# Four models of the public sphere in modern democracies

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What qualities should the public sphere have to nurture and sustain a vigorous democratic public life?[1] More specifically, who should be participating and on what occasions? What should be the form and content of their contributions to public discourse? How should the actors communicate with each other? What are the desirable outcomes if the process is working as it should? These are normative questions that have been important issues in political theory for many years. Classical theorists such as Rousseau, Locke, and Mill provide certain broad parameters in which answers can be sought; contemporary political theory develops the answers in more detail. There is a close link between theories of the public sphere and democratic theory more generally. Democratic theory focuses on accountability and responsiveness in the decision-making process; theories of the public sphere focus on the role of public communication in facilitating or hindering this process.

Our purpose, here, is to review four traditions of democratic theory, mining them for the answers they suggest for the public sphere and, more particularly, for mass media discourse in "actually existing democracies."[2] We regard our categorization as a convenient organizing tool for attempting to identify normative criteria that play a significant role within and across perspectives. A number of writers overlap traditions or make shifts over time, so we consider their ideas wherever it seems most convenient. Often we will find different traditions calling attention to similar criteria and sometimes there are different emphases among theorists we are grouping together and calling a tradition. The boundaries do not really matter for our purpose of unpacking the normative criteria for mass media discourse that they collectively imply. In further work, we show how these criteria can be operationalized and apply them to abortion discourse in Germany and the United States.

We label the four traditions as Representative Liberal, Participatory Liberal, Discursive, and Constructionist. In each of the traditions sketched below, we attempt to highlight the ideas we see as being shared – thus defining a tradition – and to highlight the specific normative criteria that each perspective would endorse and emphasize. At the end, we summarize these criteria in terms of *who* should speak, the content of the process (*what*), style of speech preferred (*how*), and the relationship between discourse and decision-making (*outcomes)* that is sought (or feared). Finally, we compare the hierarchy of values expressed by each tradition, and briefly report some findings of the empirical study we have undertaken that suggest that Germany and the United States each conforms more closely to the standards of different traditions.

### Representative liberal theory

We group a range of theories under this rubric. At one end are those who take a strongly elitist and conservative stance – the "school of democratic elitism," as Peter Bachrach calls it.[3] At this end, theorists so much fear the participation of "the rabble" in democratic politics that they wish to see filters and barriers erected to diminish the citizen's role. At the other end are writers who want a strong and well-functioning public sphere, but see its role as strengthening a system of formal representation through political parties that secures the real basis of democracy. We focus particularly on theories that accept the desirability of a public sphere but one in which general public participation is limited and largely indirect.

One can trace roots of representative liberal theory back to John Stuart Mill and such skeptical commentators on popular democracy and the French revolution as Edmund Burke.[4] Joseph Schumpeter's *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* is a classic modern articulation. More contemporary exemplars include Anthony Downs's *An Economic Theory of Democracy* and William Kornhauser's *The Politics of Mass Society.*[5]

This tradition shares the assumption that ultimate authority in society rests with the citizenry. Citizens need policy makers who are ultimately accountable to them but they do not need to participate in public discourse on policy issues. Not only do they not need to, but public life is actually better off if they don't. This is the "realist" school of democ-

racy – the belief that ordinary citizens are poorly informed and have no serious interest in public affairs, and are generally ill-equipped for political participation. Hence, it is both natural and desirable for citizens to be passive, quiescent, and limited in their political participation in a well-functioning, party-led democracy.

For representative liberal theorists, the citizen's main role is to choose periodically which among competing teams of would-be office holders will exercise public authority. Some would argue that such voting should be the only role, while others would accept some limited direct participation in public discourse as completely appropriate, although not so important that it demands active encouragement by the media. If the media are doing their job, citizens will be encouraged to vote, and the media will provide enough information about the parties and candidates so that citizens can choose intelligently among them. If citizens are dissatisfied with what they are getting, they can "vote the rascals out." In the interim between elections, officials need to respond to problems that are technically complex and most people have neither the inclination nor the ability to master the issues involved. Representative liberals thus place particular weight on political parties as bearers of public discourse.

From this perspective, an important criterion of good public discourse is its *transparency*. It should reveal what citizens need to know about the workings of their government, the parties that aggregate and represent their interests, and the office-holders they have elected to make policy on their behalf. Inclusion is important, not in the sense of giving ordinary citizens a chance to be heard, but in the sense that their representatives should have the time and space to present their contrasting positions fully and accurately.

Inclusion should depend on having a legitimate representative to articulate one's preferred frame in a public forum. Those citizens who feel their views are insufficiently represented have the political obligation to use the representative process being offered. Without their own representative at the table, their preferred frames will, appropriately, be largely disregarded. This is legitimate, since such views are, at best, irrelevant in practice, and can be potentially dangerous.

We will call this standard *elite dominance*. The public sphere, according to representative liberalism, should reflect the public's representatives. The larger and more representative the party or organization, the

more voice it has earned in the media, and the more powerful it should be in shaping decisions. This suggests a criterion of *proportionality* – that is, media standing and the amount of coverage of the frames of different actors should be more or less proportional to their share of the electoral vote for parties, or to membership size for relevant civil society actors. Thus, government officials, major party spokespersons, and large formal organizations that can credibly claim to represent the interests of a substantial portion of the population should dominate the public sphere. The nature and quality of their relations with the mass media are central to evaluations of the quality of public discourse in general.

To expect citizens to be actively engaged in public life is seen by advocates of this view as, at best, wishful thinking, what Edwin Baker in summarizing this theory, characterizes as "romantic but idle fantasy."[6] And sometimes encouraging such engagement obstructs and complicates the problems of democratic governance by politicizing and oversimplifying complex problems that require skilled leadership and technical expertise. The media can play a positive role in assuring transparency – for example, by exposing corruption and incompetence and providing the public with reliable information about what is actually happening. But they can also play a negative role if they give too much voice to those who misunderstand, oversimplify, or distort issues to serve their own personal agendas.

The media should encourage a dialogue among the informed, and most citizens are not well-informed enough to contribute. There are exceptions – citizens defined as "experts," either on the political process in general, or on the substantive matter under discussion. This criterion of representative liberalism, *expertise*, emphasizes its value in informing the people's representatives in making wise decisions, rather than in informing the public.

Ideally, experts should not be stakeholders in the conflict, but disinterested and without any political agenda. From this position, they can dispassionately advise. Representative liberal theorists are realistic enough to recognize that, in conflict situations, opposing sides will often have their own technical experts. This only enhances the value of independent experts who have no political axe to grind. Experts should play a particularly strong role in defining the issues before they reach the stage at which decisions need to be reached.

In some versions, journalists themselves should play the role of dispassionate expert. From their inside knowledge of the political process and their research on the substantive issues, journalists acquire expertise that they should share with decision-makers and attentive publics. As advisors to decision-makers in their commentary, journalists are expected to take a position on the issues at stake and so guide officials toward more knowledgeable choices. Editorial opinion should reflect what journalists, as experts, think is right and need not be either representative or neutral. But the "chattering classes" should not usurp the appropriate role of parties and elected representatives who, as accountable decision-making elites, should ultimately dominate public discourse.

When it comes to evaluating the *content* of public discourse, the operant metaphor for representative liberalism is the free marketplace of ideas.[7] Restrictions on content are inherently suspect. The criterion of proportionality legitimately excludes those ideas held by small minorities but this does not exclude them on substantive grounds. Whether any content is too extreme to be permitted is a matter for debate.

In Germany, groups or ideas that are judged to be "hostile to the constitution" (*verfassungsfeindlich*) are formally excluded, and denial of the Holocaust, use of Nazi symbols, and advocacy of Nazi views are legally prohibited. In the United States, no ideas are formally excluded but the "specter of Communism" was used to allow both government and private actors to suppress and punish advocates of socialist ideas throughout most of the twentieth century.[8] But even the exclusion of "anti-democratic" ideas is problematic for representative liberal theorists, and is not clearly normative.

This openness to a range of ideas does not extend to a range of styles of expression. On the *how* question, the prescribed form of communication is *detachment* – a rejection of the expression of emotion. To betray emotions through one's facial expression or body language suggests that one's arguments are driven by them rather than by cool reason.

> In a democratic society, reasonable decisions are preferable to unreasonable ones; considered thought leads to the former, emotions to the latter; therefore, deliberation is preferable to visceral reaction as a basis for democratic decision-making. [This view] prescribes that citizens are to approach the subject of politics with temperate consideration and objective analysis, that is, to use their heads when making judgments about public affairs. Conversely, people are not to react emotionally to political phenomena. A de-

mocracy in which citizens evaluate politics affectively, to use the current language of social psychology, presumably leaves much to be desired.[9]

In this view, emotion and reason are defined as inherently contradictory. As a result, all impassioned appeals are suspect.

Representative liberalism endorses a normative standard of *civility*, that is, a way of speaking politically that does not inflame passion or permit *ad hominem* attacks upon other speakers. It is not the same as detachment since civility is perfectly consistent with the expression of positive emotions such as empathy, but it dovetails nicely with detachment. Detachment focuses on one's emotional relationship to one's own ideas while civility is about how one treats the ideas of those who disagree.

Because there is no universal standard by which we can resolve normative disagreements, others have a right to their contrary opinions. This implies respectful disagreement and the avoidance of verbal attacks on others. Speakers can say anything they want, but they ought to avoid saying it in a deliberately offensive and provocative way and be prepared to defend it against reasoned argument.

Representatives are elected in order to decide for the people, and once a decision is reached, there is no further need for debate. Representative liberal theory endorses a norm of *closure* – a time at which all concerned can agree that the matter has been decided and the system moves on. The public sphere should be full of discourse on a subject in the period leading up to a decision, but once a decision is reached, the media should move on to other issues on which decisions are still pending.

The model is that of an election: the winner and loser alike acknowledge their respective positions, the winner takes a place in the system, the loser concedes graciously, and the contest is set aside until the next appropriate time for a decision comes around. It is enough that the discussion has taken place in a public and informed manner, and that a majority of legitimate, accountable representatives have decided on a particular policy. Even if no decision can be reached, closure is desirable lest endless and irreconcilable debate ensue. Debate that is not leading to a decision is potentially harmful, because it appears to call into question the ability of decision-makers to meet citizen needs effectively.

In summary, representative liberal theory particularly focuses on the question of who participates and, related to the normative value it places on *elite dominance*, it endorses the following criteria: *transparency, proportionality, expertise, a free market place of ideas, detachment, civility*, and *closure*. A public sphere designed to produce wise decisions by accountable representatives organized in political parties best serves the needs of democracy.

**Participatory liberal theory**

The common thread in participatory liberal theories is the desirability of maximizing the participation of citizens in the public decisions that affect their lives. To do this, they should, to the extent feasible, be active participants in the public sphere as part of an ongoing process. Participation enhances the public sphere, allowing for the emergence of something approximating a general will, and improves the individual, by drawing on and developing the person's highest capacities for action. With roots in Rousseau's preference for direct democracy over representative democracy, writers in this tradition often share a distrust of institutional barriers and mediating structures that make participation indirect and difficult. While Paul Hirst refers to this as an "associative democracy," Benjamin Barber calls his version "strong democracy"[10]:

> Strong democracy is defined by politics in the participatory mode: literally it is self-government by citizens rather than representative government in the name of citizens. Active citizens govern themselves directly here, not necessarily at every level and in every instance, but frequently enough and in particular when basic policies are being decided and when significant power is deployed. Self government is carried on through institutions designed to facilitate ongoing civic participation in agenda-setting, deliberation, legislation, and policy implementation (in the form of "common work").

In a complex modern democracy, no one expects or desires that all citizens spend all their time discussing public affairs and directly deciding on public policies. Inevitably, there must be delegation to mediators who aggregate and articulate one's discursive interests in the public sphere. But this implies a particular relationship between these mediators and the citizens on behalf of whom they speak. Robert Michels in 1911 described how even social democratic parties with ideological beliefs in participatory democracy became staff driven rather than member driven.[11]. Although Michels himself never used the phrase, others characterized his argument as an "iron law of oli-

garchy." The iron law, it turns out, is more conditional than Michels recognized in his argument; still, the tendency toward oligarchy is common enough.[12]

In the participatory liberal tradition, organizations with active forms of member participation and a leadership that is accountable to members are more desirable mediators than those who are only nominally accountable to members, as many modern political parties may be. More centralized and bureaucratic organizations with a division of labor can be accountable. Indeed, some degree of centralization and bureaucratization may serve the wider goal of effectively mobilizing large numbers of citizens to act politically on their own behalf, rather than merely delegating their political interests to others.[13]

Furthermore, participation in public discourse is an ongoing process and the participation of these grassroots actors should be continuous – not simply something that occurs periodically during election campaigns or only at the beginning of the decision process. Writers in this tradition typically share with the discursive and constructionist traditions discussed below the belief that preferences and abilities for judging public issues emerge in the process of public deliberation. Participation transforms individuals into public citizens. In this view, political interests are not given *a priori* by the descriptive characteristics of people, but produced in the political process. To quote Barber again:

> In place of a search for a pre-political independent ground or for an immutable rational plan, strong democracy relies on participation in an evolving problem-solving community that creates public ends where there were none before by means of its own activity.… In such communities, public ends are neither extrapolated from absolutes nor "discovered" in a preexisting "hidden consensus." They are literally forged through the act of public participation, created through common deliberation and common action and the effect that deliberation and action have on interests, which change shape and direction when subjected to these participatory processes.[14]

*Popular inclusion*, as we label this criterion, has implications for media content. As Peter Dahlgren puts it, the public sphere should provide "the institutional sites where popular political will should take form and citizens should be able to constitute themselves as active agents in the political process.… The goal is to establish structures of broadcasting in the public interest … which optimize diversity in terms of information, viewpoints and forms of expression, and which foster full and active citizenship."[15]

Similarly, James Curran argues "The basic requirement of a democratic media system should be … that it represents all significant interests in society. It should facilitate their participation in the public domain, enable them to contribute to public debate and have an input in the framing of public policy."[16] Or, in the hopeful words of James Carey, citizens will "reawaken when they are addressed as a conversational partner and are encouraged [by the media] to join the talk rather than sit passively as spectators before a discussion conducted by journalists and [political] experts."[17]

Popular inclusion does not simply demand a passive non-exclusion nor encourage only a top-down transparency for governmental action. It places normative demands on media to seek out and actively facilitate the inclusion of diverse speakers and interests. In addition to the voices of member-driven organizations, the voices of ordinary citizens ought to be present. Formal credentials should not be a prerequisite for participation; the participatory liberal tradition rejects the norm of *expertise* that representative liberals endorse.

The argument that public participation transforms individuals into engaged citizens implies that media content should first and foremost encourage *empowerment*. This requires that media discourse should address a major impediment to political engagement. As John Gaventa argues, people often do not rise up to challenge even decisions that are contrary to their own interests because one of the "hidden aspects" of political power is its ability to obscure real lines of cleavage and conflict in a society.[18] Mainstream political parties, with their stake in the status quo, often collaborate in discouraging more extended citizen engagement that might curtail the power of party leaders.

Participatory liberalism thus draws on a long and rich history of social and political conflict theories, including many social movement theories, to suggest that social inequality is typically reproduced by a variety of social, political, and cultural practices. To challenge such entrenched inequalities, people need to be actively mobilized to recognize and act on their own interests. From this perspective, therefore, social movements have a positive role to play in mobilizing individuals – especially those who are socially and politically disadvantaged – to develop and act on political commitments. Since engagement in politics is itself a spur to developing political awareness, media discourse that facilitates such mobilization is desirable.

From their basic commitment to empowerment, writers diverge in evaluating the styles of communication that will best contribute to this goal. Some advocates of the participatory liberal tradition extend the criterion of empowerment to reject the norm of *civility*, at least as representative liberal theory interprets it. Polemical speech acts or symbols that capture the emotional loading of public issues as well as their cognitive content can play a very important mobilizing role. Randall Kennedy, for example, criticizes what he calls the "civility movement."

> The civility movement is deeply at odds with what an invigorated liberalism requires: intellectual clarity; an insistence upon grappling with the substance of controversies; and a willingness to fight loudly, openly, militantly, even rudely for policies and values that will increase freedom, equality, and happiness in America and around the world.[19]

Style, in this view, is intertwined with empowerment. Speech that mobilizes people to participate places them in a position in which their awareness of the complexity of politics can grow through their participation in the political process itself. Thus even "emotional" slogans such as "abortion takes an innocent life" or "my belly belongs to me" should directly foster a more inclusive public sphere and indirectly lead, through greater participation, to a more politically competent and knowledgeable public.

Other participatory liberal theorists are more skeptical of this mobilization path and are wary about what an ill-informed and slogan-driven participation may produce. Barber, for example, in calling for a more deliberative process, echoes the stylistic norms of the discursive tradition:

> The public voice is deliberative, which means it is critically reflective as well as self-reflective; it must be able to withstand reiteration, critical cross-examination, and the test of time – which guarantees a certain distance and dispassion. Like all deliberative voices, the public voice is dialectical: it transcends contraries without surrendering their distinctiveness.[20]

Thus, while participatory liberal theorists cannot be said to endorse slogans and polemics as a means of discourse, they do not reject such style of expression out of hand. The normative criterion here is a *range of communicative styles*. Whatever frames or points of view are most entrenched and taken-for-granted should be challenged by ideas that call the taken-for-granted into question. Opponents of the political status quo have a normative role in challenging established elites and

dominant ideologies. Appropriate forms of discourse do not preclude civility and deliberativeness, but do not necessarily require it.

Writers in this tradition also tend to be suspicious of calls for closure, seeing in such demands a means of pushing enduring structural conflicts of interest off the political table. Social movements can and should play an important role in agenda-setting, calling public attention to issues that the established parties and elites would prefer to see ignored, and even intervene in the process of policy implementation. The ability of social movements to continue to press their agenda in the public sphere is an alternative source of political power for them, and allows the alternative frames that they advance to enter into debates with official power-holders. Critical theorists in the participatory liberal tradition see social conflict stemming from structural inequality as ongoing; hence, the fear here is of premature closure and pseudo-consensus, not of endless debate.

"Good deliberation," writes Jenny Mansbridge, "will have opened areas of agreement and will have clarified the remaining areas of conflict."[21] Mansbridge even suggests that those who lose in any specific decision have a particular responsibility to continue to articulate the alternative, a "loser speaks" norm that specifically rejects closure without a normatively achieved consensus to back it up. The mere exercise of majority power in making a decision, she argues, does not legitimate the silencing of the minority. Given the inequalities in political power in all "actually existing" democracies, minority voices and political outsiders are essential to a well-functioning public sphere.

In summary, participatory liberal theory is a critical perspective on democracy that particularly stresses the benefits of active engagement in politics both for the citizen as an individual and for the system as a whole. Its central normative criterion is therefore the widest possible *empowerment,* and *popular inclusion* is necessary to achieve this. From this commitment, it derives its endorsement of *a range of communicative styles*, and *avoidance of premature closure*. It rejects or is ambivalent about such criteria as *expertise, detachment*, and *civility.* Since the role of public discourse, in this view, is to mobilize participation among ordinary people, not merely to help elites decide, it is dubious about criteria that may have the consequence (perhaps unintended) of discouraging and excluding popular participation.

**Discursive theory**

The line between participatory liberal and discursive theories is not easy to draw, especially regarding who should be included in the public sphere. *Popular inclusion* is equally embraced by both traditions. As Joshua Cohen puts it, "The notion of a deliberative democracy is rooted in the intuitive ideal of a democratic association in which justification of the terms and conditions of association proceeds through public argument and reasoning among equal citizens."[22] The central value here is in the process of deliberation with popular inclusion being desirable because it supports the valued process.

Jürgen Habermas, the most commanding figure in this tradition, accepts the fact that decisions on public affairs are normally made at the political center – by government agencies, parliaments, courts, and political parties. For routine decisions, it is reasonable and acceptable if these are made without extensive public discussion. But when important normative questions are at stake, it is crucial that the discussion not be limited to actors at the center of the political system. On such issues, a well functioning public sphere should simultaneously include actors from the *periphery* as well – that is, civil society actors including especially grassroots organizations. Political parties may therefore offer sufficient opportunities for political discourse in typical cases, but issues that are novel or normatively significant should reach beyond the routine deliberative processes found in political parties and draw in outsiders to discuss them.

Within this periphery, Habermas makes a distinction between autonomous (*autochtone*) actors, characterized by a mode of association tied to the "life-world" of the citizens, and power-regulated (*vermachtete*) actors, characterized by formal bureaucratic relations of hierarchy.[23] The autonomous actors, by which Habermas basically means small, non-bureaucratically organized grassroots associations with little or no division of labor, are minimally mediated and closer to personal, everyday experience.

Habermas assumes that such associations will take a particular organizational form, noting that "with their informal, multiply differentiated and networked communication processes, they form the true periphery." In this regard, his standard for what "counts" as a grassroots organization is much narrower than the participatory liberal perspective, which values groups that actively bring their members into politics

regardless of their specific form of organization. For Habermas, the organizational form is important because of its contribution to the deliberative process – the less bureaucratic, centralized form serves to carry political discussion into the lifeworld of the members.[24] Autonomous groups have a special role in the public sphere and their inclusion is vital. These associations, Habermas writes:

> are the knots in a communication net constructed among autonomous publics. Such associations are specialists in creating and spreading practical convictions. They specialize in discovering issues of relevance to the entire society, contributing to possible solutions, interpreting values, producing good rationales and discrediting others.[25]

Habermas assumes that these autonomous actors communicate in a different way. They are free from the burden of making decisions and from the constraints of organizational maintenance. This allows them, in contrast to other actors, to deliberate more freely; they can more easily take the viewpoint of other actors and respect the better arguments.

Representative liberal critics doubt that *autochtone* actors such as social movements deliberate more fully than vermachtete actors or that their communication processes are better in the ways that Habermas claims. Ultimately, this is an empirical question, best answered by closely and systematically examining differences, rather than relying on problematic a priori assumptions.

Several years before Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* first appeared in German, C. Wright Mills seems to have anticipated some of the central themes of the discursive tradition:

> In a public, as we may understand the term, 1) virtually as many people express opinions as receive them. 2) public communications are so organized that there is a chance immediately and effectively to answer back any opinion expressed in public. Opinion formed by such discussion 3) readily finds an outlet in effective action.... 4) authoritative institutions do not penetrate the public, which is thus more or less autonomous.[26]

Criteria concerning the style and content of public communication are at the heart of the discursive tradition. The ultimate goal is a public sphere in which better ideas prevail over weaker ones because of the strength of these ideas rather than the strength of their proponents. The normative ideal in the Habermas version is embodied in the concept of an "ideal speech situation." He insists that it is more than

simply an abstract ideal that should guide practice without ever being fully achieved. It is being realized, at least in part, whenever one starts to argue in order to convince others rather than simply commanding, negotiating, suggesting a compromise, or in other ways abandoning the effort to persuade.

Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson's "deliberative democracy" suggests a similar set of normative standards. Citizens must be able to transcend their narrow interest to consider what can be reasonably justified to people who disagree with them:

> Deliberation can clarify the nature of a moral conflict, helping to distinguish among the moral, the amoral, and the immoral, and between compatible and incompatible values. Citizens are more likely to recognize what is at stake in a dispute if they employ moral reasoning in trying to resolve it. Deliberation helps sort out self-interested claims from public-spirited ones.[27]

For the better argument to be decisive, it should not matter who is making the argument. Differences in external status or power among speakers should be bracketed – that is, put aside and ignored. There must be mutual and reciprocal recognition of each by all as autonomous, rational subjects whose claims will be accepted if supported by valid arguments. If this process is constrained by political or economic force or manipulation, or some arguments are disallowed, then participants are not taking the arguments of others seriously – and the conditions of an ideal speech situation are not being met. Thus, *popular inclusion* in the discursive tradition is justified in part by its ability to foster *deliberativeness*, the more theoretically central criterion.

Other criteria on the how and what of good public communication also flow from deliberativeness. *Civility* and *mutual respect* are required. In an ideal deliberative process, one seeks agreement when it is possible and maintains mutual respect when it is not. Mutual respect is a form of agreeing to disagree, but demands more than simply tolerance. "It requires a favorable attitude toward, and constructive interaction with the persons with whom one disagrees."[28]

Communitarians such as Amitai Etzioni offer similar rules of engagement for what he calls "values talk." The normative standards should "reflect the tenet that one should act on the recognition that the conflicting parties are members of one and the same community; hence, they should fight, as the saying goes, with one hand tied behind their back." These standards lead him to such specific rules as: the

participants should not "demonize" one another or depict those with whom they disagree as "satanic" or "treasonous." Another rule is "not to affront the deepest moral commitments of the other groups. The assumption is that each group is committed to some particular values that are sacrosanct to it, values which must be particularly respected by others; as well as some dark moments in its history upon which members prefer not to dwell.... Self restraint in these matters ... enhances the processes that underlie moral dialogue."[29]

All of these strands of discursive democratic theory share an underlying assumption – that the participants are part of the same moral community, sharing basic values. They assume that all the participants deserve respect but what of those participants who repudiate the shared values or whose ideas are not worthy of respect? Once one acknowledges that there is a boundary defining what content is included or excluded in a mutually respectful discourse, one can see that this is often contested and not consensual.

Suppose one believes that a doctor who performs an abortion is a murderer, or that a person who murders a receptionist in a women's health clinic is outside of the moral community. Then it hardly makes sense to extend mutual respect to those who defend such people. It turns out that most issues with a strong moral component involve ambiguity about who is or is not in the same moral community. Different frames give different answers, and draw the boundaries of who should be extended mutual respect in different ways. The applicability of this normative standard of mutual respect depends on and assumes a consensus about the boundaries of inclusion that often does not exist in practice.

In addition to mutual respect, the participants in public discourse should demonstrate their readiness for *dialogue*. Dialogue, in the Habermas version, implies a discourse in which claims and assertions are backed by reasoned, understandable arguments. This implies a willingness to entertain the arguments of those who disagree. Dialogue oriented speakers take account of the arguments of others, include some of their valid points in further refining and developing their own position, provide a full account of their reasoning and justifications so that others in turn may attend to them, and actively rebut rather than ignore ideas that they view as invalid.

James Hunter argues that the right to participate in the public sphere should be balanced and limited by a corresponding responsibility to speak appropriately:

> First, those who claim the right to dissent should assume the responsibility to debate.... Second, those who claim the right to criticize should assume the responsibility to comprehend.... Third, those who claim the right to influence should accept the responsibility not to inflame.... Fourth, those who claim the right to participate should accept the responsibility to persuade.[30]

The normative standards of dialogue, civility, and mutual respect combine to promote a positive value on consensus-seeking speech. Guttman and Thompson explicitly apply their model of deliberative democracy to abortion discourse:

> Accommodation calls on citizens to try to minimize the range of their public disagreement by promoting policies on which their principles converge, even if they would otherwise place those policies significantly lower on their own list of political priorities. Thus, pro-choice advocates may think that publicly funded programs that help unwed mothers care for their own children are less important than pro-life proponents do, but the pro-choice advocates should join in actively promoting these programs and other policies that are similarly consistent with the principles they share with opponents. By trying to maximize political agreement in these ways, citizens do not end serious moral conflict, but they affirm that they accept significant parts of the substantive morality of their fellow citizens to whom they may find themselves deeply opposed in other respects.[31]

Guttman and Thompson contrast the normative standards of deliberative democracy with a discourse that

> encourages the practice of impugning the motives of one's opponents instead of assessing the merits of their positions.... When the "imputation of bad motive" dominates an institutional culture, citizens do not reason together so much as they reason against one another. They reflexively attack persons instead of policies, looking for what is behind policies rather than what is in them. In a culture where moral disagreement turns so readily into general distrust, citizens are not disposed to think and act in a reciprocal frame of mind. A reciprocal perspective is important not only to enable citizens to resolve disagreement but also to enable them to learn to live with it.[32]

The practices they impugn are often associated with the actual mobilizing efforts of social movements which, as participatory liberal theory points out, may need to heighten contrast between positions, emphasize threats to strongly held values, and discredit the trustworthiness of government in order to encourage people to see their own political actions as necessary and efficacious.

It is worth noting that Guttman and Thompson make repeated efforts to define the boundaries of what is acceptable discursive practice more broadly than in the Habermas version. "We do not assume," they assert, "that politics should be a realm where the logical syllogism rules."[33] They argue, for example, that deliberation can be "consistent with impassioned and immoderate speech. First, even extreme non-deliberative methods may be justified as necessary steps to deliberation…. Second, deliberation itself does not always have to take the form of a reasoned argument of the kind that philosophers are inclined to favor."[34]

Their standards of *civility* are relatively weak in comparison to those of representative liberalism. They do not demand that priority be given to logic over emotion. They concede that their "politics of mutual respect is not always pretty…. Citizens may find it necessary to take extreme and even offensive stands…. These strategies may be justified when, for example, they are required to gain attention for a legitimate position that would otherwise be ignored, and thereby to promote mutual respect in the long term."[35] Here, they show recognition of the potential conflict between the norm of popular inclusiveness and the norms of deliberativeness and civility – a tension that we examine more thoroughly below in reviewing constructionist theory.

The civic or public journalism movement in the United States draws much of its inspiration from this discursive tradition. Edmund Lambeth, in an essay discussing civic journalism as democratic practice, suggests that if it were "to require a philosophical patron saint, Habermas … would appear to be a logical nominee."[36] Tanni Haas elaborates this point. Habermas, she argues, implies that "the primary responsibility of journalists should be to *facilitate* [emphasis in original] public deliberations aimed at reaching rational-critical public opinions that are autonomous vis-à-vis the private sphere and the state."[37] Or to quote Jay Rosen, one of the major articulators of the civic journalism project, journalists should "focus on citizens as actors within rather than spectators to [the democratic process]."[38]

The discursive democratic tradition assumes that an ideally conducted public discourse should produce a gradual consensus over time. People are encouraged to think in terms of the collective good rather than their private good and search for areas of agreement in an atmosphere of mutual respect. If consensus is ever possible, these conditions should produce it, since conditions such as these promote an atmos-

phere designed for conflict resolution. At a minimum, a good public discourse should produce a working consensus – enough of an agreement on the general direction of public policy to remove it from the public agenda.

While this tradition shares with representative liberalism a belief in the positive normative value of *closure*, it assumes that achieving a consensus is both desirable and attainable, at least in the ideal case. Only under these conditions, does closure after a decision make sense:

> According to the perspective of discourse theory, majority opinion must maintain an internal link to the praxis of argumentation…. A majority rule should only be formed in a way that its content can be considered as a rationally motivated but fallible result of a temporarily finished discussion about the right direction to solve a given problem.[39]

Representative liberal theorists tend to be skeptical about consensus as a realistic goal in politics. The public sphere works better, in their view, if actors recognize that there are different positions that are unlikely to be reconciled. In such a situation, it is better to follow Bruce Ackerman's principle of "conversational restraint," avoiding fundamental normative disputes and looking for a working compromise rather than consensus.[40]

In summary, the discursive tradition shares the value of *popular inclusion* with participatory liberalism, but unlike that tradition, views this as a means to a more deliberative public sphere rather than as an end in itself. Inclusion of speakers from the periphery should contribute to an active dialogue between center and periphery and foster more deliberative speech. *Deliberativeness* is the core value of this perspective, and it involves recognizing, incorporating, and rebutting the arguments of others – *dialogue* and *mutual respect* – as well as justifying one's own. *Civility* and *closure* are also values that this tradition shares with representative liberalism, but these norms are interpreted more loosely: civility is not tantamount to emotional detachment nor is closure desirable if consensus has not been achieved.

### Constructionist theory

Writers in this tradition share a critical approach, questioning existing arrangements and categories to see if they conceal hidden inequalities. They are more pessimistic than discursive theorists about the possibil-

ity of separating oppressive power from speech. They are indebted to Michel Foucault in identifying discourse as the practices of power diffused outside formal political institutions, making use of seemingly neutral categories of knowledge and expertise to control others as well as to construct the self as a political actor. We call this tradition constructionist because it emphasizes the contingently produced nature of every aspect of the political process. Outcomes of discourse are power-laden in shaping the range of future discourse and decisions. The ongoing relation of discourse to power is the starting point for the core normative criteria of this tradition.

Many of the most active theorists in this tradition such as Nancy Fraser, Seyla Benhabib, and Iris Marion Young, begin from feminist premises and develop their theories in part to explain and critique the marginality of women in politics.[41] They point out that the very definition of "politics" situates it as a separate "sphere" apart from and in some ways "naturally" opposed to private life. From this perspective, the sharp boundary drawn between "politics" and everything else that happens in life serves to obscure the continuities of power relations across these domains and is itself, therefore, a discursive use of power.

The power to separate and exclude daily life from the realm of the political narrows the range of choices open to public decision, serving to exclude those speakers best able to name and challenge existing power relations because they have experienced them in "private."[42] Because power relations operate throughout an individual's "private" life, a good public discourse should include individual speakers who will name and exemplify such connections for others. This tradition thus actively rejects the representative liberal criterion of *expertise*.

So, on the question of who should participate and when, the constructionist approach shares the strong normative value placed on *popular inclusion*. Many would privilege the voices of those who are marginalized in society, since they can offer the "double vision" of those who are "outsiders within" the system.[43] Indeed, inclusion is at the heart of this tradition but the value of inclusion is tied conceptually to *recognition* of the distinctive standpoints of the actors.[44]

Recognition means putting particular value on social differences in experience and identities. Rather than producing a common system of meaning, political discourse has need of making the other "strange" in order to encounter and comprehend the compelling reality of their

difference. As Zali Gurevich argues, "the process of making strange exposes the presence that was veiled by a web of taken-for-granted meanings. This exposure of presence may bring forth new understandings and recognition, but it might also involve threat and anxiety." He defines true recognition as a de-centering: "a recognition not only that I am the center, meaning that he is different from me, but also that he is the center, making me the different other. Thus through making strange and experiencing otherness, the two sides of a dialogue can be realized."[45] Recognition politics, sometimes called identity politics, creates a good public sphere by de-centering dominant speakers and their assumptions of what is "natural." Constructionists argue that the more socially diverse the participants in public discourse are, the wider the range of options and implications that can be imagined. Anne Phillips makes this case for structures that would actively bring in marginalized groups:

> Difference is not something we have only just noticed. What we can more usefully say is that difference has been perceived in an overly cerebral fashion as differences in opinions and beliefs … which may stem from a variety of experience, but are considered in principle detachable from this … what is to be represented then takes priority over who does the representation…. But if the range of ideas has been curtailed by orthodoxies that rendered alternatives invisible, there will be no satisfactory solution short of changing the people who represent and develop the ideas.[46]

Thus the "who" of inclusion is tied also to the process of speech itself, and *creativity* in bringing new ideas forward is highly valued. Contemporary women's movements have particularly stressed the emancipatory significance of public discourse that breaks unrecognized silences. One of the tasks of critical theory, Fraser argues, should be to expose ways in which the labeling of some issues and interests as "private" limits the range of problems, and of approaches to problems, that can be widely contested in contemporary societies.[47] Changing who speaks about rape, sexual harassment, battering, prostitution, or reproductive rights also changes what is spoken about. Jean Cohen applies this argument to the abortion issue:

> Every modern feminist movement has explicitly attempted to reshape the universe of discourse so that women's voices could be heard, women's concerns perceived, women's identities reconstructed, and the traditional conceptions of women's roles, bodies, and identities, as well as the male dominant supported by it, undermined…. The abortion issue encompassed all of these concerns. It quickly became apparent that this issue threw down the gauntlet to the traditional universe of discourse.[48]

To foster such new ideas, some constructionists challenge the desirability of a single public sphere, preferring the idea of multiple independent public spheres. Dialogue in a single public sphere is not necessarily as desirable as autonomous and separate cultural domains, or "free spaces" in which individuals may speak together supportively and develop their identities free of the conformity pressures of the mainstream.

Others are more skeptical. As Martha Akelsberg argues: "True, some places may seem (or even be, occasionally) more comfortable, more safe than others; but, as we have learned to our great discomfort … even "home" is precarious: each and every "home" is based on exclusions … [and enforces] a homogeneity and rigidity within the community that is often destructive."[49]

Critics argue that emphasizing the connection between positions taken in public discourse and specific life experiences structured by relationships of inequality will lead to misleading forms of "categoricalism" or "essentialism."[50] When diversity is treated as the property of "underrepresented groups," even those in sympathy with the aims of this approach worry about the extent to which the public becomes fragmented into mutually uncomprehending factions, groups are attributed unitary identities that reflect the standpoints of the most powerful among them, and identity claims are used to silence dissent.[51]

Nonetheless, Anne Phillips argues that pre-political identities are vital to true inclusion of marginalized groups in public discourse, even though they neither can nor should try to capture the "essential" quality of what members of such groups will say. She argues that for publics to prevent such essentializing: "There should be no privileging of some voices as more authentic than others, and no coercive imposition of a supposedly unified point of view … any prior setting of the boundaries risks restoring some version of the authentic subject, for even if the boundaries are significantly pluralized, they still define in advance what are the appropriate or relevant differences."[52]

She is optimistic that "robust democracy," such as already exists within actual "identity based" social movements, will foster contestation and challenge, noting that within these movements "the vehemence of debate indicates both a recurrent tendency towards essentialism and a continuous challenge to this: people are tough enough to resist prior classification and far too argumentative to accept someone else's definition of their selves."[53]

Unlike the participatory liberal tradition, which sees public discourse as a resource for mobilizing individuals to join a separate "political" sphere, this constructionist tradition sees the political as spilling across the artificial boundary between public and private. Families, cultural activities, even lifestyles, are political in the sense of having power relations woven through them. The constructionist approach to popular inclusion, by challenging the separation of public and private, stresses how ordinary people are actually engaging in politics in diverse arenas of their lives – by what they buy, wear, eat, or use to travel. Hence, it is appropriate for the media to seek out and validate the politics of everyday life as well. While the participatory liberal tradition wants grassroots actors to mobilize and speak to the media in the media's terms, the constructionist tradition wants the media to step out of its routines for dealing with the powerful and actively seek out other perspectives at the grassroots.

The constructionist tradition and those who represent it are especially wary of theories that celebrate practices about how one should communicate that may conflict with the inclusion norm. Benhabib, for example, is critical of the way participation is understood in the republican civic virtue tradition, contrasting it with:

> a conception of participation which emphasizes the determination of norms of action through the practical debate of all affected by them…. This modernist understanding of participation yields a novel conception of public space. Public space is not understood agonistically as a space of competition for acclaim and immortality among a political elite; it is viewed democratically as the creation of procedures whereby those affected by general social norms and collective political decisions can have a say in their formulation, stipulation, and adoption…. Democratization in contemporary societies can be viewed as the increase and growth of autonomous public spheres among participants.[54]

While sharing Benhabib's criticism of Hannah Arendt's radical separation of public and private, Bonnie Honig argues that Arendt valued combative struggle where "the point of the action is to offset the normalizing effects of the social by opening up and founding new spaces of politics and individuation for others to explore, augment and amend in their turn."[55] Rather than Arendt's fear that a weak boundary between the social (especially economic and the expert) and the political would overwhelm the political (what Hanna Pitkin famously called "the attack of the Blob"), Honig and Pitkin see the discursive claims of marginalized groups as courageously expanding the realm of the political by creative collective action.[56]

Taken together, these claims and counter-claims from the construc-
tionist tradition stress popular inclusion, for the sake of both empower-
ment and recognition, and object to the inclusion of so-called experts
or elites, in favor of seeing all speakers as the experts on their own life
experience. In this view, the marginalization of certain speakers and
certain experiences is a self-reinforcing cycle that restricts and impov-
erishes public discourse. It can only be broken by actively contesting
the boundaries between public and private, expanding political debate
by creative action that challenges taken-for-granted silences with new
voices.

Critics, from Arendt on, have viewed identity politics with fear and
loathing, suspecting these new public speakers of suppressing true
individuality, fragmenting the public sphere, and swamping the polity
with inappropriate social concerns. Theorists in the constructionist
tradition responded in a variety of ways to these challenges, but the
problem of achieving recognition without essentialism remains thorny.

With regard to content and style, constructionists do not devalue
deliberation and formal argument in discourse, but they are concerned
that unexamined assumptions about how discourse should be con-
ducted may, intentionally or inadvertently, limit who participates.
While public discourse should be conducted by public rules, these
norms need scrutiny lest they return women's concerns and voices to
the "backyard" of politics.[57]

Narrative is one preferred mode of the "non-expert" who can at least
speak from her own experience in this form. More generally, if cultural
norms of how discourse should be conducted differ by social location,
then these norms have the potential to silence those who habitually use
alternative modes. The issue here is not the inability of some groups to
provide rational arguments for their beliefs, but that narrative and
other preferred modes may be unfairly devalued and the "impartiality"
of technical expert discourse may conceal an unacknowledged political
agenda.

This is a central theme in constructionist and feminist readings of
Habermas. Fraser, in her discussion of Habermas's arguments on "the
colonization of the life-world by systems" in welfare state capitalism,
notes that the key to an emancipatory outcome lies in the replacement
of normatively secured contexts of interaction by communicatively
achieved ones. Normatively secured forms of action are "actions coor-

dinated on the basis of a conventional, prereflective, taken-for-granted consensus about values and ends, consensus rooted in the precritical internalization of socialization and cultural tradition."[58]

In contrast, communicatively achieved actions are "coordinated on the basis of explicit, reflectively achieved consensus, consensus reached by unconstrained discussion under condition of freedom, equality, and fairness."[59] From this vantage point, the norms of deliberativeness that Habermas advances as well as the standards of civility that representative liberals offer are seen as too limited in that they reflect conventional rather than inclusively forged standards.

The tendency to forget the socially constructed nature of such categories as public and private – that is, to treat them as natural categories describing the world – blinds us to their potential for exclusion. Indeed, Habermas has conceded this point.[60] Public and private have a gendered subtext in which the public realm is a male sphere and its norms and practices reflect this in subtle (and often not so subtle) ways to exclude "feminine" modes of participation. The norms and practices governing policy discourse privilege certain forms of presentation over others, and thus selectively disempower certain categories of speakers.

In particular, the normative standards regarding policy discourse derive from specific institutional contexts in Western society – in particular, parliaments and courts. As Iris Marion Young observes, "Their institutional forms, rules, and rhetorical styles have defined the meaning of reason itself in the modern world." Claims of universality are made, but the norms of deliberation are culturally specific and often operate as forms of power that silence or devalue the speech of some people.

> The norms of deliberation privilege speech that is dispassionate and disembodied. They tend to presuppose an opposition between mind and body, reason and emotion. They tend falsely to identify objectivity with calm and absence of emotional expression.... These differences of speech privilege correlate with other differences of social privilege. The speech culture of white, middle class men tends to be more controlled, without significant gesture and expression of emotion. The speech culture of women and racial minorities … tends to be more excited and embodied, more valuing the expression of emotion, the use of figurative language, modulation in tone of voice, and wide gesture.[61]

Young calls her model of a broader normative standard "communicative" to distinguish it from the narrower "deliberative" model. She makes an especially strong case for the importance of *narrative* as an appropriate and desirable form of policy discourse. "Narrative," she writes, "fosters understanding across ... difference without making those who are different symmetrical." It reveals experiences based on social locations that cannot be shared fully by those who are differently situated. She offers the example of wheelchair users making claims on university resources. "A primary way they make their case will be through telling stories of their physical, temporal, social, and emotional obstacles."[62]

Storytelling promotes empathy across different social locations. Similarly, Lynn Sanders points out that narrative complements arguments, while tending to be more egalitarian since all people are experts on their own experiential knowledge.[63] Thus, the positive criterion for the content and style of a good public sphere that this perspective offers is the inclusion of narratives that directly bridge the lifeworld and the sphere of formal politics, undercutting both the separation between these spheres and the power relations that produce and maintain that separation.[64]

Style of public expression is also a matter of class, as the distinction between the bourgeois public sphere and the plebian one suggests. Constructionists worry that the original insight about the exclusionary character of the bourgeois public sphere becomes lost in allowing elements of rhetorical style to determine the definition of rational-deliberative discourse. Mary Ryan reminds us that in the nineteenth century, "American citizens enacted publicness in an active, raucous, contentious, and unbounded style of debate that defied literary standards of rational and critical discourse," and that "Those most remote from public authorities and governmental institutions and least versed in their language sometimes resort to shrill tones, civil disobedience, and even violent acts in order to make themselves heard."[65]

Civility in discourse is a matter of socially secured agreements to conform to the local culture, and such local and specific cultures are deeply imbued with power. What is normal in public discussion in some places is rude in others; and what is considered a normal way of showing respect in some venues seems mannered and arid in others. Constructionists remind us that in identifying normative criteria about deliberative discourse, we must be careful to attend to different dimen-

sions of power, including those that act discursively to restrict content and participation though the limits they place on acceptable style.

Like critical theorists in the participatory liberal tradition, constructionist writers fear premature closure and false consensus. But more than this, they also positively value a discourse that continually widens the realm of the political by bringing unimagined ideas and invisible groups into it. The stress constructionists place on recognition of difference, the "other" who is "made strange" for the sake of authentic dialogue, makes them suspicious of closure.

Ending debate also stops the expansion of the political and accepts the exclusions that remain. Carol Gould argues that the emphasis on consensus as a desirable outcome in the Habermas model "does not value but aims to override difference."[66] Chantal Mouffe echoes the point: "To negate the ineradicable character of antagonism and aim at a universal rational consensus – that is the real threat to democracy."[67] In their search for a model that revels in the diversity and pluralism of actually existing democracies, constructionists broaden the type of desirable outcomes beyond the ability to produce policy outcomes.

Johanna Meehan, using the concept of an ideal speech situation as her starting point, asks how it might be broadened to accommodate "a feminism truly committed to a plurality of perspectives arising from differences." The ideal she suggests is "an arena for exploring, comparing, and working not towards consensus, but towards building a community in which we work together to develop solutions to concrete problems which will allow the diversity of our beliefs and values to be served."[68] Consensus, in this tradition, is not always desirable, and always requires critical analysis in evaluating it.

Conversational constraint is a similarly flawed concept in this analysis, resting as it does on the principle of "dialogic neutrality." This principle, as Bruce Ackerman develops it, requires that "no reason advanced within a discourse of legitimation can be a good reason if it requires the power holder to assert that his conception of the good is better than that asserted by his fellow citizens, or that regardless of his conception of the good, he is intrinsically superior to one or more of his fellow citizens."[69] Benhabib argues that this principle:

> is too restrictive and frozen in application to the dynamics of power struggles in actual political processes. A public life conducted according to the principle of liberal dialogic neutrality ... would restrict the scope of public con-

> versation in a way that would be inimical to the interests of oppressed groups. All struggles against oppression in the modern world begin by redefining what had previously been considered private, nonpublic, and nonpolitical issues as matters of public concern, as issues of justice, as sites of power that need discursive legitimation.[70]

Conversational constraint and pseudo-consensus can work against the outcome of public discourse that is most important here: furthering the process of building a discursive community that allows a diversity of beliefs and values to be served.

Constructionists point to important weaknesses and hidden assumptions in other models but some critics of this tradition find it frustratingly abstract with its alternative solutions undeveloped. It never becomes clear, in their view, exactly what a good discourse would be like and the reader is left to make sometimes large inferential leaps.

In summary, the constructionist view of a well-functioning public sphere begins by questioning the separateness of the public sphere at all. Public discourse should question the boundaries of "the political" by a strong norm of *popular inclusion,* which in turn serves the goals of *empowerment* of the marginalized and *recognition* of differences. Incorporating the standpoints of socially marginalized individuals and social movements can both name and exemplify the linkages between public action and private life. The norm of *expertise* is rejected explicitly, and the standards of *deliberativeness* and *civility* are qualified by subjecting them to critique based on a higher value of *popular inclusion.* Rather than *dialogue* and formal argumentation, constructionists particularly value *narrative* as a characteristic of content and style that challenges both the diffuse power relations of daily life and the concentrated power of disembodied formal political institutions by revealing the connections between them. Legitimating the language of the life world in discourse privileges the experiential knowledge of ordinary citizens and contributes to their empowerment. Finally, *closure* after a decision is deeply suspect since it can so easily suppress the diversity of expression that vitalizes democracy.

**Summary**

We summarize our excursion through democratic theories of the public sphere by grouping the criteria suggested into four broad categories: who should be included, what is the ideal content of the discursive

*Table 1.* Normative criteria in democratic theory

| Theory types | Criteria for a good democratic public discourse | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | *Who* participates | In *what* sort of process | *How* ideas should be presented | *Outcome* of relation between discourse and decision-making |
| **Representative liberal** | *Elite dominance* *Expertise* *Proportionality* | Free market-place of ideas Transparency | Detachment Civility | Closure |
| **Participatory liberal** | Popular inclusion | *Empowerment* | Range of styles | Avoidance of imposed closure |
| **Discursive** | Popular inclusion | Deliberative | *Dialogue* *Mutual respect* *Civility* | Avoidance of premature, non-consensus-based closure |
| **Constructionist** | Popular inclusion | Empowerment Recognition | Narrative creativity | *Avoidance of exclusionary closure* *Expansion of the political community* |

process, how participants should express themselves, and what relationship between discourse and decision-making should result. For some criteria, there are advocates and those who are indifferent, but virtually no dissenting voices. For others, there is significant challenge to the normative standard. We hope to clarify the nature of the disagreements by distinguishing criteria that are sometimes conflated, as well as to highlight how the priorities of each tradition vary. Table 1 summarizes the differences among the four traditions.

In this table, the priority concern is presented in italics. Each tradition places its emphasis on a different question. For the representative liberal tradition the problem of who should be included (the "who" question) is central; for the participatory liberal, what the process of engagement in public debate is and does (the "what" question) is core. The newer theoretical approaches also shift their primary emphasis to new questions: for the discursive tradition, the issue of the style in which debate occurs (the "how" question) is central, while for the

constructionists it is the relationship between public debate and decision-making (the "outcome" question).

On the who question, the representative liberal tradition stands alone in valuing *elite inclusion* over stronger and more active versions of *popular inclusion*. The representative liberal tradition positively values *expertise*, while constructionists suspect it as a way of managing discourse to maintain existing relations of dominance and subordination. The other two traditions are essentially indifferent to the extent to which experts are included, as long as their participation does not displace that of ordinary individuals, speaking from the lifeworld.

Representative liberal theory suggests a criterion on how public discourse space should be allocated: *proportionality*. It should be distributed in proportion to voting strength or size of representation. Discursive theory suggests that it should be divided among actors in the center and periphery, at least for non-routine decisions. The other traditions are vague or silent on this question.

On the content of the discourse, none of these traditions would defend *a priori* restrictions. In the "what" category, representative liberals favor a process that functions as a free marketplace of ideas, placing particular value on the inclusion of a variety of beliefs that can contend for support based on the strength of their representation. This connects the "what" and "who" questions. Additionally, for the representative liberal tradition, the discourse should make visible to the public what its representatives are doing so that they can be held accountable – the criterion we have labeled *transparency*. Other traditions do not reject this but emphasize its insufficiency.

There are major disagreements, however, on the *empowerment* criterion. For participatory liberal theory, it is the central responsibility of public discourse to engage as many citizens as possible in public life. For the constructionist tradition, empowerment is also very important, but empowerment is a means to the end of including all standpoints, widening and improving the range of ideas being considered by decision-makers, not an end in itself as it is for participatory liberals. Thus for constructionists, the continuing *recognition* of difference is equally important. Dialogue across difference rather than transformation into a general will is an indication of successful empowerment. Empowerment is less emphasized but implicit in the discursive tradition, which demands the ability to set aside differences in power in order to com-

municate. However, empowerment is explicitly rejected by representative liberal theory as a normative criterion for public discourse.

There are also major differences on the how question. The representative liberal tradition calls for a strong form of *civility* and *emotional detachment* as the proper form of communication. The discursive tradition endorses a weaker variant of civility, emphasizing *mutual respect* but not necessarily detachment. The other traditions are not opposed to civility but emphasize its potential conflict with *popular inclusion* and *empowerment* on which they place a higher value. The constructionist tradition seeks *creative* means to name the politically invisible and values the use of novel and imaginative tactics to expand the boundaries of the political. Of the four traditions, it is most critical of the demand for civility, seeing it as a way to discipline persons and ideas into existing normative categories.

*Deliberativeness*, the highest value in discursive theory, includes the criterion of *dialogue*, a process in which one provides fully developed arguments for one's own position and takes seriously and responds to the arguments of others. Participatory liberal theory does not reject dialogue but calls for a *range of communicative styles* to promote empowerment, its higher value. Similarly, constructionist theory does not reject dialogue but is wary that emphasizing it can delegitimize other forms. In particular, it can delegitimize *narratives* of personal experience and other preferred forms of communication in the lifeworld, thereby silencing women and other culturally excluded groups.

Finally, on the outcome question, the representative liberal tradition places the strongest value on *closure*. Public discourse is only useful in relationship to decision-making, and once decisions are made, continuing debate is at best a waste of resources and at worst a threat to legitimacy. Discursive theories also value closure but contingent on it arising from a consensus that has emerged through a deliberative process. The other traditions are more concerned with *avoiding premature closure*. The participatory liberals fear an imposed closure by the powerful that serves to silence the less powerful. The constructionists fear closure that suppresses diversity, a continuing source of vitality for a democracy. Because differences will always exist, de-centering dialogues are always necessary. Political debates widen the agenda of decision-makers on an on-going basis, as different aspects of identity surface in resistance to all reifying categorizations.

**Research implications**

This article, in reviewing different theories of the public sphere, derived from them normative criteria that can then be used to analyze empirical differences in how the public sphere operates in different countries on different issues. In our forthcoming book, we take on the difficult challenge of measuring them, using public discourse on abortion in elite newspapers in Germany and the United States over a 30-year period. What are our main findings?[71]

German discourse, in most respects, meets the criteria highlighted by **representative liberal theory**. The discourse is dominated by accountable state and party actors, supplemented by experts and representatives of the Catholic and Lutheran churches. It is carried on with little incivility. Not all possible ideas about abortion appear, of course, but within a broad range, the sponsors of different policies are given free reign to offer the most persuasive arguments that they can muster, and they do so.

The discourse provides extensive and detailed accounts and commentary on what the people's representatives are doing in both countries. Finally, German discourse provides just the kind of closure that is advocated by this tradition. Authoritative decisions provide a clear signal that this discussion is completed and, following them, public discourse moves on to other topics. With minor exceptions, then, German media discourse is a good approximation of the representative liberal ideal.

U.S. discourse comes much closer than German discourse in meeting the criteria emphasized by **participatory liberal theory**. Civil society actors, including grassroots organizations and ordinary people, are given a lot of voice along with the people's representatives. There is a lot more discourse promoting citizens as active agents rather than as clients to be protected. There is allowance for or even encouragement of styles of expression that would probably be considered bad taste in Germany. Government decisions do not force an artificial end to efforts by mobilized citizen groups to achieve policies that they consider better. Advocates of this tradition should really have very few complaints about the quality of U.S. abortion discourse.

The answer to which country best fits the criteria of **discursive theory** is more complicated. On the issues of inclusion, U.S. discourse is

clearly a better fit. U.S. discourse clearly does better in providing a balance of center and periphery, providing much more standing for civil society actors, especially grassroots, autonomous ones. On the issue of deliberativeness, the evidence is ambiguous, with no clear-cut advantage for either country. On dialogue, in particular, different measures show slight advantages for one country or the other, or no difference. If there is a difference in the amount of dialogue between countries, it is not robust enough to show up consistently.

The closure that German discourse provides does not flow from a deliberatively achieved consensus and, hence, is not the closure that the model envisions. But the ongoing U.S. discourse does not fit any better since it shows little tendency to produce a consensus that should lead to voluntary closure. The absence of a tendency toward consensus is a failure of the deliberative process in both countries.

Finally, U.S. discourse comes much closer than German discourse in meeting the criteria emphasized by **constructionist theories**. The criteria which it shares with the participatory liberal tradition – popular inclusion, empowerment, and the avoidance of premature closure – are better met in the United States. U.S. discourse is also notably stronger in overcoming the distinction between the public and private realm, and in legitimizing the language of the lifeworld and experiential knowledge through personal narratives. However, from the perspective of the other models, it veers dangerously close to the fragmentation of identity politics, and the weight given to the social and the personal can appear to swamp the political in sensationalism.

We suggest that the criteria we have derived from democratic theory are fruitful for comparing discourse in different societies on many other issues, using the ones that any particular theorist considers most important, to evaluate the quality of the democratic public sphere.

## Notes

1. This article is the product of a fully collaborative effort with the authors listed in alphabetical order. It draws on ideas in the authors' forthcoming book, *Shaping Abortion Discourse: Democracy and the Public Sphere in Germany and the United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
2. Nancy Fraser uses the phrase to distinguish normative theories based on non-utopian and achievable assumptions in "Rethinking the Public Sphere: Contribu-

tion to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," 69–98 in her *Justice Interruptus* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

3. Peter Bachrach, *The Theory of Democratic Elitism: A Critique* (Boston: Little Brown, 1967).

4. John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (Amherst, Mass.: Prometheus Books, 1991, originally 1861); Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, edited with an Introduction by L. G. Mitchell (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, originally 1790).

5. Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1942); Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), William Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1960).

6. C. Edwin Baker, "The Media that Citizens Need," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 147 (1998): 317–407.

7. The marketplace metaphor may be particularly apt when financial strength is accepted as a legitimate factor in the competition of ideas for a hearing. Seeing restrictions on election financing as restrictions on speech, as the U.S. Supreme Court has done, makes clear that this competition of ideas need not be thought of as being among equally empowered actors.

8. Consider the legal prosecution of Wobblies, deportations of communist and socialists, and various formal and informal blacklists recounted in Bud Schultz and Ruth Schultz, *It Did Happen Here: Recollections of Political Repression in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), and the suspicion directed at "unpatriotic" speech in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.

9. James H. Kuklinski, Ellen Riggle, and Victor Ottati, "The Cognitive and Affective Bases of Political Tolerance Judgments," *American Journal of Political Science* 35 (1991) 1–27.

10. Paul Hirst, *Associative Democracy: New Forms of Economic and Social Government* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994); and Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). The quotation is from p. 151.

11. Robert Michels, *Political Parties* (New York: The Free Press, 1949, originally 1911).

12. See Dieter Rucht, "Linking Organization and Mobilization: Michels's Iron Law of Oligarchy Reconsidered," *Mobilization* 4 (1999): 151–169 for further discussion of this point.

13. Both Suzanne Staggenborg and Jane Mansbridge make the argument that formal organizations offer advantages in allowing membership participation that extends beyond the friendship cliques and informal elites that can dominate ostensibly non-hierarchical groups. See Suzanne Staggenborg, *The Pro-Choice Movement. Organization and Activism in the Abortion Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); and Jane Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). The problems of the "leaderless" grassroots organization were vividly described by Jo Freeman in her classic article "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," published under the name "Joreen" in A. Koedt, E. Levine, and A. Rapine, editors, *Radical Feminism* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1973). See also Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation* (New York: David McKay, 1975).

14. Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy*, 151.

15. Peter Dahlgren, "Introduction," 1–24, in Peter Dahlgren and Colin Sparks, editors, *Communication and Citizenship: Journalism and the Public Sphere* (London: Routledge, 1991). The quotations are from p. 2 and p. 11.

16. James Curran, "Rethinking the Media as a Public Sphere," 27–57, in Peter Dahlgren and Colin Sparks, editors, *Communication and Citizenship: Journalism and the Public Sphere* (London: Routledge, 1991). The quotation is from p. 30.

17. James Carey, "The Press and Public Discourse," *The Center Magazine* 20 (1987): 4–16. The quotation is from p. 14.

18. John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1980).

19. Randall Kennedy, "The Case Against 'Civility,'" *American Prospect* 41 (Nov–Dec, 1998): 84–90. The quotation is from p. 85.

20. Benjamin Barber, "Making Democracy Strong: A Conversation with Benjamin Barber," in Bernard Murchland, *Civic Arts Review* 9 (1996): 4–14. The quotation is from p. 8.

21. Jane J. Mansbridge, "Using Power/Fighting Power," 46-66, in Seyla Benhabib, editor, *Democracy and Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). The quotation is from p. 47.

22. Joshua Cohen, "Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy," 17–34, in Alan Hamlin and Philip Pettit, editors, *The Good Polity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1989). The quotation is from p. 17.

23. As Habermas uses the term, "lifeworld" is in the realm of communicative action, in contrast to systems run by power or money. The life-world, if intact and not colonized by other systems, secures cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Thomas McCarthy, translator (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

24. In practice, the distinction may simply reflect differences in how real social movements are structured in the United States and Germany. Social movement organizations in the United States are typically larger, and have more of a division of labor, including a media relations division or specialist, while German social movements, being organizationally decentralized and non-bureaucratic, come closer to Habermas's ideal type.

25. Jürgen Habermas, "Volkssouvernität als Verfahren: Ein normativer Begriff von Öffentlichkeit," *Merkur* 43 (1989): 465–477. The quotation is from p. 474.

26. C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 303–304.

27. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 43.

28. Ibid., 79.

29. Amitai Etzioni, *The New Golden Rule* (New York: Basic Books), 104–105.

30. James Davison Hunter, *Before the Shooting Begins* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 239.

31. Gutmann and Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*, 89.

32. Ibid., 360.

33. Ibid., 4.

34. Ibid., 136.

35. Ibid., 90.

36. Edmund Lambeth, in E. Lambeth., P. Meyer, and E. Thornson, editors, *Assessing Public Journalism* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 27.

37. Tanni Haas, "What's Public about Public Journalism?" *Communication Theory* 9 (1999): 346–364. The quotation is from p. 356.

38. Jay Rosen, "Making Things More Public: On the Responsibility of the Media Intellectual," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 11 (1994): 363–888.

39. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 42.

40. See Bruce Ackerman, "Why Dialogue?" *Journal of Philosophy* 86 (1989): 5–22.

41. Nancy Fraser, "What's Critical about Critical Theory," 21–55, in Johanna Meehan, editor, *Feminists Read Habermas* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995); and Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," 69–98, in *Justice Interruptus* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Seyla Benhabib, "Models of Public Space," 73–98, in Craig Calhoun, editor, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992); and Seyla Benhabib, editor, *Democracy and Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Iris Marion Young, "Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy," 120–135 in Seyla Benhabib, editor, *Democracy and Difference.*

42. Dorothy E. Smith, *Writing the Social: Critique, Theory and Investigations* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

43. See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991); and Dorothy E. Smith, *The Conceptual Practices of Power: A Feminist Sociology of Knowledge* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990).

44. The problem of identifying the authentic voice of an actor as well as empowering that actor to use it effectively in the political arena is thus a central issue for these standpoint theories. See the nuanced treatment of the skills necessary to speak autonomously in Diana Tietjens Meyers, "The Rush to Motherhood: Pro-natalist Discourse and Women's Autonomy," *Signs* 26/3 (2001): 735–774.

45. Zali Gurevich, "The Other Side of Dialogue: On Making the Other Strange and the Experience of Otherness," *American Journal of Sociology* 93/5 (1988): 1179–1199)). The quotation is from p. 1189.

46. Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Polity Press, 1995), 476–480. See also, Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); and Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

47. Nancy Fraser, "What's Critical about Critical Theory."

48. Jean L. Cohen, "Critical Social Theory and Feminist Critiques," 57–90, in Johanna Meehan, editor, *Feminists Read Habermas* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995). The quotation appears on pp. 79–80.

49. Martha Ackelsberg, "Identity Politics, Political Identities: Thoughts toward a Multicultural Politics," *Frontiers* 16/1 (1996): 87–101.

50. Among the more influential feminist critics of some standpoint epistemologies are R.W. Connell, *Gender and Power*, (Stanford University Press, 1987); and Susan Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender-skepticism," 133–156, in Linda Nicholson, *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge). See also, Aili Mari Tripp's discussion of how a discourse of difference may be specific to feminist political experiences in the United States and Western Europe, in comparison to the discourse of unity being constructed in Africa in 'Rethinking Difference: Comparative Perspectives from Africa," *Signs* 25/3 (2000): 649–675.

51. See Janet Jakobsen, *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); Ann Russo, "We Cannot Live without Our Lives," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); and Noel Sturgeon, *Ecofeminist Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory and Political Action* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

52. Anne Phillips, "Dealing with Difference: A Politics of Ideas or a Politics of Presence?"

475–495, in Joan Landes, editor, *Feminism:The Public and the Private* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). The quotation is from p. 485.

53. Ibid., 486.
54. Benhabib, "Models of Public Space," 86–87.
55. Bonnie Honig, "Toward an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity," in Judith Butler and Joan Scott, editors, *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992). Although Arendt is typically seen as unfeminist and hostile to the constructionist project, Honig argues that Arendt too can offer theoretical resources to the constructionist tradition, since she, too, challenges "a politics of representation that projects a false commonality of interests that is impositional and ill-fitting [and that] obstructs an important alternative: a performative politics that instead of reproducing and re-presenting 'what' we are, agonistically generates 'who' we are."
56. Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
57. Barbara Holland-Cunz, "Öffentlichkeit und Intimität – demokratie-theoretische Überlegungen," 227–246, in Elke Biester, Barbara Holland-Cunz, and Birgit Sauer, editors, *Demokratie oder Andokratie? Theorie und Praxis demokratischer Herrschaft in der feministischen Diskussion* (Frankfurt a/M: Campus, 1994).
58. Fraser, "What's Critical about Critical Theory," 28.
59. Ibid, 28, drawing on Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*.
60. "Empirically, I've learned most from the criticisms that point to the exclusionary mechanisms of the public sphere, liberal or postliberal…. An analysis of the exclusionary aspects of established public spheres is particularly revealing…the critique of that which has been excluded from the public sphere and from my analysis too: gender, ethnicity, class, popular culture," Jürgen Habermas, "Concluding Remarks," 462–479, in Craig Calhoun, editor, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992). The quotation is from p. 466.
61. Young, "Communication and the Other," 123–124.
62. Ibid., 131.
63. Lynn Sanders, "Against Deliberation," paper presented at annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, 1992.
64. Dorothy Smith, *Writing the Social.*
65. Mary P. Ryan, "Gender and Public Access: Women's Politics in Nineteenth Century America," 259–288, in Craig Calhoun, editor, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992). The quotes are from pp. 264 and 285–286.
66. Carol C. Gould, "Diversity and Democracy: Representing Differences," 171–186, in Benhabib, *Democracy and Difference.*
67. Chantal Mouffe, "Democracy, Power, and the 'Political'," 245–256, in Benhabib, *Democracy and Difference.* The quotation is from p. 248.
68. Meehan, *Feminists Read Habermas*, 17.
69. Bruce Ackerman, *Social Justice in the Liberal State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 11.
70. Benhabib, "Models of Public Space," 84.
71. Ferree et al., *Shaping Abortion Discourse.*