

Please Explain Yourself: Mechanisms of Opinion Improvement in
Deliberative Forums

DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Public opinion is intended to hold a powerful place in American democracy. Yet, factors such as low political knowledge, low political interest, low political efficacy, and the limitations of individual information processing result in opinions that are of dubious quality. Ill-considered political attitudes are of little use to both citizens, as they attempt to make sense of the political world around them, and elected officials looking for guidance on matters of policy. Citizen-to-citizen public deliberation has been shown to have positive effects on those who participate including a beneficial impact on the quality of political attitudes. However, we still know very little about the mechanisms at play during public deliberation that allow for these effects. Using originally collected data from deliberative forums on higher education, this dissertation makes the case that two factors, present in public deliberation but absent from most political environments, help to explain why deliberation is able to improve the quality of individual opinions. Specifically, deliberation is able to improve the quality of political attitudes when participants hold each other accountable, through questioning, for the opinions that they espouse. Additionally, the quality of attitudes is improved when deliberative forums provide a sense of stakes or a clear sense that a person's participation in a forum is connected to levers of political power.

To Pattie, with love and gratitude

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Chapter 1

Mr. Smith Goes to... the Public Library

Public opinion is so much a part of our politics that it is surprising that we have not incorporated it into the Constitution. We constantly use the term, seek to measure whatever it is and to influence it, and we worry about who else is influencing it. Public opinion exists in any state, but in our democracy it has a special power.

—*Gordon Wood*

Introduction

A few years of training in American political behavior would leave even the most starry-eyed optimist more than a little skeptical about the average American citizen's ability to competently participate in democracy. A quick glance at an introduction to American politics textbook will reveal that the term democracy comes from the Greek word *demokratia*, meaning, "rule of the people;" a radical form of government based on the notion that there is no higher authority than the people themselves. Yet, where does a system of government stand if its ultimate authority (the people in this case) has shown time and again to be unfit for the task of self-governance? For at least the last six decades, students of American political behavior have been inundated with evidence that the average citizen cares little about politics, knows even less, and does not seem to have the desire to improve the situation by learning more. While sub-par political interest and knowledge are certainly not the death knell of democracy, they do manifest themselves in more troubling ways. A lack of interest and knowledge translates into low levels of political participation and opinions that are baseless at best and non-existent at worst.

Looking for hope outside the classroom, the student of political behavior sees television clips of disastrous town-hall meetings¹ and even late night talk shows poking fun at the abysmal quality of public opinion. Taken together, these things leave a person with very little faith in their fellow citizens—if democracy is truly rule by the people, we are in big trouble!

With this as my background, I set out in the fall of 2011 to attend a deliberative forum that was being held at the public library near my home. I went, not as a researcher, but as a citizen who was interested in participating in the event. The evening's topic was social security, and while I was eager to participate, my training in political behavior caused me to temper my expectations for what was to come. While deliberative forums are not known for their representativeness, due to the fact that their samples are usually self-selected, this particular room was a decent cross-section of the community, complete with age, gender, and racial diversity. The only things we shared in common were that we lived in the same community and were interested enough in the topic to spend an hour out of our lives discussing social security. Moreover, none of us, myself included, had any special knowledge of the topic. Yet, we were still able to have a productive and intelligent discussion. There was widespread participation in the room, true give and take, and not one instance of the conversation devolving into partisan talking points or petty bickering. Needless to say, given my background and prior attitudes, I was truly surprised at how fruitful the forum was. After just one short hour, I left the forum with

¹ Town hall meetings are a quintessential feature of participatory democracy; A group of concerned citizens gathering together to discuss the issues of the day with their representative. How can something that sounds so perfect, go off the rails in such a dramatic fashion? See Neblo (2009) for a discussion of the inflammatory town halls on health care.

increased knowledge of the topic in general as well as greater awareness of the trade-offs associated with various courses of action. While my opinions did not undergo a wholesale change, they were certainly more informed, and I was thinking differently about the topic. Part of this different thinking is that the forum had exposed me to the views of others. By deliberating, I was exposed to the viewpoints of others and learned that our disagreements were not based on their ignorance or lack of information, but rather that they had reasons for feeling the way that they did. While I still disagreed with some in the room, I left with a better sense of and respect for “where they were coming from.” Most importantly, I left the forum with a renewed faith in my fellow citizen. It *is* possible to have an informed discussion about the issues, even with those you disagree with and the average citizen has more political sophistication than popular accounts suggest. The best way I can describe the experience is that something powerful occurred during our group’s deliberation in the public library that night. I say this because I felt a change in myself while at the forum. I was more measured in my words and more intent in my listening. But why? I have had countless political discussions in my life with close friends, family, and colleagues, yet never had this feeling—I always shot from the hip. What is it about deliberation that makes it such a powerful experience?

While the story above should not be confused with systematic evidence, it does serve as the impetus for this project. Previous research has shown that the quality of American public opinion is poor and research has also shown that deliberation is able to improve the quality of public opinion. Yet, what remains a mystery is just *why* deliberation is able to achieve this. How do political opinions ascertained through deliberation compare with opinions obtained from a traditional survey and what is it

about deliberation that drives the differences? As Hackman and Morris (1975) state, “There is substantial agreement among researchers and observers of small task groups that something important happens in group interaction which can affect performance outcomes. There is little agreement about just what that “something” is.” In short, the overarching purpose of this project is to take steps to better understand that “something” in deliberation.

What’s Wrong? Some Pathologies of Public Opinion and Political Behavior

Low Levels of Political Knowledge

At a very basic level, the average American is not particularly well informed about the workings of government, struggles to identify key political actors, and lacks a firm grasp of the issues of the day. This point is well-established, so an extended list of examples is unnecessary. To give an idea though, Pew regularly fields a “News IQ Quiz” survey that measures citizen knowledge of various current events and political topics. Recent results from this series of surveys show that 33% of citizens can correctly state the number of women on the Supreme Court, 51% of citizens can correctly identify Elizabeth Warren out of a set of four pictures, and 52% of citizens knew which party controlled the majority in the U.S. Senate.²

Given all the handwringing about the present levels of political knowledge, it might be easy to assume that we once lived in a world, decades ago, when citizens were much more politically sophisticated. At the same time, one could also assume the opposite. Given the increase in the amount of political information available, today’s citizens would surely be more knowledgeable about politics than their grandparents were.

² Pew Research Center. “What the Public Knows in Words, Pictures, and Graphs.” April 28, 2015.

In actuality though, levels of political knowledge have remained remarkably stable for the last several decades (Clawson and Oxley 2013; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Americans today are no better or worse in terms of political knowledge than their grandparents were several decades ago. In short, a dearth of political sophistication is nothing new to the political behavior and public opinion landscape.

Levels of political knowledge are not particularly high and never have been. It is a matter of debate though as to just how much political knowledge citizens *need* to have. To some (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), “political information is to democratic politics what money is to economics: it is the currency of citizenship,” while to others (Bartels 2008), the real question about a lack of political knowledge is, “so what?” In short though, it is inarguable that citizens do not know much about politics and that possession of at least some modicum of political knowledge is necessary to *effectively* participate in democratic public life.

Low Interest

Related to low levels of political knowledge are similarly low levels of political interest. At a broad level, few Americans admit to *liking* politics, but many do claim to be interested in following the news on public affairs, campaigns, and elections. Since 1960, the American National Election Study (ANES) has asked citizens how interested they are in following “what’s going on in government and public affairs.” From 1980 to the present, the proportion of citizens responding that they are interested in following what’s going on “most of the time” has held steady at approximately a quarter of the citizenry. Over the same period of time, the proportion of citizens responding to the same question with “hardly at all” or “only now and then” has held steady at

approximately one-third of the citizenry. Taken together, Americans today are not very interested in politics and, perhaps as a result, do not know very much about politics.

Low Efficacy

Possibly related to low knowledge and interest, and perhaps more troubling, are the low levels of political efficacy possessed by citizens today. Political efficacy, as commonly measured, contains two dimensions. The first, internal efficacy, taps the extent to which citizens themselves feel competent enough to effectively understand and participate in democratic public life. The second dimension, external efficacy, assesses the extent to which citizens are confident that their voice is heard (by elected officials) and has some bearing on government conduct. As with low knowledge and interest, low levels of political efficacy are a troubling feature of the American political landscape. Americans are not overly confident in their own ability to understand and participate in politics, and they have even less faith that their voices are heard and valued by people in positions of political power. Data from the 2012 ANES shows that 56% of citizens agree that “politics is so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on.” The number stood at 68% on this item in 2008. The 2012 ANES also shows that 61% of citizens agree with the statement “public officials don’t care much what people like me think.” A glance at current data on political efficacy paints a rather sad picture of a citizenry that feels impotent when it comes to politics. Many lack confidence in their own abilities to participate and an even larger number doubt that their participation would make a difference anyway.

Result: Non-Attitudes and No Attitudes

Taken together, the above describes a citizenry that lacks interest in politics, knowledge about politics, and faith that their voice is heard. As such, it should come as no surprise that citizens oftentimes lack opinions on the major issues of the day or provide non-attitudes (providing an opinion when one really doesn't have one) to survey researchers. Non-attitudes plague survey research and lots of thought is put into ways of mitigating this problem. However, we should really be surprised, given the low levels of interest, knowledge, and efficacy, that citizens have any opinions about politics at all.

Doubts about citizen competence and the weak, unstable, or non-existent political attitudes that result are grounded in a rich tradition of political science scholarship. This tradition begins with the landmark Elmira and Erie County studies of Lazarsfeld and colleagues (1944; 1954), who set out to study the impact of media consumption on political behavior. While they found “minimal effects” relating to media, Lazarsfeld et al. still managed to shed a tremendous amount of light on the average citizen's political behavior. Specifically, they were troubled to find that most citizens in their studies failed to meet the idealized citizen of democratic theory. Berelson et al. (1954) found citizens to be uninterested and unknowledgeable when it came to the political climate around them. This lack of interest and knowledge manifested itself in a lack of opinions on the most pressing issues of the day. Speaking of citizen opinions on the big campaign issues of the time, Berelson et al. (1954) note, “there is a considerable amount of ‘don't know’—sometimes reflecting genuine indecision, more often meaning ‘don't care.’” More though than just uninterested and unknowledgeable, Berelson et al. (1954) depict a citizen that is completely baffled by all things politics. “The ordinary voter, bewildered

by the complexity of modern political problems, unable to determine clearly what the consequences are of alternative lines of action, remote from the arena, and incapable of bringing information to bear on principle....” (Berelson et al. 1954). The authors go on to express wonder that the American democracy continues to function in spite of widespread incompetence on the part of citizens. Ultimately, Berelson et al. (1954) note the benefits of a largely ignorant public and attribute the continued functioning of democracy to a political division of labor, whereby a small subset of informed citizens carry the weight normally ascribed to the citizenry as a whole.

Building on this, Philip Converse (1964) set out to further home in on the dynamics of opinion at the individual level. Specifically, Converse (1964) looked for constraint in the belief systems of ordinary citizens, or evidence that an individual’s collection of political opinions tied together in some coherent way. Ultimately, Converse (1964) concluded that most citizen opinions lacked any meaningful form of constraint. In fact, by using panel data on the same issue questions, Converse found that citizens changed their opinions on the same topic, seemingly at random when asked at different points in time. These random shifts were chalked up as non-attitudes. In an attempt to avoid looking foolish, survey participants would offer opinions on topics that they really had no opinion on. Since they did not possess a real attitude, their answers to the same questions were likely to be different if asked again.

Building on this work was still more foundational research by John Zaller, both alone (1992) and in collaboration with Stanley Feldman (1992). Rather than attributing the pathologies of public opinion to ignorance, as had previous scholars, Zaller and Feldman (1992) described American public opinion as full of ambivalence. That is to say

that citizens were not completely innocent of opinions on the issues but that they were in possession of a number of considerations, many of which were in conflict with each other. Thus, when asked for their opinion on an issue, citizens cull whatever considerations are salient (top of the head) to them at that time and respond accordingly. Given the ever-evolving parade of political stimuli citizens are exposed to, the considerations culled are likely to be different at different points in time, which helps to explain the seemingly wild shifts in individual opinions on the same issue. While somewhat more favorable to the competence of average citizens than scholars before him, Zaller's (1992) own theory still, "makes no allowance for citizens to think, reason, or deliberate about politics."

It is hard to overstate just how influential the aforementioned work on citizen competence and public opinion has been. Spanning nearly 50 years, a variety of political climates, and a number of research strategies, the dominant theme remained the same. Namely, citizens lack the competence to effectively participate in political life. Formidable challenges to this line of research did emerge over time (Achen 1975; Nie et al. 1976), but none powerful enough to shake this dominant conception of woefully ignorant citizens.

Cognitive Misers and Biased Processors

Through a combination of low knowledge, low interest, and low efficacy it can be difficult or unappealing for citizens to engage with or think about the most important political issues of the day. Not surprisingly, this lack of engagement and thought tends to result in a citizenry that lacks solid opinions on political issues. Several decades of research from political behavior suggests that citizens are unwilling or incapable of

conceptualizing politics in a sophisticated manner. On top of this, further research contends that even when citizens do engage with politics and think about the issues, they tend to do so in a cursory and often biased manner.

Research from psychology and political science has consistently shown that individuals are cognitive misers, who prefer easier, less cognitively taxing methods of processing information (Stroh 1995). Individuals tend to prefer less labor-intensive methods of information processing in an economic sense (i.e. individuals do not want to spend all day researching political topics). Additionally, easier methods of processing are favored because our ability to process information is bounded, in the words of Herbert Simon (1985), by limits in human information capacity, knowledge, and attention.

Given the sheer number of decisions that a person must make each day, individuals tend to favor quicker and easier methods of decision-making as a matter of efficiency if nothing else. In spite of this preference for quick and easy methods of information processing, individuals are capable of and do, at times, engage in more thorough forms of information processing. As an individual trait, possessed more strongly by some than others, certain individuals simply enjoy rigorous thinking more than others do (Cacioppo and Petty 1982). Regardless of individual differences and preferences, there are other situational factors that can influence the amount of effort and thought that one puts into a matter. This realization, that citizens are neither all-knowing information processors nor unthinking dolts, is reflected in dual process theories of information processing and persuasion. These theories attempt to distinguish gut-level reactions from thoughtful consideration and explore the conditions under which each of these routes might be followed by citizens. One of the key variables that influences depth

of processing is the extent to which an issue is personally relevant to an individual (Petty and Cacioppo 1981). When an issue under consideration is personally relevant, individuals are more likely to engage in a more thorough form of information processing, where they are attentive to the merits of an argument. By contrast, when the issue at hand is not deemed to be personally relevant, individuals will fall back on information processing shortcuts and base judgments not on the merits but on more peripheral factors such as the perceived attractiveness or credibility of a message source. Put simply, depth of processing is more a function of motivation than ability. When an issue is relevant to the types of things that a person really cares about, this provides the motivation necessary to engage in deep and thoughtful consideration.

In addition to the amount of thought one puts into an issue, another fear regarding the quality of public opinion is the extent to which citizens will give an issue, and all of its sides, a fair and impartial hearing. Enough evidence exists to support the fear that citizens are biased information processors. For example, Kunda (1990) argues that the motives or goals people bring to the table affect the manner in which they process information. Individuals can be motivated to process information in one of two ways. First, individuals can be motivated by *accuracy* or a desire to “get things right” in processing information. When motivated by accuracy, individuals exert more cognitive effort, thinking more deeply, about a subject. This increased cognitive effort leads to a decrease in biased information processing and a desire to arrive at the best possible conclusion. To be motivated by accuracy produces high quality opinion, but this is tempered by the fact that some are motivated by partisan goals, which cause them to process information with an eye toward arriving at a particular, directional conclusion.

People motivated by partisan goals, process information in a biased manner in an attempt to preserve their prior, partisan attitudes. Citizens like to maintain a “veil of objectivity” but in reality they stack the deck in favor of maintaining their current attitudes by calling to mind a biased set of considerations with regard to the topic at hand. Using this as a jumping off point, Taber and Lodge (2006) attempt to uncover when and why citizens are biased processors of political information. They find evidence of three cognitive biases, which are mostly concentrated among the strongest partisans and most politically sophisticated. First, they find evidence of a prior attitude effect, whereby those with strong prior attitudes evaluate attitudinally supportive arguments as superior to counter-attitudinal arguments in spite of instructions to be objective. Second, they find evidence of a disconfirmation bias, whereby people spend a great deal of time counter-arguing and denigrating counter-attitudinal information while uncritically accepting information that comports with their prior attitude. Finally, Taber and Lodge (2006) find evidence of a confirmation bias, whereby individuals seek out attitudinally congruent sources of information if given the freedom to choose the material they consult. Additional research by Lord et al. (1984) has shown that biased information processing persists in spite of researcher pleas for subjects to be as objective as possible when confronting new information. Lord et al. (1984) take this as evidence that biased information processing cannot be ameliorated simply by imploring individuals to exert more effort or be more objective in their evaluations. Rather, they conclude that biased information processing is often the result of a person’s failure to “consider the opposite.” In other words, a person’s failure to think deeply about the other side’s claims in a debate resulted in biased information processing. In addition to affecting information processing, Lupia

(2015) also argues that motivated reasoning influences how citizens view the opinions of others. Specifically, he notes that motivated reasoning hinders the ability to recognize value diversity. It is uncomfortable for citizens to confront and truly give a fair hearing to opinions that differ from their own. As such, we are motivated to treat opinions that differ from our own as the product of ignorance as opposed to the product of different people valuing different things.

Overall Result: Low Quality Opinions

The above does not paint a particularly flattering picture of the American public and its ability to effectively participate in political life. Low levels of political knowledge, political interest, and political efficacy help to create an environment in which citizens often lack any opinion at all on the major issues of the day. What is more, when opinions are present, they are often the product of biased and quick modes of information processing.

Taken together, these pathologies of American political behavior create a situation where the *quality*, not the distribution, direction, or strength, of public opinion is of primary concern. Popular accounts of public opinion tend to focus on its distribution or *what* people think. How many individuals support policy X as opposed to policies Y or Z? How do individuals feel about candidates X, Y, and Z? Given what we know about political behavior and public opinion though, shouldn't the more important question be what any of this actually means? If what passes as public opinion is actually just non-attitudes or the product of biased and cursory information processing, how much weight should we put in public opinion? For all of the aforementioned reasons, the overall quality of public opinion in America is quite low. No commonly accepted criteria

for low quality opinions exists but a few factors seem obvious. For starters, low quality public opinion is potentially made up on the spot or even non-existent in the case of non-attitudes. Low quality opinions also have a very weak grounding in sound information. Lastly, low quality opinions are the product of a cursory or biased thought process, whereby alternate viewpoints or shortcomings to one's own viewpoint are not considered.

Given the raft of research on the topic, it is fairly easy to make a claim that the quality of American public opinion is quite low. Much rarer though is a discussion of what high quality public opinion would look like. Often, conversations in this arena lament and search for ways to improve the public's factual knowledge about objective political questions. This is reflected in book titles like, *How Stupid are We?* (Shenkman 2008) or headlines like *Politico's* "Americans bomb Pew test of basic political knowledge."³ Improving knowledge of factual political items is fine as far as it goes, but does little to address the quality of public opinion. Knowing which party controls the majority in Congress or being able to identify the Speaker of the House are not the kind of opinions that help elected officials represent their constituents or help citizens to navigate themselves through the political world.

Far different than factual political knowledge, the major issues that citizens, communities and the country face are matters of judgment. The search for "correct" answers is futile when it comes to issues like poverty, education, or immigration. If correct answers existed on thorny issues like this, we long ago would have eradicated poverty, perfected the method by which we educate children, and created a fair, safe, and humane system of immigration. The absence of correct or easy answers does not free us

³ Gass, Nick. "Americans bomb Pew test of basic political knowledge." *Politico* April 28, 2015.

though from the duty to wrestle with the difficult political issues that we face. Rather, the persistence of difficult issues with no easy answers only serves to heighten the need for high quality public opinion, the need for sound judgment. These most difficult issues require citizens to think through what *ought* to be done.

If high quality public opinion and sound judgment about what ought to be done are necessary, what do these things actually look like? Opinion quality has been described as the missing concept in the voluminous literature on public opinion (Yankelovich 1991). That being said, there are still certain indicators one can look to in order to assess the quality of an opinion. However, because there are few “correct” answers when it comes to the issues that society faces, it is more important to look at the manner in which an opinion is arrived at rather than the end result.

For starters, a high quality opinion should have a fairly strong foundation in quality information. Information is not the sole ingredient though. If the availability of information were the only requirement for high quality opinions, the present media landscape provides more than enough information for public opinion to be sound. The key here is that citizens need not be policy experts but simply have enough information to aid them as they think through an issue.

High quality opinions should also be well thought out. That is, they should not be the result of knee jerk reactions or gut feelings. Rather, high quality opinions should be the result of deep or central processing, in that citizens actually take the time to really think hard about the issue at hand. Given the number of decisions citizens must make each day and simple limitations of the brain’s capacity, it is impossible to argue that citizens must engage in central processing on every decision that they make. Indeed, this

lack of thought partly explains the low quality of public opinion on many issues. This should not be surprising though if the questions asked are of little importance to citizens. However, if the issue at hand is truly important to the lives of citizens (e.g. the education of children, the safety of communities), deep thought should not be an overly burdensome requirement.

Additionally, given the complexity of most political issues and the absence of easy answers, high quality opinions should also reflect an awareness of the tradeoffs that accompany any policy matter. In forming their opinions, citizens must be able to acknowledge, work through, and ultimately decide whether or not to accept the drawbacks that even their most preferred policy preferences entail. In this sense, a thorough evaluation of tradeoffs puts an individual's opinions to the test. If an individual still supports a certain policy after evaluating all of its potential drawbacks, that is a strong opinion.

Lastly, high quality opinions should have a strong grounding in reasons. For many questions, providing reasons as to why we feel the way that we do can be difficult or even impossible. Why is *Moby Dick* your favorite book? Why is red your favorite color? For opinions like these, individuals often fall back on, "it just is." In cases like these, it is perfectly harmless to lack a bevy of supporting reasons as to why these opinions are held. By contrast, political questions involve decisions that might affect the life, liberty, and rights of others. As a result, we owe each other some justification when we express opinions that affect other people. Regardless of how burdensome one actually finds it, if I feel strongly that we must take our shoes off at the airport to ensure safety, I owe my fellow citizens a few reasons as to why I feel that their lives should be

altered in this way. For questions like this, it is not sufficient to fall back on, “that’s just the way I feel.”

Potential Fixes

The most popular route in scholarship and commentary on modern public opinion has been to criticize and question its quality, thereby calling into question citizen rationality. “The political ignorance of the American voter is one of the best documented features of contemporary politics,” (Bartels 1996). Early work including Lippmann’s (1922) *The Phantom Public*, Lazarsfeld et al.’s (1944; 1954) studies of Erie County, OH and Elmira, NY, and Campbell et al.’s (1960) *The American Voter* all paint very bleak pictures of the average citizen’s ability to form coherent political opinions. In general, they depict an American citizen that is not interested in politics, does not know much about politics, and whose opinions on the issues of the day shift at random. When citizens did have opinions on issues or made decisions at the ballot box, these preferences were usually rooted in demographics or longstanding partisan loyalties as opposed to solid information about the issues or candidates.

Because this early work was strong and because it was conducted when public opinion polling was still young, those making the case that citizens are rational or competent have always had an uphill battle. Indeed, much rarer is the work claiming that citizens are interested, informed, competent, and rational. As an example of how uncommon this line of argument was, V.O. Key (1966) describes his argument that, “voters are not fools” as, “perverse and unorthodox.” Furthermore, those who do take on the task of arguing that citizens are rational generally do so “through the backdoor.” In other words, their arguments hinge on how citizens can still make reasonably sound

decisions *in spite of the fact* that they are uninformed and uninterested. For example, some make the case that citizens can make reasonably sound decisions by relying on heuristics or information shortcuts (Popkin 1990; Sniderman et al. 1991). According to this line of argument, citizens need not have much information or think very hard about an issue to arrive at a sound decision. Rather, citizens can rely on information shortcuts like endorsements and party identification to arrive at a decision that is likely to be the same one they would have reached had they given the issue more thought. Another line of argument designed to rescue voters from the notion that they are fools is that of collective rationality. The most prominent example of this argument comes from Page and Shapiro (1992), who argue that public opinion, at the collective level, is rational, stable, and moves in sensible ways in response to actual events. According to Page and Shapiro's (1992) argument, opinions, at the individual level, can still be uninformed, baseless, wrongheaded, and unstable. However, through the "miracle of aggregation" these individual level errors balance out to form a coherent whole. Thus, even those who take on the uphill battle of claiming that citizens are politically capable and competent do not paint a particularly rosy picture of the American citizen. Citizens can still be uninformed and do not have to think much about the issues in order to be classified as rational. Instead, information shortcuts and collective rationality are purported to save the day.

Why Low Quality Public Opinion Matters

Thus far, I have outlined several possible factors, that together, help to explain why public opinion is in the state it is today. Given what is known about levels of citizen political knowledge and political interest, it is easy to ask why they do not know more or

care more about politics. However, perhaps the more prudent question is, why should they care? If a substantial portion of citizens are indeed turned off by politics-as-usual (Neblo 2015) and have limited faith that anyone in a position of power actually cares what they think, it is a wonder that citizens have any opinions about politics at all. After all, why would one devote the time and energy necessary to think about and form opinions on a topic that does not interest them and on which nobody else cares what they think. For example, if given a quiz on the history and current goings-on in the world of opera, I would perform quite poorly. I know nothing about opera and really have no opinions on the matter other than the fact that I am not particularly interested in it as a form of art. Moreover, I am also certain that nobody cares what I think about opera. As such, my own lack of knowledge and opinions about opera is more a function of my own lack of interest and the absence of others who care what I think than it is a function of my own capability of learning about the issue. In fact, if pressed, I could probably take the time to learn enough about opera to have a thoughtful conversation and form some basic opinions on the topic. In terms of politics, one way of dealing with the low quality of public opinion is to point the finger at citizens and their own ignorance and lack of competence. Another method is to point the finger at the very nature of modern politics in America and ask how an environment like this contributes to the quality of public opinion we see.

If the question from the citizen perspective is, “why should we care?,” the message from some in the scholarly community is “don’t worry!”. Citizens do not know much about the issues or have sound opinions on them, but they do not need to. Democracy has and will continue to function just fine in spite of these things. Heuristics

and aggregation are meant to assuage the fears of those concerned about the quality of public opinion. However, they offer little comfort to those in search of more meaningful or powerful public opinion.

The argument goes that by using heuristics (e.g. information shortcuts like party identification or newspaper endorsements), citizens are able to make quick and easy political decisions. By using a small bit of information, say a prospective candidate's party identification, citizens are able to make a larger decision (like vote choice) without need for a thorough information search or much thinking at all. In this sense, heuristics are an exercise in efficiency, as they allow citizens to make decisions without spending an abundance of time conducting research or thinking. Not only efficient, but decisions reached via heuristics are often thought to be the same decision that one would have reached had they taken the time to engage in deep thought about the issue. More to the point, heuristics are often pointed to as the reason why democracy continues to function fairly well in spite of all the negative indicators regarding political knowledge and public opinion.

Relying on heuristics in order to redeem the competence of the average citizen is problematic for several reasons. First, heuristics, as they are treated in the political science literature, are seen as a means by which citizens can improve their decision-making capabilities. By contrast, research in psychology, where the concept of heuristics originated, often treats heuristic use as a means by which individuals depart from rationality and end up with sub-optimal decisions because they took a short cut (Kuklinski and Quirk 2000). Fiske (1986), writing before the surge in popularity of heuristics in political science, offers a strong critique of the notion that citizens can make

sound decisions through limited information processing, “The cognitive miser is not an information processing whiz-kid, but rather someone who often takes wrong turns or even simply stays in place, perseverating.” The perspective from psychology makes intuitive sense; by eschewing a deep thought process and relying instead on a shortcut, it is natural that the odds of making an unwise choice increase.

The use of heuristics, far from saving citizens from complete incompetence, opens the door to more “mistakes” than is commonly discussed. Even if that were not the case and heuristics worked perfectly, they would still be troubling in a larger sense. To tout heuristics as a savior of democracy is to tacitly endorse a conception of public opinion that offers little power to individual citizens. Our own opinions and attitudes are a source of personal guidance in the political landscape. By leaning on heuristics for this guidance, we are essentially handing the steering wheel off to someone else, usually an elite. These elite cues might lead us in the right direction or our preferred direction, but they most assuredly are in the direction that someone else sets.

It is this same lack of empowerment that plagues arguments insisting that aggregation insulates us from concerns over the low quality of public opinion. When aggregated, the mistakes, volatility, and overall flaws of individual opinions are smoothed out. Because these mistakes at the individual level cancel out, public opinion as a whole appears rational. In this sense, if public opinion as a whole is rational, sound guidance is offered to elected officials. At the same time though, public opinion should also offer guidance to the individual as they navigate their way through political life. Theories of aggregation offer little for those concerned about attitudes and opinions being a source of empowerment at the individual level.

Given the importance of public opinion as a source of guidance (for both individuals and elected officials), individual opinions would ideally be wise ones. Low levels of political interest, knowledge, and efficacy make the prospect of sound citizen decision-making a difficult one. In search of ways to redeem citizen competence, arguments focused on heuristics provide an avenue for making decisions easier, while arguments focused on aggregation offer little in the way of opinion improvement at the individual level. Both sidestep the necessity of citizens actually doing the hard work of thinking about, talking about, and making decisions about difficult political issues. At the same time, both lines of argument attempt to bring citizens back to a conception of competence that might not reflect sound judgment at all. Earlier, I made the case that high quality opinions are the product of sound information, deep thought, an analysis of trade-offs, and the public explication of reasons in support of a particular position. More commonly though, high quality opinion is judged by the extent to which opinions are held strongly, they are stable over time, and that they fit together under an overarching ideology. In contrasting a deliberative conception of citizen competence with these classical indicators, Neblo (2015) notes, “...Remaining undecided on an issue in advance of deliberation, being willing to switch sides in light of deliberation, and exercising contextual judgment are often good things. Upon reflection there is something very strange about a normative theory of democratic citizenship that renders such dispositions direct indicators of *incompetence*.”

How Deliberation Might Help

Public opinion is important to democracy, yet its quality (and thus its usefulness) are highly questionable. While not usually phrased in terms of public opinion, there

seems to be a shared general sense that something is indeed wrong with American political behavior. This sense is reflected in the number of noble initiatives designed to rectify the situation and improve the health of American democracy. These initiatives are as varied in their aims as they are plentiful in number. A few common threads do emerge in this line of work though; citizens need *more* information, *more* participation, and *more* democracy.

Calls for more information generally take the form of better or more rigorous civics education for young people (e.g. iCivics). The hope is that by providing more civics-related information, young people will see the value of being an active participant in political life. Quality information is certainly important for citizens to have as they wade their way through political life. However, if the quantity of political information were the only necessary ingredient for a healthy political system, the number of newspapers, blogs, and 24 hour cable news channels would be surely be sufficient in that regard. Furthermore, these efforts are generally geared towards providing more information such that individuals learn the value of participating more in politics. In other words, it is generally not the provision of information to aid in making sound decisions but the provision of information to spur political participation.

Another common theme of initiatives seemingly removes the information part of the equation and calls for more participation at all costs (e.g. Rock the Vote!; Vote or Die!). These initiatives view the health of democracy as at least partially a function of the number of people who show up to vote in periodic (usually national) elections. As with the civics information campaigns, these participatory campaigns are usually geared towards young people as well. Indeed, levels of voter turnout, both nationally and

locally, are dreadful and young people have historically had the lowest levels of turnout among all the age groups. Furthermore, low voter turnout is a significant problem insofar as those who do vote tend to be different (i.e. age, education, socio-economic status) than those who do not vote. As such, election results are not necessarily representative of how the public feels. However, calls to increase voter turnout do nothing to address the quality of the individual vote choices themselves. The act of voting requires two decisions; whether or not to vote in the first place and who to vote for. These campaigns emphasize the former question with little attention paid to whether citizens are making sound decisions with regard to the latter question. That to one side, these campaigns also assume that voting is the only relevant and important political decision in a citizen's life. Perhaps unknowingly, these campaigns emphasize an elite theory of democracy, where the primary role of citizens is to vote and then quickly step out of the way, so the business of governance can be carried out by others.

A third commonly expressed solution to the problems that ail democracy is to call for more democracy. This generally takes the form of citizens being able to directly vote on matters of legislation. The idea here is that citizens should have a direct, rather than indirect say, in policy matters that affect their daily lives. This is a fine idea as far as it goes but if the low quality of public opinion is indeed a fundamental political problem (not to mention low levels of voter turnout), direct democracy might exacerbate rather than mitigate some of the problems facing democracy. Direct democracy measures simply give more weight and more power to public opinion that is of questionable quality. If citizens have not had the time and opportunity to really think about ballot

measures, gather sound information, and discuss the proposals with their peers, why should more weight be given to top-of-the-head opinions?

The above three examples are all common reactions and proposed solutions to some of the problems facing American democracy. On their own, more information, more participation, and more democracy are certainly not bad things. The missing ingredient though, and the source of far fewer initiatives, is sound public judgment. In order to be able to effectively operate in democracy, citizens must be able to make sound decisions. Without sound judgment, calls for more information, more participation, and more democracy will likely fall short of their goals.

It is here, in the quest for sound public judgment, that citizen-to-citizen public deliberation emerges. Citizens living in communities across the country face a number of challenges both big and small. What should we do? This is the operative question for all of these challenges. Issues ranging from global climate change to determining whether a new stop sign should be put up at the end of the block demand that citizens themselves wrestle with that question. Problems like these do not have correct answers just waiting to be implemented. For example, a new stop sign might increase safety by reducing the likelihood of cars zipping through the neighborhood at high rates of speed but it might also back up traffic, making it more difficult to get around. Thus, problems like these require citizens to think about what the problem really is, explore the pros and cons of various options designed to address the problem, and decide together what the best course of action might be. More information, greater voter turnout, and direct democracy cannot do this for citizens; public deliberation can.

A democratic system, complete with robust citizen-to-citizen public deliberation, has the power to address the pathologies of public opinion and equip citizens with the sound public judgment necessary to be effective citizens. Public deliberation is difficult though, both in terms of the difficulty of the problems that must be addressed but also logistically in terms of another activity for already busy citizens to squeeze into their lives. As such, a critic might be quick to point out anemically low levels of political interest as a significant obstacle to the promise of public deliberation. This is true, but when a citizen is asked whether they are interested in politics, images of democrats and republicans, debates on the floors of Congress, and televised shouting matches quickly fill their minds. We know that most Americans do not like this and, as such, they dutifully register to survey researchers that they are not interested. If phrased differently though, one could imagine a much higher proportion of citizens expressing interest in politics. Are you interested in the education your children receive, the safety of your neighborhood, or the quality of the water you drink? The answer to those questions and many similar others would be an overwhelming yes. Yet, the dominant manner in which those issues are discussed and acted upon turns citizens off. Public deliberation offers something different than politics-as-usual, a different way of talk and a different conception of action. As a result, the number of citizens interested in participating is surprisingly high. In fact, the kinds of people drawn to public deliberation are some of the very same individuals who sit on the sidelines of traditional political activity (Neblo et al. 2010).

Additionally, public deliberation also addresses serious problems in terms of citizen political knowledge and efficacy. Previous studies (Fishkin 1995) have made the

case that deliberation has a positive impact on participants' political knowledge. Simply by being engaged in discussion with others, deliberative participants learn from what is said by their peers. At the same time, most deliberative events also provide a short collection of non-partisan briefing materials that can enhance political knowledge. Related to the matter of political interest, other studies (Esterling et al. 2011) have shown that the political interest produced via deliberation can also motivate gains in knowledge by spurring participants to do additional reading and research outside of the formal deliberative context. In terms of political efficacy, deliberative forums with a member of Congress were shown (Neblo et al. 2010) to be a significant motivator of participation. Even forums with a much weaker connection to formal levers of power, speak to citizen efficacy. The hundreds of thousands of participants in National Issues Forums over the last three decades all participate, in part, because somebody cared enough to ask them. More specifically, Morrell (2005) finds deliberation to have a positive impact on internal political efficacy. At the same time, Esterling et al. (2011) find that deliberation positively influences the political efficacy of those who had low levels prior to deliberation but decreases the efficacy of those who had high levels prior to deliberation.

What's Missing—Deliberative Mechanisms

Public opinion holds a special place in American democracy. When citizens have well-informed and considered opinions on the issues of the day, guidance is provided to elected officials and citizens themselves are empowered to be effective advocates for their own policy positions. Yet, as we have seen, many citizens lack opinions in the first place to say nothing of how informed or considered they are. In the face of this crisis of public opinion, public deliberation stands out as a means by which citizens might have a

stronger say in matters that affect their lives and by which high quality public opinion can be cultivated. Moreover, public deliberation stands as a means by which the pathologies of public opinion and political behavior might be cured.

Over the last two decades or so, a boom in empirical research on public deliberation has produced a raft of results, most of them showing public deliberation to have an overwhelmingly positive impact on those who participate and the political attitudes they possess. Since this is relatively uncharted territory, the bulk of the empirical research on deliberation has focused on outlining the effects of participating in a deliberative forum. By and large, this research has documented effects that would be pleasing to most anyone concerned with the quality of democracy in America. Studies of public deliberation have found that deliberation enhances political tolerance, increases political efficacy, increases political knowledge, makes citizens more aware of and respectful towards their opponents' views, and more considered and thoughtful in their opinions (Melville et al. 2005). Yet, the emphasis on research outlining deliberative effects has left us in a situation where deliberation is something of a mysterious black box (Ryfe 2005; Mendelberg and Karpowitz 2014). Citizens look one way prior to deliberation and come out the other side looking completely different. The positive effects are then attributed to deliberation writ large, which leaves us asking, "why?" In short, what's missing from an otherwise exemplary body of research is a full treatment of the mechanisms at play during citizen-to-citizen deliberation. What is it about deliberation that allows it to have such an overwhelmingly positive impact on citizens?

This project will pursue that question with a special focus on the mechanisms at play during deliberation that exert an impact on the quality of political attitudes.

Specifically, I will make the case (fully explicated in Chapter 3) that deliberation possesses two features, not present in survey settings, that help to explain *why* deliberation has a positive impact on the quality of public opinion. First, the social nature of deliberation produces a sense of accountability among participants. Accountability, in this sense, is meant to denote the expectation among participants that they will be called upon by others in the group to explain or justify the opinions that they espouse. This expectation will cause participants to think harder about the issue at hand and their own opinions than they ordinarily might. The expenditure of greater cognitive energy, in turn, has a positive impact on the quality of citizen opinions.

Secondly, deliberation, especially as constructed in this project, has a sense of “stakes” that is largely absent from the dominant political culture. When it comes to elections, a single individual is just one vote in a sea of many. On top of this, many citizens doubt that elected officials care what they think anyway. When participating in a public opinion survey, individuals are right to question who actually cares about their opinions as well. After all, participants give their attitudes to a paid interviewer who will conduct the same interview hundreds of times. More to the point, it is quite dubious whether anyone in a position of policy power is concerned with the opinions espoused by an average survey participant. Thus, it is easy to see why survey participants might exert little cognitive effort on the task, since it is unclear as to who cares about their opinions and how those opinions might affect policy. Much rarer are situations where individuals have a stake in the matter at hand and are clearly connected with policy-makers who are genuinely concerned with their opinions. I argue that deliberation provides a much clearer sense of the “stakes” of a matter. Simply by being invited to a deliberative forum,

participants see that someone cares what they think in a manner that is much more substantive than simply answering a battery of survey questions. In the case of this particular project, participants (college students) deliberated on the future of higher education. For starters, questions regarding the access, cost, purpose, and value of a college degree are especially germane to current college students. In addition to issue salience, though, the deliberative forums described in this project were explicitly linked to levers of power when it comes to university decision-making. Specifically, these higher education forums were endorsed and attended by the university president and provost.

The goal then is to test the influence of two mechanisms, present in deliberative forums, on the quality of political attitudes. Part of the reason why deliberation is shrouded in mystery and hidden in a black box is the difficulty of a task like this. The social nature of deliberation, perhaps its most uniquely beneficial aspect, is the same aspect that makes it a difficult thing to study. Put simply, there are a lot of moving pieces in a deliberative forum. To study deliberation is to study multiple people with different personalities all interacting with each other. Add to the mix the influence of different moderators, different settings, and different issues up for discussion and we are left with a complicated web of interacting factors. As such, this project employs an experimental approach in order to isolate the specific mechanisms of interest. The hope is that by manipulating the presence of social accountability and the stakes of the exercise, I will demonstrate that these two mechanisms, not just deliberation broadly construed, are partly responsible for driving deliberation's influence on public opinion.

To gain a better understanding of the mechanisms at play during deliberative forums is important for several reasons. For starters, identifying these mechanisms begins to address a gap in the empirical literature on deliberation and shines a light through the black box. Secondly, by identifying mechanisms responsible for improving the quality of public opinion, this study provides guidance on what to do (and not to do) in the design of deliberative events. If these mechanisms do indeed have a positive impact on the quality of political attitudes, future deliberative events might be wise in attempting to heighten the presence of these factors. Lastly, and most importantly, this study offers additional support for V.O. Key's (1966) "perverse and unorthodox" claim that "voters are not fools." By highlighting the presence and impact of accountability and high stakes in deliberative forums, this study shows that citizens are far more capable and competent than most give them credit for. Citizens are indeed capable of forming thoughtful and considered opinions on the most pressing issues of the day. Citizens are not, however, political whiz-kids ready to demonstrate their political acumen at a moment's notice on a pop quiz. In other words, citizens are not fools but they are not geniuses either. If though, citizens are placed in the right situation and given a reason to care, they demonstrate a level of thoughtfulness and competence that is surprising to most observers of political behavior. The presence of accountability and high stakes in deliberative forums spurs citizens to demonstrate this capacity. However, these critical factors, highlighted in this study, are notably absent from the dominant method we have, public opinion polls, of ascertaining political attitudes.

Chapter Outline: Plan for the Dissertation

The task then for this dissertation is to seek a better understanding of the mechanisms at play during citizen-to-citizen deliberation that allow for such a powerfully positive effect on the quality of public opinion. Personal anecdotes about deliberation, like my own, are plentiful if not a little romantic too. Taken together, these anecdotes make clear that something powerful and transformative happens when ordinary citizens gather in non-descript places to think through and talk through the issues of the day. In some sense, the romance of it all is heightened by our struggle to pinpoint the mechanisms at play during deliberative forums. This allows us to end the conversation by pointing to the magical, powerful, and transformative *something* that happens. However, in order to fully understand and harness the benefits of deliberation, we must achieve greater clarity on what that *something* actually is.

This process begins in Chapter 2 by demonstrating, via secondary data from deliberative forums, the puzzle at hand. In analyzing data from these forums, we see (as with previous studies) that deliberation does indeed have a positive impact on the quality of citizen opinions. In describing how their thinking has changed as a result of deliberation, participants describe a wide array of subtle effects. Namely, many report a new appreciation for the issue's complexity, acknowledge the difficult trade-offs associated with the issue and express an overall sense of being more informed on the issue. This analysis, while confirming that deliberation does have an impact on public opinion and a positive impact at that, tells us little about why deliberation was able to produce these results.

Given the puzzle explicated in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 offers a theory of opinion improvement via deliberation. This theory attempts to provide a bridge between the mountain of positive results we have regarding deliberation and the question of why those results came to be. Specifically, I make the case that two mechanisms, present in public deliberation but largely absent from the dominant political culture, help to explain why deliberation is able to improve the quality of citizen opinions. First, citizens are accountable to each other in a deliberative forum, in the sense that all participants know in advance that they might be called on by other participants to justify why they feel the way that they do. This sense of accountability provides the impetus for citizens to think harder about an issue than they might otherwise do. Second, deliberative forums provide a very clear signal to participants that someone cares what they think. This “someone who cares” might be very clear in some instances (Neblo et al. 2012) or it might be a somewhat vaguer promise that forum results will be sent to policymakers. In either case though, this provides a sense of “stakes” for the whole enterprise. In addition to accountability, knowing that someone cares provides another strong push for citizens to think harder about an issue than they otherwise might.

Chapters 4 and 5 begin to test this theory by analyzing originally collected data from a series of deliberative forums on the topic of higher education. In these forums, both accountability and stakes were experimentally manipulated in order to better understand their effects on the quality of opinions as formed through public deliberation. As a preview, the findings suggest that both accountability and high stakes do contribute to the high quality (as compared to traditional means of opinion measurement) of opinions formed through deliberation. However, the results also suggest that there is a

price to be paid for artificially ramping up the amount of accountability present in deliberative forums. Finally, Chapter 6 summarizes the research questions, theory, arguments, and evidence. I end by suggesting future avenues for research. In sum, this dissertation incrementally builds on the ever-growing empirical literature focused on deliberative democracy. We know from previous work that the quality of public opinion is suspect and that participation in deliberative forums is associated with a vast array of positive effects on individual political behavior. The present work adds to this existing literature by offering and testing a novel theory designed to uncover two previously hidden mechanisms at play during public deliberation.

Chapter 2

On Deliberative Effects

The great enemy of truth is very often not the lie—deliberate, contrived, and dishonest—but the myth—persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic. Too often we hold fast to the clichés of our forebears. We subject all facts to a prefabricated set of interpretations. We enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.

—*John F. Kennedy*

As the “deliberative turn” in democratic theory has aged, more attention has been paid to the impact of deliberation. Whether it be through Study Circles, Deliberative Polls, World Café, National Issues Forums, World Wide Views or any number of other venues, more and more citizens are taking part in deliberative exercises. Some of these forums have clear links to institutional actors, while others make it a point to remove themselves from formal levers of political power. Regardless, a fair and logical follow-up question to all of this deliberative activity is, “so what?” When a group, or numerous groups, of citizens get together to discuss a pressing political issue, what impact does it have?

The question of impact is one of great importance to a number of constituencies. As empirical studies of deliberation have increased, scholars have looked to chart quantifiable impacts of deliberation in an effort to bolster theoretical claims about its efficacy. By that same token, scholars more skeptical of deliberation have also looked to questions of impact to point out the negligible (Denver et al. 1995) or negative (Sanders 1997; Sunstein 2002) impacts of deliberation. In addition to those with scholarly

interests in deliberation's impact, the growing community of deliberative practitioners, those who convene and moderate forums, also engage in a fair amount of self-reflection about their work—Does what we do matter? Lastly, citizen participants themselves are also inquisitive about the impact of their efforts and participation. The reasons why a person chooses to participate in a deliberative event are certainly varied. Undoubtedly, some citizens attend deliberative forums in order to do something fun, get out of the house, go somewhere with friends, get something off their chest, or simply learn more about an issue. Questions of impact are likely of little concern to this subset of deliberative participants. Others, however, are quite interested in their participation making some sort of tangible impact. Although no studies formally examine individual frustration with deliberative events, anecdotal evidence suggests that a common question at the end of deliberative forums is something along the lines of, “now what?” We have gathered in this room and talked about an issue. What happens next or what happens with the information gathered in this room? It is probably safe to say that most people do not enjoy “spinning their wheels” or doing something purely for the sake of doing it. Other forms of political participation provide citizens with a clear outcome or result. Voters can see if their preferred candidate won but participants in deliberative forums have a much more nebulous sense of their participation's impact.

Varieties of Impact

Undoubtedly, the impact of deliberation is a concern shared by many, but what exactly is meant by “deliberative impact” or “deliberative effects?” When it comes to the always-important “so what” question, it is useful to note that one can look in a variety of places for evidence. Indeed, asking about the impact of deliberation is too broad a

question and a number of scholars have examined different areas of potential impact. There are at least three different broad levels of analysis that one can look for evidence of deliberation's impact: the systemic or institutional level, the group level, and the individual level. At the systemic or institutional level, scholars look for evidence that deliberation, or what developed out of deliberation, had some tangible impact on the politics of a certain place or discrete pieces of public policy. In a general sense, deliberation taking root in a particular community has been shown to play a role in transforming dysfunctional political climates into more productive ones (Mathews 2014). More specifically, other studies chart how deliberative events affect actual pieces of policy as is the case with participatory budgeting exercises (Cabbanes 2004) or electoral outcomes in the case of the Citizens Initiative Review in Oregon (Gastil and Knobloch 2010). Demonstrating such impacts, though is obviously a very high bar, especially in places like the United States where citizen deliberation often lacks a formal and binding connection to institutions with policy-making power. A separate line of research turns to the group level in search of evidence about deliberative effects. Scholars like Gastil et al. (2012) and Mendelberg and Karpowitz (2014) examine the role that group dynamics and composition play in deliberation. People are getting together and talking in all of these events, but what is the quality of the discussion? Moreover, how do social forces like gender or class affect the extent to which all voices in a deliberative forum are given equal regard?

Most importantly though for the present work is the ever-growing body of research that examines the effect of deliberation at the individual level. What effect does participation in a deliberative forum have on an individual's attitudes, political

participation, and other forms of political and social behavior? If participation in a deliberative forum is the independent variable, the list of outcome variables under examination in these studies has been voluminous. Scholars have examined deliberation's impact on an individual's political efficacy (Harriger and McMillan 2007), political knowledge (Gastil and Dillard 1999), tolerance of opposing views (Gutmann and Thompson 1996), and propensity to participate in politics (Gastil 2000; Gastil et al. 2002). Lastly, a fairly common area of inquiry is studies in search of deliberation-induced attitude change (Fishkin 2009; Luskin et al. 2002). Definitions of deliberation often include a clause stating that participants are willing to revise their preferences in light of new information. Chambers (2003) states that, "a central tenet of deliberative theory is that deliberation can change minds and transform opinions." If the revision of preferences or changing of minds is indeed a key component of deliberation, a good way to examine whether deliberation is occurring, and whether it is having an impact, is to examine the extent to which attitudes change as a result of deliberating. Studies in this mold generally include a pre-deliberation attitude survey that establishes a baseline of opinions. Next, a deliberative event occurs and a post-deliberation attitude survey is conducted using many of the same questions from the pre-survey. Baseline attitudes are compared with post-deliberation attitudes to check for movement.

The preceding description is an admittedly brief and incomplete treatment of the many ways that deliberation's impact on individuals has been studied. While some might doubt the robustness of these positive outcomes, that is not the purpose here. Rather, the purpose here is to make the case that previous studies of deliberation's impact on individual attitudes and behavior sets the bar for impact too high. This high bar is partly

responsible for the mixed bag of results and also for the skepticism that exists (Delli Carpini et al. 2004). A good number of studies that examine deliberation's impact on individuals are limited to one-off instances of deliberation (but see Harriger and McMillan 2007 for one of the few longitudinal studies of deliberation and its impact). As mentioned in the previous chapter, deliberation is truly a powerful experience. This power is all the more impressive given the simplicity and brief length of the actual event itself. That being said, and given the fact that most deliberative experiences are one-off events, aren't we asking too much in the way of demonstrable effects? Wholesale attitude change, boosts in efficacy, and the reversal of longstanding intolerance is an awful lot to ask of a one hour conversation. This is not to say though that changes in attitude, boosts in efficacy and all other sorts of positive effects do not stem from deliberation, as the laundry list of studies demonstrating otherwise indicates. Rather, the point is that we should be all the more impressed with deliberation's power given the activity's limitations in time and frequency. Moreover, small effect sizes, inconsistent results, or context dependent results are not an indictment on deliberation or evidence that it is ineffectual. Rather, it is more a reflection of the short amount of time that people deliberate and the high bar that has been established for demonstrating an impact on individual attitudes and behavior.

In addition to an overly high bar used to demonstrate impact, many studies of deliberation's effects focus on ancillary benefits or outcomes that are not the purpose of deliberation to begin with. In spite of a voluminous literature, the purpose of deliberation, at its core, is fairly simple. The case to be made for deliberative democracy over other forms of democracy is that deliberation produces "better" decisions that are

more legitimate. Thus, a simpler focus would analyze whether decisions reached through deliberative processes are superior to decisions reached via other mechanisms. It would also analyze the extent to which decisions reached through deliberation are deemed legitimate by those who must live under and are affected by them. That deliberation is able to increase political knowledge or boost efficacy is beside the point. It is certainly a good thing if deliberation is able to produce these things but unfair to judge the merits of an enterprise on its ability to deliver outcomes that it does not set out to achieve.

More troubling though is to solely focus on changes in issue attitudes when evaluating a deliberative event. Deliberation is not an exercise in trying to sway a body of individuals in favor of a predetermined course of action. As Beiner (1983) notes, “The traditional model upon which rhetoric has tended to be construed is that I first discern what I want, what my ends are, and then I choose the most efficacious medium in which to pursue it, the most effective means to the end. It is this model that has, as it were, given rhetoric a bad name.” Quite the contrary, the very purpose of deliberation is for citizens, operating in a realm of uncertainty about which course of action to take, to decide together, through discussion, how they might proceed.

Within this conception of deliberation, there is certainly room for persuasion. Persuasion though, must be conceptualized in a manner that is broader than just changes in issue attitudes. The largest body of scholarly literature on persuasion comes from the field of social psychology, where persuasion is often equated with substantive changes in issue attitudes. Invariably, change in issue attitudes does occur but to solely focus on that aspect of persuasion misses the more subtle elements of persuasion that might result from deliberation. For example, as a result of deliberation one might be persuaded that those

they disagree with make some reasonable points or they might be persuaded to acknowledge that the issue at hand is more complex than they originally thought. These are both instances of persuasion but, in both cases, one's substantive issue attitudes might remain the same. Additionally, the persuasion literature from psychology notes how individuals are susceptible to persuasion via peripheral (Petty and Cacioppo 1984) or heuristic (Eagly and Chaiken 1993) cues. This route to persuasion demonstrates how factors that are less important or non-central to the concern at hand (e.g. speaker appearance) influence information processing and persuasion. Other literature on persuasion (Cialdini 2001) builds off of these peripheral cues to present persuasion as a skill or technique to be learned. This is not to say that persuasion is a bad thing in and of itself but to say that persuasion in deliberation must be based on the merits of effective and reasoned arguments. In sum, persuasion is a part of deliberation. However, to equate persuasion as simply changes in issue attitudes misses the fact that persuasion in deliberation might be more subtle. To focus solely on attitude change also obscures the question of whether attitude change is a desired outcome. It is tempting to look at changes between pre and post deliberation opinions and assume that the changes are for the better. However, as Minozzi et al. (2012) point out, attitudinal changes produced via deliberation must be linked to mechanisms specified in normative theories lest we have little reason to be confident that the changes are necessarily for the better.

In addition to the more substantive concerns mentioned above, there are additional concerns centering on how reasonable it is to expect issue attitude change to occur as a result of deliberation. First, as mentioned earlier, expecting that one's political attitudes will undergo a wholesale change after a one hour discussion is unreasonable. It

overstates the extent to which citizens are blank slates and overlooks the fact that some political attitudes are deeply held and resistant to change. That being said, significant attitude change does occur at times as a result of deliberation. So too does the more likely scenario that attitudes might shift slightly, whether that be in a softer or more extreme direction (e.g. a pre/post shift from 3 to 4 on a 5 point attitude scale). Attitude shifts do indeed occur but the whole enterprise should not be judged, positively or negatively, on the basis of producing attitude change. Not only is attitude change not the purpose of deliberation, but evidence of attitude change is not necessarily indicative of a particularly successful (or unsuccessful) deliberative event.

By contrast, the real purpose of deliberation is to produce *better* opinions—better opinions that lead to better decisions, which lead to informed action. Said differently, deliberation is an opportunity for citizens to exercise and develop sound judgment, such that they can be effective political actors. To quote Beiner (1983) again, “Deliberation is a crucial term in the equation that relates *phronesis* and judgment, for it is in the course of deliberation that the man of practical wisdom exercises his judgment.” A high quality opinion, formed through deliberation, very well might be different than how a person felt before they deliberated. It could also be the case that a person’s opinions are the exact same before and after deliberation. Even so, these opinions, while the exact same on the surface, will be richer for having deliberated. A person’s pre-deliberation thoughts and feelings are put to the test in a deliberative forum. Pre-existing attitudes are scrutinized during deliberation. People are exposed to new information, hear the opinions of others, hear the stories of others, and think about the benefits and drawbacks of various approaches to a particular issue. A research focus on attitude movement misses the

process by which attitudes, even if they do not budge, are enriched through deliberation. “The extent to which a proposition withstands the critical scrutiny of other minds determines its validity,” (Triadafilopoulos 1999).

Subtle Effects

In the previous chapter, I told the story of my first experience as a participant in a deliberative forum. At the risk of being a braggart, I should note that I walked into that forum with fairly strong opinions on the topic, a good amount of political knowledge, and a strong sense of political efficacy. After discussing the issue for about an hour with those in my community, I left and went home. On the surface, the experience did not have a big impact on me. After deliberating, none of my opinions were different, and I wasn’t perceptibly more efficacious or knowledgeable. And yet, deliberation was still an incredibly powerful experience for me. If asked, I would have said that it had a big impact on me, although I would have struggled to pinpoint exactly what that impact was.

What then if deliberation’s effect on individuals, like me, was more subtle? What if deliberation’s impact was something that was harder to place or put a finger on? An account of deliberation’s more subtle effects serves several purposes. First, by lowering the bar of “deliberative impact,” we can begin to categorize deliberation’s effects in a more realistic manner. The subtle effects of deliberation are more realistic in the sense that most individuals who attend forums actually only deliberate for an hour or so. As mentioned earlier, it is unreasonable to place such an “impact burden” on an occurrence that is likely to be a one-off event that is short in time. Undoubtedly, a subtle impact is not the same thing as no impact. An account of deliberation’s subtle effect on individuals also recognizes the possibility that deliberative effects might be cumulative. Most

academic experiments in deliberation involve one-time events and longitudinal studies of deliberation are rare. However, what longitudinal evidence we do have (Harriger and McMillan 2007) suggests that the impact of deliberation on an individual compounds with repeated exposure to the practice.

Thinking Differently

As such, I will argue here that the primary effect that deliberation has on an individual, at least initially, is that it causes them to “think differently” about the subject at hand. Admittedly, the phrase “think differently” is terribly and painfully vague. It lacks the precision and clarity of measurement that social scientists cherish. With that drawback in mind, I argue though that it is still the best way to capture how participation in a deliberative forum affects someone. It certainly captures how I felt after participating in my first deliberative forum. As mentioned, my opinions were unchanged and my knowledge and efficacy were largely static. However, I was thinking differently about social security. Something had shifted in how I was thinking about the issue—something that would be unlikely to show up on a survey designed to capture deliberative effects.

At this point, two claims previously made in this chapter bear repeating. The first is the claim that we should recognize and explore the subtle effects of deliberation as opposed to searching for big effects like attitude change. Along these lines, the second point is that a major impact of deliberation on individual citizens is that it causes them to think differently. I am aware and sympathetic to the idea that a call to recognize subtle effects might be confused with a plea to accept weak results. Similarly, the argument that deliberation causes people to think differently might be cast aside as a claim that is overly

vague. However, the analysis that follows will demonstrate that when deliberative participants describe *how* they are thinking differently, they mention the very same characteristics that normative theories of deliberation hold up as ambitious goals. Far from a lowered bar for the sake of demonstrating results, the subtle effect of thinking differently is essential to the health of democracy.

Data: The National Issues Forums

Unsurprisingly, there is little guidance in public opinion research on how to measure a concept as vague as the extent to which a person is thinking differently. Luckily though, one of the nation's longest running experiments in citizen deliberation, The National Issues Forums, has periodically asked such a question over the years. The National Issues Forums Institute is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that strives to promote public deliberation on pressing political issues of national concern. The NIF does not convene forums itself though. Rather, the NIF produces what they call issue guides, which are brief (usually between ten and twenty pages) overviews of a political issue. Since 1982, the NIF has produced at least one issue guide on a political issue of national concern. Topics covered have included everything from the national debt, to gambling, to foreign policy. The issue guides are not intended to be exhaustive policy summaries. They are intended to provide individuals with enough information that they are able to feel confident in discussing it. The issue guides generally describe a political problem and then outline three or four potential options (drawn from national discourse), and the drawbacks associated with these options, that might be taken to address the problem. The purpose then is not to make policy experts of individuals but to stimulate public deliberation by encouraging individuals to evaluate the relative merits of various

proposals. These issue guides are made available for purchase and are used by any number of people and organizations to convene forums. Over the years, church basements, public libraries, and college classrooms have all been frequent locales for NIF forums. Through an analysis of returned questionnaires, moderator interviews, and forum observations, the NIF presents the results of that year's forums to a number of audiences including policymakers in Washington, D.C.

To be clear though, the NIF does not operate in order to conduct research on deliberative opinions, nor is the purpose to encourage forums for the production of data for social scientists to use. In its issue books, the NIF does include a brief questionnaire. Most researchers claim that their surveys are brief but NIF questionnaires are brief in a way that most public opinion polls do not come close to approaching. Without a focus on research, the questionnaires are included for the purposes of collecting information that might be used to write a national report on the forums. After an issue guide is rolled out and forums are held across the country, a national report on the forums is written and published to chronicle what happened during the forums. This report is then taken to various audiences (including legislators) to describe how a deliberative public feels about a certain issue. In practice though, because the questionnaires are short and because the participants are not randomly selected, data drawn from this source are not leaned on too much in crafting the report. Instead, the national report on the forums tends to focus more on interviews with forum moderators as well as forum recordings and transcripts. In short, the reports tend to focus on the qualitative rather than quantitative angle of deliberative forums.

While the NIF questionnaires are brief (all questions fit on one piece of paper) and not designed for academic research purposes, they do contain at least one question that is relevant here. At various intervals over the years, the NIF questionnaire has asked participants, after they have deliberated, “Are you thinking differently about this issue now that you have participated in this forum?” The response option is a binary yes/no, with space for those answering “yes” to describe how their thinking has changed. To some, this question might be seen as painfully vague. However, it is the perfect kind of question if making an argument that deliberation’s impact on individual participants is subtle and difficult to put one’s finger on. “Thinking differently” captures the subtlety of deliberative effects, without priming participants to think about attitude change or other more specific measures.

Table 2.1. Thinking Differently after Deliberation

Year	Issue	% Thinking Differently	N
2006	Energy	60%	366
2008	Healthcare	40%	960
2010	Foreign Policy	37%	385
2010	Economic Security	42%	945
2011	National Debt	43%	817
2012	Higher Education	38%	1,228

*Source: National Issues Forums

Table 2.1 above summarizes responses to the “thinking differently” question using available data from six NIF issues over the past 10 years. It bears repeating that the information presented in Table 2.1 is not derived from a random sample of Americans

who have deliberated. In addition to not being random, the number of participants also fluctuates from year to year, with Table 2.1 showing a low of 366 participants and a high of 1,228 participants. In fact, all the N represents is the number of questionnaires that were mailed to the NIF after the forums. Thus, it is entirely possible that the true number of deliberative participants is much higher than Table 2.1 suggests. Some conveners of NIF forums opt not to distribute the questionnaires, while others might distribute the questionnaires but fail to mail them back to the NIF. Survey research organizations usually have a certain sample size in mind and contact as many people as necessary to reach that number. By contrast, the NIF does not produce the questionnaires for the purposes of conducting social scientific research. As such, they do not have pre-established targets in terms of number of forums or number of participants. The number of participants and questionnaires available for analysis is entirely dependent upon the whims of a loosely organized network of NIF conveners and moderators. All this to say that NIF questionnaire data should be taken for what it is. It does not reflect the views of a random sample of Americans, so it should not be used to make any statements about what “the public” thinks or feels about an issue. Rather, NIF questionnaire data reflects the informed views of a self-selected group of individuals who chose to participate in a deliberative forum. In other words, NIF questionnaire data is unrepresentative. However, it is unrepresentative in the best sense of the word. It is unrepresentative in that it captures the views of individuals who are more likely than the general public to: be concerned about an issue, read unbiased background information about an issue, and to have discussed an issue in-depth with their peers.

“Are you thinking differently about this issue now that you have participated in this forum?” That is the question wording used on NIF questionnaires to ascertain the extent to which participants are thinking differently. As Table 2.1 indicates, a non-trivial portion of those who participate in forums (usually about 4 in 10) report that they are feeling differently about the issue at hand after having deliberated on it with a group of their peers. The proportions described in Table 2.1 are significant, but there is reason to believe that the number is artificially deflated due to question wording. As it stands now, the NIF question wording offers no guidance to participants on what “thinking differently” includes or does not include. As mentioned, this vagueness is a boon to this research, but it does raise the possibility that some participants take “thinking differently” to mean attitude change. I have two reasons to believe this is the case. First, as I will soon show, in describing how they are thinking differently, virtually zero NIF participants note that their opinion has changed. Second, in experimental data used later, I alter the question wording to include the qualifier, “even if your opinion has not changed” and the proportion responding that they are thinking differently is significantly higher than in the NIF data presented here.

The Contours of Thinking Differently

More interesting though than the raw number who report thinking differently is the description of *how* they are thinking differently after having deliberated. For those who respond “yes” that they are thinking differently, there is an open-ended follow-up question that invites them to describe how they are thinking differently. Analyzing these open-ended responses allows one to gain a better handle on the impact of deliberation as well as a better understanding of what individuals mean when they report that they are

thinking differently. To do this, I will analyze the open-ended responses to this question for one of the recent years where the NIF made data available to me—2011’s National Debt. This endeavor will not provide conclusive evidence of deliberation’s impact on individual thinking but it will provide a first glimpse at the broad contours of how deliberation affects public opinion.

In looking at the open-ended comments across forums on this issue, a broad set of 10 categories emerges that capture how individuals are thinking differently after a deliberative forum. In describing how their thinking has changed, extremely rare are the instances of wholesale opinion change. Rather, the responses reflect opinions and patterns of thought that are *better* more so than they are completely different.

The method used to categorize open-ended responses is certainly not a full-blown content analysis. The purpose here is to capture the broad contours, in participants’ own words, of how thinking is altered as a result of a deliberative forum. In looking at the 2011 NIF forum on the national debt, 43% of participants, or 351 individuals, reported that their thinking had indeed changed as a result of the forum. Of those, 345 completed the follow-up question that invited them to describe exactly how they were thinking differently. In many cases, these descriptions do not neatly fall into just one category. Since it is an open-ended question, participants occasionally write quite a bit. As a result, their responses might touch on several topics that reflect different dimensions of “thinking differently.” Thus, their responses will fall into several categories. For example, a participant might describe how they have a greater appreciation for the complexity of the issue, how they feel more informed about the issue, and how they were

affected by hearing the opinions of others. Below, I will describe each of the categories and provide a few exemplars of descriptions within that category.

More Informed

The most common substantive category was that participants reported feeling more informed about the issue after deliberation. This certainly does not represent a seismic shift in how individuals are thinking about an issue. While opinions might not have changed, participants do leave the forum feeling more confident in their grasp of an issue and in possession of opinions that have a firmer informational basis. Below is a small sample of participant responses that fell into this category.

Table 2.2 More Informed

“Gained more knowledge.”

“I became much more informed about several issues and can analyze them in a new light.”

“Eye opener.”

*Source: National Issues Forums. 2011 Nationwide forums on the national debt.

Recognition of Issue Complexity

Another common refrain from participants, in describing how their thinking had changed, was a mention of how the issue was more complex than they originally thought it to be. By taking time to think about an issue (the national debt in this case) and discuss it with their peers, NIF forum participants left with a greater appreciation for how complex the issue really was. Again, this does not reflect a major shift in attitudes but it does suggest that forum participants begin to abandon “silver-bullet thinking” and

recognize the wicked nature of the problem. Below is a small sample of participant responses that fell into this category.

Table 2.3 Recognition of Issue Complexity

“I have a better sense of the complexity of the issue.”

“Choices are more complex than they originally appeared.”

“There are no easy answers to budget dilemmas.”

*Source: National Issues Forums. 2011 Nationwide forums on the national debt.

Appreciate Hearing Opinions of Others

In describing how their thinking had changed after deliberating on the national debt, a number of participants cited how powerful or important it was to hear the views of their fellow discussants. These comments speak to the power of the simple back and forth that takes place between individuals in a deliberative forum. Comments in this category reflect several different benefits to hearing the views of others. For starters, simply by listening to the others’ comments, more information is brought to bear on a topic. Second, a number of participants mentioned how hearing a wide array of views enhanced respect for those they might otherwise disagree with. Lastly, several participants mentioned how the views of others triggered deep thought within themselves or at least caused them to think about an issue in a different way. Below is a small sample of participant responses that fell into this category.

Table 2.4 Appreciate Hearing Opinions of Others

“I was exposed to people’s opinions I hadn’t heard before.”

“I heard opposing opinions that made sense.”

“Listening to everyone’s opinions made me think more.”

*Source: National Issues Forums. 2011 Nationwide forums on the national debt.

Wrestling with Trade-offs

Similar to recognizing an issue’s complexity is an acknowledgement that all or most approaches for dealing with a problem come with significant trade-offs. To some (Yankelovich 1991) this change in thinking represents the beginning of a move from top-of-the-head opinions to more stable judgment. The logic here is that an opinion is not truly solid until an individual has acknowledged the drawbacks associated with their most preferred course of action. If, after analyzing the drawbacks, a person still supports that action, one can be confident that this is a stable and thoughtful opinion. In other words, this line of thinking demonstrates that an individual has moved beyond the wishful thinking that a particular policy proposal is a silver bullet or panacea. In the present example, the participants who mentioned trade-offs tend to simply acknowledge them or note that they are surprised to learn of all the drawbacks associated with various policy proposals. It does not appear, from the comments at least, that many have taken the next step of deciding whether or not they can live with those drawbacks. Below is a small sample of participant responses that fell into this category.

Table 2.5 Wrestling with Trade-offs

“Knowing that there are grave consequences for all of these decisions.”
“The forum forced me to think through the ramifications of each action.”
“Sharpened my focus on how each proposal/idea has both positive and negative consequences.”

*Source: National Issues Forums. 2011 Nationwide forums on the national debt.

Greater Awareness of and Openness to Different Viewpoints

As noted earlier, some participants described changes in their thinking in relation to hearing the views of others. A related category of comments involves participants who express greater openness to new ideas or awareness of ideas that one had never entertained prior to deliberation. The table below provides a few examples of comments that fell into this category.

Table 2.6 Openness to New Ideas

“More open to other options.”
“I have a view from all sides now instead of my own biased view.”
“I’ve never been introduced to new perspectives and opinions.”

*Source: National Issues Forums. 2011 Nationwide forums on the national debt.

Greater Awareness of Issue Significance

One of the more common refrains from participants was some mention of how the national debt was a more complex issue than they had previously thought. Along those lines was a separate breed of comment that expressed a newfound awareness of how significant or pressing the issue was. From this view, deliberation has an “agenda setting” (Iyengar and Kinder 1987) impact on participants. The content of opinions

might not be different but many participants left the forums with a newfound appreciation for all that hung in the balance with regard to the national debt. Similar, and still in the same category, is a separate breed of comment in this vein. Some left the national debt forums with a newfound sense of how important the issue was. Other participants described their changes in thinking more in terms of consciousness raising. For these individuals, they had never even thought about the national debt before. As such, the forum put the issue on the agenda for them in the first place rather than heightening appreciation for an issue they were already concerned about. The table below provides a few sample comments that reflect this change in thinking.

Table 2.7 Issue Significance

“It made me realize how much is at stake.”

“I now realize the enormity of the problem.”

“I’m actually thinking about it now.”

*Source: National Issues Forums. 2011 Nationwide forums on the national debt.

Deeper Thought

Some forum participants described the change in their thinking by discussing the depth of their thinking. Again, rather than monumental changes in the direction or intensity of opinion, many attribute the change in their thinking, after deliberation, simply to the fact that they are thinking more. In many cases here, participants are describing a “sober second thought,” where they are impacted by taking the time to really consider how they feel about an issue. Below is a sample of comments that reflect this change in thinking.

Table 2.8 Deeper Thought

“Made me think more.”

“Now I have much more to think about.”

“It makes me really consider where I stand.”

*Source: National Issues Forums. 2011 Nationwide forums on the national debt.

Interest Piqued

This category of comments seems to suggest that some participants saw their deliberative forum as a potential jumping off point or step one in a larger process.

Specifically, these individuals noted how they were more interested in the issue, wanted to learn more about it, or still had many unanswered questions. In other words, their interest in the issue was piqued as a result of deliberation, and perhaps they will go on to seek more information or more discussion. Below is a sample of comments in this vein.

Table 2.9 Interest Piqued

“More interested in current plans and staying informed.”

“I just have a lot of questions.”

I want to learn more about it.”

*Source: National Issues Forums. 2011 Nationwide forums on the national debt.

Greater Attitudinal Clarity

Most of the changes in thinking documented here suggest that participants leave a deliberative forum with less certainty in terms of their attitudes and beliefs. Hearing the views of those they might disagree with, wrestling with trade-offs, and acknowledging the complexity of an issue all indicate that participants leave a forum with more questions

and uncertainty than they entered with. While expressions of uncertainty are more common, some participants did note how the forum helped to clarify their thinking and opinions. A sample of comments along these lines is below.

Table 2.10 Greater Clarity

“Issues are more clear.”
“More clarity about what is important to have.”
“I very rarely have solid opinions—I waffle. Saying and hearing these things out loud has made me more strong in my opinions.”

*Source: National Issues Forums. 2011 Nationwide forums on the national debt.

Miscellaneous/Highly Specific

Lastly, some responses to the question asking participants to describe how their thinking has changed were so specific or idiosyncratic that they defied neat categorization. These individuals noted that their thinking had changed as a result of deliberation, but their description of that change is difficult to categorize. Comments of this sort were numerous, but a small selection is included below.

Table 2.11 Miscellaneous

“I am realizing that many people already feel as though they are sacrificing too much.”
“Individuals are interested in achieving solutions.”
“Clinton balanced the budget—why can’t we?”

*Source: National Issues Forums. 2011 Nationwide forums on the national debt.

Discussion

In sum, a good portion (generally about four in ten) of participants in NIF forums report that they are thinking differently about the issue at hand after deliberating. The

analysis above presents the broad contours of exactly *how* they are thinking differently. The answer to this “how” question comes in a variety of flavors as the ten categories described above indicate. Taken together though, it is safe to say that all the varieties of thinking differently after deliberating reflect opinions that are more thoughtful and more considered if nothing else.

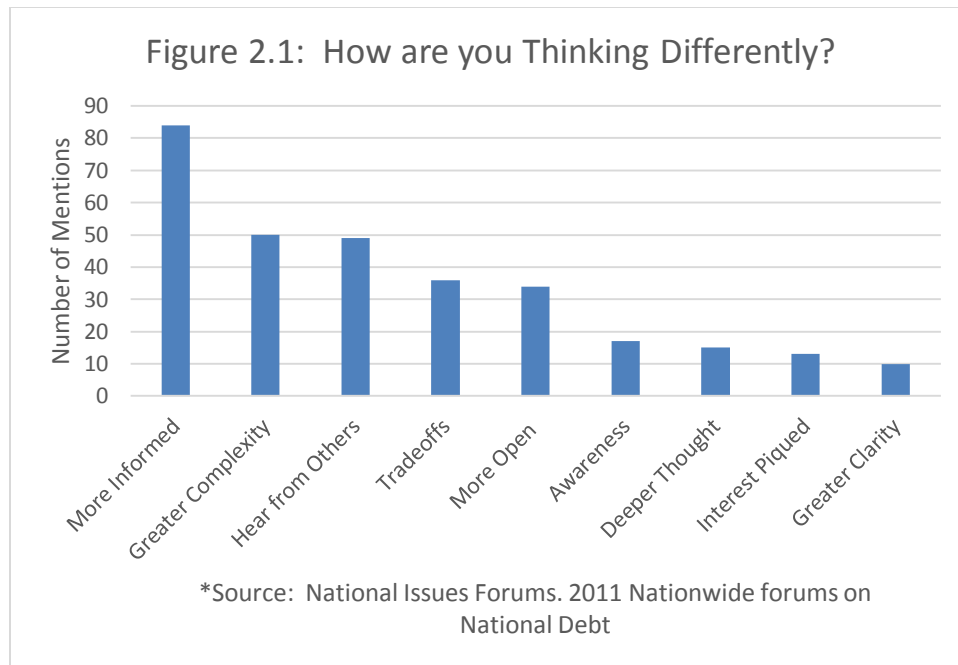


Figure 2.1 depicts how common each of the categories of thinking differently were. Most common were mentions of how a deliberative forum on the national debt made individuals feel more informed about the issue. In addition to being more informed, participants also noted the revelatory impact of hearing opposing views and the difficulty of wrestling with policy trade-offs. Also interesting though were the kind of comments that did not appear in this analysis of NIF data. Never did a participant describe how they were thinking differently in terms of a complete change in opinion. Certainty is valued in our society and nobody wants to think of themselves as a flip-

flopper. Perhaps then the lack of attitude change being admitted is a reflection of that reluctance. It could also be the case, as I argue here, that the absence of attitude change is to be expected. Deliberative forums are brief, sometimes one-off events, and involve individuals who are not blank slates. As such, subtle effects like the ones described above are all one can realistically expect to result from such an event. Subtlety though should not be confused with lack of impact. To be sure, wrestling with policy trade-offs, hearing from those with opposing views, and becoming more open to new ideas are powerful forces being exerted on an individual's opinions and thinking. They are subtle only in the sense that these forces are difficult to measure and difficult to describe when they are occurring within oneself.

To say that the effects of deliberation are subtle because it is unreasonable to expect otherwise is one thing. It is also the case though that the subtle effects described in this chapter jibe well with the normative expectations that theorists apply to deliberation. It is instructive then to compare the results described in this chapter with the criteria for deliberative quality set forth by one of the most preeminent scholars of citizen-to-citizen deliberation, James Fishkin. Fishkin (2009) proffers the following five conditions that can be used to assess the quality of a deliberative process:

1. *Information*: The extent to which participants are given access to reasonably accurate information that they believe to be relevant to the issue.
2. *Substantive Balance*: The extent to which arguments offered by one side or from one perspective are answered by considerations offered by those who hold other perspectives.
3. *Diversity*: The extent to which the major positions in the public are represented by participants in the discussion.
4. *Conscientiousness*: The extent to which participants sincerely weigh the merits of the arguments.
5. *Equal Consideration*: The extent to which arguments offered by all participants are considered on the merits regardless of which participants offer them.

In comparing Fishkin's criteria with the data presented here, we see that the characteristics of new thinking described by NIF participants are the very qualities that we want out of deliberation. Based solely on descriptions of how a person is thinking differently, not much can be said with regard to condition #3 (diversity) or condition #5 (equal consideration). However, when applying Fishkin's other three conditions, NIF participants fare quite well. With regard to the condition of information, feeling more informed on the issue was the most common way that participants in this set of NIF forums described their change in thinking. There is also good evidence to suggest that the condition of substantive balance was also met. A good number of NIF participants noted how impactful it was to hear the opinions of others, even those they might disagree with. In describing how their thinking changed, some participants also noted greater openness to or awareness of new ideas. Lastly, there is also good evidence to suggest that the criteria of equal conscientiousness was met. Often it is difficult to know whether individuals are sincerely weighing the merits of all arguments. In this case though, that NIF questionnaires offer participants an open-ended space to describe, if applicable, how their thinking has changed provides a window into the weighing that does occur. In very clear language, many NIF participants described the process by which they wrestled with the trade-offs that various policy options entailed. Through their words, one can see the participants weighing potential courses of action against the drawbacks that might ensue.

The Importance of Thinking Differently

This chapter has demonstrated that deliberation does cause participants to think differently. This change in thinking has also been tied to normative criteria used to assess the quality of deliberation, which provides some assurance that the changes in thinking

are in a positive direction. But why does any of this matter? Why should we care or want people to be thinking differently with regard to pressing political issues?

One way to begin pursuing an answer to these questions is to look at the converse of Fishkin's conditions or the converse of the categories of thinking differently outlined in this chapter. In this case, the converse would be opinions that are uninformed, opinions that go unchallenged, or individuals who are rarely exposed to arguments that differ from their own. The converse would also involve opinions that are formed without the benefit of methodically weighing the pros and cons of various policy proposals. In many ways, the converse situation just described sounds quite similar to the current state of American political discourse and public opinion. It does not take a very diligent search to find evidence that citizens lack fairly basic information about the functioning of American government and the details of public policy. More troubling perhaps might be the lack of discussion across lines of difference and the accompanying lack of exposure to ideas that differ from one's own. Whether it be as a result of migration patterns, preference in television news, or some other factor, American citizens increasingly inhabit one-sided political echo chambers. The polarization that ensues makes political discussion, when it does occur, uncivil and unproductive. Lastly, it is often said that American public opinion lacks substance; that it is based more so on partisan allegiances or demographic factors than it is on the actual substance of policy or ideas. This lack of substance also shows up at the elite level, where campaigns for the highest office often try their best to shy away from policy discussions. Policy is rarely discussed, not to mention any sort of honest and thorough analysis of a proposal's pros and cons.

The above is an overly quick and cursory description of some of the pathologies of public opinion and American political culture. An abundance of research on political behavior not only makes such a cursory discussion possible, but it also suggests that these pathologies are genuine and a real threat to the vitality of American democracy. That these problems are real and pressing is not to suggest that the situation is hopeless. The average American citizen is not the all-knowing possessor of wisdom that some make him out to be, nor is he the utter dolt that others might suggest. The argument here involves neither of those extremes, but instead merely suggests that most citizens are *capable* of exercising their capacity for judgment and intelligently and effectively participating in political life. This capacity is demonstrated in the brief analysis of this chapter. After deliberating with a group of their peers, many NIF participants report to thinking differently about the issue. The contours of this different thinking (e.g. more information, exposure to new opinions, weighing trade-offs) reflect the impact of deliberation and are consistent with normative theories about deliberation. Most importantly though, this kind of different thinking provides an antidote to some of the primary dysfunctions of public opinion and discourse. That deliberation causes individuals to think differently is certainly a subtle effect in that the changes are not monumental. However, to think differently is a subtle effect with potentially powerful ramifications for the future of American democracy.

This chapter has used NIF data to demonstrate that participants in deliberative forums often leave thinking differently about the issue at hand. In looking at participant descriptions of how their thinking had changed, we see little evidence of wholesale attitude change but ample support for more subtle effects. What do these subtle effects

mean though? In describing how they were thinking differently, participants noted that they wrestled with policy trade-offs, were more informed about the issue, had greater appreciation for the issue's complexity, and were impacted by hearing views contrary to their own. It is safe to say that most would describe these changes in thinking as being positive in terms of the quality of public opinion and political thinking. These are characteristics that public opinion *ought* to possess. It is desirable for citizens to have opinions with a firm basis in sound information. It is also desirable for one's own opinions to be subjected to scrutiny from fellow discussants who might disagree. Lastly, it is desirable for citizens to weigh their own opinions against the trade-offs and ramifications that certain policy proposals might entail. In short, the results described here suggest that deliberation causes individuals to think differently. Their opinions are not necessarily different but rather they are *better*.

The claim made here is that deliberation has subtle effects on political attitudes and the quality of political thinking. These transformations do not result in qualitatively different attitudes but they do result in better or higher quality attitudes. To claim that deliberation has a positive impact on the quality of public opinion though is certainly not a novel finding. The claims made here, using data from NIF forums, has been made more forcefully by different scholars using different data.

Motivating a Theory

In spite of the consonance between the present analysis and previous research, we are still left with a number of questions. Deliberation has a positive impact on the quality of political attitudes—why? What is it about deliberation that causes it to have such positive effects on the quality of political thinking? As mentioned earlier, most

participants in a deliberative forum (myself included) will tell you that something special happens when a group of citizens get together to respectfully discuss a political issue and attempt to decide what they might do to address the problem. This agreement though, that something happens, is tempered by questions surrounding just what that something actually is. In the next chapter, I will introduce a theory that attempts to take a step forward in identifying a particular mechanism, present during deliberative forums, that might help to explain the positive effects we see. Put differently, this theory will attempt to answer the “why” question that emerges when examining the largely positive effects of deliberation.

Chapter 3

But Why? A Theory of Accountability in Deliberation

“There is substantial agreement among researchers and observers of small task groups that something important happens in group interaction which can affect performance outcomes. There is little agreement about just what that “something” is.”

—*J. Richard Hackman and Charles G. Morris*

Introduction

Boiled down to its simplest terms, each of the first three chapters of this dissertation asks one question, with each question building off the last. In setting the stage, chapter one asks, “what’s the problem?” The answer to this opening question is twofold, with the first, and most fundamental, problem being that public opinion in America is of a very low quality. Citizens lack opinions altogether on many of the most pressing issues of the day. Furthermore, when citizens do have opinions, they are oftentimes snap judgments, based just as much on things like question wording as they are on a serious and thoughtful consideration of the issue at hand. The second aspect of the problem laid out in Chapter one is that we know deliberation can help. Deliberating on a political issue with a group of peers has been shown to produce very positive effects on the quality of public opinion. This is obviously not a bad thing, but the problem stems from the fact that our understanding of *why* deliberation can improve public opinion is so limited.

Given the establishment of the problem in Chapter one, Chapter two asks, “What happens (in relation to the problem) when citizens deliberate?” Using data from several years’ worth of National Issues Forums events, I demonstrate (as many others have before) that public deliberation does indeed have an impact on the political attitudes that participants espouse. The effects documented in Chapter two are largely positive as well, with NIF participants leaving a forum with greater political knowledge, greater appreciation for an issue’s complexity, greater knowledge of and appreciation for the views of others, and an awareness of the trade-offs associated with a particular issue.

These previous chapters set the stage for the question, often heard from children, that is the focus of the current chapter—but why? The first chapter lays out the problem, and the second chapter demonstrates that deliberation can help to ameliorate the problem. The goal of this chapter is to put forth an argument as to *why* deliberation is able to improve the quality of political attitudes. Lots of things happen when a group of individuals gather together to discuss or deliberate about a political issue. What is it specifically though about these interactions that helps to explain deliberation’s impact on public opinion? As such, this chapter will review previous literature, primarily from social psychology and deliberative theory, to help inform a theory of opinion improvement or judgment via deliberation. This is a theory about mechanisms designed to shed light on features of deliberative forums, that while usually hidden from plain sight, help to explain why deliberative forums have the impact that they do on political attitudes.

Deliberation

Part of the term deliberation comes from the Latin (*libra*) which refers to a scale used to weigh in order to determine worth (Mathews 2014). This etymology should immediately conjure up images of the scales of justice that one might find on display in a courtroom or attorney's office. This is an apt image, as deliberation, as used in the present context, is just another in a long list of possible means by which a person or group can make a decision. For example, people can make decisions at random (e.g. coin flip), based off gut instincts, or based on the thoughts and advice of trusted sources (e.g. heuristics) just to name a few. While presumably more rigorous than the aforementioned, the purpose of deliberation, like the others, is to make a decision. Given a problem, given the options we have for dealing with the problem, and given the trade-offs associated with those options, what *should* we do? The emphasis on *should* is important here, as most political questions of interest are normative questions where there is no objectively correct answer about what we should do. Operating in a world of uncertainty with no objectively correct answers heightens the need for the judgment that is the product of carefully weighing options for tackling a problem. The hope with deliberation is that this process of careful weighing will produce more sound decisions, especially in comparison to the other means by which a person or group can make a decision.

One can certainly deliberate internally and we do this all the time. Should I cross the street right now, should I lean my chair back on the airplane? In these instances, we assess a situation and evaluate our options for action internally in our own heads without the need for an extended discussion with others about what we might do. These are trivial examples but it has been argued that internal deliberation is a much larger

component of deliberation than most scholars give it credit for (Goodin and Niemeyer 2003) and might even be part of a larger deliberative system (Neblo 2015). Nevertheless, the focus of this project is *public* deliberation and the distinction is important to note because public deliberation brings unique characteristics to the table that are not present with internal deliberation. The emphasis on decision-making through the careful weighing of options is still the same, but the process is done publicly through conversation with peers who share the same problem. The public and discursive aspects of public deliberation provide things that even the most disciplined and thoughtful internal deliberator could not muster on their own. In publicly discussing a political issue with others, discussants will invariably share information, tell a story, or offer a perspective that no other group members could have come up with on their own. The public and social nature of deliberation also challenges citizens. It challenges citizens to put voice to their concerns and publicly work through the tensions, both within the issue itself and within the mind itself as citizens wrestle with the competing considerations they might hold. More specifically, public deliberation provides a venue for citizens to challenge each other. In the course of deliberating on an issue, citizens challenge each other to provide reasons, evidence, and justification for the views they espouse. The decision-making environment is all the richer as a result. The public aspect of deliberation also brings with it all of the pressures, both positive and negative, that are associated with any form of group interaction (Mendelberg and Karpowitz 2014; Noelle-Neumann 1984). By publicly discussing an issue with a group of peers, citizens face all sorts of social challenges that are not present when thinking about an issue in isolation.

One might feel pressured to avoid conflict and keep the peace. They might also feel pressured to kowtow to the most knowledgeable or dominant members in the group.

Why Deliberation?

Why should deliberation be singled out as the best means of answering the question, “what should we do?” Fully wading into the question of “why deliberation?” is beyond the scope of this project. This work presupposes that deliberation is a good thing and simply seeks to explore how and why it impacts the quality of political attitudes. However, a brief foray into the question of “why deliberation?” is instructive because some of the very same factors that make deliberation a critical component of democracy and decision-making also help to explain why it has the impact it does on political attitudes.

The growing body of empirical research on political deliberation has produced an impressive collection of deliberative effects (see Melville et al. 2005 for a partial list). As impressive and important as things like enhanced political tolerance are, the vast majority of deliberative effects are ancillary to the primary goals of deliberation. The first of these primary goals is that deliberation produces decisions, laws, and regulations that are seen as legitimate by those who are obligated to live under them (Gutmann and Thompson 1996; 2004). The enhanced legitimacy stems from the deliberative pillar of public justification. In terms of public justification, governments wield great power in crafting public policy that fundamentally affects the daily lives of citizens. Various political decisions can go against our own personal preferences or even limit our freedom or liberty in various ways. Given the magnitude of political decisions, it is reasonable for people to be given reasons as to why a certain course of action was taken. Even if a

citizen does not initially get what they want, they have been given the opportunity to be a substantive participant in a discussion about policy and were provided reasons by their opponents as to why a certain course of action was preferred. Chambers (2003) nicely makes the case for the importance of public justification to deliberative democracy by stating, “A legitimate political order is one that could be justified to all those living under its laws. Thus, accountability is primarily understood in terms of “giving an account” of something; that is, publicly articulating, explaining, and, most importantly, justifying public policy.”

The second primary goal of deliberation is that more citizen deliberation will produce “better” opinions inasmuch as more political discussion will lead to more considered political views. Neblo (2015) argues that deliberation, by way of bringing citizens together to discuss politics, is able to produce better decisions simply because more information is brought to bear in a group discussion. In simpler terms, two, three, four, or even twenty heads are better than one. Participants in deliberative forums, who come from diverse backgrounds, with different interests, and different views will naturally raise concerns or make points that others in the group have never entertained before. In doing this, more information is presented and different viewpoints are considered which leads to “better” decisions.

Reason-Giving

As with any body of literature, there exists a number of disagreements within the deliberative democracy literature. In most cases though, these disagreements and points of contention tend to be on the margins, as the fundamentals are widely shared among scholars. By contrast, the literature on deliberative democracy involves disagreement on

things as fundamental as what constitutes deliberation in the first place (Schneiderhan and Kahn 2008) or even the very nature of politics (McAfee 2004). In the presence of such fundamental tensions, there exists widespread agreement on at least one primary characteristic of deliberation. Namely, most all scholars of deliberative democracy agree on the critical importance of reason-giving to any deliberative enterprise (Schneiderhan and Kahn 2008).

Gutmann and Thompson (2004) state things as such, “[Deliberative democracy’s] first and most important characteristic, then, is its reason-giving requirement.” Reason-giving figures prominently in the work of giants such as Jurgen Habermas (1996) and John Rawls (1997). Both Habermas, in his discursive theory of democracy and Rawls in his work on public reason, argue forcefully for public reason-giving as a means of justifying one’s claims for or against various proposals. In addition to being publicly stated, reasons or justifications must also be ones that others might reasonably accept on the merits of the argument itself. For example, Cohen (1997) describes an ideal deliberative procedure as one in which actors are required to provide reasons in support of various policies. Cohen goes on to note that an ideal deliberative procedure is one in which it is the quality of these reasons, and not the power, wealth, or social standing of the reason-giver, rules the day. In other words, the key force in an ideal deliberative situation is what Habermas (1996) terms “the unforced force of the better argument.” In addition to publicity and quality, other scholars (Gutmann and Thompson 2004) include accessibility as central to the importance of reason-giving to deliberation. Reasons or justifications must not only be public and acceptable, but they must also be phrased in terms that those who are subject to them can understand and relate to.

The above describes just how central the concepts of reason-giving and public justification are to public deliberation. An important question though is why reasons of this sort are so vital to public deliberation. The answer to this harkens back to the notion of deliberation as a means of making important political decisions. Political decisions generally involve tension over the allocation of scarce resources and they might also involve the sacrifice of certain things that individuals hold valuable. With so much at stake, there are inevitably winners and losers, those who get what they want or those whose values are prioritized over others. Reasons are necessary when decisions and policies impinge on others. For example, if someone were to openly state that they hate a certain movie, they do not necessarily need to provide reasons or justifications for that opinion. Their discussion partners might inquire as to why they hated the movie, but ultimately providing a compelling reason to support the opinion is not essential. Matters of taste or personal preference, like opinions on movies do not affect the lives of others. By contrast, if someone said they wanted to raise taxes on all Americans or cut the speed limit on all roads by half, they would be compelled to provide compelling reasons or justifications for those claims.

In discussing the concept of reason-giving and its importance, the literature on deliberative democracy often states that citizens “owe” each other reasons. “Citizens owe one another justifications for the institutions, laws, and public policies that collectively bind them,” (Gutmann and Thompson 2004). Phrased in these terms as it often is, the process of reason-giving sounds like something that is simply nice to do. In the same way that a person might “owe” their brother an apology or “owe” it to themselves to exercise more frequently. In these instances, to owe is to do something

that you *ought* to do but there is certainly no guarantee that your brother will ever get an apology or that your gym membership will ever get used. So why do people give reasons in deliberative forums?

Tilly (2006) argues that human beings, by their nature, are reason-giving animals. Others agree (Mercier and Sperber 2011) that reason-giving is second-nature or something that humans do automatically, whenever they think that what they say is susceptible to challenge as opposed to a widely acknowledged fact. Neblo (2015) likens deliberation to a game of giving and asking for reasons. Through the socialization process, individuals learn the rules of this game as young children. Neblo (2015) further pushes the game analogy in noting that deliberation, like other games, involves a certain amount of “buy-in” inasmuch as all game participants are, for the most part, on the same page with regard to the game’s rules and expectations. Importantly though, Neblo (2015) cautions that the *level* of “buy-in” is a random variable. While everyone might agree on the broad foundations of the game, they will not be equal in terms of how strictly they adhere to all the rules. In sum, not only is conjuring up reasons something that most do automatically (Mercier and Sperber 2011) but there is also a strong norm, or expectation, that one publicly express these reasons in dialogic situations where claims are being made. In other words, before even entering a dialogic or deliberative session, people anticipate and know that providing reasons is something that will be required of them.

Obstacles to Deliberation and Reason-Giving

The picture painted thus far of deliberation is quite a rosy one. A group of average citizens gather together as equals to engage in a lively back and forth on an important issue of shared concern. Additionally, this conversation or “game of giving

and asking for reasons” has been shown to produce a laundry list of positive effects on those who participate (Melville et al. 2005). Together, all of this makes deliberation seem like a “no-brainer” or “slam dunk” means of improving the state of democracy around the globe. At the same time though, the challenge faced by deliberation is that its promise runs up against much of what is known about citizens as information-processing and political animals. How then is deliberation able to overcome these formidable challenges posed by research in political behavior and social psychology?

Deliberation possesses great promise with regards to its ability to be a transformative experience for those who participate. It should be emphasized though that deliberation is difficult and requires more cognitive effort than citizens are usually willing to expend on political questions. The far easier way, and the default in most settings like surveys, is for citizens to give only a cursory amount of attention and thought to the questions that come before them. In juxtaposing the promise of deliberation with the challenge from political behavior and social psychology research, Ryfe (2005) frames the problem similarly. In the face of this problem, Ryfe (2005) asks how and under what conditions citizens are able to shift from their normal mode of information processing to a deliberative mindset. Based on a review of the literature, Ryfe (2005) summarizes his answer to the question by citing Marcus et al. (2000) saying, “things that make us uncomfortable.” In this list of “things that make us uncomfortable,” Ryfe (2005) mentions diversity, high stakes, and accountability. In terms of diversity, Ryfe (2005) uses the concept to indicate situations where individuals are surrounded by those with a variety of viewpoints. Being situated in these “cross-cutting networks” has been shown to have positive effects on an individual’s political tolerance and open-

mindedness (Mutz and Mondak 2006). The other two mechanisms mentioned by Ryfe (2005) (accountability and high stakes) will be taken up in greater detail below.

Accountability

Citizen preference for quick information processing along with partisan motivations often lead to biased information processing and attitudinal polarization. Furthermore, research from psychology and political science has shown that debiasing individuals is an incredibly difficult task that occasionally backfires (Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Sieck and Arkes 2005). That being said, one successful debiasing technique, that is particularly suited to political deliberation, is accountability. Lerner and Tetlock (1999) define accountability as, “the explicit or implicit expectation that one may be called upon to justify one’s own beliefs, feelings, and actions to others.” The expectation that one might have to justify their beliefs sets in motion a process in which individuals exert greater cognitive effort on the task at hand. Accountability pressures have been shown to result in greater integrative complexity (Tetlock 1983), greater awareness of alternative perspectives (Tetlock 1985), and more open-mindedness (Lerner and Tetlock 1999). Taken together these accountability effects often lead to more accurate and well-reasoned judgments (Tetlock 1983; Tetlock and Kim 1987).

As mentioned earlier, accountability pressures alter the manner in which individuals process information, which often leads to more accurate and well-reasoned judgments. But what is it about accountability that sets this process in motion? The vast majority of the research showing individuals to be cognitive misers and biased information processors was conducted in a laboratory setting. The laboratory setting isolates individuals from a social setting, which is at odds with how people actually

process information and form opinions in their everyday lives. In reality, most of the decisions we make occur within a social context. We often develop, adjust, or strengthen our political attitudes while discussing the issues with friends or family members. In contrast to the social nature of most decision making and information processing, both psychology and political science study the mechanisms underlying these processes in a social vacuum, (Tetlock 1985). The vast majority of the experimental work on judgment and decision making treats individuals as “isolated information processors,” (Tetlock 1985). This research strategy neglects the important role of social context in judgment and decision making. Research from political science also takes issue with the view of citizens as “autonomous decision makers, void of any social context,”(Beck et al. 2002). Beck et al. (2002) note that the study of political decision making without regard to social context misses a crucial aspect of the process. By presenting individuals with accountability pressures, this social vacuum starts to disappear. Accountability pressures put other people in the mind of the individual as they go about their particular task. In most forms of research, participants sit at a computer terminal in a lab setting, and fill out a survey that they presume that the experimenter and only a few others will ever see. Never does it enter the mind of the participant that they might be called upon to justify or even merely discuss their responses. By contrast, when faced with accountability pressures, the respondent changes his manner of information processing and survey response to reflect the fact that his task has now become a far more social one, replete with all the pressures and rewards associated with potential social interaction.

It is important to note, however, that accountability is not a panacea for satisficing behavior. Only under specific circumstances will accountability promote more complex

thinking and open-mindedness. When an individual knows the views of the audience they are accountable to, they will use the acceptability heuristic and shift their attitudes toward those of their audience, (Lerner and Tetlock 1999). Conversely, it is when an individual does not know the views of their audience that they will engage in more open-minded critical thinking. In addition to unknown audience views, Lerner and Tetlock (1999) outline four other conditions under which accountability will promote critical thinking. First, the audience must be interested in accuracy. Second, the audience must be more concerned about the process of decision making rather than arriving at a specific outcome. Third, the audience must be reasonably well informed vis-à-vis the individual. Finally, the audience must have a legitimate reason for inquiring into the reasons behind a participant's attitudes.

Stakes

As mentioned earlier, the sense among American citizens that people in positions of political power “don’t care what people like them think” is pervasive and longstanding. The 2012 version of the American National Election Study (ANES) found that 61% agreed that public officials did not care much what people like them thought. This number was only 35% when the ANES first asked the question in 1952 but has been consistently greater than 50% since the mid-1970s. If that many people do not have faith that anyone in a position of power cares what they think, it is no surprise that citizens will, in turn, not put forth much thought or effort when they are asked about political topics. In other words, if citizens, by and large, do not feel as though their opinions matter, the stakes for them having sound opinions are extremely low. Other than a sense

of duty or intrinsic interest in politics, there is not much reason for citizens to take the time to develop sound opinions on the issues of the day.

The dominant means by which citizen opinions are ascertained, the public opinion poll, provides little in the way of stakes. Although it has been argued that public opinion polls are inherently democratic (Lipari 1999) due to the principle of random selection, they offer little reassurance to citizens that someone in a position of power cares. For starters, it is unlikely that a survey interviewer, who makes thousands of calls each day, genuinely *cares* what each individual thinks. Moreover, the connection between being asked to participate in a survey and the results actually reaching someone in a position of power is unclear. Furthermore, citizens are frequently exposed to high level elected officials noting how they do not govern or make decisions based on what the polls say.⁴ Granted, elections in America are undoubtedly high stakes affairs where quite a bit hangs in the balance. In this sense, voting in elections provides a truly high-stakes, consequential form of political behavior for citizens to engage in. However, even with voting, the sense of stakes drops in actuality as a non-trivial portion of the citizenry reports not caring who wins presidential elections, while others feel that their individual vote does not matter, and many more choose not to vote at all.⁵ Deliberation stands to turn all of this on its head by providing citizens with a high stakes form of political behavior, where people in positions of power genuinely do care about the results.

⁴ “I really don’t care what polls and focus groups say. What I care about is doing what I think is right.” This quote was made by George W. Bush on the CBS Early Show in 2000 during his first presidential campaign.

⁵ According to the 2012 ANES, 19% reported not caring who won the upcoming presidential election. According to a 2006 Associated Press/Ipsos poll, 24% think that their individual vote doesn’t matter. Lastly, voter turnout data compiled by the United States Election Project shows that only 58% of the voting eligible U.S. population cast a ballot for president in 2012.

It is true though that not all deliberative events provide a sense of high-stakes and some even make the conscious decision to remove themselves and their deliberative activities from formal channels of power. According to Fung (2003), some make the case in favor of these “cold deliberations” based on the notion that ideal deliberative participants should be unemotional, open-minded, and lacking in firm prior opinions. If too much were at stake, the argument goes, deliberation would lose some of the very qualities that make it so powerful. That being said, Fung (2003) himself makes the case for “hot deliberations,” arguing that they ultimately promote better conversations and more meaningful effects on participants. In describing the benefits of “hot deliberation,” Fung (2003) notes that, “Participants will invest more of their psychic energy and resources into the process and so make it more thorough and creative.” As such, the link is made between high stakes deliberative activities and a more thoughtful and considered citizen. However, Fung (2003) is quick to caution that, in spite of his arguments, there exists no empirical evidence on the true impact of high stakes deliberative exercises.

As Fung (2003) notes, there is limited evidence regarding the relationship between high stakes and deliberation. However, the impact of high stakes has been tested in other information processing environments. Together, these studies help to shed light on how the effect of high stakes might play out within a deliberative environment. In studying the conditions under which various information processing strategies will be employed, Petty et al. (1981) examined the influence of personal issue relevance. They argued that individuals can only process a finite number of counter-attitudinal arguments each day, given constraints of time and energy. As such, individuals must be selective in choosing which issues merit the investment of psychic energy required to diligently

consider an issue. Given this, Petty et al. (1981) hypothesized that personal issue relevance helps to dictate how thorough an individual will be in processing information. To test this, the authors told a student sample that their university was undergoing an academic evaluation and that the new chancellor was interested in feedback and recommendations from students. In particular, the students were told that one such policy under consideration was a requirement that all seniors must pass a comprehensive exam in their major area of study in order graduate. To manipulate issue relevance, the authors told half the sample that a potential comprehensive exam policy would be effective next year (high relevance), while the other half was told that the policy would not take effect for another ten years (low relevance). Ultimately, the authors found that those in the high relevance condition were more likely to utilize central processing, where they diligently considered the issue at hand and paid more attention to issue-relevant arguments as opposed to more peripheral cues.

While Petty et al. (1981) discuss the personal relevance of an issue, Mayseless and Kruglanski (1987) discuss the similar, yet distinct concept of, “fear of invalidity.” Fear of invalidity is described as another situational and motivational factor that might affect individual judgment and information processing. Specifically, Mayseless and Kruglanski (1987) describe the concept as a “desire to avoid judgmental mistakes in view of their perceived costliness.” This desire to avoid mistakes promotes a mental “unfreezing,” whereby individuals are motivated to entertain more alternate hypotheses and be more receptive to information that runs counter to an issue’s preferred or dominant interpretation. In addition to prompting a more diligent and open-minded information processing environment, the authors note that one pathway to a fear of

invalidity is the expectation that one's judgment will be evaluated or seen by a prominent outsider.

Both of the aforementioned examples, while not dealing directly with deliberation, suggest ways in which high stakes might operate within a deliberative environment. Personal issue relevance and a fear of invalidity both produced more thoughtful, diligent, and open-minded information processing. While the terms used and experimental conditions are different, both sets of research support the contention that the quality of information processing and decision making are enhanced when individuals have a clear sense that what they are doing matters. Because the task at hand matters, there is a clear incentive for individuals to pay attention, think hard, and try their best to avoid mistakes.

Theory and Argument

Just as reason-giving sits at the heart of theories of deliberative democracy, so too is reason-giving central to this dissertation's theory of opinion improvement via deliberation. In the deliberative theory literature, it is often said that citizens "owe" each other reasons during deliberative encounters. When discussing matters and evaluating policies that might impinge on another person's life and liberty, it is only right that we provide them with a few solid and acceptable reasons as to why. That we provide our fellow discussants with reasons is spurred by a norm that is learned early in life.

Closely related to the norm of reason-giving in deliberative forums is a psychological mechanism, that I will argue helps to explain why deliberation is able to improve the quality of citizen opinions. Since reason-giving is a norm, it is something that most all citizens know will be expected of them when they enter into a deliberative

situation. Knowing in advance that one will be called upon to provide reasons in support of their positions promotes a sense of accountability in deliberative participants. It should be noted that arguing for the prominence of accountability in deliberative forums is not an entirely novel claim, as Ryfe (2005) mentions accountability as one possible mechanism responsible for putting citizens in a new, deliberative mindset. However, the evidence for accountability's impact comes primarily from social psychology. Thus, its impact in deliberative settings is suspected but has never been formally tested.

The presence of accountability in deliberative forums helps to explain why deliberation is uniquely able to have such a positive impact on opinion quality in spite of all the evidence suggesting that citizens are political know-nothings and biased information processors. The kind of accountability that is present in face-to-face citizen deliberation is absent from the vast majority of political settings. Most importantly, accountability is absent from the dominant means by which we measure public opinion—the public opinion poll. Furthermore, the accountability in deliberative forums is also different from even the social psychological research that demonstrated the mechanism's import.

As mentioned earlier, Lerner and Tetlock (1999) define accountability as, “the explicit or implicit expectation that one may be called upon to justify one's own beliefs, feelings, and actions to others.” This sense of accountability, described by Tetlock and colleagues is meant to resurrect the oft-neglected social dimension of information processing. Attitudes are often shaped in social settings through both formal and informal discussion with others, and accountability is a by-product of this social setting. Tetlock's voluminous work on the subject clearly demonstrates the power of

accountability pressure to alter citizen opinions. However, the work generally demonstrates the effect that *the threat* of accountability has on citizen attitudes. The usual experimental protocol in the accountability research, involves telling subjects, at the outset of an experiment, that they will be required to discuss an issue with a discussion partner of some sort. After this warning, subjects complete various tasks designed to measure their attitudes and the extent to which they are thinking hard about the issue at hand. Ultimately though, the subjects never actually discuss the issue with someone else. In essence then, the experimental work on accountability still operates within a social vacuum. Face-to-face deliberative forums mirror this experimental work in that participants know ahead of time that they will have to explain themselves and justify their views to their peers (the threat). However, deliberative forums move beyond the threat of accountability insofar as citizens actually do gather together to discuss the issue together. Thus, deliberative forums provide an opportunity to witness the effect of accountability “in the wild.”

More important though than the differences between accountability in experiments versus accountability in deliberative forums is the difference between the deliberative setting and that of the survey setting. Just as the norm of reason-giving and accountability are present in deliberative forums, the opposite is true, or an “anti-norm” is present in surveys. Survey research has been in existence long enough to where most citizens are familiar with how surveys work, to the point where norms have been established. In a telephone or in-person survey, citizens know that an interviewer will ask them questions, the interviewee will provide an answer, the interviewer will record that answer, and then move on to the next question. At this point it is important to

reiterate Lerner and Tetlock's (1999) definition of accountability, "the explicit or implicit expectation that one may be called upon to justify one's own beliefs, feelings, and actions to others." Citizens know that this will not be the case in a survey. In fact, speaking to the strength of norms in the survey situation, we would be surprised, or even offended, if an interviewer challenged us during a survey. When taking a survey, citizens know ahead of time that they will not be called on to clarify, expound upon, or justify the answers they provide. In essence, surveys are an "explanation free zone" where citizens have immunity to say whatever they want without fear of being challenged or questioned. In a survey, one might say that they "strongly agree" that a wall should be built separating the United States from Canada. Never will the interviewer reply with, "Really? Why do you feel that way? Have you ever thought about what that might do to our relationship with Canada?" Moreover, the situation just described, face-to-face and telephone surveys, are ones in which another person is present. This says nothing of the complete lack of accountability in paper and pencil or online surveys. In short, there is no sense of accountability present in surveys and the impact of this on the quality of the opinions that are gathered is severe. Without accountability, there is no impetus for citizens to think hard about the topics and questions that are put before them. As such, they are free to offer top-of-the-head, poorly thought out, unstable, and baseless opinions without consequence. The survey environment, where the vast majority of opinion data is gathered, stands in contrast to how citizens form their opinions, which is through conversation in a social environment. It also stands in contrast to how deliberative forums work. Both everyday talk and deliberative forums possess accountability pressure. In both situations, citizens know that there is a chance that they will be called

upon to justify or explain the claims that they make. Since this is a well-developed norm, it is known ahead of time and citizens thusly “do their homework” before making claims in these situations. It is argued here that this difference in setting, and relatedly, the difference in accountability’s presence, helps to explain a good deal in the way of opinion quality.

If accountability is as important to opinion quality as I argue it to be, this suggests that the poor quality of public opinion and widespread citizen ignorance have been severely overestimated in previous work. The reason for this is because the majority of work that paints citizen capacity in a negative light is derived from survey research. Thus, we find ourselves in a situation where survey research depicts an ill-informed citizenry with poor quality opinions. This stands in direct contrast to much of the empirical work on deliberation that depicts a citizenry that seems unusually thoughtful and capable of forming and expressing high quality opinions on difficult political issues. Previously, these divergent results and divergent pictures of citizen capacity existed in something of a “he said, she said” situation with little explanation for how the two sets of findings could coexist. By shedding light on the presence and role of accountability in deliberative forums (and its absence from the survey setting), this dissertation helps to make sense of these seemingly irreconcilable sets of findings.

How Accountability Works in Deliberative Forums

At this point, it is useful to describe this dissertation’s argument as to how accountability actually operates in a deliberative setting. The connection has been made in previous paragraphs (and previous work) between accountability and high quality opinions, but it is important to spell out the intervening steps between the two.

Upon invitation to a deliberative forum, individuals are either reminded of or informed as to what a deliberative forum entails. Namely, they are told that this is a means of discussing a complicated political issue with a group of peers in a public setting. After hearing this description, individuals know, before they even arrive at the forum, what this will require of them. Specifically, because of the powerful norm of reason-giving, individuals know that a setting like this will require them to provide reasons and justifications for the opinions they espouse. This realization triggers the next step in the process.

The recognition of what a deliberative forum is and that it will require explanations, justifications, and reasons is the introduction of accountability pressure to the equation. The introduction of accountability pressure, I argue, triggers one of two emotional reactions within the individual. One possible reaction that an individual might have is a sense of anxiety or nervousness at the prospect of having to defend oneself in such a setting. This reaction to accountability pressure is well-chronicled in Tetlock's work. A second possible reaction, one that is missed in previous work, is a sense of enthusiasm or excitement about the opportunity. I argue that both of these emotional reactions, as different as they may be, to accountability pressure ultimately lead to the same destination. This destination is the third step in the process.

Whether a person responds to accountability pressure with a sense of nervousness or a sense of enthusiasm, both result in greater cognitive effort. As Tetlock and colleagues have argued, some individuals respond with anxiety to accountability pressure. When faced with the prospect of offering reasons and justifying their opinions, some individuals become nervous. In essence, they are nervous that they might "screw

up” or look foolish in front of others. At one point or another, most all of us have been put on the hot seat in class or in a meeting, where, when faced with a question, we struggle to come up with an answer. When this happens in front of classmates or co-workers, as it often does, this is a painful and embarrassing moment. According to Tetlock, we know this is a possibility and, as a result, individuals work quite diligently to prevent this sort of embarrassing situation from happening. In other words, when accountability leads to nervousness, individuals cope by “doing their homework.” To avoid potential embarrassment, individuals think harder than they ordinarily might about their own opinions and the reasons those opinions are based on. At the same time, individuals think hard and try to anticipate any questions or critiques that might come their way from those who might hold opposing opinions. In sum then, accountability pressure causes individuals to exert greater cognitive energy in thinking through their own opinions but also in thinking through why other people might feel the way that they do.

What is missed in previous work, and argued here, is that not all will respond to accountability pressure with nervousness. Certainly, some subset exists who are quite confident in themselves, knowledgeable about politics in general, or knowledgeable about a particular issue. For these individuals, accountability pressure and the prospect of explaining and defending your opinions is cause for celebration. In this sense, the accountability present in deliberative forums provides a reason to “show off” if it were. Nevertheless, their enthusiasm still causes them to think harder than they might ordinarily about their opinions and to anticipate the questions and concerns of others but the motivation for this extra cognitive exertion comes from a different place. Admittedly

though, this group of self-confident and politically knowledgeable individuals is likely to be small. Self-confidence and political knowledge are not, however, the only avenues to enthusiasm in this arena though. One of the reasons why deliberation has such powerful effects and is such a transformative experience for many is because it offers a fundamentally different way to talk about and “do” politics. Deliberative democracy, and deliberative forums, are a breath of fresh air for citizens who have grown accustomed to partisan shouting matches on television, elected officials that never seem to get anything done, and worse yet, elected officials who do not care much what people like them have to say. For people like this, accountability pressure and the prospect of defending one’s views is of secondary concern. Their reaction is not one of dread but something akin to, “finally!” In a world full of partisan rancor where the average citizen feels impotent, deliberative forums offer an opportunity for everyday citizens to voice their opinions in front of an audience where others, maybe even those in positions of power, actually care. Thus, the invitation to deliberate is met with enthusiasm. Given this opportunity, these individuals will enthusiastically respond to the challenge by thinking harder about the issue than they ordinarily might. In other words, they have been given an exciting opportunity and want to make the best of it.

Lastly, both of these emotional routes, and the greater cognitive effort they produce, lead to higher quality opinions. One reason for this is the greater cognitive effort that accountability engenders. This effort might manifest itself in a greater inquisition of one’s own beliefs, greater attention to briefing materials, or even independent research that one might conduct in anticipation of a forum. Deeper thinking about one’s own views is important as far it goes. More importantly though, the presence

of accountability in deliberative forums prompts individuals to engage in the very activity that lies at the root of biased information processing—considering the opposite. As Lord et al. (1984) conclude, biased information processing is usually the product of an individual's failure to consider the opposite. The accountability pressure induced by deliberation naturally causes people to do just that. In preparing themselves to justify their claims to others, deliberative participants will naturally anticipate what their “opponents” might say in response to their claims. This forces an individual to not only think about their own views but to also consider the views of their opponents. In sum, the hypothesized chain of causality goes from: the introduction of accountability, which then sparks an emotional reaction (either anxiety or enthusiasm). Either of these emotional reactions prompts greater cognitive effort and deeper thinking on the topic at hand. In turn, this deeper thought produces more thoughtful and considered opinions.

It is important to note too that the above process all takes place before an individual even steps foot in a deliberative forum. As described, the invitation to deliberate, and the expectations that conjures, is argued to have a powerfully positive impact on the quality of opinions. However, if it ended there, this would be similar to the social psychology experiments where the *threat* of accountability was tested rather than actual accountability. If that were the only important thing, it would suffice to simply invite people to fictional deliberative forums. In actuality though, the forums do indeed occur, which allows for the power of accountability to really take hold.

Upon entering a deliberative forum, a participant's expectation that they will be called on to defend and justify their views becomes a reality. In the normal flow of conversation in a deliberative forum, participants will naturally be called to give an

account of their opinions. They will be pressed, by the moderator or by their fellow discussants, to explain themselves and their opinions. This press to explain or call to give an account will not be as formalized as it is in experimental settings. Rather, the push to be accountable will come in the form of simple and innocuous questions like, “why?” or “do you really think that will work?” or “have you ever thought about it from this perspective?” Questions like these, that naturally come up in deliberative conversations, push participants to think hard about their own opinions. Taken together, it is argued that the pre-forum *anticipation* of accountability coupled with the actual accountability present in a deliberative conversation will have a powerfully positive impact on the quality of citizen opinions. As a result of this accountability pressure, citizens will leave a deliberative forum with more thoughtful and considered opinions; opinions that are all the better for having been put through the wringer of accountability.

How Stakes Work in Deliberative Forums

As I argue above, the sense of accountability that is present in deliberative forums stands to be a very powerful influence on the quality of citizen opinions. Accountability addresses many of the “pathologies” of public opinion that were mentioned in the previous chapter. Accountability in deliberative forums helps to rectify the low levels of information, low levels of thought, and biased information processing that plague modern public opinion. Yet, for all of these positives, accountability fails to touch one of the primary pathologies. Specifically, accountability in deliberative forums does nothing to address the low levels of political efficacy present in the American body politic. Accountability does not address the all-important “why should I care?” question. For this reason, accountability, on its own, is necessary but not sufficient in allowing deliberation

to play the role that it might in improving the quality of public opinion and democracy in America.

For this reason, I propose a second mechanism, that works in tandem with accountability, that helps to explain why deliberation is able to have the impact that it does on the quality of citizen opinions. Importantly, this mechanism speaks directly to the “why should I care?” question. Put simply, deliberative forums can possess a sense of “stakes” that is not present in other forms of political behavior. In other words, deliberative forums, when constructed with an eye towards it, can convey a sense that this act matters in the big picture of politics—not only that the act of deliberating matters but that the individual’s voice matters. More to the point, in a deliberative forum, the individual’s voice does not just matter in the vague, “Let your voice be heard!” sense, but in the more tangible sense that someone in a position of real decision-making power might care what you think on a certain issue.

As with accountability, the idea that stakes might play a role in the relationship between deliberation and opinion quality is not entirely novel. Others (Fung 2003; Ryfe 2005) have discussed the role that stakes might play. Ryfe (2005) includes stakes as one of his proposed factors that might push individuals from their default position into a more deliberative mindset. Yet, Ryfe (2005) categorizes stakes as something that makes people uncomfortable, and thus positively impacts how they think about and discuss political issues. By contrast, I argue here that stakes prompt an enthusiastic reaction as opposed to one of discomfort. One can easily see the discomfort that Ryfe (2005) associates with stakes when thinking of a big money game of poker or standing on the free-throw line with a chance to win the game. In cases like these, the high stakes very

well might cause people to be uncomfortable, as what hangs in the balance is clear, tangible, and directly related to actions the individual is about to take. The stakes that might be present in deliberative forums do not reflect such a clear picture of how one's actions might affect the outcome of interest. Rather, the stakes that might be present in deliberative forums are more about the *potential* impact that one's actions might have. Take for instance the hypothetical example of an elected official who attends a deliberative forum being held at the local library. It is unlikely that the elected official will leave the forum and completely upend their policy positions on the basis of one person or even the entire group's comments. A huge impact like the one described above is unlikely, but the elected official *might* change in some way and that possibility for impact is what is most important. The elected official is not bound to abide by whatever comes from the group, so in that way the stakes are lower here than they are when shooting free-throws with the game on the line. However, the stakes are still present. Simply by virtue of his presence at the forum, the elected official is sending a very clear signal to participants that what they are doing and what they are saying is important. I argue that this very simple signal, that someone in a position of power cares, plays a role in the power of public deliberation to improve the quality of citizen opinions. Although simple, this signal stands to have a significant impact on citizens. The reason for this is because it is such a dramatic departure from the status quo, where most citizens highly doubt that anyone, let alone someone in a position of power, cares what they think.

Granted, not all deliberative forums have an elected official in attendance and some deliberative practitioners consciously avoid the presence of elites. The physical presence of an elite though is not the only means by which the stakes of deliberation can

be heightened. Even the simpler pledge to include forum results in a national report that will be shared with policymakers (as is the case with NIF forums) conveys the same sense of stakes. This sense among deliberative participants, the sense that someone in a position of power actually cares, directly addresses the low levels of political efficacy that plague modern political behavior. When armed with high stakes, deliberative forums will, as with accountability, prompt individuals to exert more cognitive effort and take the process more seriously than they otherwise might. Taken together, I argue that the accountability that is naturally present in deliberative forums and high stakes will have a significantly positive impact on the quality of citizen opinions. Identifying these two factors, shining a light on them, and testing their impact on deliberative participants will go a long way in helping to explain how and why deliberation is able to have the impact that it does on those who participate.

Conclusion

This chapter highlights research that makes the case for citizen-to-citizen public deliberation as a means of making better decisions. When citizens deliberate they are exposed to more information regarding the issue at hand. While a greater quantity of information is certainly important, citizens are also exposed to the drawbacks associated with their preferred position as well as various points associated with “the other side.” Through discussion with their peers, deliberative participants are also exposed to the views of others and are also given the opportunity to express and defend their own views. As mentioned, the act of deliberation is simply one possible means of making a decision or determining what some group might do about a given problem. Importantly though, deliberation is especially well-suited to political problems, which

often lack a definitive correct answer. In other words, deliberation is especially useful in situations that require judgment in the face of uncertainty. Taken together, this process generally results in citizens who leave deliberative forums with higher quality political attitudes.

This chapter also highlights one key feature of deliberation that helps to connect participation in deliberative forums with higher quality individual opinions. Namely, deliberation derives much of its power from the fact that humans are natural reason-givers. Reason-giving is something we do naturally, but the process of asking for and providing reasons is quite beneficial to individual opinions. The game of giving and asking for reasons forces citizens to interrogate their own beliefs and also to assess the soundness of others' beliefs.

Reason-giving is natural, a norm that most all of us abide by without giving it much thought. However, the activation of this norm, and thus its usefulness to the quality of public opinion, hinges on a social setting. When thinking about an issue in isolation (as we often do in surveys), we are not generally compelled to provide reasons for our beliefs and we have no discussion partners with whom to exchange reasons. This is why the social nature of deliberation is so crucial to this dissertation's argument. Namely, the social nature of deliberation and the associated norm of reason-giving is linked to the psychological mechanism of accountability. In a deliberative forum, citizens know ahead of time that there is a strong probability that someone else will challenge their views by asking them to clarify, defend, or expound upon a belief they expressed. Knowing that this call to account will likely occur causes deliberative participants to think harder about the issue at hand by exploring the reasons behind their own views and anticipating

potential critiques that might come in response. This sense of accountability is unique to the deliberative setting (at least when compared to the survey setting), and it is argued here that the presence of accountability in deliberative forums helps to explain why deliberation results in high quality opinions.

The argument up to this point attempts to explain how deliberation might impact some of the cognition-related deficiencies of public opinion. Yet, neither deliberation nor reason-giving nor accountability speaks to the worry among citizens that nobody cares about their opinions. If the process ended there, deliberation would result in a citizenry with higher quality opinions but still anemic levels of political efficacy. In other words, even with deliberation, citizens still need a greater sense that somebody cares. As such, this chapter also raises the prospect of the role that “stakes” might play in the relationship between deliberation and opinion quality. Previous research has suggested that higher stakes (in forums and elsewhere) might result in the exertion of greater cognitive effort. Thus, it is argued here that heightening the stakes of a deliberative exercise will result in a positive impact on the quality of individual opinions.

To this point, the importance of the work exhibited here is not in the sense that any of it is groundbreaking. We know from previous research that deliberation has a powerful effect on those citizens who participate. We know too from previous research that accountability and stakes can have a beneficial impact on information processing and opinion quality. Rather, the importance here is that this chapter begins to connect the dots between deliberation, its obstacles, and how various psychological mechanisms operate within deliberation to help overcome these obstacles.

In chapters four and five, I will test the theory put forth here against originally collected data from a series of deliberative forums focused on the issues surrounding higher education (e.g. high levels of loan debt, the purpose of a college degree, etc.). Again, the main question is how and why deliberation is able to have the positive effects that it does on participants. It has been speculated (based on research from different fields and different settings) that accountability and high stakes are two mechanisms that might help to answer this question. The key here is to create an environment that heightens these mechanisms or makes it more likely that important norms are activated. The experiment described in chapters four and five will actually put these mechanisms to the test by manipulating their presence or absence in deliberative settings.

Chapter 4

The Perverse Effects of Voting

One cool judgment is worth a thousand hasty counsels. The thing to do is to supply light and not heat.

—Woodrow Wilson

Introduction

Thus far, this project has attempted to highlight a few points of common ground. First, the quality of public opinion in America is quite low. Public opinion holds a lofty place in American society and is intended to provide guidance to elected officials and other policy-makers as to the desires and wishes of citizens. Yet, public opinion is of little use to anyone if individual opinions are the ill-informed products of hasty decision-making processes. The second point of common ground is that citizen-to-citizen public deliberation has the potential to transform ill-conceived top-of-the-head opinions into more considered and thoughtful judgments. However, it is unclear exactly how or why deliberation is able to have this effect on individual opinions. In other words, the mechanism(s) by which deliberation is able to have such a transformative impact on individual opinions is very much shrouded in mystery. A clearer idea of the mechanism(s) at play during deliberation will help to inform future deliberative events, such that the mechanism(s) responsible for producing high quality opinions are highlighted and emphasized in forum design. This is especially important in light of the recent proliferation of deliberative activities across the country. On top of this, there is

no saying that the mechanism(s) at play during deliberation will not also be helpful outside the deliberative context. Thus, the successful mechanism(s) at play during public deliberation might also be usefully incorporated into other settings where citizens form political opinions, such as mass media or everyday discourse.

In the previous chapter, it was hypothesized that a sense of social accountability might be the mechanism, present in public deliberation, that helps to account for deliberation's powerful effects on opinion quality. Accountability's positive impact on opinion quality is well documented in lab settings, but has never been isolated and tested in a deliberative setting. Is there a way then to manipulate the presence of accountability in deliberative forums such that its impact can be tested?

This chapter attempts to explain why deliberation is able to have a positive impact on individual opinions by shining a light on a mechanism that connects the two. The focus of this chapter is a description of an experiment where the presence of accountability in deliberative forums is manipulated. By manipulating the presence of accountability, we will gain greater clarity on its role in allowing deliberation to improve the quality of public opinion.

Research Design and Procedures

In order to better understand the relationship between accountability and opinion quality in the deliberative setting, this project employs an experimental design couched within a deliberative forum. Subjects completed online surveys before and after the deliberative forum. At the forum, subjects were randomly assigned to one of two kinds of discussion groups. Those assigned to the first experimental group (High Accountability) were instructed to hold a group "vote" at the end of their discussion where each person

publicly stated and defended their preferred policy option. Subjects assigned to the second group (Low Accountability) were not instructed to hold a group vote. The forum's topic was the challenges that currently face American colleges and universities (e.g. increasing levels of student debt, the value of a college degree, skepticism regarding the liberal arts, etc.). Prior to discussing the issue with their peers, subjects listened, as one big group, to the university provost, who attended the forum, speak on the future of higher education for approximately 20 minutes.

As subjects arrived at the forum, they signed in and were given a packet. The front page of this packet randomly assigned the individual to their discussion group (e.g. group 1 rm. 260). Some discussion groups were "voting" groups and others were not. Additionally, subjects were given a set of briefing materials on the topic and a list of questions that they were free to use (or not) in their group's discussion. The briefing materials came in the form of a short (12 page) issue guide produced by the National Issues Forums Institute. For over nearly four decades, the NIF has produced thoroughly researched, objective, and non-partisan issue guides on a variety of topics. The purpose of the issue guides is not to make the reader an expert on all the ins and outs of complicated policy issues (the books are short after all). Rather, the issue guides provide enough information for citizens to feel confident discussing the issue. Ultimately, the purpose of the NIF issue guides is to spark public deliberation, and they have been used to that end for several decades. In this instance, the issue guide used was entitled, "Shaping Our Future: How Should Higher Education Help us Create the Society we Want?" The issue book participants were given contained three broad options for dealing with the problems that currently face American colleges and universities. Subjects in all

of the groups discussed these options, but half of the groups were instructed to hold a public vote on the options, where they went around the table, stated their preferred option, and explained why they liked that option best. Subjects could vote for Option 1, Option 2, Option 3, or Not Sure. Subjects recorded their votes on a group roster sheet that the moderators collected when they were finished. Subjects in the low accountability discussion groups were able to discuss the options outlined in the issue book, but were not asked to hold a public vote. To ensure that this treatment was delivered effectively, high accountability groups and low accountability groups were never in the same room. Discussion groups contained between four and six people, and several moderators floated between the groups to ensure that discussions were going smoothly, stimulate discussion if groups were quiet, and answer questions if needed. The moderators were instructed to stimulate discussion if groups were stagnating, but ultimately, each discussion group was free to end their discussion at any time. As such, discussion length varied with some groups being more talkative and engaged than others. Group discussion length ranged from a low of 36 minutes to a high of 70 minutes.

The above describes how matters proceeded at the deliberative forum. It is important to reiterate, however, that this experiment employed a pre-post design. In the days leading up to the deliberative forums, participants completed an online pre-survey that measured their baseline political and social attitudes, as well as a battery of questions specifically about higher education. Immediately after the deliberative forums, participants were sent a final online post-survey, which asked many of the same questions from the pre-survey as well as a number of questions asking about the deliberative experience itself. To sum up, subjects assigned to either of the two deliberative groups,

completed a pre-survey, attended an in-person deliberative forum, and completed a post-survey.

Subject Recruitment

Previous research has shown (Neblo et al. 2010) that citizens are more willing to deliberate than previously thought, however recruiting deliberative participants is still far from easy. Compared to traditional surveys and experiments, deliberative forums require a greater time commitment, have less schedule flexibility, and involve a large social component. In terms of time, deliberative forums generally last for at least one hour and some require several days of participation. On top of a greater time commitment, deliberative forums are similar to nominating caucuses in that they are usually one-time events that occur at a set time and a set place. Thus, if a person happens to be busy on the night of the forum, they are likely out of luck, regardless of how willing or excited they are to participate. By contrast, survey researchers can contact participants multiple times over multiple days and experiments that require a subject's physical presence in the lab generally have wide time windows over multiple days, where subjects can stop by at their convenience. Lastly, deliberative forums, especially those that are face-to-face, involve a good bit of social interaction, often with strangers, that might deter more shy or standoffish individuals from attending.

In light of the obstacles presented above, this project utilized a multi-pronged approach to recruit a sufficient number of participants. Participants in this experiment were undergraduate students at a large university in the Midwest. In total, 99 students attended the forum. Of those who attended, 87 completed both a pre and a post survey. In terms of external validity, the participants in this experiment are neither representative

of the general public nor the university population. However, the purpose of this project was not to obtain a representative assessment of how the general public or even university students feel about the issue of higher education. Rather, the purpose is to uncover the mechanisms at play during deliberative forums, where an experimental design, with a convenience sample, is suitable.

Table 4.1: Participant Profile

	Deliberative Participants (N=99)
Gender (% male)	57%
Age (mean)	21.2 years old
Race (% non-white)	18%
Party ID (% GOP)	35%

Key Measures

The primary outcome of interest in this chapter is opinion quality. In the long and distinguished history of public opinion research, a vast amount of attention has been given to the distribution of opinions, the opinion formation process, and how various survey features can alter political attitudes. Notably absent from this research is a focus, not on the content of opinions, but on the quality of opinions. One potential reason for this dearth of research could be the lack of quality tools for measuring opinion quality. In spite of this challenge, attempts have been made to measure opinion quality, with perhaps the most notable example being Philip Tetlock's work on integrative complexity. An individual's integrative complexity is composed of two distinct concepts. The first is differentiation, which refers to an individual's ability to recognize the different dimensions of an issue as well as their ability to understand different perspectives on the

issue. The second aspect of integrative complexity is integration, which refers to an individual's ability to make connections between the various dimensions of an issue (Tetlock 1983; Tetlock 1985). Traditionally, integrative complexity is measured by content analyzing participant responses to open-ended questions. However, recent advances in technology have led to the creation of an automated tool for integrative complexity coding. Automated integrative complexity coding provides an enormous increase in efficiency and has been shown to approximate the performance of human coders (Conway et al. 2014; Houck et al. 2014). As with human coders, the automated program assigns an integrative complexity score between one and seven, with seven indicating very high complexity. In order to measure integrative complexity, participants responded to several open-ended questions about higher education. The same questions were asked of all participants on both the pre- and post-forum surveys. The text from the pre-forum responses was combined and given an integrative complexity score and the same was done with the text from the post-forum responses. Thus, all participants have a pre and a post integrative complexity score.

In order to get a better handle on opinion quality, integrative complexity was supplemented with additional measures designed to tap the same underlying construct. One such additional measure was based on the simple notion that quality opinions are those that are sufficiently thought-out. One way of measuring this is to simply ask respondents to assess the nature of their own opinions. After answering a set of six closed-ended questions on higher education, respondents were asked to rate the extent to which their previous answers about higher could be classified as "gut opinions" or

attitudes they have thought a great deal about.⁶ At first glance, one might think that the socially desirable answer would be to avoid admitting that any of your opinions are “gut opinions” as opposed to ones that are well thought-out. However, “gut opinions” does not seem to carry a negative connotation (it might even be positive) as participants in the pre-forum survey were nearly evenly split between both sides of the scale.

Forum Topic: Why Education?

The deliberative forum that was conducted as part of this project centered around a National Issues Forums (NIF) issue guide entitled, “Shaping our Future: How Should Higher Education Help us Create the Society we Want?”. Over the years, the NIF has published issue guides on a vast array of topics. As a result, the forum’s topic conceivably could have been foreign policy, crime, campaign finance reform, or a variety of others. The issue of higher education, however, was chosen with specific reasons in mind. For starters, higher education and all of the challenges it currently faces, is an issue where students can clearly see the relationship between policy and their everyday lives. As a result of this, and because this project utilizes a student sample, higher education is one potential issue that students might be more inclined to deliberate on. On top of this, Fung (2003) notes that some issues are not particularly suited for deliberation because citizens do not bring any unique information or experiences to the table. This is certainly not the case with the issue of higher education, where current university students are uniquely positioned to consider the potential effects that various policies might have. They are also, by virtue of their status as current students, able to bring

⁶ Please see Appendix A for full question wording and response options for this and other measures.

information and experiences to the table that would be impossible to replicate with non-student samples.

Results

The first results examine the effect of accountability on opinion quality. Again, accountability was manipulated in this study by heightening its presence in half of the deliberative groups. In these groups, accountability was heightened by requiring participants to publicly “vote” on and explain their final issue position. In these groups, after deliberating, participants were instructed to choose from (or vote on) one of three choices outlined in the issue guide. Participants could also vote for “not sure” as their final issue position. The table below outlines how this heightened accountability pressure affected opinion quality, by looking at a number of opinion quality indicators.

Table 4.2: Opinion Quality by Experimental Condition

	Accountable Groups (Voting)	No Accountability Groups (No Voting)	P Value
Integrative Complexity	2.93	3.20	.13
Word Count	215	253	.12
# of Times Talk	1.93	2.05	.24
Length of Deliberation (in minutes)	47	58	.00
Post Option Confidence (100=Extremely Confident)	72	72	.50
Gut Feelings (4=Highly Thought Out)	2.86	3.07	.13

*P Values are derived from one-sided T-Tests

The results above certainly indicate that voting at the conclusion of a deliberative forum did not produce the anticipated effects on opinion quality. Rather than prompting rich conversations and increasing the quality of opinions, enhanced accountability (through voting) inhibited group discussions and hurt the quality of attitudes. In looking at the ensuing post-forum surveys, those in the voting groups scored lower on integrative complexity, used fewer words to express themselves, and were more likely to say that their opinions, even after deliberating, were gut opinions. Within the forum itself, the voting groups deliberated for a significantly shorter period of time, with the non-voting groups deliberating for 11 minutes longer on average. At the individual level, those in the voting groups spoke less frequently than did those in the non-voting groups. In short,

heightening accountability through a forced vote actually stunted the deliberative process. Accountability pressure resulted in less robust deliberative conversations, which in turn had a deleterious effect on the quality of opinions.

In addition to affecting the quality of group discussion and individual attitudes, voting also impacted the actual content of citizen attitudes.

Table 4.3: Pre-Forum Policy Preference by Experimental Condition

	Accountability Groups (Voting)	No Accountability Groups (No Voting)
Option 1: Emphasize STEM	28%	22%
Option 2: Instill Values	32%	28%
Option 3: Wider Access	21%	26%
Option 4: Not Sure	19%	24%
Totals	100% (47)	100% (46)

The table above shows responses to a pre-forum question asking respondents to pick their most preferred “future direction” for higher education. As expected in an experiment with random assignment, there were no significant differences between groups on this question prior to the deliberative forum. Participants were divided in preference fairly evenly between the three options, with similar proportions of both groups reporting that they “weren’t sure.”

At the deliberative forum, those assigned to the accountability (voting) groups were asked to publicly vote on and explain their preferred option to their fellow group members at the end of their discussion. The results of the vote that took place at the deliberative forum are presented below.

Table 4.4: Post-Deliberation Policy Preference

	Accountability Groups (Voting)
Option 1: Emphasize STEM	39%
Option 2: Instill Values	14%
Option 3: Wider Access	41%
Option 4: Not Sure	6%
Totals	100% (51)

*This vote occurred *immediately* following deliberation, while participants were still on-site and in their groups. Only the accountability (voting) groups conducted a vote following deliberation.

As evidenced by the table above, there was a substantial amount of change in preference between the pre-survey and immediately following the deliberative forum. So much so, that the correlation between pre-survey vote and post-deliberation vote was only .02, indicating that there was virtually no relationship between a person's opinion before the deliberation and a person's opinion after deliberation. Although not the purpose of this project, these results do offer further confirmation of the power of public deliberation on individual opinions. Most notably though, there were significant decreases in not sure responses and support for option two, accompanied by increases in support of 11 and 20 points on options one and three respectively. Furthermore, the decrease in the proportion of "not sure" responses seems to suggest that deliberation clarified the issue for participants in the voting groups.

This exact same question was administered one final time on the post-deliberation survey that respondents completed in the days after the forum had concluded. This was the third time participants in the accountability groups had answered this question (once before during the pre-survey and again immediately after the deliberative forum) and the

second time for those in the non-accountability groups. The results, separated by experimental group, are presented below.

Table 4.5: Post-Forum Policy Preference by Experimental Group

	Accountability Groups (Voting)	No Accountability Groups (No Voting)
Option 1: Emphasize STEM	44%	21%
Option 2: Instill Values	14%	14%
Option 3: Wider Access	35%	19%
Option 4: Not Sure	7%	47%
Totals	100% (47)	101% (46)

*This final vote took place on the post-forum survey that participants took online in the days after the forum.

The impact of voting on the distribution of preferences is quite stark. A chi square test of the table above indicates a highly significant ($p=.000$) difference between the two groups in terms of their attitudes on this issue.

When focusing specifically on the accountability groups, and their evolution on this question through three administrations, two contrasting portraits emerge. The first is one of substantial attitude change that occurred for “voting” participants when comparing their pre-forum responses to their preferences immediately following the forum. The second is one of crystallization, as the preferences of those in the “voting” groups remained remarkably stable between their group vote and post-forum survey, as evidenced by a correlation of .72 between their in-forum votes and post-forum survey response to this question.

By contrast, those in the non-accountability (no voting) groups experienced a substantial change in attitude between the pre-forum and post-forum survey, as evidenced by a paltry correlation of $-.08$ between their pre-forum and post-forum responses to this question. The most apparent pre-post change for this group was the large increase (23 points) in those choosing the “not sure” option. Among those in the high accountability voting groups, the proportion choosing “not sure” *decreased* by 12 points from the pre to the post forum survey. Moreover, there was a 40 point difference in “not sure” preference between the two groups with those in the non-accountability (no voting) groups being far more likely to express this sentiment in the post-forum survey.

After deliberating on the challenges facing higher education, participants were asked to choose a course of action that they would like to see universities take. Participants could choose between three substantive options or opt for “not sure.” After deliberating, a striking number of participants in the non-voting groups could not decide on one preferred option and instead opted to say that they were “not sure” what course of action universities should take. The knee-jerk explanation for this would be that those who are still not sure what to do after deliberation probably did not think very hard about the issue or discuss it in much depth. Their response of “not sure” is indicative of a lack of information and attitudes on the topic. However, this quick and intuitive explanation does not hold water upon comparison of the time spent deliberating between voting and non-voting groups.

Table 4.6: Mean Deliberative Length by Experimental Group

Group	Average Time Spent Deliberating
Accountability Groups (Voting)	47 minutes
No Accountability Groups (Non-Voting)	58 minutes

On its own, deliberative length is not necessarily indicative of deliberative quality. However, it does make intuitive sense that longer discussions, especially on complicated topics such as the one under consideration during this forum, would be better discussions.

The above demonstrates that non-voting groups, where accountability was not heightened tended to spend more time deliberating compared to voting groups. Since this does not automatically imply better deliberation, it is necessary to further examine the relationship between deliberative length and issue attitudes. One way of doing this is to examine participants' final issue position in relation to the amount of time they deliberated. The median length of deliberation, for all groups involved, was 51 minutes. Using the median as a cut-point, 74% of those who said "not sure" deliberated for 51 minutes or longer. Furthermore, those who opted for "not sure" as their final issue position, on average, deliberated for a longer period of time than their peers who chose other options.

Table 4.7: Mean Deliberative Length by Post-Forum Policy Preference

Policy Option	Mean Deliberative Length
Option 1: Emphasize STEM	52 minutes
Option 2: Instill Values	53 minutes
Option 3: Wider Access	47 minutes
Option 4: Not Sure	57 minutes

Rather than completely clarifying an issue, longer deliberative discussions tend to complicate matters in participants' minds. The complexity of the issue at hand becomes apparent and the efficacy of clear-cut solutions becomes dubious. This results in a greater likelihood that individuals will reject one-size-fits-all solutions in favor of more nuanced and complicated options. At the same time, choosing "not sure" after a lengthy deliberation is not akin to low quality attitudes. Rather, those who deliberate for a longer period of time are more likely to be in possession of high quality, well thought out attitudes. This indicates that a response of "not sure," contrary to traditional survey research, is not a marker for lack of political sophistication or cognitive effort. Quite the opposite, as those who opted for "not sure" as their final issue position actually talked about the issue for a longer period of time than those who chose one of the substantive responses.

Table 4.8: Mean Deliberative Length by Self-Reported Attitude Quality

Attitude Quality	Mean Deliberative Length
Mostly Gut Attitudes	44 minutes
Somewhat Gut Attitudes	50 minutes
Somewhat Thought-Out Attitudes	51 minutes
Mostly Thought-Out Attitudes	55 minutes

*Attitude quality is taken from participant responses to this question on the post-forum survey.

Thus far, it has been demonstrated that deliberative length is related to an individual's final issue position, with longer deliberations being more likely to produce "not sure" responses. As mentioned, a "not sure" response in this context is suggestive of high quality rather than low quality opinions. The relationship between deliberative length and opinion quality is further explored in the Table 4.8 above. As Table 4.8 shows, those who deliberated for shorter periods of time were more likely to be in possession of "gut attitudes" after deliberation. By contrast, individuals involved in lengthier deliberations were more likely to report that their attitudes on higher education were more thought-out as opposed to gut or top of the head opinions. Those who deliberated for a longer period of time were more likely to report that their opinions were thought-out (as opposed to gut opinions) after deliberation, with a .24 correlation ($p=.03$) between deliberative length and opinion quality (as measured by the gut opinion question above).

A look at integrative complexity scores by final issue attitude offers further support for the contention that "not sure" responses produced by deliberation are actually indicative of high quality attitudes. The table below shows that those who opted for "not

sure” as their final issue position after deliberation offer attitudes that exhibited higher integrative complexity than did their peers who opted for substantive final issue positions.

Table 4.9: Mean Integrative Complexity by Post-Forum Policy Preference

Policy Option	Mean Integrative Complexity
Option 1: Emphasize STEM	3.02
Option 2: Instill Values	3.15
Option 3: Wider Access	3.32
Option 4: Not Sure	3.45

The results above paint a relatively complex relationship between deliberative length and opinion quality. After deliberating for a longer period of time, participants leave deliberative forums with a set of attitudes that are well thought-out after being tested through a lively group discussion. However, lengthy discussions tend to complicate the issue at hand rather than revealing a clear-cut solution. This complexity of thought manifests itself in lengthy deliberators opting for “not sure” when asked for their final opinion on the issue. Based on this evidence, a response of “not sure,” in the deliberative context, suggests complex thought rather than a lack of thought. Longer deliberative discussions reveal the complexity of an issue, which makes discrete policy solutions less attractive. These results reaffirm the primacy of discussion in deliberative forums. Simply attending a deliberative forum and briefly discussing an issue in a perfunctory manner is not enough to yield vast increases in opinion quality. Participants must deliberate long enough to allow for a meaningful exchange of ideas with their fellow group members.

For those in the high accountability voting groups, deliberation likely caused this same sort of complexity realization in them too. However, the act of “voting” probably reduced this for them as they were forced to resolve this ambivalence. When asked to publicly vote on something, there is pressure to pick *something* as opposed to throwing up one’s hands or sitting on the fence. What is interesting though is that while virtually nobody in the voting groups opted for “don’t know” at the forum, very few of these same individuals responded with “don’t know” on the private post-forum survey. If these individuals were truly ambivalent or truly did not know, but were embarrassed to say so during the public vote, they could have easily went back to saying “don’t know” in the private, post-forum survey. That they stuck with their substantive vote indicates one of two things. The first potential scenario is that the act of publicly voting clarified the issue and one’s own opinion on it. In this sense, voting had a positive effect on attitudes as it forced individuals to deal head-on with their own ambivalence. A second way of looking at this is less positive. Perhaps the high correlation between in-forum vote and post-forum vote reflects the need to be consistent, to not be a flip-flopper. In this sense, voting did very little to clarify the issue in one’s mind. It simply served as a means of forcing someone to pick an option and stick with it out of a desire for consistency.

Discussion

What to Make of the Effects of “Voting”

By having some discussion groups publicly vote on and defend their preferred issue position, the expectation was that this process would enhance accountability pressure. Because these participants knew ahead of time that they would have to vote, it was assumed that this enhanced accountability pressure would cause them to listen more

carefully, more fully engage in discussion, and exert more cognitive energy in evaluating the various arguments and options that were on the table. All of this extra effort was hypothesized to translate into more thoughtful opinions, supported by reasons and cognizant of alternate perspectives. Operationalizing opinion quality through integrative complexity, the aforementioned expectations did not come to fruition. In fact, when using voting to enhance accountability, the opposite seems to have occurred, with those in voting groups exhibiting lower quality opinions than those in the other discussion groups. Moreover, the act of voting had interesting effects on the distribution of issue preferences as well.

In the previous chapter, it was noted that humans are natural reason-givers and question-askers. At an early age, humans learn that they often owe one another reasons to support the claims that they make, especially if those claims have some bearing on the life of another person. This natural tendency to ask for and provide reasons is related to the psychological mechanism of accountability. When people know in advance that they will have to provide justifications for their views, it has a positive impact on the quality of their attitudes. The experiment described in this chapter attempted to leverage these two features of social life in order to investigate the impact of accountability on attitudes formed through public deliberation. In order to do this though, the presence of accountability needed to be manipulated. It was hypothesized that if accountability produces high quality attitudes, as found in previous studies, more accountability would produce even better attitudes. To do this, the desired behavior (asking for and providing reasons) was reinforced via experimental instructions. In sum, this chapter's expectations

and the manner in which accountability was produced both have a firm grounding in previous research.

In spite of these strong and well-founded expectations, the heightening of accountability did not produce the expected results. One possible explanation for this departure from expectations is that the experimental manipulation “crowded-out” individuals’ natural tendency to ask for and provide reasons in the course of conversation. Frey (1998) describes the crowding-out effect as an instance where an external intervention reduces a person’s intrinsic motivation or desire to act. Simply put, the crowding-out effect describes instances where outside efforts are made to produce desired behaviors in others. Importantly though, these desired behaviors are things that a person might very well do anyway, without prompting. In most studies, the external intervention often comes in the form of rewards or incentives, such as payments to donate blood (Mellstrom and Johannesson 2008) or perform chores (Lepper and Greene 1978). However, Frey (1998) notes that everything that is said about incentives reducing intrinsic motivation can also be said of commands reducing intrinsic motivation.

Two psychological mechanisms are thought to explain why external interventions, in the form of incentives or commands, might crowd-out an individual’s better impulses. The first is that external interventions reduce an individual’s control over their own behavior (Frey 1998). This lack of control manifests itself in less motivation to do something that one might ordinarily do of their own volition. By contrast, Cordova and Lepper (1996) note that “individuals offered choice have shown more enjoyment of, better performance on, and greater persistence at a variety of activities.” The second possible mechanism is that external interventions signal to a person that their competence

is under doubt (Frey 1998). This perception too results in reduced effort towards something that one might have done anyway.

In the case of this experiment then, it is likely that the experimental manipulation (heightened accountability through voting) crowded-out participants' natural inclination to ask for and provide reasons through discussion. Heightening accountability via command crowded-out participants in the voting groups, which resulted in those groups having shorter deliberations and participants in those groups having lower quality attitudes. By experimentally circumscribing how the forum would proceed, participants in the voting groups lost control over how the conversation should go. They certainly had some control, but they knew that all the discussion was leading up to a big vote at the end of the forum. By contrast, those in the non-voting groups essentially had full control over their conversation. This relative freedom was a tacit endorsement of their competence to have a sophisticated conversation on a difficult issue with little intervention or outside help.

In trying to explain the effect of voting on opinion quality, there are two places one can look with the data at hand. The first, integrative complexity, suggests that voting actually had a negative effect on opinion quality. One potential explanation for this is that voting had a crowding-out effect, hampering the flow of the group discussions by making them more task-oriented as opposed to simply eliciting a range of opinions. Rather than being looked to in anticipation, perhaps voting was looked at as just another task to get through. Thus, the goal of these discussion groups was to hurry up and vote as opposed to simply attempting to have a good discussion. One story from a moderator offers suggestive evidence that this was the case. According to this moderator, one of the

groups in his room immediately started the voting process upon sitting down in their small group. This group saw voting as the “end-all be-all” even though the instructions were clear that voting was to take place at the end of a group discussion.

The Quality of “Don’t Know”

Measures such as integrative complexity and word count, indicate that voting, contrary to hypotheses, resulted in lower quality opinions. However, isn’t one forgotten measure of opinion quality actually having an opinion in the first place? In a traditional survey, an answer of “don’t know” or “not sure” is generally treated as an indicator of low opinion quality, or, more accurately perhaps, no opinion at all. However, is a “don’t know” response after deliberation the same as a “don’t know” response on a survey? After a deliberative forum, responding “don’t know” reflects the realization that no easy solution exists with regard to the challenges facing higher education. Rather than choosing and committing to one “right” course of action, deliberative participants recognize that the best course of action probably lies in a combination of all of these options. In other words, by deliberating on the issue of higher education, the trade-offs that all courses of action entail become more apparent to participants. Through the course of an in-depth discussion with peers, one comes to see that the option they preferred prior to deliberation has its flaws and that the preferred options of others have merit too. In this sense, it comes as no surprise that a plurality of individuals in the non-voting groups selected “don’t know” as their preferred course of action for higher education policy. Deliberation complicates matters, muddies the waters, and this manifests itself in ambivalence. However, this represents the best kind of ambivalent response—not one that simply hides in middle response options—but one that actually

recognizes and has wrestled with the complexity of the issue at hand. That one is conflicted and unsure after deliberation is not indicative of weak attitudes, but rather it suggests that the attitude is quite complex.

The temptation is high to treat deliberation, across the board, as an intrinsically good thing. In assuming that all deliberative forums are equal, one misses the tremendous variation that exists between deliberative groups, even at the same event. In the rush to identify every possible deliberative effect or to determine the optimal deliberative design, it is important to not overlook the most fundamental aspect of deliberation—talking. The primacy of talking should never be lost in the sea of design choices that conveners of deliberative forums must make. At its most basic, deliberation is about groups of citizens coming together to explore a complicated issue, discuss potential courses of action, and weigh the trade-offs associated with those actions against the things they hold dear. In order to do all of these things, individuals must talk, and the results here indicate that talking for a longer period of time is better. However, groups required to vote at the end of their discussion talked for a significantly shorter amount of time than the non-voting groups and this difference in deliberative length, by voting, has important ramifications. Naturally, as groups talk for a longer period of time, more information is brought to the table, more ideas are explored, and the chances are greater that one's own ideas and opinions will be put to the test by others. Put simply, longer discussions are more likely to be richer and more substantive than briefer conversations. These high quality conversations lead to opinions that are certainly well thought-out but longer deliberations can also muddy the water to some degree. As discussions increase in length and more information is brought to the table, the simple causal explanations we

craft for complex issues are challenged. Participants are exposed to the weaknesses of their own preferred position as well as the benefits of previously dismissed courses of action. As such, while opinions are certainly “battle-tested” after a lengthy deliberation, choosing one “correct” answer becomes difficult or even impossible.

Conclusion

In conclusion, previous literature (Ryfe 2005; Guttman and Thompson 1996) provided strong reason to believe that accountability forces are at play during deliberative forums. Furthermore, research from social psychology (Tetlock 1983; 1985) provided an even stronger reason to believe that accountability would have a strong positive influence on the quality of citizen attitudes. Yet, in spite of these strong expectations, a major impetus for this study was that the impact of accountability had never actually been tested in a deliberative setting. Upon actually testing the impact of accountability in deliberative forums, the results were surprising. Participants who deliberated in the high accountability groups deliberated for a significantly shorter period of time and ultimately produced attitudes that were lower in terms of integrative complexity and more likely to be “gut attitudes” than their counterparts in the non-accountability groups.

Lerner and Tetlock (1999) define accountability as, “the explicit or implicit expectation that one may be called upon to justify one’s own beliefs, feelings, and actions to others.” The goal was to recreate and manipulate a form of accountability in deliberative forums that matches Lerner and Tetlock’s definition. As such, at the conclusion of their discussion, participants in half of the deliberative groups were instructed to go around the table and publicly vote on their final issue position and describe why they voted the way that they did. Participants in these groups knew about

the voting requirement prior to their discussion beginning. In other words, there was a very clear, explicit requirement that participants in the voting groups would have to publicly declare and defend their beliefs. On its face then, there appears to be very little slippage between the construct of accountability, as defined by Lerner and Tetlock, and the experimental manipulation, designed to heighten accountability, used here. However, accountability pressure, which consistently produced high quality attitudes in Tetlock's work, resulted in the opposite here.

In sum, those in the high accountability groups spent less time deliberating than those in the low accountability groups. The instructions requiring them to vote at the end of their forum compelled them to pick *something*, anything substantive as very few opted for "not sure." These relatively brief deliberations and the push to choose ultimately resulted in lower quality attitudes being expressed on the post-forum survey. By contrast, those in the low accountability groups spent far more time deliberating than their counterparts. Since they were freed from the push to vote, participants in these groups were free to explore the issue in great depth. Ultimately though, these long explorations raised more questions than answers as participants (nearly half of them) in the non-voting group were far more likely to say they were "not sure" about what we should do regarding higher education after deliberating. Interestingly though, this indecision was not indicative of low quality attitudes. In spite of being unsure on their final issue position, these individuals left the forum with higher quality attitudes that were more likely to be thought out and considered as opposed to gut opinions.

Why did accountability, as operationalized in this manner in a deliberative setting, produce results contrary to what that we are accustomed to seeing in accountability

studies? Upon reflection, it becomes clear that accountability is already present in deliberative forums. Simply by being invited to a forum, individuals are aware that they will be called upon to give a public account of their attitudes and opinions. By contrast, Tetlock's work in the lab produces accountability where none is already present and where individuals do not expect to find it. Perhaps then, the surprise or novelty of accountability in the lab setting helps to explain the consistent pattern of results from those studies. The goal here was to "ramp up" the presence of accountability even though it was already present naturally in deliberative forums. The expectation was that more accountability would simply produce more of the same result—higher quality opinions. Here, it appears as though the heightening of accountability in deliberative forums actually "crowds-out" the accountability that is already present. People are natural players in the game of giving and asking for reasons. In a dialogical setting like a deliberative forum, individuals know that they will be expected to provide explanations for their attitudes and positions. By commanding half of the participants to publicly vote and defend their positions, intrinsic motivation to perform these tasks naturally was lessened.

The experiment described in this chapter does have implications for the design and conduct of future deliberative events. Specifically, the primary takeaway point is to avoid over-engineering the deliberative process. Certain ground-rules and parameters are necessary to ensure a successful deliberative forum. However, the push to heighten the good qualities of deliberation can ultimately end up stunting the conversation. The results of this chapter are not an indictment on the potential for accountability to have positive effects on opinion quality. On the other hand though, accountability is naturally

present in deliberative forums and attempts to heighten accountability through voting produced perverse effects. By being freed from the task of voting on their final issue position, those in the non-voting discussion groups had no concrete goal or task. All they were asked to do was explore the policy alternatives presented in the issue guide. This open-ended exploration resulted in fruitful conversations that produced high quality opinions. In this sense, the task of voting at the end of a deliberative forum was akin to that of a jury arriving at a verdict following their deliberations. In exploring variance in the quality of jury deliberations, Lynn Sanders (1997) notes, "When jury deliberations are focused more on eliciting a range of views instead of on the common problem of arriving at a verdict, they appear likely to provoke both a more considerate discussion and one that leaves jurors more satisfied with their participation." Sanders' words are a reminder that an important function of public deliberation is simply that it allows citizens to explore an issue and sort through their own feelings on the topic. In this experiment, a vote or final position was forced on some participants. This vote provided premature finality to citizens who were still sorting through the issue.

If the accountability manipulation used in this study did indeed "crowd-out" our better impulses, the next chapter will look for evidence and effects of the natural accountability that is present in deliberative forums. The next chapter will also explore this project's second main argument. Namely, whether high stakes deliberative exercises produce higher quality opinions from those who participate in them.

Chapter 5

Please Explain Yourself: Accountability in Deliberative Forums

The older I get, the more convinced I am that the space between people who are trying their best to understand each other is hallowed ground.

—*Mr. Fred Rogers*

Introduction

The previous chapter reported on the results of an experiment designed to test the impact of accountability pressure on the quality of attitudes formed through deliberation. Previous literature and research helped to inform a very strong expectation that accountability pressure would result in higher quality opinions at the individual level. In actuality though, ramping up accountability pressure in deliberative forums produced the opposite effect on opinion quality. Those in the accountability condition scored lower on integrative complexity and were more likely to report having “gut attitudes” even after deliberating. Furthermore, those in the accountability condition deliberated for fewer minutes on average than their counterparts who were not held accountable.

In order to explain these unexpected results, the previous chapter also raised the possibility that the experimental manipulation, designed to stimulate accountability, may have actually crowded-out the accountability that is naturally present in deliberative forums. In order for the experimental manipulation to have “crowded-out” accountability, it stands to reason that the construct of interest was present to begin with.

If accountability were not already present in deliberative forums, there would be nothing for the manipulation to “crowd-out.” There is strong reason to believe, from previous theoretical work, that accountability pressure is naturally occurring in deliberative forums.

In spite of this, the motivation and primary puzzle remains the same. From the empirical research on public deliberation, we know that deliberation can have a positive impact on the quality of individual political attitudes. From separate work in social psychology, we also know that accountability pressure can have a positive impact on cognitive effort and opinion quality. Lastly, it is suspected that some form of accountability is present in deliberative forums. However, the dots between these bits of knowledge have yet to be connected, as accountability’s presence in deliberative forums has yet to be isolated and thus its role in allowing deliberation to have a positive impact on opinion quality still remains a mystery. In short, the question remains the same but we will search for the central concept, accountability, in a different place. Rather than relying on an experimental manipulation to produce and isolate accountability, this chapter will examine the presence of accountability as it naturally occurs over the course of a deliberative forum.

This chapter will provide empirical evidence of accountability at play in deliberative forums. This naturally occurring accountability captures the true essence of the accountability that is produced in lab settings, while producing similarly positive effects on opinion quality. Further, it also has the added benefit of being organic to the deliberative process. In what follows, this chapter will lay out why one should expect accountability to naturally occur in deliberative forums. This chapter will then detail

where to look for naturally occurring accountability in deliberative forums and examine its impact on the deliberative process and the individual attitudes that result.

Natural Accountability

The expectation that accountability will be naturally present in deliberative forums relates back to chapter three's discussion of deliberative democracy's reason-giving requirement. To restate, reason-giving is central to the legitimacy of deliberative democracy as a means of making decisions and allocating resources. In discussions of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, where the decisions made will impact the lives of others, it is essential that we provide reasons to others as to why one course of action is preferable compared to alternate courses.

As critical as reason-giving is to deliberative democracy, it is fortunate that it does not rely entirely on "the better angels of our nature." In other words, scholars (Mercier and Sperber 2011; Tilly 2006) have argued that reason-giving is a very natural act for humans, something that people do automatically without needing much in the way of instruction. To provide reasons is a behavioral norm that automatically springs into action whenever we propose a course of action that will impinge on the life and liberty of another person. The last phrase of the previous sentence highlights an important distinction with regard to reason-giving. When a particular course of action has no impact on others, there is really no need, and thus no strong norm, to provide reasons to others as to why. For example, one can state to their colleagues that they are leaving in one hour to take a lunch break. In this instance, there is no need to provide an explanation for this action, as its impact on all others is zero. By contrast, one would certainly need to provide reasons if they announced to their colleagues that they are

submitting a proposal to management to shorten all employee lunch breaks by half. In this instance, since the proposed course of action affects others, there is a strong need for reason-giving. The second hypothetical scenario mirrors that of all political problems, which are public problems where proposed actions will affect others.

In a deliberative setting where citizens attempt to determine what ought to be done with regard to public, political problems, reason-giving among participants is likely to be present. As mentioned earlier, deliberative democracy's reason-giving requirement is closely related to psychology's conception of accountability if accountability is taken to mean the expectation that one will be called upon to provide an account. The centrality of reason-giving to deliberative democracy coupled with its close relationship to accountability helps to explain the strong expectation that one will find social accountability in deliberative forums. However, in spite of reason-giving being a widely accepted social norm, there is still reason to believe that individual compliance with this norm will be shy of perfect. As Neblo (2015) points out, while it is likely that all deliberative participants will adhere to the broad parameters of the reason-giving expectation, the *level* at which one adheres is still very much a question. As such, while naturally occurring accountability is likely to be found in deliberative forums, it is not a given that all participants will be as accountable as others. In other words, the expectation is that the majority of, but not all, participants will be subject to accountability pressure. For the purposes of this research, the natural variance then in accountability will allow for an examination of how accountability pressure impacts opinion quality.

Research Design and Procedures

The study from which this chapter's results are derived is the same one that was described in Chapter 4. The study involves 99 undergraduate students who attended a deliberative forum on the issues facing higher education in America. In the days prior to the forum, participants completed a pre-survey and they also completed a post-survey in the days following the forum. At the forum itself, participants were randomly assigned to a small discussion group comprised of 4-6 people. Participants were guided in their discussion by an informative issue guide, produced by the National Issues Forums, that served to provide basic information and outline three potential paths forward for higher education in America. The discussion groups were also aided by moderators who floated between the groups to answer questions and help move the discussion forward if needed.

As described in the previous chapter, participants were randomly assigned to small discussion groups that were either "voting" groups or "non-voting" groups. In an attempt to heighten the presence of accountability, the voting groups were instructed to conduct a final, public vote at their tables where each person publicly stated and explained their final issue position (choosing from one of the three options laid out in the issue guide). The non-voting groups had no such voting requirement and were simply instructed to have a group discussion on the issue. Aside from that, the small discussion groups were exactly the same.

For the purposes of this chapter's analysis, the distinction between voting and non-voting groups will not be focused on. Rather, the focus will be on evidence of participants being challenged by their fellow discussants regardless of their discussion group. Evidence of being challenged during group discussion comes from a question on

the post-forum survey which asked participants, “Did anyone in your group challenge your views during the group discussion?” The pertinent question here is whether being challenged during group discussion, which reflects the true meaning of accountability, produces the positive effects on opinion quality that accountability is purported to produce.

On Being Challenged

Again, it is important to revisit Lerner and Tetlock’s (1999) definition of accountability, which they describe as, “the expectation that one may be called on to justify one’s beliefs, feelings, and actions to others.” The vital question is how close or far away the experimental manipulation, described in the last chapter, is to the construct of interest (accountability). The logic of using a public vote as a means of heightening accountability was that participants would think hard about this vote and provide reasons in defense of their vote. However, no evidence from this project suggests that participants in the voting groups did anything other than simply go around in a circle and state their votes. As a result, no justifications were offered and no reasons were provided to support one’s vote. Further, voting was the last task to be completed in the voting groups, so there was no chance after the vote for participants to interrogate one another’s choices. In short, the manipulation designed to stimulate accountability missed the mark. However, this does not necessarily indicate that accountability is not present in deliberative forums, only that the manipulation failed to produce the construct of interest.

By contrast, simply asking respondents whether or not their views were challenged during group discussion gets much closer to the construct of accountability, as defined by Lerner and Tetlock (1999). Simply being invited to a deliberative forum

generates the “expectation” part of accountability. Participants know ahead of time what a group conversation will entail, so in that sense, accountability is already stoked. As mentioned though, a deliberative forum moves beyond the mere expectation that one will have to justify their views. In the flow of discussion about a shared political problem, whose consequences bear on others, it is natural that participants will challenge one another to provide reasons for their opinions. In this sense, the challenge to provide reasons is done verbally and explicitly, which results in a person responding in kind. It is also possible though, that one can have their opinions challenged without hashing it out verbally. For example, listening to a lecture, reading a book, or watching a movie could all challenge the way I think about an issue and force me to rethink some of my own opinions. This challenge to my opinions can be done without a formal prompt from the lecturer, author, or filmmaker. In other words, being challenged in a deliberative forum might actually involve explicit questioning and answering. However, it could also occur when a group member’s powerful statement sets off a process of internal deliberation that forces other participants to think internally about their own opinions. Regardless, conceiving of accountability in this manner is both more consonant with the term’s definition and in sync with what one naturally expects to occur in a deliberative forum.

Results

The sections that follow will analyze the same experiment described in the previous chapter, but through a slightly different lens. The main focus will be to ascertain the impact of accountability, as it naturally occurs in deliberative forums, on the post-forum quality of the opinions espoused by the participants. The sections will outline the chain that flows from accountability to opinion quality by first analyzing how

deliberation, and the prospect of accountability, generates an emotional response in individuals. This emotional response, in turn, helps to dictate the quality of group discussion, conceived of as the length of discussion. The next sections will examine the relationship between deliberative length and the likelihood of being challenged (or being held accountable) by one's fellow discussants. Lastly, the relationship between being challenged and opinion quality will be examined.

An Emotional Response

A key lynchpin in Tetlock's theory of accountability is that the prospect of accountability pressure will invoke a sense of anxiety in participants. This anxiety is a motivating kind of anxiety though, inasmuch as it is expected to spur individuals to think harder and exert greater cognitive energy in order to avoid looking foolish during a discussion. In applying Tetlock's theory to the deliberative world, it was expected that accountability pressure would produce the same sense of motivating anxiety or nervousness. While it is true that deliberation provoked emotions in participants, anxiety or nervousness was not prominent among them. In the post-forum survey, participants were asked whether their participation in the event made them feel a variety of emotions. In contrast to Tetlock's work in the lab, the most common emotional response to being involved in this deliberative forum was one of excitement or enthusiasm. A solid 63% of participants reported to feeling at least somewhat excited as a result of their participation in the forum. A smattering of participants reported to feeling nervous, angry, or bored with only 20% stating that they were at least somewhat nervous as a result of their participation in the forum.

Table 5.1: Emotional Response to Participation in a Deliberative Forum

Emotion	% of Participants (N)
Excited	63% (55)
Nervous	20% (17)
Angry	18% (16)
Bored	28% (24)

*Entries reflect the sum of “very” plus “somewhat” for each emotion.

**The percentages do not add up to 100 as each emotion question was administered separately. This allows for the possibility that participants felt multiple emotions strongly as a result of their participation.

These results suggest that public deliberation, far from being something to dread, is actually cause for excitement among those who participate. Rather than worrying about sounding foolish or getting something “wrong,” participants are enthused at the prospect of sorting through a difficult, yet important, issue with their peers. While other emotions were stimulated, the high number of those experiencing excitement as a result of deliberation is telling, both in terms of deliberation itself and as a potential mechanism by which deliberation serves as a positive and transformative individual experience.

Emotions and the Quality of Group Discussion

The previous chapter highlighted the great variance that existed in terms of the length of time that each group in the experiment spent deliberating. As mentioned before, the small discussion groups were simply asked to discuss the issue of higher education by going through each of the three options for action outlined in the NIF issue guide. As such, the groups were free to take as much or as little time as they needed to accomplish this task. Group discussion length ranged from a low of 36 minutes to a high of 70 minutes with the median discussion group deliberating for 51 minutes.

What caused some groups to discuss the issue longer than others? In other words, what factors, both at the individual and group level, motivated participants to have a more in-depth discussion of the issue? When discussing motivation, it is here that the role of emotions comes into play. The previous section detailed the emotional response that participants in the experiment had. In terms of predicting deliberative effort and motivation, excitement plays a key role. Naturally, those who report being more excited about the prospect of deliberation can be expected to exert more energy on the task at hand, which naturally leads to longer and more in-depth discussions. Indeed, there was a significant relationship between a discussion group's average level of excitement and the amount of time they spent deliberating. The correlation between average group excitement and deliberative length was .39 ($p=.000$). By contrast, the prospect of deliberation, and the whole enterprise in general, made some participants angry and agitated. This anger could be traced to participation in the forum itself or anger at the various views that they were exposed to. Regardless of the root cause, anger was significantly and negatively correlated with discussion length. The correlation between average group anger and deliberative length was $-.31$ ($p=.002$). In short, the emotions caused by deliberation can set a participant down the path of either a high quality or a low quality discussion.

Deliberative Length and Opinion Quality

Thus far, it has been stated that deliberation generates an emotional response in those who participate. For the vast majority of participants in this experiment, that emotional response was a positive one. Namely, most participants experienced excitement or enthusiasm as a result of their participation in a deliberative forum. At the

same time, some participants also had negative emotional reactions to deliberation, as some reported to feeling angry, nervous, or bored by the experience. In addition to offering some clues about how much individuals enjoy deliberation, the data on emotional reactions is important for another reason as well. Specifically, an individual's emotional response to deliberation helps to dictate how long their group spends deliberating.

In the last the chapter, evidence was presented to suggest that longer deliberations are indeed better deliberations that result in higher quality opinions. In rating the quality of their own attitudes after deliberation, participants who said their attitudes on the topic of higher education were “mostly thought out” deliberated for an average of 55 minutes. This stands in stark contrast to those who reported that their attitudes on higher education, even after deliberating, were “mostly gut attitudes.” Those who categorized their attitudes as “mostly gut attitudes” deliberated for an average of 44 minutes. The group discussions centered on an NIF issue guide that outlined three options for tackling the problems facing higher education. Participants were asked to select their most preferred option in the post-forum survey, and were also given the chance to say “not sure.” In the previous chapter it was noted that those who chose “not sure” as their final issue position deliberated for a greater amount of time than those who chose substantive options as their final issue position. In addition to deliberating for a longer period of time, those who opted for “not sure” also had reported attitudes that scored highest on integrative complexity. In sum, the evidence presented thus far suggests that deliberative length is indeed related to opinion quality.

The Positive Impact of Accountability on Opinion Quality

While deliberative length is indeed related to opinion quality, it is unlikely that simply talking indiscriminately for an extended period of time will result in higher quality opinions. Importantly, it is what happens, or what is allowed to happen, during lengthier deliberations that allows for a positive impact on the quality of individual attitudes. Namely, when discussions last longer, there is more time for participants to engage in the lively back and forth that characterizes the ideal deliberative situation. In other words, longer deliberations allow more time for participants to challenge one another, to ask for clarification, and to ask for and provide reasons in defense of one's positions.

As mentioned earlier, the act of challenging one another during group discussion gets at the heart of what social accountability represents. To challenge in this sense comes naturally and is present whenever individuals gather together to discuss issues. Also, while "challenge" might sound confrontational, it need not be, hence the title of this chapter includes the word "please." The simple act of asking someone else, "why" is indeed simple but quite powerful. Asking someone "why" is not an affront or an invitation to argue, but it is powerful in that anytime a person asks us "why" we are forced to think hard about why we said what we did and the reasons behind it. It is for this reason that I argue that being challenged during deliberative forums will have a positive impact on the quality of individual opinions. To be challenged by others during discussion is the essence of being held accountable for what we believe and say.

Natural accountability in the form of challenging one another during group discussion was certainly present during these deliberative forums on higher education. A

full 69% of participants responded yes when asked in the post-forum survey, “Did anyone in your group challenge your views during the group discussion?” The solid majority agreeing with this statement does indicate that accountability is present in deliberative forums. However, it also suggests, true to Neblo (2015), that the level of “buy-in” to the game of giving and asking for reasons is variable. While the distinction between experimental groups is blurred in this chapter, it is important to note that a greater proportion of respondents were challenged in the non-voting groups than in the voting groups. This speaks to the higher quality of discussion that was had in those groups compared to the voting groups.

Table 5.2: Natural Accountability by Experimental Condition

	Non-Voting (N)	Voting (N)
Challenged	76% (32)	61% (25)
Not Challenged	24% (10)	39% (16)

The results thus far indicate that challenging others to explain themselves was indeed prominent, although not universal, in the deliberative forums described in this project. Nearly 70% of participants reported that they had their views challenged by a fellow discussant during the forum. Further, while challenging the views of others was widespread, there does appear to be a relationship between being challenged during a forum and the length of time a group spent deliberating. As already stated, longer deliberations in this project tended to be better deliberations. By speaking for a longer period of time and more fully engaging the issue at hand, some groups simply had more time to engage in a lively back and forth with one another. In fact, the correlation between length of deliberation and having one’s attitudes challenged is .26 ($p=.02$)

The next big question to ask then is, “what effect does being challenged during deliberation have on the quality of one’s attitudes?” The variance in whether or not a person’s views were challenged during deliberation allows for comparisons to be made between the two groups. Here, the groups are those who reported that their opinions were challenged during deliberation (69% of participants) and those who reported that their opinions were not challenged (31% of participants).

The outcome of interest, opinion quality, is certainly not a cut and dried or easily identifiable construct. As such, this project utilized several different measures that can be used to assess the quality of a person’s opinions. Taken together, they begin to provide a look at the effect that accountability, construed to mean being challenged during group discussion, has on the quality of attitudes expressed after a deliberative forum. The key measures that will be discussed at length are as follows: integrative complexity, “gut” feelings, and opinion confidence.

The best known among the three, mostly due to the work of Philip Tetlock (1983; 1985), is integrative complexity. An individual’s integrative complexity is composed of two distinct concepts. The first is differentiation, which refers to an individual’s ability to recognize the different dimensions of an issue as well as their ability to understand different perspectives on the issue. The second aspect of integrative complexity is integration, which refers to an individual’s ability to make connections between the various dimensions of an issue (Tetlock 1983; Tetlock 1985). Traditionally, integrative complexity is measured by content analyzing participant responses to open-ended questions. For this project, participants were asked to answer a small number of open-ended questions on the topic of higher education in the post-forum survey. These open-

ended responses were grouped together and participants were given a composite integrative complexity score. Rather than relying on an army of human coders, as past work has done, integrative complexity scores for this project were produced through the use of an automated coding system that was recently developed, (Conway et al. 2014; Houck et al. 2014).

A second means of assessing opinion quality is through the use of a “gut feelings” measure that was specifically designed for this project. While integrative complexity is designed to be an objective, outside assessment of opinion quality, the idea behind the “gut feelings” measure was to tap a participant’s own assessment of their opinion quality. To do this, participants were asked a short battery of individual questions assessing their opinions on various aspects of higher education policy. Immediately following this specific battery of questions, participants were asked to provide a holistic assessment of their attitudes on higher education. Specifically, participants were asked whether their opinions on the issue of higher education were mostly “gut opinions” or mostly “thought-out.” The idea here is that “good” opinions are those that are sufficiently thought out as opposed to top of the head or gut opinions.

Lastly, opinion confidence was looked at as another potential indicator of opinion quality. The logic here is that just because a person’s opinions are of a higher quality and more thought-out, does not necessarily mean that they have great confidence in how they feel about an issue. In everyday parlance, the term “confidence” enjoys an overwhelmingly positive connotation. Confidence is celebrated (and rightfully so), whereas any sign of ambivalence or wavering is usually taken to indicate weakness. In the study of attitudes and opinions, however, confidence takes on a much more negative

role. In the attitudinal sense, strong confidence in one's opinions indicates that they have a neat, tidy, and uncomplicated story in their mind about how a certain issue works. In other words, opinion confidence is a function of the cognitive ease with which an opinion came to mind. When an issue is seen as uncomplicated, it is quite easy to construct a simple narrative that one can be quite confident in (Kahneman 2011). It is important to note that confidence was not measured for every opinion that a participant offered in the post-forum survey. As mentioned earlier, the deliberative forum, and the NIF issue book that guided it, was structured around three primary options for dealing with the problems facing higher education. In the post-forum survey, participants were asked to choose their most preferred option from these three and they could also select "not sure." This is thought of as their "final opinion" on the matter. As such, it was deemed important to measure how much confidence participants had in their final opinion, after going through the deliberative process. Specifically, confidence was measured using a 0-100 confidence thermometer where 100 indicated complete confidence in one's final issue position and 0 indicated complete uncertainty.

The task then is to examine how being challenged during a deliberative forum affects the quality of one's opinions as measured by integrative complexity, the extent to which opinions are "gut opinions," and one's overall confidence in their opinions. Table 5.3 below summarizes the results.

Table 5.3: Post-Forum Attitude Quality

	Challenged by Others	Not Challenged by Others	P Value
Integrative Complexity	3.35	3.01	.10
Word Count	257	249	.41
# of Times Talk	3.03	2.81	.11
Length of Deliberation (in minutes)	53	48	.01
Post Option Confidence (100=Extremely Confident)	68.3	80.5	.01
Gut Feelings (4=Highly Thought Out)	3.05	2.81	.11

*P Values are derived from one-sided T-Tests

As table 5.3 notes, being challenged by others during a deliberative forum does appear to have a positive effect on opinion quality. However, since the results often sit on the outer bounds or just outside statistical significance, these results should be taken as suggestive evidence rather than a definitive final word.

On perhaps the most classic measure of opinion quality, integrative complexity, those who had their views challenged by others during group discussion had opinions that were of a higher quality than those who did not have their views challenged ($p=.10$). Those who report being challenged during their group discussion had an average integrative complexity score of 3.35 (out of 7) compared to a score of 3.01 for those who were not challenged. It is important to note, however that this difference in integrative

complexity was not driven by word count. There was no difference in word count⁷ between those who were challenged and those who were not challenged, as both groups had approximately the same amount to say. Therefore, the difference was truly in terms of opinion quality and not quantity.

Those who were challenged during deliberation also fare better on the “gut feelings” indicator than did those who were not challenged. In asking participants after the forum to assess their own opinions on this scale, those who were not challenged by others during the forum were more likely to report that their attitudes were from the gut or top of the head ($p=.11$). Those who were challenged during the forum scored an average of 3.05 on this scale compared to 2.81 for those who were not challenged.⁸ This suggests that those who were challenged by others during the forum, or held accountable in other words, left with a feeling that their opinions on the topic had a more solid grounding in reason and facts. This indicates that by being held accountable, participants were forced to think through their opinions and cull reasons as to why they feel as they do.

With regard to opinion confidence, the results here make for an interesting pattern of results. While those who are challenged during deliberation leave a forum with higher quality attitudes, they do not leave a forum with great confidence in those opinions or a clear sense of policy direction. At first blush, this does not appear to make much sense. However, if confidence is really a reflection of how neat, tidy, and uncomplicated an

⁷ Word count refers not to the number of spoken words that participants uttered during the forums. Rather, word count indicates the number of words used in the open-ended responses on the post-forum survey.

⁸ The “Gut Feelings” indicator was a 4 point Likert scale where a score of 4 indicates mostly thought out opinions and a score of 1 indicates mostly gut opinions.

issue is in one's head, as Kahneman (2011) argues, it makes sense that those who were challenged during a deliberative forum leave without a great deal of confidence in their opinions. This helps to explain why individuals who took part in high quality deliberations where their opinions were challenged, leave the forum with less confidence in their opinions. Deliberation of this sort complicates an issue as one's opinions are challenged and others share their feelings. An issue that was once quite simple is now somewhat complicated. This complexity makes it more difficult to craft a neat and tidy explanation for how something works. As such, deliberative participants who had their opinions challenged had a more difficult time stating a final opinion on the issue, and, when they did, were less confident in what they chose. When asked to pick a final issue position, 33% of those who were challenged during group discussion opted for "not sure," compared to only 19% of those who were not challenged. Of those who did opt for a final issue position other than "not sure," those who were challenged during group discussion were significantly less confident in their decision than those who were not challenged. After selecting their final issue position, participants were asked to rate their confidence in their choice on a 100 point scale, where 0 indicates a complete lack of confidence and 100 indicates extreme confidence in one's choice. In terms of confidence, those who were challenged, had an average confidence rating of 68.3, whereas those who were not challenged had an average confidence rating of 80.5, which is a highly significant difference ($p=.01$). By not being challenged by others in their discussion group, some participants left the deliberative forum with "gut" opinions, however these gut opinions were held with great confidence because they were never challenged during group discussion. When a person is not held accountable for their

opinions, they are never forced to explicitly consider other options or to consider the weaknesses in their own issue preference. Those who were challenged during group discussion, left the forum with opinions that were well-thought out, but, as a result of being held accountable, they were less sure of where they stood on the issue. In essence, they left the forum feeling as if they “did not know it all and did not have all the answers.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, the focus of this chapter was the same as that of the previous chapter. Namely, the goal was to examine the impact of accountability on the quality of opinions that are formed through deliberation. The previous chapter attempted to manipulate the independent variable, accountability, in order to get a better handle on how and why it affects opinion quality. It was learned though that by trying to ramp up something that is already present in deliberation, accountability, it is possible to crowd it out completely. With that as preface, this chapter still sought to examine the impact of accountability. The primary difference though is that it was necessary to look in a different place. The present chapter demonstrates that the results gleaned from Chapter 4 are more a reflection of experimental design than they are any sort of statement about the role played by accountability in deliberation. In fact, the lesson from Chapter 5 is that accountability is indeed present in deliberative forums and its presence has a positive impact on opinion quality.

In thinking through the surprising results from Chapter 4, it was instructive to revisit my own past experiences as a participant in deliberative forums, including my very powerful first experience that was described in the opening chapter. As I recall,

there were no formal rules that governed the process. Aside from a point about trying to give everyone a chance to speak, there were not a great deal of things to know before we actually got down to the business of deliberating. There was no demand that we ask questions of each other or even challenge each other on points that we disagreed on. Yet, these things still happened. The conversations were rich, participants went back and forth, and we politely questioned and challenged each other as we worked through the issue. In short, all of this happened naturally in the course of our conversation about whatever the issue happened to be. Without knowing it at the time, myself and the other participants were all holding each other accountable for the opinions we espoused during those forums. More to the point, this accountability pressure was present through no special effort by the forum organizers. It is an open question as to whether my personal experience in these forums would have been as powerful had the events been less organic and more engineered.

The above lesson was certainly useful in looking at the forum results, described in this work, through a different lens. The sort of natural accountability, described above, where participants actively engage with and question one another, was certainly present in this project's experimental forums. In fact, a solid majority of participants reported experiencing this form of accountability. Anecdotally, I knew from my own experience as a forum participant that this form of accountability had a powerful impact on the way I thought about political issues. Here, we can begin to see more solid evidence of how accountability works through deliberative forums to improve the quality of individual opinions. In short, conceiving of accountability in this manner gets far closer to the heart of the concept than the previous chapter's "voting" manipulation.

For starters, this chapter shines a light on the presence of accountability in deliberative forums. In addition to demonstrating the mere presence of accountability, this chapter begins to illuminate just how deliberation works in deliberative forums. Philip Tetlock's work on accountability gave a good deal of weight to the role of anxiety or nervousness. By telling someone ahead of time that they will have to discuss and defend their opinions, Tetlock found that individuals would exert greater cognitive energy and thus produce higher quality opinions. These high quality opinions though were borne out of a fear, on the part of participants, that they would look foolish in front of others if they were not adequately prepared. Certainly because of the quality of previous work, and perhaps my own wiring, I was confident that accountability in deliberative forums would operate in much the same way. However, the results in this chapter suggest that accountability in deliberative forums is more likely to operate through enthusiasm. The difference in setting, laboratory versus public forum, might help to explain the differing emotional reactions. In Tetlock's laboratory work, accountability came as a surprise to subjects. They presumably arrived at the laboratory to participate in a regular experiment. That they were asked to discuss and defend their opinions was a wrinkle they were not expecting. In this project, participants knew ahead of time that they were attending a deliberative forum, where group political discussion would occur. If this was wholly unappealing, there was no reason for a person to attend. Thus, those who cleared this hurdle and decided to attend likely did so because they found the prospect of deliberation interesting or appealing. Thus, those who attended this project's forums, did so with a sense of enthusiasm rather than dread.

As someone who believes in the importance of public deliberation, it is certainly nice to hear that a majority of participants were enthused by the prospect as opposed to other more negative emotional reactions. However, enthusiasm was important because it set in motion a chain of events that leads to high quality opinions. In order to engage in a rich discussion with lots of back and forth between participants, it goes without saying that discussion groups need to actually spend some time talking. As described in this chapter though, the discussion groups in this chapter varied in terms of how long they spent discussing the issue of higher education. One factor that helped to determine longer discussions though, was the average level of enthusiasm in the group. Longer discussions were important because those were the discussions where participants were most likely to report that they were challenged by their fellow discussants. In other words, more enthusiastic groups were more likely to have longer discussions, which were more likely to involve discussants challenging one another in high quality discussions.

Ultimately, when participants were challenged during group discussion, good things happened to the quality of their opinions. Namely, those who report being challenged ended up with opinions that scored higher on integrative complexity, were less likely to be “gut” opinions, and were held with less confidence. Taken together, these participants left the forum with opinions that were thought-out and considered as opposed to being culled from the top of their heads. They had reasons in support of their views but could also acknowledge the opinions and accompanying reasons for alternate perspectives. The relative lack of confidence with which they held these opinions is more indicative of the thoughtfulness and complexity that deliberation produces as

opposed to the false confidence that so often accompanies opinions that have not been subject to scrutiny.

In doing this project, we are left with a clearer picture of what goes on during deliberative forums and why deliberation has such a positive impact on those who participate. The previously hidden mechanism of accountability has been illuminated to some degree. Perhaps more importantly though, this project helps to demonstrate that deliberation is indeed something to be excited about. Deliberation is far from an easy or costless form of political behavior. However, people not only participated but they did so with excitement. It is important to note though that people must be given a reason to be excited. It seems doubtful that individuals will jump for joy at the prospect of talk for talk's sake. Rather, the issue under consideration must be one that potential participants deem important or one that has a direct impact on their lives. That condition was certainly met here as participants (college students) deliberated on the future of higher education in America. In addition to issue salience, the deliberative event itself must have some "teeth." In this particular instance, that a high ranking university official was not only interested but also attended the forum went a long way in lending credence to this particular event. In the big scheme of things, the stakes were not terribly high. However, the presence of a high ranking university official at this forum certainly conveyed the message that people in positions of influence really did care what participants had to say.⁹ Lastly, while issue salience and stakes matter on the front end, forum organizers and moderators must have enough faith to let the conversations go in the direction they are intended to go. As was learned here, heavy handed attempts to

⁹ See Appendix B for a discussion of the impact of stakes on opinion quality.

stimulate “better” deliberation can have unintended consequences. If nothing else, a lesson from this work is that “ordinary” citizens are smarter and more capable than they are often given credit for. To step back and allow them to sort through an issue themselves is an act of faith, but one that will yield surprisingly positive results.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

This nation needs coolness more than clarion calls; intelligence more than charisma; a sense of history more than a sense of histrionics.

—*Richard Nixon 1972 Campaign Poster*

Years ago, when I attended my first deliberative forum, I had not thought one bit about how accountability and stakes might work through deliberation to produce high quality opinions. In fact, I had not thought much at all about any of the mechanisms that were at play whenever a group of citizens got together to talk about a pressing political problem. This soon changed though, as I left that first forum desperately trying to understand what had just happened. Why were we, a group of strangers from all walks of life, able to have such a good conversation about the social security of all things? I knew that I was thinking differently about the issue, but in what way?

Through this dissertation, I have been able to answer the questions I left the forum with and remove some of the mystery as to why deliberation is (and was for me) such a powerful experience. Namely, I have found that in deliberative forums, citizens hold each other accountable for the claims that they make. This accountability emerges naturally in the flow of conversation as citizens question each other, ask for clarification, or openly challenge each other's views. When this happens, citizens are forced to think hard about their own opinions, the reasons they have in support of those opinions as well as the views of others. In this sense, accountability does not necessarily change the

content of political attitudes, but, by prompting the exertion of greater cognitive energy, accountability does alter the quality of political attitudes. In addition to the import of accountability, I also found that deliberation is able to improve the quality of individual opinions, when deliberative participants have a clear sense that their participation, and voice, matters. When deliberative forums provide this, a sense of stakes as it is called here, participants respond in kind with greater thought, greater attention, and ultimately, higher quality opinions.

These findings are significant for two primary reasons. The first reason has to do with removing some of the mystery that shrouds deliberation and its effects on individuals who participate in forums. Daniel Yankelovich once wrote a book entitled, *The Magic of Dialogue* (1999). To me, the word magic conjures up images of black boxes, wands, and sleight of hand. The audience of a magic show has a limited understanding of what they saw and how it happened, but are impressed nonetheless. In other words, magic is all about mystery, and that is what makes it fun. By highlighting accountability, by highlighting stakes, and documenting their effects, we have a clearer understanding of how and why deliberation is able to improve the quality of political attitudes. In other words, this study has shed some light on the magic. In this case, shedding light on the magic does nothing to vitiate the power of deliberation. Deliberation is powerful but there are reasons as to why this is the case. By highlighting them here, these reasons can be fruitfully applied in all sorts of settings to effectively harness the magic of deliberation.

The second, and perhaps more substantial, reason for the significance of these findings relates to the role and importance of public opinion in a democracy. A system of

government where ordinary people are the ultimate sovereigns naturally places quite a burden on the average citizen. In other words, democracy working as intended requires a lot from ordinary people. The responsibility of citizens, then, is to do the hard work of making decisions about how political and social life ought to be. However, a good bit of evidence casts doubt on the average citizen's capacity to make the sort of sound decisions that democracy requires of them. As such, there is no shortage of people and institutions (usually political elites of some kind) who are willing to do the work of citizens for them. This no doubt contributes in some measure to the feelings of political alienation and impotence that are so widespread in America today. "Elected officials don't care much what people like me think or politics is just too complicated for a person like me to contribute." At the same time, political elites are certainly justified in their doubts about the quality of public opinion. If public opinion is ill-considered and insufficiently thought-out, why *should* elites pay it any mind? The other side of that coin is why citizens should take the time to develop sound opinions when they have good reason to doubt that elites will take notice. What we are left with is a twisted constellation of forces that cause public opinion to be both of low quality and low import to public life.

Public deliberation in general, and this work in particular, begin to offer a way out of this tangled web. This work shows that deliberating with a group of peers can improve the quality of public opinion. More importantly, it also shows that by involving elites in the process, citizens are given a clear signal that their voice matters while elites are able to see firsthand that citizens have greater capacity for judgment than is commonly thought. In short, the exercises in public deliberation described here provide the kind of public opinion that elites can count on insofar as the opinions are the result of careful

consideration, deep thought, and productive conversation. Additionally, it is unfair though to claim that public deliberation is simply a vehicle by which to serve political elites as the forums described here depict citizens who have taken back their role as decision-makers on how things ought to be.

The building blocks of this project's larger significance, as described above, can be found in the insights that were described along the way. What follows will highlight some of the key insights that were derived through this research. In many ways, Chapter 2 lays the groundwork for the entire project by using data from NIF forums to motivate the problem and theory. Specifically, Chapter 2 ponders the nature of deliberative effects and makes the case that the impact of deliberation, at least initially and at the individual level, are more subtle than one might first imagine. Chapter 2 demonstrates that a non-trivial proportion of participants in NIF forums report to "thinking differently" after the forum. On average, across several years of NIF forums, approximately 40% of participants state that they are "thinking differently." When asked to describe what this means, the most common responses were that people were thinking differently in that they were: more informed, recognized the complexity of the issue, appreciated hearing the opinions of others, and were more aware of the trade-offs that various policy proposals entailed. These effects track nicely with various normative criteria used to judge the quality of deliberative processes and individual opinions. However, the point of this work was not to demonstrate that deliberation has an impact on individual participants. Rather, that participants were "thinking differently" was a jumping off point. What is it about deliberation that causes people to think differently?

With this puzzle as a jumping off point, Chapter 3 set out to introduce a theory to help describe what happens during a deliberative forum to explain positive effects like “thinking differently.” The most helpful way I ever heard theory described was as a bridge between a research question and results. In the present context, the waters this bridge must span are shark infested. I say this in the sense that the ability of deliberation to produce opinions that are considered and thoughtful flies in the face of what we know about citizens as information processors and political animals. Thus, any theory hoping to explain why deliberation is able to accomplish this must do some heavy lifting.

The theory offered here hinges on two factors, generally present in deliberative settings, but almost always absent from other settings in which political opinions are ascertained. The first factor, social accountability, has its roots in work from social psychology, most notably done by Philip Tetlock and colleagues. Tetlock and colleagues defined accountability as, “the explicit or implicit expectation that one may be called upon to justify one’s own beliefs, feelings, and actions to others.” In applying this definition experimentally, Tetlock and colleagues found that accountability pressure tended to increase cognitive effort and produced attitudes that were of a higher quality, as measured by integrative complexity. In this experimental work, accountability was experimentally produced and manipulated by telling participants that they would have to discuss their answers to various questions with another person, whose characteristics varied. In actuality though, participants did not ultimately discuss their views with another person. In other words, the mere threat of accountability produced the results. The argument presented here is that public deliberation captures the essence of accountability, as described by Tetlock, in that participants know ahead of time that they

will have to defend and explain their views in a group setting. However, public deliberation goes one step further insofar as participants actually go through the process of engaging with others in conversation. For this reason, it was hypothesized that accountability would help to explain some of deliberation's powerful effects.

Accountability allows deliberation to overcome the cognitive challenges associated with forming sound opinions. However, it does little to address the feelings of political impotence that often lie at the root of low quality individual opinions. This theory's second factor aims to address those feelings. This second factor is referred to as "stakes" and is rooted in the idea that political opinions are of low quality partly due to the fact that citizens have little faith that anyone in a position of power cares about their opinions. If nobody cares, why should a person exert the energy necessary to form sound opinions? Thus, the second factor of this theory makes that case that opinions formed through deliberation will be of a higher quality when the deliberative event is linked to a channel of power. When participants see that someone actually does care about their opinions, they will exert greater cognitive energy on the task at hand, which will result in more sound opinions. Taken together, accountability and stakes are offered as two explanations as to why deliberation is able to produce the positive results that it does.

Chapter 4 then set out to experimentally test the impact of accountability and stakes in an actual public deliberation setting. In order to test the impact of accountability, the construct was manipulated so as to produce different levels of accountability between deliberative groups. As such, half of the discussion groups were instructed to publicly vote and explain their final issue position after discussing the issue at hand. The other half of the groups, received no such instruction and were free to

discuss the issue with no special requirements. The hypothesis here was that voting would heighten the effects of accountability, and that those in the voting groups would have higher quality opinions than those in the non-voting groups. The results indicated, though, that the exact opposite seemed to be true. Compared with those in the non-voting groups, participants in the voting groups deliberated for less time, had lower quality opinions as measured by integrative complexity, were more likely to describe their opinions as “gut” opinions, and were far more likely to opt for a substantive answer as opposed to “not sure.”

Chapter 5 then set out to make sense of these surprising and perverse effects of voting. Rather than relying on experimentally manipulating accountability through voting, Chapter 5, looked at the results anew in search of evidence for naturally occurring accountability in the forums. Evidence for naturally occurring deliberation was found in the fact that a large majority of participants stated in the post-forum survey that their views had been “openly challenged by another participant in their group.” Large majorities in both the voting and non-voting groups stated that they had been challenged. In fact, a greater proportion of those in the non-voting groups reported that they were challenged during deliberation. To have one’s views challenged in the course of discussion maps nicely on to Tetlock’s definition of accountability and more closely matches the spirit of accountability than does voting. As such, the differences between those who were challenged and those who were not challenged were inspected. The results indicate that those who were challenged by others during deliberation had higher quality opinions as measured by integrative complexity, had opinions that were less likely to be “gut” opinions, and deliberated for a longer period of time.

Taken together, the results described in chapters 4 and 5 offer support for the notion that accountability is present during deliberative forums and that it helps to explain deliberation's ability to produce high quality political opinions. What does mean though for voting? In terms of the voting manipulation used in chapter 4, the argument here is that the manipulation, intended to heighten accountability, actually served to crowd-out a person's natural inclination to hold others accountable in conversation. Accountability, or the act of asking others for reasons, occurs naturally in conversations. By mandating a vote, this experiment short-circuited the natural flow of conversation and introduced voting as just another task to be completed. This helps to explain why the voting groups talked for a shorter period of time and had lower quality opinions than the non-voting group. They saw an individual vote as the purpose of deliberation as opposed to an open-ended search for what we ought to do with regard to a problem that we all face.

Taken further, what do the results from the "voting" manipulation say about the more common act of voting in periodic elections? In this instance, knowing that a vote was ahead forestalled conversation and short-circuited deep consideration to some extent. This certainly is not a call to do away with voting. Decisions must be made and elections must be held, but it is worth considering if there is a way to conduct elections without stimulating the negative effects of voting that were found here.

Stakes

Chapter 5 included an examination of the relationship between stakes and opinion quality in deliberative forums. This examination was made possible by comparing opinion quality across three experimental groups. The first group was a survey-only

group that simply filled out questionnaires about the future of higher education. The second group participated in a deliberative forum on the topic of higher education. The university provost attended this forum and made a few remarks prior to the small group deliberations. A letter from the university president was also read. In short, both high-ranking university administration officials conveyed the message that they care what students think when it comes to education at this particular school. Lastly, the third group also participated in a deliberative forum that was led by a graduate student. While it was noted that university officials were interested in student opinions, no high ranking officials were present.

Clearly, the stakes were quite different in each of the three groups, and it was hypothesized that the highest stakes (university officials present) would spur deliberative participants to take the process more seriously and give the issue deeper consideration than their counterparts in lower stakes groups. While future research will be needed, the data gathered in this context suggests that stakes do matter in terms of opinion quality and deliberation. Those who participated in the high stakes forum had higher quality opinions than participants in the other two groups. In fact, the quality of opinions directly followed the magnitude of stakes. In other words, the high stakes deliberation group had the highest quality opinions, followed by the deliberation only group, with the survey only group having the lowest quality opinions. This suggests that deliberation, on its own, helps to produce higher quality opinions than surveys. However, deliberation with high stakes, where a clear connection to levers of power is made visible, produces the best results.

What Does it All Add up To?

Taken together, what do the various insights from the various chapters tell us about the nature of deliberation and its impact on citizens? One key effect of deliberation is that participants often leave a forum “thinking differently.” In trying to put their finger on just how they are thinking differently, participants cite things like being more knowledgeable, greater awareness of policy trade-offs, appreciation of hearing different opinions, and a greater appreciation for an issue’s complexity. In short, those things, the things that deliberation helps to produce are things that this nation desperately needs.

Energized by this, I set out to discover what it was about deliberation that allowed it to produce these things that the nation so desperately needs. Essentially, the idea was to discover these mechanisms, ramp them up, and milk them for all they were worth. A valuable lesson came from this though. Deliberation is powerful, but it is best not to over-engineer the process. Some structure is needed such that participants can see how deliberation is different. However, overdoing it on structure can lead to backfire effects, as evidenced in this project. More fundamentally, over-engineering a deliberative process actually runs counter to a fairly fundamental premise of public deliberation. Namely, citizens are far more capable and knowledgeable than most popular accounts give them credit for. Researchers must find or foment the proper opportunity and environment for deliberation, but then stay out of the way and actually give participants a chance to deliberate. Citizens can accomplish some pretty fantastic things when this combination of factors is present.

Matters of process to one side though, this project did shed light on two factors that are important in public deliberation, and whose importance to political life in general

should be explored. In short, this project tells us that, for the most part, good things happen when citizens hold each other accountable for the opinions that they espouse. When citizens are challenged, ever so gently, by others in conversation, they are forced to think harder about the issue at hand, which often results in more thoughtful and considered opinions. In that sense, the accountability that is present in deliberation helps to overcome the cognitive aspect of low opinion quality. At the same time, cognition is of little use if there is no factor motivating the exertion of greater cognitive effort. Along these lines, this project helps to show that opinions will be of a higher quality when citizens see that their participation and opinions are valued by someone in a position of power. Given this, a question then to consider is how these things (accountability and stakes) can be fostered in settings beyond the deliberative forum.

Future Research

In the grand scheme of things, this project is just one small sliver in the larger quest to better understand the mechanisms at play during public deliberation as well as the role and effects of public deliberation in the larger political system. For starters, future research would be wise to continue to shine light inside the black box of deliberation, most especially on the social and psychological mechanisms that allow public deliberation to have the positive effects it does. More closely building off of the present project, future work might examine the impact of accountability and stakes, not on individual opinion quality as this project has done, but on the ‘deliberativeness’ of the discussion as a whole. The present work has demonstrated the positive individual effects that accountability helps to produce but greater knowledge of accountability’s impact on the entire discussion group is certainly warranted. Lastly, and perhaps most ambitiously,

would be a project that explores the downstream effects of (continued) deliberation on individual and group political behavior outside of the forum. The present project focuses primarily on sound judgment and high quality political opinions. These are certainly things that are sorely lacking from our modern political environment. However, judgment exists hopefully to service and guide political action. Thus, the idea would be to see how the habit of engaging in public deliberation ultimately impacts the totality of one's political behavior.

Conclusion

The opening words of this dissertation, an epigraph from Gordon Wood, remark on the special place and power of public opinion in American democracy. At first blush, the quote is completely unobjectionable. However, so much of what we see from political behavior research (suggesting how poorly considered opinions are) as well as research on the connection between public opinion and public policy (suggesting that forces other than public opinion play a larger role) calls the special power of public opinion in a democracy into question. Does public opinion really have special power or is this just a romantic notion that fails to hold water? This project does not explore or answer the question of how much sway public opinion holds in a democracy. What this project does do, however, is to demonstrate some conditions under which public opinion can have power in a way that reflects the opening epigraph. The deliberative forums described in this project help to foster public opinion that is powerful in the sense that the opinions are thoughtful but also connected to levers of power. In this way citizens have an active role in shaping their political lives as opposed to being mere spectators watching the great theatre that is politics.

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Appendix A: Question Wording

Thinking Differently (NIF Questionnaire)

Are you thinking differently about this issue now that you have participated in the forum?

- Yes
- No

If yes, how?

Gut Opinions

Would you say that your opinions on education policy are more “gut feelings” from the top of your head or opinions that you’ve thought a great deal about?

- Mostly Gut Feelings
- Somewhat Gut Feelings
- Somewhat Opinions I’ve Thought a Great Deal About
- Mostly Opinions I’ve Thought a Great Deal About

Final Vote/Most Preferred Issue Option

If you had to pick one, what should the mission be for U.S. colleges and universities moving forward?

- Emphasize student learning in science and math to ensure that the US remains competitive in a tough global marketplace
- Help society by instilling in students a sense of responsibility, integrity, and concern for others.
- Help to close the gap between the haves and have nots by making college more accessible to all Americans.
- Not Sure/None of the Above/Combination of the Above

Open Ended (Integrative Complexity)

Some people say that a college education unlocks the door to a successful life and that college should be made more accessible to all. Others say that, “college is not for everyone” and that relaxing admissions standards to make college more accessible will

hurt the overall quality of education. How do you feel? Please write your thoughts and feelings on the issue.

Let's say a university decides to close their Philosophy and History departments in order to devote more resources to their Math and Chemistry departments. Regardless of your own personal view, can you think of any reasons why someone might be *in favor* [*against*] a proposal like this?

Emotions

At any point, did your participation in this project make you feel...?

- Very Nervous [Excited, Angry, Bored]
- Somewhat Nervous [Excited, Angry, Bored]
- Not Very Nervous [Excited, Angry, Bored]
- Not at All Nervous [Excited, Angry, Bored]

Appendix B: The Impact of Stakes on Opinion Quality

Below is a discussion of how high stakes deliberative forums impact opinion quality. The results discussed lack statistical power, so they are included here as an appendix. As such, these results are only suggestive. However, they are interesting enough to merit inclusion and further research.

The Impact of Stakes on Opinion Quality

This project makes an argument that two factors help to explain deliberation's impact on opinion quality. The first factor discussed was accountability. The second factor discussed was high stakes. To test the impact of stakes on opinion quality, different experimental conditions, of varying stakes, were created. The low stakes group only took an online survey about their opinions. The medium stakes group attended a deliberative forum hosted by a graduate student. The high stakes group attended a deliberative forum where the university provost attended. As noted, the hypothesis here is that those in the higher stakes group will exert more cognitive energy on the task at hand (because they deem it to be important) and subsequently express higher quality opinions. Unfortunately, only a small number of participants were able to be obtained for the low stakes (survey only) and medium stakes (forum with graduate student) groups. Thus, there is not enough power to make strong claims about the role of stakes. In spite of this lack of power, the results as they relate to stakes are suggestive of something at

work. Again, these results should only be viewed as suggestive and certainly merit further study with a greater degree of statistical power.

Emotions

As mentioned earlier, it was hypothesized that the process by which deliberation leads to high quality attitudes starts with an emotional reaction to the opportunity to deliberate. Specifically, it was argued that participants would react with excitement to the opportunity to deliberate. This excitement then would prompt the exertion of greater cognitive effort, which would ultimately lead to higher quality attitudes. In this case, results suggest that participants responded with more excitement to the opportunity to deliberate as opposed to the opportunity to participate in a survey. Only 29% of those in the low stakes (survey only) condition responded that they were very or somewhat excited to take part in this process compared to more than 60% in each of the deliberation conditions.

Table B1. Excitement by Condition

Condition	% Excited (N)
Low Stakes (survey only)	29% (11)
Medium Stakes (forum with grad student)	64% (7)
High Stakes (forum with provost)	63% (55)

*Entries reflect the percentage of individuals in each condition who reported being very or somewhat excited. Since results are presented by condition, the entries do not add up to 100%.

Opinion Quality

The results describe thus far seem to suggest at least that higher stakes lead to positive outcomes in the form of greater efficacy and excitement. It seems to be the case as well that higher stakes have a positive impact on opinion quality. Those in the

deliberation conditions were much more likely to report that they were “thinking differently” after the process. However, a greater proportion of those in the medium stakes condition reported this than those in the high stakes condition. Also, those in the deliberation conditions were less likely to report that their opinions on the issue at hand were mainly “gut” opinions, with those in the high stakes group being least likely to have gut opinions. Lastly, those in the high stakes condition outperformed those in the other conditions in terms of the integrative complexity of their opinions.

Table B2. Opinion Quality by Condition

Condition	% Thinking Differently (N)	% Gut Feelings	Integrative Complexity Score
Low Stakes (survey only)	21% (8)	45% (17)	2.64
Medium Stakes (forum with grad student)	91% (10)	36% (4)	2.45
High Stakes (forum with provost)	76% (66)	29% (25)	3.07

*Results are presented by condition, so the entries do not add up to 100%.

Taken together, the data suggest the following about the relationship between the stakes of an activity and opinion quality. For starters, the data suggests that opinions formed through deliberation are of a higher quality than those expressed via survey. Further, opinion quality appears to be higher for those who participated in the high stakes forum as opposed to the medium stakes forum with a graduate student.

Discussion

It bears repeating that the preceding analysis is only suggestive and should not be taken as definitive claims about the relationship between any of the variables. However,

the relationship that does appear to exist, between stakes and opinion quality, does merit further explanation, both here and in future work. In short, it appears that the current project reinforces the notion that gathering opinions via survey and gathering them in tandem with public deliberation are completely different animals. This work is consistent with a hunch that many undoubtedly have with regard to survey research. Namely, surveys give individuals little to get excited about. Perhaps more than failing to excite, surveys are likely seen as a bother. This emotional reaction has consequences though in that it manifests itself in low quality responses. After all, most people do not tend to exert much energy or effort on tasks that fail to excite them or whose relevance seems dubious and this shows in the quality of the work. Compared to public deliberation, people do not give much thought to issues when they are posed as questions in a standard survey. This lack of thought is reflected in opinions that are expressed more as gut feelings or top-of-the-head reactions. At the same time, surveys do not convey to participants that anyone actually cares what their opinions are. In fact, it is likely true that, somewhere out there, the sponsor of most all surveys, cares deeply how the results turn out. However, this is not clear to your average survey participant. In other words, the connection between participation in a survey and anything that matters is often unclear at best and non-existent at worst. The lesson here is that distributing a survey is a poor way to show people that you are interested in their concerns, even if that is genuinely the case.

At the same time, the data presented here suggest that not all deliberative events are created equal. That both deliberative groups, regardless of stakes, seemed to outperform the survey-only group, hints at the power of deliberation. However, the

differences between deliberative conditions helps to illuminate the role of stakes. Far more data is needed to better understand the importance of stakes, but the data here seem to suggest that there might be something of substance in the “just talk” criticisms of deliberation. The present work highlights the importance of citizens seeing a clear connection between their political participation and someone who cares. The high stakes forum used in this experiment provided that clear connection, and it showed in the high quality opinions that were expressed as a result.

Taking a step back, people are willing to deliberate and deliberation can have powerfully positive effects on those who take part. However, it can be a costly form of political participation, in the time and effort that it requires. As such, practitioners and scholars should tread lightly around this golden goose. People may indeed continue to participate in deliberative events with little or no stakes (for social or educative reasons perhaps), but one can imagine a scenario in which citizens grow weary of continued participation in deliberative events that never seem to lead anywhere. At some point in history, it was probably deemed a real honor to participate in a survey too!