

Why Process Matters

Democracy and Human Nature

BY MARTÍN CARCASSON

Human nature and democracy have always been intertwined. Political philosophers since Plato and Aristotle have debated political systems based on the question of whether humans can govern themselves or whether they require some sort of stronger authority to ensure appropriate behavior. With the advent of the Internet and the increasing political polarization and animosity of our times, concerns about democracy and human nature have once again risen to the forefront. Deliberative democracy offers a particular response to these concerns, one that is rather optimistic, ambitious, and process oriented. A key assumption of those of us that support a more deliberative democracy is essentially that process matters. We optimistically believe that humans are certainly capable of self-governance, on the key condition that quality processes are utilized, which help bring out their best thinking. Alternatively, we realize that bad processes can bring out the worst in our fellow humans, and make democratic living untenable. As a result, a key question arises: what mechanisms can be employed to best tap into the positives of human nature and avoid the bad? With that question in mind, and armed with 10 years of experience running deliberative processes at the Colorado State University Center for Public Deliberation, I decided to do a deep dive into the recent literature on social psychology and brain science to develop better answers to that increasingly critical question. This essay summarizes my key findings. The short answer is that my belief that process matters has exponentially been strengthened, based both on my realization that many of the public processes we tend to rely on the most are exceedingly problematic (i.e., they tap into and reify the worst in human nature) as well as the argument that when done well, deliberative practices have great potential to avoid or overcome those tendencies and unleash our inherent empathy, creativity, and sense of purpose.

This essay is organized in four parts. I first summarize the research on and explain the impact of the unfortunately more dominant negative aspects of human nature, which I label “detrimental motivated reasoning.” I then summarize the less dominant but still critical potential positive aspects of human nature. Considering both, I then argue that our most common public processes—a two-party system; winner-take-all elections; politicized, for-profit media; public hearings and citizen comment time; most social media engagement; letters to the editor; etc.—unfortunately overwhelmingly tend to activate and exaggerate the negative and rarely tap into the positive. I then move to the more hopeful argument that deliberative processes can flip that script. To close, I qualify my argument with the recognition that the shift to a more deliberative political system will be exceedingly difficult at the national level, however, the possibility of supporting this shift at the local level is not only possible, but urgently necessary.

Negative Motivated Reasoning and the Vicious Cycle of False Polarization

My research into social psychology and brain science highlighted five key features of how our brains are, unfortunately, individually wired for polarization. Each of these features are primarily subconscious and inherent. The first, and perhaps most important, is that we crave certainty and consistency. We are “cognitive misers” that want easy decisions. Once we make decisions—such as what party to identify with—our brains work overtime to fortify that decision and protect it from attack. This thirst for certainty is in many ways the primary driving force for the remaining conclusions.

Second, we are suckers for simplistic good versus evil narratives. We are naturally storytellers, and our favorite stories cast “our side” as the heroes, and those that disagree with us as the villains. We use these stories to help organize all the facts and

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opinions we confront, twisting them to fit our preferred narrative. And once those that disagree are successfully identified as “evil,” their arguments are that much easier to dismiss, particularly because we are so convinced of their ulterior motives. Third, we are tribal creatures that prefer to gather with the like-minded. As Jonathan Haidt has argued, we are “groupish” not “selfish.” This does provide some positive potential, which I highlight later, but too often this tribal nature establishes the “us” by negatively defining the “other.” Gathering with the like-minded also then works to magnify the need for certainty and the good versus evil narrative.

Fourth, and perhaps most relevant to deliberative scholars, we prefer to filter and cherry pick evidence to support our views. In my full report on which this piece is based, I walk through five sequential stages in which this happens. First, we are guilty of selective exposure in terms of what sources we rely on, then we interpret evidence in a biased way, utilizing much tougher rules of evidence for information that runs counter to our current perspective. This is known as confirmation bias, which is perhaps one of the most important concepts overall to understand and defend against, and the primary culprit fueling the development of a “post-fact” society in which we have seemingly lost the ability to discern good data from bad. Then, we make egoistic attributions and tell stories about the evidence that organizes them unfairly, leading to decisions that utilize simple heuristics and a self-serving bias. Finally, after our decisions, our memories are often biased, holding on to consequences and examples we prefer and ignoring others. Combined, these stages help explain the phenomenon of why facts don’t seem to change minds or even contribute positively to a debate. People naturally seek out, highlight, distort, and remember the facts and examples that fit their perspective, and avoid, dismiss, distort, or forget those that do not. The backfire effect even teaches us that the stronger the argument made against our perspective, the more our brains must work to overcome it, leading to the scary thought that high-quality data is somehow actually even more detrimental to the debate. The bottom line is that people don’t change minds and come together based on data. Due to these various factors, being more “informed” too often actually means being

more significantly misinformed, and the mix of confidence and bias can be very dangerous.

The final feature simply highlights that because of the first four, we inherently avoid value dilemmas, paradoxes, and tough choices. We see the world through more simplistic lenses. Unfortunately, in a world of wicked problems, dilemmas, paradoxes, and tough choices underlie all the big issues we care about.

These five features of negative motivated reasoning lead to individuals with strongly developed biases, which essentially serve as blinders that narrow their thinking. When these individuals subsequently enter the political arena, things quickly escalate into what I’ve called the vicious cycle of false polarization. I emphasize the “false” because I truly believe our differences are significantly over-exaggerated and manufactured (which later leads to the promising impact of better processes). Nonetheless, when these biased individuals interact with others with opposing blinders, it does not go well. Negative interaction effects occur that only exacerbate their biases. These unproductive clashes leave them both more polarized, sure of themselves, and convinced of their opponent’s depravity. Then, you can add in what I’ve termed the “Russell effect,” named after philosopher Bertrand Russell and a popular Internet meme featuring a quote attributed to him that states, “The whole problem of the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and wiser people are full of doubts.” This phenomenon further exaggerates the polarization because the loudest and most frequent voices are often the most biased, while those that see nuance in political issues and hope to bring people together often are often silent. They simply do not see a place for their perspective in the political battlefield. The polarization further increases with the impact of social media (which intensifies all the mechanisms of bias, such as selective exposure and confirmation bias), the strategies of adversarial politics (which thrive on simplistic good vs. evil stories), and the typical tactics of the media (which know that conflict and spectacle drives interest). This negative cycle ultimately fuels rampant polarization, cynicism, and, to growing levels, animosity and even contempt.

A Look on the Bright Side

To bring us back from the brink, my research on human nature also revealed some core positive aspects of human nature that can be tapped into to overcome the false polarization highlighted above. First of all, while the negative features are well documented, they are not overwhelming, and, thankfully, many scholars are beginning to focus more and more on why they happen and how they can be avoided or mitigated. New subfields focused on “debiasing” and “debunking” are developing. We are learning more about the conditions of when these quirks of human nature are strongest and weakest, critical information for process designers, public engagement specialists, and deliberative practitioners.

Beyond the ways to minimize the negative quirks, we are also learning more about the potential strength of alternative features of human nature, such as the fact that we are inherently social beings who seek purpose and community. The growing field of positive psychology teaches us that people are often at their happiest when they are doing hard things well, and, as Daniel Pink argued in *Drive*, we crave autonomy, mastery, and purpose in ways that can be directed to community and the common good. Our tribal nature, in other words, doesn’t have to be divisive. We can construct tribes that are more inclusive, particularly in local contexts. Nationally, it is difficult to get away from the Democrat, Republican, or perhaps the “cynically detached” tribes, but locally, perhaps your tribe is your city, bringing people together in important ways. Local tribes can put more focus on the “us,” rather than the other, and more naturally take on the tough choices inherent to living in community together. Similarly, we are learning more about our natural empathy, which pushes back on assumptions of simple self-interest. A vibrant debate is forming regarding the scope of empathy, and whether a global notion of empathy is possible.

Perhaps most important, we are recognizing more and more that humans are inherently creative, pragmatic, and collaborative problem solvers. Indeed, this is perhaps the defining feature of our species. The question is, to what extent and within what contexts do we tap into that collaborative potential? It is clear that wicked problems call for creativity

and collaboration, in ways that the simplistic good versus evil political frames do not (the “good” need to simply vanquish the “evil,” as all the Disney movies of our childhood taught us). But to what degree do our political conversations spark, support, and rely on collaborative creativity?

Last, the research shows, as Aristotle argued 2,000 years ago, that while we are clearly impacted by the quirks of our brains, we can certainly overcome our bad tendencies and build better habits. We can create a culture of collaboration. We can withstand the inherent push toward polarization and certainty, adopt a wicked problems mind-set, and learn to work through tough issues. There are two primary connected and complementary factors to accomplishing this. One is education, and the other is process. We can revamp our educational systems to focus more on collaborative problem-solving and managing our wayward brains, and we can rely more on processes specifically designed to bring out the best in us and avoid or mitigate the worst. While both factors are critical, the rest of the essay will focus on the latter.

Sadly, based on the developing knowledge of social psychology and brain science, we fall woefully short in terms of the public processes we primarily rely on to support public decision-making. Indeed, if I were to purposefully design a system to ensure polarization and division, I would likely conjure up a two-party system with winner-take-all elections that are so exceedingly expensive that they require absurd amounts of fundraising and that are heavily influenced by both unproductive social media interactions and a politicized, profit-focused media. Such a system takes the inherent features of negative motivated reasoning, and exponentially multiplies their effects. Unfortunately, democracy is often mostly associated with presidential elections, which quite literally represent democracy at its worst in terms of the quality of public discourse.

Beyond elections and party politics, many of the other basic features of our political communication and public engagement apparatus, when seen through the lens of social psychology and brain science, are clearly counterproductive. A dominant majority of public processes focus on allowing individuals or groups to express their opinions,

but rarely provide genuine opportunities for productive interaction, shared learning, or cocreation. Whether at the microphone at city council, in the letters to our editors, on our posts on social media, or through chanting during a protest march, we predominately hear an extended collection of individual or likeminded opinions. Based on our human nature, those are likely simply a collection of rather biased views, rocketing past each other, leading to, at best, no real engagement, and, at worst, further polarization.

Based on our knowledge of wicked problems, we know we need much more from our public engagement. Providing opportunities for people to express their opinions is simply the first step. Beyond that, we need our public processes to allow people to develop mutual understanding and trust. We need processes that help us elevate quality arguments and expose weak or manipulative ones. We need processes that incite learning and the refinement of opinions. We need processes that spark creativity and innovation, and ultimately lead to cocreation and collaborative action. These are all possible despite our mental peculiarities, but they call for different ways of engaging.

The Deliberative Alternative

Within this context, we can reconsider the basic components of deliberative engagement, and how when utilized well, they can create genuine opportunities to get past the negative and activate the positive. Full consideration is beyond the capacity of this essay, but consider just a few of the key components of deliberation: a wicked problems mindset, issues named and framed for deliberation rather than persuasion, ground rules, and small diverse groups gathered together face to face and arranged in a circle with a facilitator equipped to help them engage. These components, both individually and collectively, clearly work to mitigate negative motivated reasoning. When combined well, they can create an environment where the need for certainty is out of place, the simplistic good versus evil narrative is more easily dismissed, our tribes are broadened, cherry picking is frowned upon, and our aversion to paradox and tough choices is overcome. We can move away from a political climate in which bad arguments are rewarded and good arguments

punished to one that inspires and rewards quality thinking. Most important, we can avoid the vicious cycle of false polarization and work towards a virtuous cycle of authentic engagement, in which genuine interaction leads to more trust and mutual understanding, which in turn supports learning and refinement of opinion, and then ultimately to cocreation and collaborative action, all of which is mutually self-reinforcing.

To close, based both on my 10 years of practitioner experience and my extended foray into the literature on social psychology and brain science, I have renewed optimism of the possibility of a robust deliberative democracy. That optimism is obviously tempered by the growing polarization, exhibited by the ridiculous tenor of the 2016 election and the continued hyperpolarization that followed. My optimism has an important limiting condition, however. Shifting from our dominant, bias-inducing processes at the national level will be exceedingly difficult. The adversarial forces tied to the current system are simply too strong. At the local level, however, my optimism finds a home. Following the argument of the late Benjamin Barber and, more recently, the authors of *The Metropolitan Revolution*, I believe cities will (and must) step up to save our democracy. Mayors and city managers can't play political games as much; they must find ways to work together to address their wicked problems. At this smaller, but still very significant level, key leaders and organizations can build capacity for deliberative engagement processes designed and proven to help create the collaborative cultures that work against the tide of polarization. As we work to create more and more of these wise, deliberative cities, our long-term hope is that people will see that process matters, will build the habits, and will ultimately demand more from our national systems as well.

Martin Carcasson is a professor of communication studies at Colorado State University and the founder and director of the CSU Center for Public Deliberation. This piece is a summary of a larger report completed for the Kettering Foundation entitled, Process Matters: Human Nature, Democracy, and a Call for Rediscovering Wisdom.

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