

# SPEAKING OF POLITICS

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*Preparing College Students for Democratic  
Citizenship through Deliberative Dialogue*



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200 Commons Road  
Dayton, Ohio 45459

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First edition 2007

Manufactured in the United States of America

ISBN 978-0-923993-22-1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2007925891

## Chapter One

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# Why College Students? Why Deliberation?

In the fall semester of 2001, we began a journey that would take us through four years of experimentation with deliberative democracy in a campus setting with 30 entering first-year students at our liberal arts university. We called the group “Democracy Fellows,” and we worked with them in the classroom, on campus, and in the wider community as we explored together the joys, challenges, and just plain hard work that come with democratic processes. Only a few weeks into that first year, as we gathered for our morning seminar, two planes crashed into the World Trade Center towers in New York City and, no doubt, changed forever the context within which we would study young people and their civic engagement. While we were at a loss to explain what was happening on that fateful day, it did occur to us—and we shared the thought with our students—that the violence we were witnessing was almost invariably preceded by a breakdown in civil political discourse, the very enterprise these students were studying. A “war on terrorism” followed, as did the war in Iraq. During their senior year in 2004, as students ended their tenure as Democracy Fellows, a divisive presidential election occurred. The world does not stand still while researchers conduct their controlled studies. Such is the nature of social-science research.

This is the story of the four years we spent with the Democracy Fellows. In it we speak in several voices. We are the social-science researchers, attempting to measure the impact of deliberative interventions with a group of college students and to frame that research in the larger context of our disciplines of political science and communication. We are the teachers who sought to teach the students not only the theory and concepts of democracy, but also the democratic skills and sensibilities that would serve them as citizens in a democratic society. And finally, we are ourselves citizens of our university and larger communities who feel an

obligation to engage with those communities through processes that are both democratic and respectful.

There are other voices speaking in this story as well. They are the Democracy Fellows, as well as other students who were not in the program. Throughout the four years, we captured their voices through individual interviews, focus groups, and writing assignments. To the extent possible, we have used these voices to help us tell this story. In the end, this is the story of how a group of students learned what we call in this work a set of “democratic sensibilities”—what one advocate of deliberative democracy calls “the discipline to keep an open mind, the willingness to stand in someone else’s shoes, the capacity to change, and the ability to make decisions with others” (Mathews 1997, 16).

## Defining the Problem

For several decades, scholars and practitioners have been concerned about the decline of political, and more broadly, civic engagement among U.S. citizens. Declining voter turnout, polls showing alienation from public life and cynicism about politics and politicians, and evidence of significant lack of knowledge of, and interest in, politics have all raised concerns in both the political science and communication disciplines about the health of American democracy (Arnett and Arneson 1999; Asen 2004; Hauser 1999; Ivie 1998; Mann and Patrick 2000; Putnam 2000; Sproule 2002). This disengagement appears to be especially high among young people. While voter turnout is low across all age groups, it is lowest for the youngest voting cohort. Even more important are the attitudes that lead to low levels of participation. In her analysis of young Americans, Carol Hays (1998, 45) concludes that *alienation*—a catchall term combining cynicism, distrust, lack of efficacy, and apathy—is “the most widespread characterization of this generation.” While adults tend to feel anger toward politics, work in the 1990s showed that younger voters felt pessimistic and disconnected (The Harwood Group 1993; Johnson, Hays, and Hays 1998, 219). The 2000 Higher Education Research Institute

(HERI) annual survey of college freshmen provided further confirmation of this trend, reporting that student interest in politics was at an all-time low for an election year (Sax, Astin, Korn, and Mahoney 2001). More recent data indicate a slight upswing, suggesting that perhaps this trend has bottomed out and a new generation of “millennial” students (Lowry and Strauss 2001) may be developing more interest in politics in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Certainly, the presidential election of 2004 provided some evidence that more young people could be mobilized to participate in a critical election (HERI 2004b; Patterson 2004). However, even with this upward turn, interest in politics and political engagement is still half of what it was for young people when freshmen surveys began in the 1960s (Rooney 2003). Furthermore, the 2004 HERI survey showed that students who *are* engaged are mirroring the polarization found in the larger electorate (HERI 2004a), pointing to another set of issues about what *kind* of engagement democratic citizens employ. Robert Putnam (2000) also finds declining involvement in this youth cohort across a number of measures of civic engagement.

### **Civic Renewal, Higher Education, and Deliberation**

In response to these troubling trends, those working in the area of civic renewal have pursued multiple ways of thinking about the problem and approaches to reengaging young people in political life. Two particular concerns in this movement inform this research. The first is the role that higher education can and should play in encouraging engaged citizenship. (See, for example, Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens 2003; Englund 2002; Galston 2003; Gutmann 1987; Kettering Foundation 1992; London 2000; McDonnell, Timpane, and Benjamin 2000; Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996; Nussbaum 1997; Walker 2002.) Regardless of the course of action they advocate, many scholars agree with Woodruff Smith that, “for better or worse, American public higher education, the American public sphere, and American democracy rise and fall together” (2003, 69).

The second concern motivating this work is an interest in the value of deliberation and the positive effects opportunities to deliberate about public issues can have on political attitudes and behavior (Button and Ryfe 2005; Delli Carpini, Cook, and Jacob 2004). Though the notion of deliberation is a contested one, when we speak of deliberation, we mean a particular kind of conversation in which participants weigh the costs and consequences of various choices against what they consider most valuable. (See Burkhalter, Gastil, and Kelshaw 2002, for a recent effort toward definitional and theoretical clarity.) Public deliberation allows people to discover what concerns them most, what they are and are not willing to do about a problem, and what trade-offs they are willing to accept. The goal is progress toward a shared sense of direction or purpose, not consensus or complete agreement on any solution. The deliberative model features talk that involves listening as well as speaking, considering the experiences and underlying values of others, and structuring the conversation in such a way as to afford equal status for all participants (Delli Carpini, Cook, and Jacobs 2004).

Most scholars who support public deliberation argue that it is essential to a more legitimate participatory democracy, and that, as McLeod, et al. (1999, 744) conclude: “It is only through this constant give-and-take relationship that citizens can develop a fuller understanding of their own position and the various positions held by others within the community.” Gastil and Dillard (1999b) conclude that deliberative discussions foster a general sophistication in political judgment. Other scholars argue that deliberation improves the political climate by informing the population about current issues, promoting reasoning skills, and ultimately forcing citizens to defend their views in the face of opposition (Stokes 1998). Deliberation also emphasizes thinking in terms of the common good rather than solely in terms of the individual, and thus results in policy outcomes that benefit a wider range of the population (Gambetta 1998). John Rawls argues that deliberation is bound up with citizenship:

The ideal of citizenship imposes a moral, not a legal, duty—the duty of civility—to be able to explain to one another

on those fundamental questions how the principles and policies they advocate and vote for can be supported by the political values of public reason. This duty also involves a willingness to listen to others and a fairmindedness in deciding when accommodations to their views should reasonably be made (1993, 217).

Theorists of participatory democracy emphasize the educative function of participation and, for many of them, deliberation is one of the most important means by which this learning occurs. This view assumes that the very act of participation *teaches*, as citizens learn what it means to be part of a public (Barber 1984; Pateman 1970). While Gastil and Dillard stop short of claiming a direct correlation between deliberating in National Issues Forums (NIF)<sup>8</sup> forums and political participation, they did find that NIF can bolster participants' political efficacy, refine their political judgments, broaden their political conversation networks, and reduce their conversational dominance (1999a, 179). Barbaras (2004, 699) found that deliberation can have the positive effect of encouraging citizens to "discard their inaccurate factual perceptions as well as rigidly held political views." Finally, Benjamin Barber argues that a strong (participatory) democracy that includes deliberative opportunities can "overcome the pessimism and cynicism" that many citizens feel (1984, 119).

Deliberation is not without its critics. The practice has the potential to force homogeneity on heterogeneous communities and can slow community response and adaptation to change. There is always the possibility that stronger, more eloquent, better informed community members will unfairly influence weaker participants and the increased likelihood that some discussants will perpetuate inaccurate information (Deetz 1999; Gambetta 1998; Janis 1989). When people are misled by a particularly eloquent speaker, Przeworski terms it *indoctrination* and argues that it can

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<sup>8</sup> NIF is a nationwide network of civic and educational organizations whose common interest is to promote nonpartisan deliberation on public issues. See Melville, Willingham, and Dedrick (2005) for a comprehensive description of the function and impact of the NIF network.

lead people “to hold beliefs that are not in their best interest” (1998, 140-141). There is a possibility that citizens will resist the opportunity to deliberate (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002) or that deliberation on extremely contentious issues will simply lead to no solution at all (Shapiro 1999, 28-38).

“Difference democrats” (see, for example, Mouffe 1999; Young 1997) have waged a particularly compelling attack on deliberation. Some scholars (Bell 1999, 70-87; Bohman 1996, 16; McLeod, et al. 1999; Sanders 1997; Schauer 1999, 22) argue that the pluralism of contemporary society precludes the possibility of equal representation and participation that is required by the “ideal speech situation” (Habermas 1984). More consonant with our national diversity, argues Mouffe (1999), is “agonistic pluralism” which recognizes our forms of exclusion instead of rationalizing or moralizing them and keeps alive the “democratic contestation.” (See also Ivie 1998.) Young (1997) adds that the narrowness of acceptable communicative forms in deliberation inherently excludes those not well versed in those skills. The “force of the better argument” (Habermas 1984) should be supplemented, in Young’s view, by communicative forms to which there is wider access, such as greeting, rhetoric (which she defines as emotion and figurative speech), and storytelling. (See also, Ryfe 2006.) When discussion becomes only a “gentleman’s club” (Dryzek 2000, 57), dominated by a well-informed, articulate faction, the result may be that weaker members feel less capable (Stokes 1998, 124). Deliberation among diverse groups can also deteriorate into ordinary, polarizing debate, which reinforces the alienating effects of politics (Shapiro 1999). But a lack of diversity in the group can also have a negative impact on deliberation, minimizing the ability of participants to learn and to change as a result of their experience (Ryfe 2005).

In our research we have attempted to take into account both the benefits and the potential limitations of deliberation. Review of the research literature reminds us that “Habermas may be correct that deliberation is a natural human talent, but it is not easy to cultivate and maintain” (Ryfe 2005, 60). We ask whether the positive



transformative effects of learning to deliberate can be achieved through the teaching and training of young people in higher education. But we also ask how we can be aware of the potential problems of deliberation and how they might be ameliorated in that process. We acknowledge that much of the discussion of the proposed benefits and dangers of deliberation is untested and speculative. Our goal in this project is to contribute to the relatively new but growing efforts to test these various propositions through empirical research (Delli Carpini, Cook, and Jacob 2004; Ryfe 2005).

The concept of deliberation, as a method of increasing student civic engagement has gained standing. With regard to higher education, deliberation has been considered as a classroom tool (Campbell 2005; Doble, Peng, Frank, and Salim 1999; Ervin 1997), a method of campuswide communication (Mallory and Thomas 2003; Schoem and Hurtado 2002), and a means of promoting interaction with communities (Brisbin and Hunter 2003; Murphy 2004). In *Democratic Education*, Amy Gutmann (1987, 173) argues that “learning how to think carefully about political problems, to articulate one’s views and defend them is a form of education for which universities are well suited.”

As a classroom tool, deliberation provides a means of exposing students to important civic knowledge, skills, and experiences needed for citizenship. It teaches them “to critically examine evidence, to be able to see the world through multiple viewpoints—to step into other shoes; to make connections and see patterns” (Howell 2002, 117). Attempts to promote deliberative methods campuswide should be developed to include more than “sporadic public panel discussion and lectures, departmental meetings, or professional seminars,” which typically represent the dialogue that occurs on college campuses (Mallory and Thomas 2003, 11), and should instead seek ways to involve students in wider governance processes when possible (Carey 2000; McMillan 2004; Morse 1993). Deliberative dialogue is a beneficial tool for linking students with communities outside of college campuses as well. Practicing public deliberation in communities could produce deliberative habits, develop necessary skills, and build political knowledge

(Burkhalter, Gastil, and Kelshaw 2002; Gastil and Dillard 1999a). Efforts to improve campus-community partnerships involve “more informed conversation between college and universities and collective organizations in the state or region surrounding the campus” (Brisbin and Hunter 2003, 485; Thomas 2000).

John J. Patrick (2000) identifies the key components of effective civic education that colleges and universities should consider in developing programs of this sort. These include the acquisition of *knowledge* of concepts, principles, and history of democracy and the role of citizens; the development of *cognitive skills* of identifying, describing, analyzing, explaining, evaluating, and thinking critically and constructively about what this substantive knowledge means for the way democracy works and our role in it; the development of *participatory skills*, such as interacting with others, monitoring public events, deliberating about public policy and influencing policy decisions; and finally, the encouragement of *dispositions of citizenship*, which include the promotion of the general welfare, recognition of the common humanity of each person, respecting and protecting rights, taking responsibility for one’s participation, and supporting democratic principles and practices.

In this book, we consider the ways teaching college students the process of deliberation might contribute to their interest in, and the quality of, their participation in civic life. We have framed our study using the educational components identified by Patrick and the notion of *context*—the settings where deliberation might be used and the strengths and limitations of each venue for teaching students the democratic skill of deliberative talk. (See Huckfeldt 1979; Huckfeldt, Beck, Dalton, and Levine 1995; McLeod, et al. 1999 for discussions of the importance of context in assessing deliberation.)

## The Research Design

In 2001, we began a longitudinal research project, which examined the experiences of a group of students as they made their way through four years of education at our private, liberal arts college in North Carolina. We were interested in exploring several

interrelated questions that probe the role of higher education in civic education. We sought to understand:

- how the college experience itself shapes students' attitudes and behavior with regard to civic engagement. What is happening during this time that either encourages or discourages them to become involved in politics and in their communities?
- whether students who learned how to deliberate about public issues developed different sensibilities about their roles as democratic citizens than their peers who had not had this experience.
- the effects of context on the deliberative experience. Did it make a difference whether students deliberated with each other in the classroom, with their peers on campus, or with diverse citizens in the community?

We pursued these questions by gathering data from several sets of students. The first was a group of 30 students who were recruited from the entering class in the fall of 2001 to participate in the Democracy Fellows program. These students were enrolled in a first-year seminar entitled "Deliberative Democracy" and participated in various activities that provided them the opportunity to experiment with democratic decision making during their four-year careers. Later in this chapter, we will describe these fellows and their selection in more detail. During the first semester, we conducted entry interviews with all the fellows to establish a baseline of their political views. In subsequent years, they were interviewed in focus groups about their ongoing experiences with deliberation and campus life and were given a brief participation survey to gauge their political activities. In the senior year, we conducted exit interviews with them. All of these sessions were audiotaped and transcribed.

The second group of 30 students was randomly selected from a list of the entering class that *excluded* the 30 Democracy Fellows. We called this comparison group the "class cohort" (of the 30 invited, only 25 participated initially), and they were invited to participate in focus groups each year. While the original cohort served as the core group throughout the study, their numbers

were supplemented, when necessary, to maintain a critical mass of non-fellow respondents from the class of 2001. In the first year, these students were asked the same questions that had been asked of the Democracy Fellows in the individual interviews. In subsequent years, we asked both the Democracy Fellows and the class cohort some of the same questions. In addition, we queried the Democracy Fellows about their experiences with deliberative activities, something the class cohort had not experienced. These interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

During the second year of the study, we talked with a third group of students as well. These students were neither in the Democracy Fellows program nor part of the class cohort. They were students from all classes who participated in a campus deliberation planned and hosted by the Democracy Fellows in October of 2002. Again 30 students were invited and 25 attended focus groups where we asked them the same questions we asked the Democracy Fellows about their deliberative experience and administered the same participation survey that the fellows and cohort took.

When designing a research project, social scientists are always faced with challenging choices about what kind of data to gather and what methods to use in gathering and analyzing them. No approach is perfect and each choice both illuminates and obscures. Our decision to work with a small group of students on a single campus allowed us to go into considerable depth through interviews and focus groups and gave us a substantial amount of data in the authentic voices of the students. We recognize, of course, that in order to get that depth and specificity, we sacrificed breadth and sample size, which might have allowed us to make broader generalizations about college students. As a partial correction of this deficiency we used survey data that we gathered by adding questions to the Wake Forest campus surveys given to all entering freshmen and a sample of exiting seniors who served as subjects of the national HERI study of college students' attitudes. These data provide some insight into how our two sample groups compare to their Wake Forest peers.

## The Setting

Wake Forest University is a private liberal arts college located in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. It was founded by the Baptist State Convention in 1854 and it maintained that relationship until 1986, when the Board of Trustees voted to become autonomous. In addition to the College of Arts and Sciences, the university includes an undergraduate business college, a law school, a graduate school of business, a divinity school, a graduate school of arts and sciences, and a medical school located on another campus in the city. In the spring of 2002, when the Democracy Fellows entered, there were 4,045 undergraduates on campus and the majority of first-year students were in the top 10 percent of their graduating classes in high school. The student body was predominantly white, with a minority student population of 12.2 percent. Although the campus is experiencing increasing diversity, the critical mass of the student population is affluent and leans toward political conservatism.

In contrast to its sleepy, small-town beginnings in eastern North Carolina, Wake Forest today is well known as one of the “small Ivies,” consistently making a strong showing in the annual *US News and World Report* college rankings. Guided by its motto “*Pro Humanitate*,” the school has a storied history of weighing in on social and political battles, such as the evolution controversy, and has turned back several challenges to its strong stance on academic freedom. Wake Forest took a giant, but controversial, step in the leadership of higher education in 1995 when it struck a deal with technology giant, IBM, to become one of the first completely wired campuses in the country.

Wake Forest has not been exempt from the national concern over student public-mindedness, which we chronicled above. There have been varied efforts to respond to that concern, including the university’s participation in the Kettering Foundation’s Public Leadership Education Project, the strengthening and expansion of the Volunteer Service Corps (VSC), collaboration between the VSC and the Teaching and Learning Center to promote service learning across the curriculum, and recently, some preliminary efforts to

encourage more public deliberation in addressing campus-life issues. Therefore for the purposes of this study, it is important to note that given its culture and history and anchored by its motto "*Pro Humanitate*," Wake Forest *should* be a campus amenable to the process of deliberation. Other campuses would undoubtedly face different, perhaps more formidable, challenges. It is our hope that schools of different sizes, populations, and even educational philosophies will benefit from our experiment and, in particular, will test and refine our methods to ensure a more successful deliberative future for higher education.

### **Who Were the Democracy Fellows?**

Without betraying the confidentiality that the students were promised and the Institutional Review Board requires, we would like the reader to know as much as possible about the Democracy Fellows. First, the Admissions Office provided us with a demographic breakdown of the entering class of 2001 so that, in selecting the fellows, we could seek a relatively representative sample of entering students, at least in some categories. Over the summer of 2001, we contacted each first-year student with information about the Democracy Fellows program and suggested the possibility that he or she might opt to apply for the program and thereby choose Deliberative Democracy as the first-year seminar. In addition to asking for demographic information used to align the applicants with the larger class profile, we asked applicants to list their most significant high-school activities, to reflect on the requirements of citizenship, to describe their memorable experiences in working with a group, and to tell us what they expected to contribute to the Democracy Fellows group they were proposing to join.

We received 60 applications for the 30 available slots, a number fixed by the fact that we could only offer two sections of the first-year seminar and these courses were limited to 15 students per section. After each researcher carefully read each application, we sorted them according to the parameters of the class with regard to gender, minority status, and geographical diversity. Then we

considered the additional information the applicants had given us. The selection of the final 30 was ultimately determined by insightfulness of the application, varied high-school activities, unique perspectives, openness to learning a new perspective, and a balanced mixture of liberal and conservative viewpoints. Despite the fact that in the overall group there appeared to be a bias that politics matters, several of the students admitted to not having acted on that presumption. In fact, we intentionally took some students whose high-school activities and self-professed assessment reflected little or no political zeal and, in a number of cases, we eliminated from the pool some students who had been extremely active politically.

In the group of 30 Democracy Fellows chosen, there were 15 males and 15 females, with 8 minority students. Slightly more than half (18) were from the Southeast, with 6 of them from North Carolina. There were six students from the Mid-Atlantic states, three from the Midwest, two from New England, and one from Texas. Thus, in terms of demographics, the group mirrored fairly well the overall make-up of the entering class.

While all of the applicants professed some level of interest in politics and citizen engagement, there was variation in the degree to which their “most significant” high-school activities reflected that interest. Still many of the students’ reports contained activities that were tacit, if not explicit, examples of citizenship:

- 11 students listed student-government activities; about half had held an office
- 13 listed community-service projects of one sort or another
- 6 listed active participation on debate teams
- 6 others listed an assortment of activities that have political content of some sort: model UN, political science club, youth membership on the city council, a city-sponsored multicultural leadership program, and a national office in the Future Business Leaders of America

Philosophically, the students who were selected seemed relatively similar in answering what they thought citizenship requires:

paying attention to public affairs and voting, themes which might be encapsulated in a sense of responsibility, which many referenced. Beyond those commonalities, however, were some interesting variations, which we sought to capture in the selection process—for example, the differences between “passive” and “active” citizenship; individualism versus community; and the role and functions of voice. Most students clearly felt that they would contribute to the group with life experiences, leadership skills, and public speaking and debating experiences (several told us that they liked to “argue” about politics). Not surprisingly few, if any, seemed to think of public talk in deliberative ways.

### **Summary of Findings**

What we found, in brief, was that when they left Wake Forest after four years, the Democracy Fellows were more interested and engaged politically than a comparison group in these specific ways: they were more involved in traditional political venues, more expressive of the responsibilities of citizenship, more analytical and critical of political processes, more efficacious in their political attitudes and language, more communal in political language and outlook, and more imaginative in recognizing possibilities for deliberation and its broader application. Furthermore, we learned that even limited exposure to deliberation, less frequent and less formal, also delivers at least trace amounts of those same benefits that were prominent among the Democracy Fellows.

The exit data gathered annually from the senior class by the Higher Education Research Institute and the WFU Office of Institutional Research offers another interesting finding: because this survey allowed us to contrast the Democracy Fellows, the class cohort, and the senior class as a whole, we were able to discern the relative impact of deliberative exposure. As we will describe more specifically in Chapter Six, the Democracy Fellows separated themselves from both the cohort and the class-at-large on two important measures: their perceptions of voice and their belief that their college education, which had featured intensive



deliberative training, had prepared them for active citizenship. However, the students in the cohort with their limited focus group exposure, were more positive on these measures than the class-at-large, reinforcing the qualitative data on the benefits of *any* deliberative experience. Finally, we found that the contexts available to colleges—the classroom, the campus, and the larger community—do make a difference in students’ learning and that each offers both benefits and limitations in teaching students to become active citizens.

### The Plan of the Book

We will explicate the findings previewed above first by examining the entering expectations of the Democracy Fellows and their first-year class cohort. What experiences that shaped their views about politics and their expectations about the college experience did they bring to campus? We explore the phenomenon we call “citizenship deferred”—a notion we found within both groups that politics and citizenship are not something they can and should do now, but instead something they’ll get to, maybe, sometime later in their lives. (See also, Campus Compact 2002; Loeb 1994.)

The next three chapters explore the impact of the three deliberative interventions that the Democracy Fellows experienced during their first three years: a first-year seminar, in which they learned and practiced deliberative skills; a campus deliberation, which they planned and executed during their sophomore year; and a community deliberation, which they organized in Winston-Salem during their junior year. In each we consider what we learned about that particular context for deliberation in terms of its benefits and/or drawbacks for developing democratic sensibilities in the students. In Chapter Six, we discuss the senior-year data, comparing the Democracy Fellows to their senior cohort. After four years, which experiences seem most powerful? Which aspects of the college experience have been most significant for both groups? As they enter the working world, will they continue to defer their citizenship or will they embrace it?

We speak to the wider applicability of our study in two chapters of the book. We summarize our major findings and explore how they either confirm or modify received traditions about the political development of college students—or offer some totally new insights. Finally, given what we learned, what can and should colleges and universities do to develop democratic citizens? What can higher education bring to the civic-renewal movement?