Agreement and Deliberation: How to Effectively Overcome Polarization

Polarizing phenomena such as deep disagreement, confirmation bias, echo chambers and algorithmic search suggestions all point toward a bleak conclusion – that groups or individuals that stand in opposition to each other seemingly have little means and even less interest in truly discussing with their opponents. In this paper, I aim to overturn such a view of disagreements. Instead of going the standard route and exploring reasons for disagreement, I will point out the concrete evidence for optimism in places where cynicism seems to be ubiquitous.

First, I will discuss how deliberative democracy provides an operational framework for defining solid ground for agreement. Although it might seem surprising, empirical research in such deeply divided countries as Brazil, Bosnia and Colombia shows that discussions can go from the atmosphere of disagreement and even hostility, to that of sound, reasoned and empathetic agreement. Steiner et al. call such instances positive deliberative transformative moments (pDTM). Although such research is merely in its infancy, I will try to show how it deserves far wider recognition than it has so far gotten, and that it points toward a clear direction for establishing bases of agreement.

Second, I will delve into the data of said research, especially its qualitative aspect. I explore what where the exact conditions that led to pDTM. Namely, the low quality of discussion, as defined by the measurement called DQI (discourse quality index), was the result of participants in the discussion displaying lack of trust in each other, lack of patience for differing points of view and aggressive, although ill-reasoned defense of their own views. However, the situation changed once individual participants managed, through reason and personal stories, to establish some point of agreement between opposing parties. In almost every instance where that happened, pDTM followed. I will try to show that this is not an isolated occurrence and that one can generate a series of conditions that would help both repeat such results in future research and help better understand both why pDTMs happen or don’t happen and how this can be related to actual instances of sharp political polarization, such as witnessed especially in 2020 and 2021.

Third, I will try to show that situations where pDTM occurs hold sufficient promise that they can cast doubt on different ways in which political realists (Williams, Geuss, Sleat, Dunn and others) typically criticize proponents of political moralism or ideal theory. In that sense, the approach to agreement I sketched has both theoretical and practical implications. This can become especially clear if we have in mind that participants at the described events had mutual history of conflict that in its intensity and repercussions exceeds most of what has been the topic of disagreements in Europe or the USA. For instance, in Colombia participants were former combatants (ex-paramilitaries and ex-guerilla) in a decades-old civil war. If pDTMs can reliably occur in such an atmosphere of lingering conflict, then there is hope for achieving similar results on a wider scale.