

Politicisation and Depoliticisation within the Deliberative System: assessing interactions and tensions of political communication

Politisation et dépolitisation au sein du système délibératif : analyse des interactions et des tensions de la communication politique

Politización y despolitización dentro del sistema deliberativo: análisis de las interacciones y las tensiones de la comunicación política

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Abstract

By adopting a systemic approach to deliberation, this article explores interactions and tensions in political communication across formal and informal settings of the political system. This theoretical framework helps bridge the gap between governmental state-centric approaches and theories of a broader public sphere. Two central arguments are advanced. First, deliberative democrats should pay far more attention to processes of politicisation and depoliticisation in a network of governance. Second, a model of hybrid and interconnected media is needed to analyse such interdependencies and tensions in a dynamic way. An illustrative case study is provided to discuss implications for new possibilities of empirical analysis within the systemic approach to deliberation.

Keywords

Deliberative system, Political communication, Public sphere, Media system.

Résumé

En adoptant une approche systémique de la délibération, cet article explore les interactions et les tensions dans la communication politique à travers les espaces formels et informels du système politique. Ce cadre théorique aide à combler un fossé entre les approches gouvernementales centrées sur l'État et les théories de la sphère publique. Deux arguments centraux sont avancés. Premièrement, les démocrates délibératifs devraient accorder plus d'attention aux processus de politisation et de dépolitisation dans un réseau de gouvernance. Deuxièmement, un modèle de médias hybrides et interconnectés est nécessaire pour analyser ces interdépendances et tensions de manière dynamique. Une étude de cas illustrative est présentée pour discuter des implications pour de nouvelles possibilités d'analyse empirique dans l'approche systémique de la délibération.

Mots clés

Système délibératif, Communication politique, Sphère publique, Système de médias.

Resumen

Al adoptar un enfoque sistémico de la deliberación, este artículo explora las interacciones y las tensiones en la comunicación política a través de los espacios formales e informales del sistema político. Este marco teórico ayuda a salvar una brecha entre los enfoques gubernamentales centrados en el estado y las teorías de la esfera pública más amplia. Dos argumentos centrales están avanzados. En primer lugar, los demócratas deliberativos deberían prestar más atención a los procesos de politización y despolitización en una red de gobernanza. En segundo lugar, se necesita un modelo de medios híbridos e interconectados para analizar tales interdependencias y tensiones de una manera dinámica. Se proporciona un estudio de caso ilustrativo para discutir las implicaciones de las nuevas posibilidades del análisis empírico dentro del enfoque sistémico de la deliberación.

Palabras clave

Sistema deliberativo, Comunicación política, Esfera pública, Sistema de medios.

Introduction

Democracy is facing several challenges nowadays. These challenges stem from the large and widening gap between governors and the governed, the rise of anti-politics, and the nationalistic, discriminatory and explicitly anti-human rights agenda of several populist political representatives. In this context, deliberative democratic theory, which has been considered the “most active area” of political theory (Dryzek, 2007, p. 237, 2016; Mansbridge et al., 2012; Thompson, 2008), should pay ever more attention to the nexus between depoliticisation and anti-politics. Thus, amongst the challenges for deliberative democrats is the need to understand interactions and tensions in public communication, across formal decision-making institutions and informal settings and wider publics.

In this article, I advance two related arguments. First, the systemic approach to deliberation is better equipped than both governmental state-centric approaches and theories of broader public sphere to capture interactions and tensions in political communication across formal and informal settings. Yet,

deliberative democrats should pay far more attention to processes of politicisation and depoliticisation in a network of governance. The second argument developed in this article is that a model of hybrid and interconnected media is needed to analyse such interdependencies and tensions in a dynamic way. In other words, analyses of both massive and interpersonal communication in practical situations must be combined. This chapter illustrates this argument by describing a case study that investigates collective reason-exchange by providing a bridge between different discursive arenas and citizens' informal political discussions. The conclusion discusses implications for new possibilities of empirical analysis within the systemic approach to deliberation.

A systemic approach to deliberation: assessing politicisation and depoliticisation

The appeal to expand the scale of analysis of deliberation that occurs in single institutions or forums to include complex interrelations in a political system has been advanced in various ways in the past decade (Goodin, 2005; Habermas, 1996, 2006, 2009; Hendriks, 2006; Mansbridge, 1999; Neblo, 2005; Parkinson, 2006; Thompson, 2008). Only recently, however, have scholars explicitly embraced a systemic approach as a research agenda (Dryzek, 2016; Elstub, 2015; Maia, 2012, 2017, 2018; Maia, Laranjeira and Mundim, 2017; Mansbridge et al., 2012; Mendonça, 2016; Neblo, 2015; Niemeyer, 2014). The chief concern now is to assess a variety of arenas, institutions and actors, as well as the interconnection and combination of parts of the political system.

The systemic approach to deliberation has been defined as the 'third phase' in deliberative studies (Elstub, 2015; Maia, 2012; Mansbridge et al., 2012), following the stage of political philosophical debates on normative controversies and the "empirical turn". Earlier studies were concerned with inquiry into theoretical problems - such as the type of communication needed for deliberation; the role of argumentation and issues of power, bargaining and strategy; the type of equality required in deliberative politics; the outcomes expected from deliberation; the notion of consensus, either conceptualized as a unanimous agreement or as multi-level understandings, and so forth. The studies in the second phase, having an empirical feature, became mostly devoted to understanding specificities of a vast range of deliberatively-designed initiatives applied worldwide. Certainly, deliberative theory has developed in different directions; a number of disagreements persist within each field, and theories intertwine and constantly change in face of various evidences provided by empirical research.

In such developments, a gap was observed between macro and micro approaches, insofar as studies were informed either (a) by public sphere theories focusing on discursive exchange as an informal and unstructured process throughout society or (b) by mini-public theories focusing on bounded discussions taking place in particular settings or institutions, encompassing organized publics (Chambers, 2009; Hendriks, 2006; Maia, 2012; Miège, 2010). In this section, I argue that a systemic approach is welcome to bridge this gap and provide a more complex picture of various levels of public communication, and tensions across private and public, civic and state-controlled domains. Still, more attention is required to survey how deliberation relates to processes of depoliticisation and politicisation.

The concept of the "public sphere", mainly based on Habermas' (1989, 1996) thinking, has inspired scholars from ever broader fields. While this philosopher's writings on the public sphere have evolved over the decades, they have retained the core idea that political legitimacy of collective decision making on issues of common concern is achieved through public reasoned discussions and mutual justifications. By reconstructing a process of public deliberation in contemporary society in *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas (1996) uses his refined theoretical framework organized around functional subsystems and the *lifeworld*, which includes multiple forms of life. He makes clear that the public sphere, regarded as the *Locus* of argumentative discussion, cannot be understood

as an “institution” or a “place” because it refers to *the use* that the subjects make of communication, particularly related to argumentative exchange (Habermas, 1996, p. 361). To counter the unitary view of the public sphere, Habermas suggests a typology of public sphere, differentiated according to “density of communication, organizational complexity, and range” (Habermas, 1996, p. 374). He discusses the *episodic public sphere*, referring to informal argumentative processes in various everyday environments; the *public sphere of occasional publics of organized presence*, referring to gatherings and meetings in forums created by voluntary associations and civil organizations; and the *abstract public sphere*, referring to single readers, listeners, and spectators spread out globally. Furthermore, in contrast to his earlier works, Habermas (1996, 2009) argues that different actors should fulfill distinct functions in relation to public deliberation. Thus, *Between Facts and Norms* avoids the cognitive overburden of citizens that is generated by the expectation that laypersons will be able to interpret and present effective solutions to highly complex problems in contemporary society. Daily conversation that spreads through private or semi-public domains has a special capacity, according to Habermas (1996), to allow for a more sensitive perception of “new problem situations”, and produce interpretations of needs and interests from the citizens’ own perspectives. Civil associations or social movements are especially apt to “exercise public influence”: “give voice to social problems, make broad demands, articulate public interests or needs, and thus attempt to influence the political process” (Habermas, 1996, p. 355). Experts have a set of skills that allows them to test beliefs, ideas and arguments with regard to a particular subject matter; they can provide technical information and appraise the consequences of certain actions, in order to clarify controversial issues. Under favourable conditions, experts may help political representatives and the public at large to engage more effectively in decision-making processes. The public sphere thus assumes a network structure insofar as reasoning together processes encompasses different categories of actors; and it can be observed in singular places as well as across settings. The public sphere presents distinct configurations in terms of spatially, temporally, and institutionally variations.

A number of scholars have rightly contended that the Habermasian theoretical framework does not provide middle-level generalizations about the various mechanisms through which civil society shapes public policy. John Dryzek (2006) points out that Habermas’ linkage of the civil-social periphery to the political center is grounded on “loose connections” (Habermas, 1996, p. 61). In a similar vein, Robert Goodin (2008) states that when deliberative theorists are pressed to go beyond illustrative examples of how civil society concerns make their way into the formal political process, they often tend to “*go meta* and start talking in pretty ungrounded ways” (Goodin, 2008, p. 261).

In this context, several types of deliberatively-designed mini-publics, applied worldwide, have demonstrated how deliberation might actually be institutionalized in contemporary democracies. In contrast to the abstract and fuzzy nature of interactions in the “wild public sphere”, as conceptualized by Habermas, studies focusing on mini-publics were concerned to provide specific evidences for those who deliberate; the types of behavior enacted by participants (for example, how informed, respectful, able to make reasonable considerations and open to listen to the view of others); the level of opinion change or participants satisfaction with the process.

No doubt, mini-public initiatives demonstrate many of the desirable consequences of deliberation (Fishkin, 2009; Grönlund, Bächtiger and Setälä, 2014; Neblo, 2015; Niemeyer, 2014; Warren and Pearse, 2008). These forums can demonstrate how the demanding normative principles of deliberation can work in practice, especially when the initiatives are designed to produce the representativeness of citizens’ aspirations and interests; to offer incentives for considered reflection and learning, including provision of plural information and the opportunity to listen to competing experts; and to facilitate equal discussion among participants. Moreover, mini-public experiences have been highly productive in spawning new insights related to various types of connection between citizens and decision-making bodies (Grönlund, Bächtiger and Setälä, 2014; Warren and Pearse, 2008).

Thus, I concur that mini-publics are to be seen as one of the most innovative and promising experiences of democracy. However, we should not assume that they are necessarily more democratic than loose communication in the broader public sphere. It is important to keep in mind that mini-public initiatives can also suffer from poor debate quality and monopolization of a few participants. The political elites may organize mini-publics just to satisfy the public or the opposition; they can control the process in other domains and use these experiences as a manoeuvre to replace wider forms of citizens' judgement (Grönlund, Bächtiger and Setälä, 2014; Hendriks, 2016; Parkinson, 2006; Strandberg and Grönlund, 2014). Thus, mini-publics can be as equally problematic as loose discussion in the public sphere; and such experiences can become deeply depoliticising, particularly when seen in a network of governance.

The systemic approach seems to bridge the macro and micro traditions that have developed side by side in the studies of deliberation. Rather than focus on a separate forum or a single institution to investigate whether the discussions taking place meet or do not meet the standards of deliberation, scholars have sought to understand how different agents and organizations perform different functions; and to assess how separate moments can have different virtues of deliberation conceived as a society-wide process (Goodin, 2005; Neblo, 2005). Beyond state-centric approaches focusing on elite decision-making, there is a well-established understanding now that a deliberative system cannot be conceived without a picture of an enlarged public sphere, besides governmentally shaped forums and mini-publics (Bächtiger and Wegmann, 2013; Chambers, 2017; Dryzek and Hendriks, 2012; Habermas, 1996, 2009; Maia, 2017; Mansbridge et al., 2012; Niemeyer, 2014). Indeed, large-scale processes such as legitimation of norms and building confidence for policies unavoidably require the engagement of wider publics. Informal political discussions are important for constituting a broader public sphere for at least three reasons (Maia, 2017): discovery and articulation problems from the perspective of those affected and concerned citizens; transformation of topics into issues of public concern; and public criticism aiming at correcting the malfunctioning of governmental bodies, political manoeuvres and resisting co-options.

For developing my argument, I would like to emphasize that since public political discussions occur through various forms of interactions, one cannot fail to appreciate distinct concomitant possibilities for politicisation and depoliticisation in the private, public and governmental spheres. I will pay attention to the "discursive" dimension of such processes, referring to speech acts, discourses and ideas. My key argument is that an analysis that focuses exclusively either on institutions (referring to policy-making or institutional reforms) or on publics (referring to citizens' claims or collective demands) will be conducive to narrow assessments.

I draw here on Colin Hay's (2007) notion of three types of politicisation/depoliticisation (see also Fawcett, Flinders, Hay and Wood, 2017). In brief, the most basic form of politicisation (Type I) is associated to the agents' capacity to articulate harms as socially-constructed problems, in such a way that such matters are no longer be seen as located in the realm of fate or necessity. For instance, the citizens' ability to speak out about their own immediacies regarding their identities, aspirations and needs, in order to identify structural factors and social obstacles to their emancipation or self-realization, is a crucial requirement for developing their autonomy as well as for ensuring intelligibility of injustice. Type II of politicisation refers to the transformation of topics into issues of public concern, rather than individual or private wellbeing. Free communicative exchange across distinct groups in a complex web of relations in society is essential for processing moral disagreements, conflict of interests and details of the common good, and thus advance recognition of rights, achievements and mutual commitments. Finally, Type III of politicisation is associated to institutionalization processes, including legislative debates on the issue at stake, new laws or public policies to enforce the responsibility of governmental bodies.

However, in most contentious debates, particularly when there is an intense conflict of interests and a high level of uncertainty, we should expect that processes of politicisation go hand in hand with those

of depoliticisation. Type 1 of depoliticisation in the governmental sphere includes the politicians' attempts to deflect blame for wrongdoings and evade responsibility or accountability for policy revision. Under this circumstance, elected politicians typically seek to delegate responsibility to extra-governmental organizations, parastatal or semi-independent bodies for carrying out alleged governmental tasks or for providing remedies to detected problems. Type II of depoliticisation involves privatization as well as efforts to retreat public issues into the private sphere. The existence of choices is no longer debated and questions of public concerns are seen as matters of the individuals' concerns. Hence, neither the state nor the society at large is called to cooperate to alleviate such problems. The final form of depoliticisation (Type 3) is based on denial of the social dimension of problems. Again, harms, deficiencies or failures are regarded as results of individual-level behaviors, competencies and choices, rather than grounded on economic-social structures or embedded in societal culture. Thus, such issues are regarded as problems of the individual alone and no institutional, collective, responses or shared responsibilities are appropriate for regulation.

That said, I understand that a systemic approach provides scholars with broader lenses to capture complex, and often contradictory, relations between governmental and civic spheres, public and private spaces, formal and informal arenas. This framework is more suitable than both state-centric and civic-driven perspectives to capture the diffusion of discourses (and underlying ideas and values) mobilized by a range of interdependent actors in distinct institutions and arenas of the political system. Paying more attention to the interplay of the aforementioned three faces of politicisation and depoliticisation provides a more sophisticated and dynamic analysis of the current challenges of democracy, such the gap between governors and the governed, the rise of anti-politics, and the discriminatory and explicitly anti-human rights trends.

The Hybrid and Interconnected Media Environment across Forums and Wider Publics

It should be emphasized that both politicising and depoliticising discourses can be initiated within and outside the state (Fawcett, Flinders, Hay and Wood, 2017; Hay, 2007). In ethically pluralist societies, we should thus expect multiple struggles in the constitution of public debates insofar as specific social actors refuse to even listen to the demanding group; others contest their claims and defend the *status quo*; others may be willing to cooperate dialogically and negotiate mutually acceptable courses of action or find ways of living together; and still others may make antagonistic demands (Habermas, 1996; Honneth, 1996, 2003, 2012; Maia, 2014). In this section, I argue that a better understanding of today's hybrid media environment – one that merges mass and interpersonal communication and produces mixed-media relationships – is necessary for a critical perspective of connections among parts of a deliberative system (Maia, 2017, 2018 -forthcoming).

Governmental agents, policymakers and politicians have been increasingly motivated to create their own political communication. Digital participatory innovations ask citizens to submit suggestions to public authorities, participate in public consultations, or engage in discussions to form opinions and make recommendations at local, regional, national, or transnational levels. Mass media-based communication and digital technologies have significantly enlarged the spaces for discussion on current facts and issues (Chadwick, 2013; Coleman and Moss, 2012; Kies and Nanz, 2013; Margetts and Dunleavy, 2013; Maia, 2017, 2018 forthcoming; Strandberg and Grönlund, 2014). We have been witnessing an increasing interplay between information from mass-mediated sources and interpersonal sources, to the extent that individuals disseminate news in a many-to-many format within SNSs; and thus distribute the cost of collecting, selecting, and analysing news among other participants. Platforms of citizens' self-generated content, such as blogs, video sharing and social media usually act as “re-framers” of issues on the mass media and public agenda, by interrogating, challenging, making public assertions, or taking public positions (Barnidge, 2015; Coe, Kenski and Raimis, 2014; Klofstad, Sokhey and McClurg, 2013). Social movements and civic entities are

particularly active for spreading messages across a variety of audiences and publics, running campaigns, promoting protests, providing political representation, sustaining public debates, and exerting pressure to shape decision-making (Dahlgren 2013; della Porta, 2012; Cammaerts, Mattoni and McCurdy, 2013). Moreover, ordinary citizens, via multi-platform communication, personally shape their messages through a diversity of dynamics, such as creating news-like materials, directly contacting political representatives, creating public events, starting a mobilization, and so forth (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl, 2012).

These communicative encounters play out freely in the hybrid and interconnected media environment – across governmentally-shaped forums, mass media-based arenas, civic associations and everyday environments. As I have argued, such communicative exchange processes shared interpretations of needs, rights, and achievements as well as interpretations that deny the existence of choices, define issues as fate-like occurrences, propose individualized responses to collective social challenges, and attempt to close down public debate *per se*.

Clearly, concerns with processes of politicisation and depoliticisation direct our attention to the central role played by the mass media—in promoting the visibility of politically relevant issues, setting the political agenda, framing topics, scrutinizing and evaluating those in authority, and so on. Recent research in the digital environment has provided vast evidences for observing variations in the online political discussion in different platforms, regarding the levels of users' identifiability, the role of moderation, the exposure or lack of exposure to political differences, and the purpose of the digital forum and its context (Coleman and Moss, 2012; Maia, 2014; Maia and Rezende, 2016; Strandberg and Grönlund, 2014; Stromer-Galley and Wichowski, 2011; Sunstein, 2017). However, most research on political discussion or deliberation has been restricted to one type of media. Rather than focusing on just a portion of the media environment, either on traditional mainstream media or on social network sites, more attention to the hybrid and interconnected media environment is needed to understand how mass communication merges with interpersonal communication. Mixed-media relationships involve up-and-down communication around houses of formal government and the civil society, including interest groups, civic organizations, informal networks and private discussions. Such a hybrid and interconnected media model is thus important for capturing, in a dynamic way, the diversified, complex, and usually contradictory processes of politicisation, depoliticisation and re-politicisation within the political system, as discussed in the previous section.

By using an empirical case, I would like to briefly illustrate how multiple digital platforms are becoming ever more important for citizens to engage in political discussions in ways that traverse the institutional-formal forums in the centre of the political system and civic arenas. In a recent research, we have examined citizens' online discussions about a controversial issue – the reduction of the age of criminal responsibility in Brazil – in settings that have distinct functions within a deliberative system: public hearings organized by the Brazilian Senate, the news media, and an activist Facebook Page (“18 reasons for saying ‘no’ to reduction of the age of criminal responsibility”, which was built by 153 civic associations in favour of the adolescents' rights (Maia et al., 2015). In brief, the online platform hosted by the Senate allows citizens who could not participate directly in discussions in the public hearings to do so in a virtual manner. News media websites for comments enable citizens to scrutinize news on the issue at stake, display opinions publicly and regard opinions of other readers. By its turn, the Facebook page exposes citizens to partisan information and offers the opportunity for them to participate in discussions regarding activist campaigns.

It should be stressed that there was a near unanimous acceptance of the proposal for lowering the age of criminal responsibility in Brazil when this study was conducted – opinion surveys demonstrated

that over 90% of the population supported the reduction policy¹. Our analysis revealed political elites – defined here as agents who dedicate their primary activities to politics or public affairs, such as politicians, government officials, spokespersons of social movements and civic entities – attempted to politicise the issue; and good institutional conditions existed for public deliberation in the main arenas selected in our study. Interestingly, most participants (politicians, experts and civic associations) in the public hearings challenged hegemonic discourses and contested the reduction proposal; news media articles presented heterogeneous information and a balanced share of pro and con arguments; and civic entities, via the activist campaign in the Facebook page, provided a set of justifications to oppose such a policy. However, our analysis on citizens’ online discussions revealed that commenters used dominant frames and one-dimensional argumentation in the digital platforms attached to the three aforementioned arenas. Commenters, while feverishly engaging in discussion, failed to consider the plurality of arguments available to assess causes and alternative recommendations for dealing with young offenders. In online discussions, the adolescents breaking the law was mostly framed as an individual’s choice (heinous acts as freely and wrongfully inflicted) rather than a social problem; and the large majority of discussants admitted only one solution (imprisonment), and thus foreclosed debate over alternative or unfamiliar solutions. Despite being exposed to diverse perspectives and a pool of conflicting reasons in a legislative forum, the news media arena and an activist social media, citizens’ pre-deliberative consensus persisted.

This study is useful for illustrating that success of deliberation seen as a broader process depends not only on the right institutional settings, or the right actor motivations and strategies in particular forums, but also on the capacity to deliberatively engage wider publics in a continuum of political practices. Events of deliberation *per se*, regardless of their empirical finality, are part of larger discursive processes in society. Patterns of political discussion achieved in any forum compete with other discursive arenas and other publics. The issue of lowering the age of criminal responsibility explicitly or implicitly brings about historical social conflicts in Brazil. It is linked to public safety concerns that evoke “moral panics”, since the growing violence in Brazil is a harm deeply felt by a large number of citizens, including the sense of an existential threat. Our findings suggest that not all problems identified in the deliberative system can be resolved through deliberation. Rather, some problems require a broader critique of economic conditions in which the deliberative system is located. A better understanding of cultural and psychological aspects behind broader citizens’ judgments is also required.

Final considerations

In this article, I have sought to grasp interactions and tensions in political communication across governmental and broader public sphere, focusing on different forms of politicisation and depoliticisation. By adopting the systemic approach to deliberation, I am not suggesting that the macro–micro distinction be rejected or that their lines of demarcation be obliterated. Depending on the research project, a micro-, meso-, or macro-level of analysis obviously continues to be important to observe specific variables, forms of logic, and dynamics at play. My point is that keeping in mind a systemic perspective and possible micro–macro linkages can improve the efficacy of explanations of the relationships among categories of actors, deliberative moments, and discursive contexts. I have argued that more attention should be paid, regardless of whether one is moving “downwards” or

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¹ A June 2013 survey (National Transports Confederation) revealed that 92.7% of Brazilians favoured a penal age reduction from age 18 to 16. Another poll conducted by DataFolha, published in April 2013, pointed that 93% of São Paulo citizens were in favour of changing the current legislation.

“upwards” in the analysis, to competing pressures across private and public, civic and state-controlled domains; and the interplay of different forms of politicisation and depoliticisation.

The notion of deliberative system is also very valuable to appraising the role of the media in a nuanced way. Thinking more seriously about media-based communication and connections among arenas, including wider publics in a continuum of political practices, points to the interdependencies and the “nexus” between depoliticisation and repoliticisation across governmental sectors and civil society spaces. Beyond media-centric approaches, the hybrid and interconnected media model facilitates a more sophisticated account of discourses, strategies, narratives and performances, not as isolated practices, but as complex outcomes of diverse categories of actors, who have distinct functional roles, often conflicting interests and unequal resources and opportunities for interacting and influencing others in public.

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