PHD REVIEW

Deliberative democracy amidst the Tower of Babel

Insights from Luxembourgish deliberative minipublics

Nicole Curato[1]

Abstract

Much normative and empirical work on deliberation still operates under the assumption of a monolingual public sphere. Where linguistic diversity is acknowledged, it is often treated as a logistical challenge rather than a democratic asset. Verhasselt's PhD dissertation invites readers to consider what normative frameworks and practices are required when linguistic pluralism is embraced as integral to democratic life. This piece reflects on the profound implications of Verhasselt's work for deliberative theory and practice. It concludes by calling for a broader conversation that connects scholarship pursuing similar lines of inquiry around the world.

Keywords: Deliberative democracy, Deliberative mini-publics, Citizen engagement, Multilingualism, Luxembourg

Lisa Verhasselt's PhD dissertation puts forward an argument that, at first glance, appears uncontroversial. Linguistic diversity, she argues, shapes the inclusivity, authenticity and consequentiality of citizens' assemblies. The claim seems intuitive. Language is a marker of identity. It reveals a person's ethnolinguistic background, class origins, education, social networks and migration history. If deliberative forums are to take epistemic inclusion seriously, multilingual design is essential. It fosters more inclusive participation by mitigating the power of dominant language speakers and enabling all participants to articulate their perspectives in their own voice. It also

enhances epistemic quality, as language shapes how people conceptualise issues and engage with opposing views. Speaking one's own language allows for the fullest and most authentic expression of perspectives, enriching deliberation.

These arguments may seem too obvious to warrant deep theoretical or empirical exploration. Verhasselt's dissertation, however, shows what it means to take multilingualism seriously in deliberative settings. Through a critical review of the literature, Verhasselt demonstrates that much normative and empirical work on deliberation still assumes a monolingual public sphere. Where linguistic diversity is acknowledged, it is often seen as a logistical challenge, not a democratic asset. The dissertation provokes readers to ask what normative frameworks and practices are needed when linguistic pluralism is treated as integral to democratic life. The question is timely, as nationalist movements are on the rise around the world, reinforcing language hierarchies and marginalising minority and migrant speakers. At the same time, citizens' assemblies are being adopted across diverse settings – from Europe to Latin America to South Asia – where multilingualism is the norm. Verhasselt's work charts a pathway for how deliberative democracy must evolve to address the practical challenges and normative stakes of linguistic diversity.

There is much to admire in the dissertation. Its empirical focus on Luxembourg provides a valuable case of multilingual deliberation in practice, but the work could more confidently connect its findings to global conversations. It would be valuable, for example, to explore how Verhasselt's findings might enter into dialogue with research on India's *gram sabhas*, where Paromita Sanyal and Vijayendra Rao (2019) document the marginalisation of non-dominant language speakers and create opportunities for mutual learning between the Indian and Luxembourgish cases. More could also be done to situate the dissertation within conversations developed by agonistic democrats such as Monique Deveaux (2018) and Selen Ercan (2017), who have long explored the relevance of deliberative democracy in multicultural contexts. Their work on structural inequalities and conflicts of culture in the wider public sphere offers critical insights which could have been used in evaluating and researching multilingual mini-publics, as Verhasselt does in the empirical chapters of her dissertation.

This is a timely and important dissertation, offering insights that speak both to current debates in deliberative democracy and to the broader political challenges of linguistic diversity today. Its contribution lies in challenging deliberative scholars to fundamentally rethink how linguistic diversity shapes deliberative practice. Its insights deserve to travel far beyond Luxembourg.

References

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