authors reach similar conclusions about the important role of relationship building in participatory pro-cesses (Wondolleck and Yaffee 1994; Moore 1994). More recent articles also find relationship building between managers and citizens, and among citizens themselves, to be an important process-oriented measure of successful public participation (Lachapelle, McCool, and Patterson 2003; McCool and Guthrie 2001; Shindler and Neburka 1997). The relationship between procedural justice and trust is also closely linked to the notion of fairness, which contributes to the trust people place in authorities and the decisions they make (Smith and McDonough 2001). The role of trust in this literature also focuses attention on the individual and the quality of interpersonal relationships. In most instances, these findings are grounded by the everyday realities of public participation procedures. ''I trust you. Therefore, I am willing to work with you, to understand your perspective, and to live with the deci-sions that are jointly derived.'' Clearly, trust is an important element of any social relationship, and a key component of contemporary democracies. Members of the public trust expert knowledge on many complex issues, mainly because they lack suf-ficient time or interest to explore and understand these issues for themselves. If we can't be experts on more than a few areas, if any at all, then we must rely upon scien-tific, technical, and political experts to act on our behalf in responsible ways, and to manage the complexities of our modern societies.

There is a dark side, however, to the trust we impart to these experts. According to Freudenburg, ''the very division of labor that permits many of the achievements of advanced industrial societies may also have the potential to become one of the most serious sources of risk and vulnerability'' (1993, 914). This vulnerability can be expressed in technical terms, whereby more complex and tightly coupled technolo-gies such as nuclear power stations, integrated food production systems, or forest ecosystems are prone to periodic failure by design. In certain instances, institutions act inappropriately (or fail to act) within policy or technical realms, thereby exposing the public to unintended consequences. Besides these concerns over technical com-petence, scholars may also criticize elite-based leadership models and point to the inability of a few decision makers to reflect a broader range of public values. With increasing levels of cultural pluralism come greater demands on our leadership to be more inclusive of these public values (Williams 1998; Young 2000). So at the core of this issue lie two key factors: on one hand, our dependence on expertise and the vulnerabilities generated by increasing knowledge requirements, and, conversely, a

growing gap in the ability of experts and decisions makers to effectively address an expanding range of public values.

### Emphasis on Institutional and Critical Trust

Within this dynamic tension we observe the complementary relationship between trust and deliberation. In a world of limited resources (i.e., time, money, knowledge), members of the public are faced with choices about where to invest their political resources. In certain situations, levels of trust between institutions and individuals may be high. This may have one of two effects: Citizens may be encouraged to participate because they feel they can make a valuable contribution, or citizens may choose to defer the opportunity to participate, leaving those decisions to a group of trusted experts or other trusted representatives. In the latter instance, for example, we may consider such issues as water treatment to be fairly straightforward, with a limited but likely adequate number of technical solutions at our disposal. Therefore, extensive public deliberation may not be very beneficial or appropriate in this context. On the other hand, where solutions are less well defined and where distrust exists between individuals and institutions, the choices associated with situating personal resources become more obvious. If we don't trust the experts, then we want to be involved, to scrutinize, to debate, to influence the final outcome. In essence, variance in trust provides direction for individuals to invest their time and energy. This functional relationship between democracy and trust might be thought of as "distinct but complementary ways of making collective decisions and organizing collective actions. When one trusts, one forgoes the opportunity to influence decision making, on the assumption that there are shared or convergent interests between truster and trustee" (Warren 1999, 4).

If we can conclude from the natural resource literature that trusting relationships constitute a foundational quality of successful public participation, how do we reconcile the functional relationship between trust and democracy to which Warren refers? If deliberative processes are marked by a high level of trust, is it logical to conclude that citizens will continue to invest their political resources in those trusting relationships? Or are they just as likely to shift those resources into other areas of public life where distrust and uncertainty are more acute? In other words, does it make sense that interpersonal trust serves to further the democratic process? Perhaps not. Here, then, we can begin to observe the important distinction between interpersonal trust and institutional trust that deliberative democrats have attempted to articulate.

Again, it is useful to draw the source of this argument about institutional trust from historical and conceptions descriptions of the public sphere. In his early conceptions of the public sphere, Habermas argued that "citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion—that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions—about matters of general interest" (1964, 136). This argument for procedural norms associated with public deliberation is carried through in contemporary discussions regarding trust and democracy. Offe (1999), for instance, suggests that the kinds of problems facing contemporary society are unavoidably institutional. In other words, deliberative processes require "rules of the game" whereby all individuals, regardless of the quality of personal relationships, can trust the process to be fair, accessible, and safe. Individuals who may wish to participate in public

policy issues, who make a conscious choice to invest their political resources in a particular issue of concern (perhaps because they distrust the current actors in various ways), are more likely to enter such deliberative processes if certain guarantees are in place: namely, ones that assure their safety, allow their voice to be heard, and provide hope to influence outcomes. Trust, from this perspective, ceases to be interpersonal, and takes on an institutional flavor. Actors may not trust each other, but they do (or maybe hope to) trust the procedures for engagement. So from a deliberative democratic perspective, trust and public participation are intrinsically linked. But the deliberative democrat tends to emphasize the importance of institutional trust rather than interpersonal trust.

Moreover, some theorists are beginning to contemplate a functional role for distrust. "Distrust is essential not only to democratic progress but also, we might think, to the healthy suspicion of power upon which the vitality of democracy depends" (Warren 1999, 310). Other theorists are proposing a notion of "critical trust." Under certain conditions, citizens may be willing to participate in a deliberative process because those involved may have a history of reliability and are thought to deal in good faith, while at the same time they may be skeptical and question the utility of certain procedures and the accuracy of received information (Poortinga and Pidgeon 2003).

## Implications and Conclusions

This article introduces a deliberative democratic perspective to public participation in natural resource management. In most cases, we have only exposed some major threads in a richly textured and highly contrasting body of literature. However, for authors in the natural resource and the deliberative democratic literature, issues of decision making, inclusion, and trust loom large in theory and practice. Inasmuch as these are shared issues, we also observe several points of departure between these two literatures.

Specifically, a deliberative turn in natural resource management would focus on more than specific decision-making processes and would seek to understand the ubiquitous and amorphous networks and coalitions of discussion and debate that press on decision makers. With an interest in promoting or expanding available opportunities for public deliberation, researchers may study the factors that fuel public discussion and debate and how those deliberations are both enhanced and/or inhibited. Empirical work may also involve investigating how nodes of the public sphere (i.e., environmental groups, outdoor recreation organizations, citizen committees) connect with each other and how these deliberative processes are linked to public opinion.

Also, a deliberative turn would focus on forms of internal exclusion that are not commonly addressed in the natural resources literature. In this case, inclusion involves more than a seat at the table. It involves access that may require a radical expansion of allowable forms of communication. Cross-cultural communication such as greeting, rhetoric, and narrative may play an important role in lowering forms of internal exclusion and opening up entirely unique resource management alternatives.

Finally, a deliberative turn would focus on institutional levels of trust, rather than interpersonal levels of trust. In many deliberative settings, the cultivation of interpersonal trust may de-politicize public processes and limit the quality of critical

debate. If we trust those with knowledge and authority, then we are likely to become less scrutinizing, less critical, less aware of abuse and exploitation. In response, a notion of critical trust, where general trust in the process is coupled with a healthy skepticism of facts, may prove to be an important dimension of democratic decision making in natural resource management.

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