Feature Article: Political Theory Revisited

Democracy, elites and power: John Dewey reconsidered

Melvin L. Rogers

Department of Politics, University of Virginia, PO Box 400787, Charlottesville, Virginia 22902, USA.
E-mail: Mlr2d@virginia.edu

Abstract   This essay demonstrates that the management and contestability of power is central to Dewey's understanding of democracy and provides a middle ground between two opposite poles within democratic theory: Either the masses become the genuine danger to democratic governance (*à la* Lippmann) or elites are described as bent on controlling the masses (*à la* Wolin). Yet, the answer to managing the relationship between them and the demos is never forthcoming. I argue that Dewey's response to Lippmann for how we ought to conceive of the relationship between citizens and elites if power is not to become arbitrary is located within a larger framework that avoids the problematic distinction Wolin draws between the demos and representative government. For Dewey, the legitimacy of decision-making, and, indeed, the security of freedom, is determined not merely by our actual involvement, but the extent to which non-participation does not preclude the future contestability of power.
Contemporary Political Theory (2009) **8,** 68–89. doi:10.1057/cpt.2008.25

Keywords: Dewey; Lippmann; Wolin; democracy; power; freedom

Introduction

The relationship between democracy and elites poses theoretical and practical difficulties. This is not surprising. As Sheldon Wolin notes democracy was born in revolt – emerging from a bundle of 'transgressive acts' in which 'the demos could not participate in power without shattering the class, status, and value systems by which it was excluded' (1996a, p. 37). In the American context, we have always had problems deferring to our betters not because of an aversion to differences of intellectual abilities, but because such differences usually become justification for suppressing the process of contestation and deliberation that should otherwise define the space of political reflection. Historically, we have often naturalized those differences and constructed institutions and rights to support them. But once power becomes a private monopoly, domination will inevitably follow. This leaves us in a condition that

is far from democracy. How then are we to manage the relationship between elites and the demos?

Some attempts at addressing this question usually result in shifting the locus of concern. Either the masses become the genuine danger to democratic governance or elites are described as bent on controlling and manipulating the masses at every turn. For example, in arguing for the importance of experts to governance, Walter Lippmann (1965, 2004) advances suspicion of the decision-making abilities of the masses and worries about the anarchic possibilities that might follow if they are allowed to rule in any substantive sense (cf. Schumpeter, 1950; Dahl, 1956). Wolin, for example, shares with Lippmann a belief in democracy's anarchic qualities. Yet his vision of democracy differs in that it rejects political representation as a genuine substitute. Representation is merely another form of elite rule. As such, democracy is most clearly at work and ought to be encouraged when, like a 'fugitive' from prison, it escapes the institutional form that otherwise acts as a restraint (Wolin, 1994, 1996a).

To be sure, Lippmann and Wolin understand the meaning of elites in different terms. Yet both confine their views to experts or political officials that may come to occupy a privileged decision-making position because of the presumed knowledge or skill they offer. Either they should be the source of praise or the object of contempt; the answer to managing the relationship between them and the demos is never forthcoming. This is especially distressing in a time when our reliance on experts and the institutions of representative government is simply inescapable.

In this essay, I do not pursue this issue as a free-standing problem, but rather as one within the political philosophy of John Dewey and to which he is often seen as offering questionable guidance. But in my view he is specifically concerned about this issue and seeks to provide a way out of this quandary that sheds important light on his political philosophy. The problem of how to understand the relationship between elites and the demos thus becomes the lens through which we may revisit and assess Dewey's outlook. His classic response to Lippmann for how we should conceive of the relationship between citizens and elites if power is not to become arbitrary is located within a larger framework that avoids the problematic distinction Wolin draws between the demos and representative government.

To read Dewey this way will seem strikingly odd since he is consistently assailed for being inattentive to the operations of power (Diggins, 1994, Chapter 7; Wolin, 2004, pp. 516–517). As the criticism goes, Dewey's emphasis on inquiry ironically encourages a vanguard politics, albeit one guided by experts, that is insensitive to the exercise of power. This much C. Wright Mills maintains when he claims that Dewey 'avoids a really definite recognition and statement of the problem of political power' that is involved in connecting

democracy to the scientific method (1969, pp. 418–419). For Wolin more specifically, Dewey was neither concerned with power nor the inequities in the use of power: 'Dewey never squarely associated democracy, local or otherwise, with participation in the exercise of power or self-government. His definitions of democracy were surprisingly pallid' (2004, pp. 516–517).

I strongly discourage the reader from accepting this claim or from believing that Wolin provides us with an acceptable alternative. On a careful reading of Dewey's political and ethical writings, what emerges is a view of democratic governance that places political power and its management at the center of analysis. For him, how power functions becomes the test for assessing the relationship between the demos and elites. This provides us not only with a response to Lippmann and Wolin, but also allows for an exploration of an underappreciated aspect of Dewey's political philosophy that is largely missing from the otherwise insightful scholarship on his work.

In fairness, scholars have observed the connection Dewey draws between scientific inquiry and democracy, and the presumption of broad base inclusion it implies (Putnam, 1991; Westbrook, 1991, 2005, Chapters 1, 3 and 4; Bohman, 1999, pp. 590–607). Yet, they have failed to make *explicit* that at the core of his understanding is a preoccupation with power and domination. Robert Westbrook rightly notes, for example, that for Dewey: 'The planned society left the choice of ends to the powerful who used 'physical and psychological force' to secure conformity and left the choice of means to technicians who asked how but not why' (1991, p. 456). In my view, Dewey worries about this not simply because reflective self-governance is central to human growth, but more importantly because without having a say in forming and guiding the ends to which power will be put, I leave my development and that of the community to which I belong open to *arbitrary* rather than *directed* control. As contemporary republicans and pragmatists observe, this makes my freedom far more uncertain because the potential for input does not exist (Pettit, 1999; Shapiro, 1999). By making the contestability of power central to his understanding of democracy, Dewey envisions a relationship between power and freedom that does not concede final authority to elites, but which simultaneously avoids the irreconcilable tension between popular sovereignty and representative government that we find in Wolin's account. The difference between Wolin and Dewey, then, does not revolve around two competing accounts of democracy; rather, the difference is between an account of democracy insensitive to the demands of modern life and one that seeks an adjustment that continues to affirm the importance of participation and freedom.

In the first section of this essay I lay out the positions of Lippmann and Wolin, indicating the distinctive problems that plague each. In the second section I take up three distinct, but related arguments. The first explains

Dewey's specific response to how we ought to conceive of the relationship between experts and citizens – a response that hinges on his understanding of the importance of local knowledge to collective problem-solving. The second argument maintains that Dewey's engagement with Lippmann is located within a larger framework that understands democracy as a system concerned with how power functions, and as a result views the legitimate use of power as existing within a space of conditionality. This emphasis on conditionality leads to the final claim: we are free in Dewey's view not simply because of the actual control we display through participatory activity, but more significantly, because we always hold in reserve the ability to contest the ends to which such political control is being put. To the extent that contestation is closed to us, we will most certainly find ourselves in conflict with the administrative institutions of the state. But for him, this only points to a *possible* rather than a *necessary* tension.

The Danger of Political Pessimism: Between Lippmann and Wolin

Walter Lippmann's writings on democracy in both *Public Opinion* and *The Phantom Public* are part of a much larger discourse during the 1920s that challenged the viability of popular sovereignty – that is, the vision that the public informs and authorize political action. For Lippmann in particular, the obstacle here is not merely that citizens lack the requisite time and interest to bring the democratic ideal to fruition. More importantly, he maintains that citizens are inherently resistant to information that would call into question their deeply held beliefs.

He advances this argument in his discussion of the importance of stereotypes to human psychology. Stereotypes are value-laden conjectures about the world that arrange experience. They are part of a wider social network in which individuals exists and do not depend for their functioning on perpetual cognitive awareness. As he says: 'The subtlest and most pervasive of all influences are those which create and maintain the repertory of stereotypes. We are told about the world before we see it. … And those preconceptions … govern deeply the whole process of perception' (Lippmann, 1965, p. 59). This is particularly so in industrial societies precisely because people are asked to reflect on issues of which they can have no first hand experience. While stereotypes serve several key functions, the most important of these includes ontological security. Lippmann thus refers to stereotypes as the 'fortress of our tradition' because they stave off challenges from contrary forms of life or ways of being that appear menacing (p. 64). Stereotypes seem to economize our thinking just to the extent that they help us reconstruct the complex environment on 'a simpler model before we can manage it' (p. 11). These

simpler patterns of understanding 'determine a very great part of men's political behavior' (p. 13).

In light of this discussion of stereotypes, Lippmann believes that citizens are unable and unwilling to re-evaluate their commitments in the context of new evidence. The result is that the entire process of decision-making is distorted. It is no wonder that he prefaces *Public Opinion* with an extended passage from Book 7 of Plato's *Republic*, presumably not only to draw an analogy between the shadows on the cave wall that are believed to be real and the way stereotypes function, but to highlight the danger that comes when those images are threatened (p. vii). As he says: 'The public must be put in its place … so that each of us may live free of the trampling and the roar of a bewildered herd' (Lippmann, 2004, p. 145).

Against this background above, Lippmann begins to articulate his elitist vision of democracy. Prefiguring Joseph Schumpeter's view that democracy means 'only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them' (Schumpeter, 1950, pp. 284–285), Lippmann argues that the 'public does not select the candidate, write the platform, outline the policy any more than it builds the automobile or acts the play. It aligns itself for or against somebody who has offered himself' (Lippmann, 2004, p. 47). Lippmann, however, holds an additional view that diverges from the position of democratic realists: 'I find it so myself for, although public business is my main interest and I give most of my time to watching it, I cannot find time to do what is expected of me in the theory of democracy' (p. 10). To do what is expected means not merely paying attention to political issues, but having the requisite knowledge to understand those issues. Here, too, he believes political decisions by elected representatives are in need of prior supplementation and clarification (Lippmann, 1965, pp. 19, 182). As he argues, the unseen facts of political reality can only be ascertained and 'managed by a specialized class' of social scientific experts (1965, pp. 195, 236). Their role is to examine and report on the unseen political phenomena that are blocked from view by our cognitive deficiencies.

Yet Lippmann intends much more than mere reporting. Experts provide not only facts, but an interpretation of those facts and a vision of how we ought to proceed if the current problem is to be alleviated. If we think about the role of experts in politics, it is not an exaggeration to say that for Lippmann experts give shape to the problems that are only dimly perceived by both citizens and political officials. The cognitive authority he attaches to experts thus slides into a kind of political power that shapes the landscape in which political officials and the citizenry function from the outset.[1]

This is a bare sketch of Lippmann's argument. And as Dewey indicates in his reviews of both books there is much to recommend (1983a, pp. 337–345; 1984a, pp. 213–220). He agrees with Lippmann's discussion of stereotypes and the

poverty of the public's knowledge in decision-making. He, too, is unconvinced by a view of democracy that envisions citizens as omni-competent. Yet Dewey takes issue with both the emphasis Lippmann places on educating 'officials and directors' over and against the public, and his corollary belief that experts do not need to be informed by or receive input from the public (1983a, p. 343).

These disagreements point to a slippage in Lippmann's argument. His rejection of what he considers the classical description of democratic citizens wrongly slides into an attack on their deliberative capacities. Lippmann obscures alternative ways of understanding the public, especially the extent to which citizens ought to serve as the beginning and ending points for understanding problems and assessing proposals. This slippage is largely based on his assertion that most of us are simply dogmatic and irrational when it comes to our beliefs. But as Dewey maintains, there is no reason to posit this as fundamental to human psychology and socialization, precisely because citizens invariably do move away from or rethink the beliefs they hold (1978a, part 6). Indeed, this is a point which he shares with contemporary deliberative democrats (Fishkin, 1997; Muntz, 2006). This is not to deny that resistance to changing one's beliefs is real; rather, the simple point is that we cannot assume that citizens will take a dogmatic stance independent of a specific deliberative context. Lippmann's failure on this point leads him to set up a false distinction between the objective outlook of the experts and the subjective perspective of citizens, and to identify the former as the appropriate guardians of democracy.

For Dewey, however, this description fails to acknowledge a view that has achieved normative and empirical currency within Western modernity that understands knowledge as formed through the historical specificity of our social practices. Knowledge is the fruit of our transactions with the natural and social world. How we come to understand political problems and respond implies a kind of local knowledge and communal vision that is beyond the purview of experts. While experts may be able to provide technical knowledge, they have no way of judging the 'bearing of [that] knowledge' (Dewey, 1984b, p. 365). However important it may be, expertise is often connected to some narrow technical domain, rather than being expertise of political affairs *in toto*. Dewey's aim, then, is to offer a vision of democracy, which, in keeping with Lippmann, acknowledges the need for an epistemic division of labor, but one that does not allow inequalities in information to undermine the necessity of deliberation. Before turning to this issue, we need to assess Wolin's understanding of democracy.

Wolin and fugitive democracy

In a series of essays and books, Sheldon Wolin defends a radical notion of democracy against the constraining effects of institutions and elites. But a

tension emerges in his account at the very moment democracy allies itself with institutional form. As Wolin argues: 'Democracy does not complete its task by establishing a form and thus being fitted into it. A political constitution is not the fulfillment of democracy but its transfiguration into a 'regime' and hence a stultified and partial reification' (1994, p. 55). To understand this tension and therefore see where Wolin goes wrong, we need to examine more carefully the content of his description of democracy and his understanding of constitutionalism. Whereas Lippmann moves too far in the direction of privileging elites, Wolin moves too far in the opposite direction, resulting in an inability to reconcile popular sovereignty with representative institutions.

Wolin elucidates his understanding of democracy in several important essays, but it is in 'Fugitive Democracy' that his vision is most clearly articulated:

> Democracy is not about where the political is located but about how it is experienced. Revolutions activate the demos and destroy boundaries that bar access to political experience. Individuals from the excluded social strata take on responsibilities, deliberate about goals and choices, and share in decision that have broad consequences and affect unknown and distant others. This revolutionary transgression is the means by which the demos makes itself political. (Wolin, 1996a, p. 38)

In this passage, we should first observe Wolin's implicit distinction between revolutionary and normal modes of managing collective affairs. He discusses this explicitly at the outset of the essay when he defines 'the political' as a moment of collective problem-solving that is forged and managed through public deliberation to preserve the collective's well-being. He distinguishes this from what he refers to as 'politics' – that is, a bitter negotiation over access to and distribution of resources among 'unequal social powers' (p. 31). For Wolin, democracy is an expression of the former precisely because it destabilizes what he takes to be the natural state of politics. Its anarchic quality inheres in the fact that it constitutes a threat to 'politics as usual,' which functions to the disadvantage of the powerless.

Democracy, then, is both *functionally* and *conceptually* tied to revolution. In contrast to Lippmann's view, Wolin writes the following of democracy's subversive quality: 'I propose accepting the familiar charges that democracy is inherently unstable, inclined toward anarchy, and identified with revolution and using these traits as the basis for a different, *a*constitutional conception of democracy' (1994, p. 37). The link Wolin draws between democracy and revolution is a function of writing under the seductive memory of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. In the American context, these extraordinary periods witnessed the consolidation of civic power outside of

the normal processes of electoral politics, both constraining those processes and their larger constitutional structure. The aim was to deepen the purchase on freedom for wider segments of the population and restructure existing institutions. With this image in the background, it is no wonder Wolin describes democracy as a form of 'collective action that gathers its power from outside the system' (1996b, p. 64).

Wolin's description of politics is embodied in the process of constitutionalism; it stands in opposition to his description of the political and democracy. Read in this light, constitutional democracy is not an attempt to formalize popular governance. Rather, it is both a strategic and clandestine attempt to put the demos in its place and contain its passion: 'Constitutionalism might be defined as the theory of how best to restrain the politics of democracy while ensuring the predominance of the social groups and classes represented by the best men' (1994, p. 35; 1993, p. 476; 1996a, p. 34). Constitutionalism then is corrupt at its origins, making all claims about the importance of popular participation chimerical. In fact, modern representative government, he contends, did not find a better way to express the collective power of the populace. Instead, it transferred that power to public agents and agencies, and in doing so transmuted how the populace viewed the *proper* expression of that power (Wolin, 1989, Chapters 1, 3, 5, 10). 'The inherent danger,' says Wolin, 'is that the identity given to the collectivity [through constitutions] by those who exercise power will reflect the needs of power rather than the political possibilities of a complex collectivity' (p. 13). From the outset, he concludes, constitutionalists have thus sought to secure the privilege position of elites, whether based on political skill or intellectual abilities, over and against popular participation.

This is a far more complicated argument than I have presented here, and addressing all of its details is beyond the scope of this article. For our purposes, it is enough to point out the inescapable tension in the argument which distorts how we orient ourselves to the political landscape. This distortion takes place first at the level of how we understand representative democracy, and second at the level of how we conceive of freedom. To begin, Wolin describes the normal state of society as an oligarchy, and representative government works to underwrite and protect the maintenance of that oligarchy. While he concedes in a number of different places that the complexities of modern society make representative democracy necessary, it is unclear how he is able to inspire faith in the system given how he understands its origins. In fact, he is not encouraging a healthy sense of suspicion of representative institutions, but rather a corrosive contempt. '[A] few tokens,' he says, 'supposedly representing the remarkable diversity of American society are not synonymous with democracy but a parody of equalitarianism' (p. 4). He says elsewhere that the 'Presidency … is the cruelest symbol of the impotence of the demos' (Wolin, 1996a, p. 34). Wolin's language does not advance suspicion at a particular

person that may occupy the Presidency, but the very thought of executive authority. The problem with his argument then is that he rigidly adheres to his theory of constitutionalism, placing it and democracy in an inevitable battle that defies intentionality and historical development. This criticism does not imply that reliance on the institutions of representative government is the only or even most significant avenue to express and deepen democracy. It only means that such institutions are not necessarily inimical to those efforts.

The second problem that emerges relates to his understanding of freedom, especially as it is bound up with self-governance. If my first worry is accurate, then we can advance the additional inference that when the normal operations of government are active, we are somehow not free: 'The true question is not whether democracy can govern … but why it would want to. Governing means manning and accommodating to bureaucratized institutions that, *ipso facto*, are hierarchical in structure and elitist, permanent rather than fugitive – in short, anti-democratic' (Wolin, 2004, pp. 602–603). Precisely because Wolin draws a fundamental connection between freedom and insurgency, it follows that the normal operations of government, which include the presence of bureaucracy and hierarchy, function in an inverse relationship to freedom itself. In making this argument, he places institutional authority and freedom in opposition in a way that cannot be reconciled.

Yet it is not clear why the presence of bureaucracy and hierarchy are necessarily anti-democratic and hostile to freedom. To be sure, they may become so insofar as their purpose comes unhinged from accountability to the public, but to assume this as the starting point precludes us from employing such institutions to manage and negotiate the complexities of the modern world. Indeed, Wolin's tragic understanding of modern politics reduces freedom to a fleeting experience, suggesting that we must resign ourselves to a state of affairs in which we suffer under the weight of inevitable domination. This resignation, tied as it is to the image of the fugitive, can only reinforce the problematic tendencies Wolin identifies in modern democratic societies. This is because he gives up on the ideal of a system of representation that is accountable, abandoning even the most basic premise that *who* occupies the various branches of government is a question of great importance to citizens. But surely this resignation is self-defeating.

The foregoing discussion leaves us with a number of different questions as we shift to Dewey's writings. Is it possible for him to offer a view of democracy that advances a healthy suspicion of the institutional structures of the state but which nonetheless views such institutions as important to democracy? Can he also capture precisely the transgressive quality that Wolin attaches to democracy without it exhausting how we understand the meaning of that term? The answer to these questions takes us to Dewey's concerns about power and its relationship to freedom – a position that is a piece of his response to Lippmann.

Employing Power and Avoiding Domination

We have considered at some length the way both Lippmann's and Wolin's understanding of democracy is plagued by a kind of political pessimism that either misdescribes the role of experts in decision-making or reduces democracy to fleeting moments of revolution that places political authority and freedom in perpetual opposition. But neither view provides us with a way to manage the relationship between elites and the demos. The issue to which we must now turn is the precise way Dewey's account provides a more balanced perspective than either of these two positions. In doing so, I argue, we can distill from Dewey's description of democracy a concern to manage power over those whom it will be exercised so that its use does not become arbitrary. This comes out by first attending to why he believes citizens do not merely authorize power, but are authoritative in decision-making. Second, his emphasis on the communal nature of knowledge formation, which the previous point suggests, shapes how he understands the legitimacy of political power and the kind of conditions that must exist if power is to enable freedom. We are free, in Dewey's view, not simply by virtue of the control we have over our community (an argument about *exercising a capacity*), but because such control does not leave us vulnerable to the arbitrary uses of power (an argument about the *conditions under which we live in political society*). This latter qualification serves as the all-important corrective to Wolin's account.

Democratic inquiry and expertise

In *The Public and its Problems* of 1927 and elsewhere, Dewey acknowledges the technical dimension of issues facing modern citizens. For him, the various innovations in communication and transportation, the global scale of warfare, and the ongoing developments of the economy make reliance on experts unavoidable. He acknowledges that we rely not merely on specific experts trained, for example, in the areas of law and engineering, but also on the very social and material world they help construct. Short of some breakdown, there is no reason to rethink our dependence. For Dewey, however, what is important from the perspective of democratic decision-making is that we understand that how and why we rely on experts is itself a public judgment that makes inquiry genuinely cooperative.

This claim emerges in *The Public and its Problems* when he describes the relationship between experts and the citizenry, revisiting some of the thoughts expressed in his reviews of Lippmann's work:

> The final obstacle in the way of any aristocratic rule is that in the absence
> of an articulate voice on the part of the masses, the best do not and

cannot remain the best, the wise cease to be wise. It is impossible for highbrows to secure a monopoly of such knowledge as must be used for the regulation of common affairs. … The man who wears the shoes knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied. (Dewey, 1984b, p. 364)

This all-important passage is located in Chapter 6 where he discusses the problem of method. Among the many arguments Dewey makes in that chapter, one of the chief claims he advances is that the hypotheses we form for responding to problems are only as good as the methods we employ – that is, the extent to which the methods make us receptive to data from various sectors of the environment. But problems themselves, as he understands, frame and guide our inquiry; they imply the existence of a complex horizon of value and meaning that is now fractured and in need of creative valuation to restore continuity. When we take this into consideration, his point in the passage above is not simply that without the input from the wearer of shoes the shoemaker will respond in such a way that would not address the existing pinch. Rather, without input from the individual experiencing the pinch, the expert shoemaker will not have the subject matter to initiate or guide his inquiry.

Unlike Lippmann who elevates the role of experts, Dewey views their position as ancillary to that of citizens: '[T]heir expertness is not shown in framing and executing policies, but in discovering and making known the facts upon which the former depend' (1984b, p. 365). Dewey is making two critical points. The first point is that expertise properly understood is always indexed to a more 'technical' field of investigation. Experts come to gain cognitive authority and so become bearers of knowledge because of the audience they address. Citizens are thus authorities just to the extent that it is their problems that create the framework in which expertise functions. The complexity and texture of those problems, Dewey argues, come into view through a discursive exchange among citizens that draw out existing and emerging concerns and worries (which are not necessarily in harmony). All of this helps citizens determine what they will make of the information provided, but it also means that there will rarely be complete agreement on who the experts are and this will cut against any argument for blind deference.

The second point of the sentence indicates that if something like 'expertise' of political affairs exists, it will have to emerge from the public. That is, how citizens understand information is an issue about the ends to which they are moving as a political community and this can only emerge through deliberation and not through means external to that process. Central to this process are questions not merely about how we understand the problem from the outset (for example, Who are the subjects of this problem? What may be the long-

term results if the problem is allowed to persist?), but the implication of various proposals to alleviate the problem (for example, What are the values or economic tradeoffs in choosing this or that proposal?). For Dewey, answering these questions implies a kind of collective artisanship to social inquiry that draws on the specific experiences of individuals, facts about the problem in question and potential risks of action.

The significance Dewey accords deliberation yields two points. First, not unlike contemporary deliberative democrats (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996; Fishkin, 1997; Dryzek, 1990), for Dewey, deliberation works to bring 'conflicts [among citizens] out into the open where their special claims can be seen and appraised' in understanding the depth and complexity of political problems and policy proposals (1987a, p. 55). This does not deny that one result of this process may be a deepening of dissonance; cooperative inquiry may reveal to us that the ends we seek are at odds with what the social and natural world will allow. Although in this context we engage in deliberation with the hope of constructing policy proposals that both respond to the problem and in doing so sublimate values that otherwise conflict, we must not lose sight of the fact that for Dewey this is itself a hypothesis that may go unrealized. As he says: 'Differences of opinion in the sense of differences of judgment as to the course which it is best to follow, the policy which it is best to try out, will still exist' (Dewey, 1984b, p. 362). But he continues, indicating how he views the centrality of deliberation: 'But opinion in the sense of beliefs formed and held in the absence of evidence will be reduced in quantity and importance. No longer will views generated in view of special situations be frozen into absolute standards and masquerade as eternal truths' (p. 362).

Second, deliberation functions to give shape to the very purpose of expertise. Both the transformative role that underwrites how we come to understand political problems in their various dimensions and which contributes to the possibility of forging shared values for action, and the role of deliberation in contextualizing expert knowledge are coextensive with democratic decision-making. These two elements suggest that the authority and legitimacy of lay and expert knowledge gains whatever vitality it has from being forged through a deliberative process that makes each responsive to the other (Dewey, 1984b, pp. 364–365).

There is a practical upshot here. For example, where decision-making is based less on the continuous input from public hearings, town hall meetings, advisory councils and other deliberative bodies there is greater reason to be concerned about the ends to which those decisions aim. Moreover, there is reason to be equally suspicious of bureaucratic processes that are adverse to expanding decision-making power by taking a bottom-up approach. Of course, there may be good reason not to take such an approach, as for example when we think about the obstacles that limited resources and time poses for politics.

Here Lippmann's point about the obstacles to broad-based inclusion are inescapable (cf. MacGilvray, 2004, Chapter 4). But it follows from Dewey's argument that the burden of proof for why the deliberative arena should be limited must rest with those who seek less rather than more inclusive arrangements.

Dewey does concede that experts do possess information that citizens facing a given problem do not. He says, for instance, that 'it is not necessary that the many should have the knowledge and skill to carry on the needed investigations' (Dewey, 1984b, p. 365). It follows from this that understanding the intricacies of political problems and the kinds of emerging solutions bespeaks an inequality in both information and skill sets. Instances in which scientists make the public aware of the adverse effects of their current industrial activity on the environment clearly imply special knowledge and skills that do not exist in large measure throughout the population.

Yet, and in contrast to Lippmann, recognizing the epistemic limitations of citizens need not require us to abdicate or substantially limit the role they ought to serve. Dewey's argument is that policy regarding what to do, what trade-offs will be made, and where to invest economic and educational resources is an issue that falls to the public because the consequences of those decisions extend beyond the realm of experts. To the extent that expertise slides into political authority without taking its orientation from the public through deliberation the entire decision-making process loses in legitimacy what it gains in suspicion.

Democracy as managing power

What is often missed about these considerations above is that they are part of how Dewey understands the historical emergence of modern political democracy in broadening the use of political power. By political democracy he means 'a mode of government, a specified practice in selecting officials and regulating their conduct as officials' through universal suffrage and emphasizing the transparency of decision-making (p. 286). For him, democracy's modern emergence represents an 'effort in the first place to counteract the forces that have so largely determined the possession of rule by accidental and irrelevant factors, and in the second place an effort to counteract the tendency to *employ political power to serve private instead of public ends*' (p. 287, emphasis added).

Although Dewey does not provide us with a definition of political power, we can distill one nonetheless from his writings. To be clear, in saying that Dewey's account of democracy implies a description of power, I do not mean to suggest that he provides us with a theoretical framework that is currently

missing from the power literature (see Dahl, 1957; Lukes, 1974; Gaventa, 1980). I therefore do not seek to engage the theoretical complexities that inform the multiple faces of power. Rather, my purpose is to indicate that Dewey's concern about political power helps us understand how he thinks about democracy and how we ought to orient ourselves to the use of power if it is not to be employed arbitrarily.

In his 1936 address, 'Authority and Social Change,' delivered at the Harvard Tercentenary Conference of Arts and Sciences, Dewey discusses the relationship between freedom and authority that informed the historical development of liberal democracy. In keeping with his discussion in *The Public and its Problems*, he indicates how liberal democracy emerged in an attempt to block political power from being exercised arbitrarily. Political power is arbitrary in his view when it cannot be substantively informed by those over whom it will be exercised:

> [Liberal democracy] was also a struggle between groups and classes of individuals – between those who were enjoying the advantages that spring from possession of power … and individuals who found themselves excluded from the powers and enjoyments to which they felt themselves entitled. The [individualistic] philosophy which transforms this historic and relative struggle into an inherent and fixed conflict between the principle of authority and the principle of freedom tends … to present authority as purely restrictive power and to leave the exercise of freedom without direction. (Dewey, 1987b, p. 133)

I shall come back in a moment to precisely how power, for Dewey, implies a corresponding account of freedom. At this juncture, however, we can say that for him political power is not merely restrictive, but enables us and so makes freedom possible. Hence, he says in an early work, 'effective freedom' requires 'positive control of the resources necessary to carry purposes into effect, possession of means to satisfy desire' (Dewey, 1978a, p. 392). Political power thus refers to both the policing apparatus of communities and the way in which managing collective affairs is coextensive with enabling citizens to determine the area of potential action. The legitimate use of political power, for Dewey, always exists within a space of conditionality. This indicates its inherent circumspection in any given context. Political power is thus expressive of both the role we play in 'forming and directing the activities' of the community to which we belong, and also the possibility that is open to us in 'participating according to need in the values' that our community sustains (Dewey, 1984b, p. 328).

This emphasis on political power suggests that for Dewey the standard in assessing democracy is not whether it produces consensus or if it meets some

distributional criteria regarding goods. Rather, democracy is assessed based on whether it does a better job than other ways of managing collective affairs in preventing power from becoming arbitrary. This much he suggests when he says we are likely to miss the importance of democracy if it is understood outside the context of 'its historic[al] background' (p. 287). Indeed, he continues, that when 'men … damn democratic government absolutely' they usually do so 'without comparing it with alternative polities' (p. 287). Presumably, he means alternative polities that would permit power to function unconditionally.

In Dewey's view, democracy configures the political landscape so as to keep power in view; it defines membership not simply in virtue of the actual participation with which we engage in determining social possibilities, but the potential participation that remains open to us if need so arises. He makes this point in his 1937 address, 'Democracy and Educational Administration,' when he remarks that the 'democratic faith in equality is the faith that each individual shall have a chance and opportunity to contribute' (Dewey, 1987d, p. 220). The operative thought here is that to the extent that power functions to determine social possibilities, those possibilities cannot be of such a nature that they preclude the future contestability and development of how power functions (Dewey, 1984b, p. 364).

From this follow two implications about how Dewey understands democratic governance. The first is an acknowledgement that insofar as power is social we will rarely escape being the subject of how it functions. There is a habitual dimension to the functioning of social life that does not require our active involvement at every moment (1983b, pp. 334–336, Chapters 4–5). Power will often work on and through us for purposes of efficiency and productivity, leaving us to direct our cognitive interventions elsewhere. 'Thus man,' he says, 'is not merely *de facto* associated, but he *becomes* a social animal in the make-up of his ideas, sentiments and deliberate behavior. What he believes, hopes for and aims at is the outcome of association and intercourse' (p. 251). The formulation is intentionally broad. Dewey is sensitive to the fact that society's functioning will often require us to be habituated for its stability. This may include, in contrast to Wolin's view, reliance on hierarchical relationships as we see in the management of schools, government agencies and even the family. As scholars of social capital underscore, social institutions must involve a level of trust among its participants if those institutions are to function without perpetual oversight (Offe, 1999). As an early contributor to the social capital debates (Farr, 2004), Dewey understands that trust and habituation are the invisible institutions of society that make social coordination possible. But that society may include hierarchies does not mean we are left to the mercy of how they function. Our trust is never completely passive

precisely because it implies a reflexive interaction with those institutional arrangements.

The second point says that to the extent that the above conditions of power hold, the possibility must exist, when necessary, for sharing in and regulating the uses to which power will be put. Having no way to express grievances, for instance, against one's parents or state action implies not merely the working of power but a relationship of domination. As Dewey says, the 'two facts that each one is influenced in what he does and enjoys and in what he becomes by the institutions under which he lives, and that therefore he shall have, in a democracy, a voice in shaping them, are the passive and active sides of the same fact' (1987d, p. 218). To say that one shall have a voice requires us to see that participation has both active and passive elements. The first refers to when we are literally vocal, while the other denotes a background condition in which the possibility for voice informs our orientation to political power from the outset. The latter is a security mechanism to ensure that political power does not degenerate into a system that places us at the arbitrary will of another.

Dewey's position commits us to a stronger point. His account discourages, as Henry Richardson rightly worries, the desire to put 'the day-to-day routines of administrators on par with the habits of autonomous individuals' (2002, p. 71). By making the management of political power central, as Dewey does, we can account for two important features of modern societies without any obvious cost to democracy. The first is the epistemic division of labor that can be advantageous from the perspective of forming public policy. The second is the presence of hierarchically organized relationships that can have gains in terms of efficiency and productivity that speak directly to Richardson's worry. For Dewey, part of assessing any gains that we may potentially receive from the specific functioning of experts or the presence of specific hierarchical relationships must be determined based on the extent to which those gains do not leave us open to the abuse of power. His position thus commits us to invoke *ex ante* this principle of assessment to avoid such abuses as we structure and revise our institutions.

Managing power and realizing freedom

Thus far, I have argued that for Dewey the relationship between expertise and citizens is grounded in a relationship of mutual responsiveness in order to understand political problems and frame policy proposals. I have maintained that the emphasis he attaches to cooperative inquiry is fundamentally a concern about preventing power from being exercised arbitrarily. But I have also gestured to his concern with both the actual involvement we have in managing power and the future possibilities that are open to us in managing

the uses to which power will be put. The latter is less about the specific identification of freedom with the workings of political democracy, and refers more to the condition in which freedom exists. This distinction allows us to attach practical and normative weight to political democracy that is missing from Wolin's account. But this also means – a point that is in agreement with Wolin – that the management of political power should not be completely identified with such institutional structures. 'Behavior,' writes Dewey, 'is not necessarily socially valuable because carried on in the name of the public by public agents. The argument … has warned us against identifying the community and its interests with the state or the politically organized community' (Dewey, 1984b, p. 245).

His reasons for this are bound up with how he thinks about freedom. 'Freedom,' he writes in his *Ethics* of 1932, 'in its practical and moral sense is connected with possibility of growth, learning, and modification of character, just as is responsibility' (1985a, p. 305; 1983b, Chapter 25). Here, freedom is understood as reflective self-control – that is, the ability to engage in evaluation of one's actions, proposals and life projects to assess their feasibility. Reflective self-control implies a perceptual sensitivity not merely to the inner workings of one's character and the life experiences it suggest, but one's larger social horizon. Freedom is measured, Dewey says elsewhere, by the ability to 'foresee future objective alternatives and … by deliberation to choose one of them and thereby weight its chances in the struggle for future existence' (1983b, p. 214). As such, 'positive freedom is not a native gift or endowment but is acquired' (Dewey, 1985a, p. 306). In being acquired, he says, it requires 'freedom of mind and whatever degree of freedom of action and experience is necessary to produce freedom of intelligence' (Dewey, 1987d, p. 220).

When Dewey's conception of freedom is discussed what is usually emphasized is the connection between reflective self-control and human growth. The tendency is to then investigate what he means by human growth, its content, and to ask if it can it be rendered intelligible when shorn of a thick ethical notion of the good (Campbell, 1995, Chapter 5; Festenstein, 1997, Chapter 3). While these issues are important, they obscure that aspect of democracy that he believes makes reflective self-control possible in the first instance. Here I mean the very orientation that we are capable of assuming in relation to political institutions. When, for example, he discusses the relationship between freedom and organizational structures in *Human Nature and Conduct* he signals this point: 'Organization tends … to become rigid and to limit freedom. In addition to security and energy in action, novelty, risk and change are ingredients of the freedom which men desire' (Dewey, 1983b, p. 212). The possibility for changing the ways in which the organizational structures of the state are managed, marks the difference, he contends, between 'the free and the enslaved' (1984c, pp. 212, 92–114). Connecting this distinction between the free and the enslaved to the

possibility of change means that where we do not have the opportunity to redescribe the boundaries of such organizations we are not free. To be enslaved, then, does not imply a diminution in choices and the ability to act on those choices. This is not a question of exercising one's freedom understood as reflective self-control. Rather, to be enslaved denotes a more general condition in which the choices we make are framed from the outset by configurations that preclude the possibility of genuine change.

Perhaps we can give more texture to this point. Consider Dewey's 1937 essay 'Freedom':

> The immediate result of the condition under which the people of the United States won their independence was, then, to identify freedom for the most part with political freedom. … Its positive expression was confined pretty much to the right to vote, to choose public officials, and thereby share indirectly in the formation of public policies, and perchance to be elected to office oneself. … Meantime, the conditions under which citizens exercised the right of suffrage, conditions which in large measure so circumscribed and controlled the right as to reduce it for many, perhaps for the masses, to something like an empty formality, were neglected. Corruption became rife; bosses and factional political machines managed from behind the scenes … But the present political situation as well as the historic past should convince us that exclusive identification of freedom with political freedom means in the end the loss of even political freedom. (Dewey, 1984b, pp. 298–299; 1987c, p. 248)

Dewey's worry, in this passage, is nicely indexed to the importance he accords change in understanding freedom, what I referred to earlier as the ability to contest and influence the development of how power functions. Having the United States as his background, he speaks of the reification of conditions that 'circumscribed and controlled' the right of suffrage which made its purpose empty. Both control and circumspection, he maintains, resulted from the emergence of 'bosses and factional political machines' whose distinct interests framed the ends to which political democracy was put. Here he is describing a situation in which the interests of the state comes unhinged from the demos as such (cf. Dewey, 1984b, p. 255). In this instance, to use Philip Pettit's language, power is exercised in a way that 'tracks … the power-holder's personal welfare or world-view … rather than the welfare and world-view of the public' (1997, p. 22). For this reason, Dewey argues, we must be cautious not to identify the protection of freedom with the institutional elements of democracy. Freedom understood as reflective self-control must imply the prospect of giving shape to the area of social possibilities. And when this does not exist, 'political democracy is insecure' (Dewey, 1987d). To be able to shape the area of social

possibilities means that the space of political reflection in which citizens work is neither controlled nor circumscribed by the intentions of bosses, whether we describe those bosses based on their political skill or intellectual abilities.

The possibility for political change and development is illusory then if the activity of political institutions prevents us from influencing their direction. This simply means we must always be cautious about how we orient ourselves to our political institutions. As Dewey says of the state, it is 'something to be scrutinized, investigated, [and] searched for. Almost as soon as its form is stabilized, it needs to be re-made' (1984b, p. 255). We must be careful how we understand this claim, lest we describe the relationship between the demos and the state from the outset as oppositional. As we have seen in Wolin's case, this can only erode any faith we might otherwise place in the government. In saying the state will need to be re-made he does not mean we need to abandon the institutions wholesale, but rather that those institutions must be receptive to revision and expansion. They must be receptive in this way not simply because political problems abound, but also because, as Ian Shapiro explains, 'power need not be abused, but it often is, and it is wise for democrats to guard against that possibility' (1999, p. 42). From Dewey's perspective, the proviso, 'need not be,' is what prevents us from describing the state and the demos in oppositional terms, even as it discourages us from believing our institutions will automatically function for to our benefit. Part of guarding against the abuse of power requires believing that the legitimacy of democratic governance rests on the conditionality of how power will be used. Above all else, it is this belief, translated into action, which leads to political transformation.

Conclusion

Does this add value to how we understand Dewey's democratic theory? From previous studies we know that he sees cooperative inquiry as central to democratic legitimacy. Why? One central reason I have argued for here is that without having the possibility for directing power, we may find ourselves living at the mercy of another's will. This implies that cooperative inquiry is not simply important because it serves an educative function with respect to developing the virtues of citizenship, but also because it has a built-in security mechanism that guards and enables freedom. This suggests that when Dewey describes democracy as an ethical ideal he means to highlight a cultural orientation that views power as always already located in a space of conditionality, the result of which contributes to and protects human growth.

My aim, then, has not been to provide an exhaustive defense of Dewey's account of democracy. Instead, I have advanced the more modest claim that one crucial element of how he thinks about democracy rests with his desire to

manage power and prevent its use from becoming arbitrary. This complements and frames his understanding of the relationship between expertise and citizens. For Dewey, power may often function without our explicit involvement or control. Nonetheless, the ends to which power will be put cannot be of such a nature that they block the future contestability of how that power functions. Managing political power then is not merely about the range of choices that may exist at any given moment for human beings, but more significantly the ability to initiate change to expand the area in which choice is made possible. To the extent that this possibility is open, freedom remains secure. This implies caution about how our institutions function, but not perpetual doubt. The first of these is healthy for a democracy because it guards against our natural tendency to see our political order as settled – a position that will seduce us into believe that existing inequalities and injustices are conditions to which we must resign ourselves rather than overcome. Yet, the second of these – perpetual doubt – can only have a corrosive effect on how we see our political institutions.

We may nonetheless worry that Dewey's formulations are terribly imprecise. After all, he says nothing about institutions in concrete terms nor does he provide us with a blueprint for managing power relations as such. This worry, I think, misses its mark. By making power and its contestability central to his understanding of democracy, we have found a standard for how to assess the construction of new institutions and the management of institutions already in existence. And we have found a standard for managing the relationship between elites and the demos. This is not to say that power exhausts the field of inquiry when it comes to understanding democracy. But as Dewey knows well, many of democracy's problems emanate from individuals feeling that they no longer have control over the forces that govern their lives. In other words, they feel that they are at the mercy of another's will, whether that is a large corporation, an impersonal school board, or their local politician. To the extent that government institutions are complicit in this process of political alienation and domination, citizens are well within their right to rethink the purpose and boundaries of those institutions.

Acknowledgement

Note

1 Lippmann does believe that experts should be checked by a periodic plebiscite and that the public can serve this role. But it is more often than not that expertise alone is not sufficient for responding to political problems. This points to the need for a more robust account of deliberation than Lippmann can provide.

References

Bohman, J. (1999) Democracy as inquiry, inquiry as democratic: Pragmatism, social science, and the cognitive division of labor. *American Journal of Political Science* 43(2): 590–607.

Campbell, J. (1995) *Understanding John Dewey*. Chicago, IL: Open Court Press.

Dahl, R. (1956) Hierarchy, Democracy and Bargaining in Politics and Economics. In: H. Eulau *et al* (eds.) *Political Behavior*. New York: Random House, pp. 66–89.

Dahl, R. (1957) The concept of power. *Behavioral Science* 2: 201–215.

Dewey, J. (1978a) How We Think. In: J.A. Boydston (ed.) *The Middle Works 1899–1924*, Vol. 6. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, J. (1983a) Review of Public Opinion. In: J.A. Boydston (ed.) *The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, Vol. 13. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, J. (1983b) Human Nature and Conduct. In: J.A. Boydston (ed.) *The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, Vol. 14. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, J. (1984a) Practical Democracy. In: J.A. Boydston (ed.) *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, Vol. 2. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, J. (1984b) The Public and its Problems. In: J.A. Boydston (ed.) *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, Vol. 2. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, J. (1984c) The Philosophies of Freedom. In: J.A. Boydston (ed.) *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, Vol. 3. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, J. (1985a) Ethics. In: J.A. Boydston (ed.) *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, Vol. 7. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, J. (1987a) Liberalism and Social Action. In: J.A. Boydston (ed.) *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, Vol. 11. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, J. (1987b) Authority and Social Change. In: J.A. Boydston (ed.) *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, Vol. 11. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, J. (1987c) Freedom. In: J.A. Boydston (ed.) *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, Vol. 11. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Dewey, J. (1987d) Democracy and Educational Administration. In: J.A. Boydston (ed.) *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, Vol. 11. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Diggins, P. (1994) *The Promise of Pragmatism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Dryzek, J. (1990) *Discursive Democracy: Politics, Polity, and Political Science*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Farr, J. (2004) Social capital: A conceptual history. *Political Theory* 32(1): 6–33.

Festenstein, M. (1997) *Pragmatism and Political Theory: From Dewey to Rorty*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Fishkin, J. (1997) *The Voice of the People: Public Opinion and Democracy*. New York: Yale University Press.

Gaventa, J. (1980) *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Gutmann, A. and Thompson, D. (1996) *Democracy and Disagreement*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Lippmann, W. (1965) *Public Opinion*. New York: Free Press.

Lippmann, W. (2004) *The Phantom Public*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publisher.

Lukes, S. (1974) *Power: A Radical View*. New York: Macmillan.

MacGilvray, E. (2004) *Reconstructing Public Reason*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Mills, C.W. (1969) *Sociology and Pragmatism: The Higher Learning in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Muntz, D.C. (2006) *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative Versus Participatory Democracy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Offe, C. (1999) How Can We Trust Our Fellow Citizens?. In: M.E. Warren (ed.) *Democracy and Trust*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 42–88.

Pettit, P. (1997) *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Putnam, H. (1991) A Reconsideration of Deweyan Democracy. In: M. Brint and W. Weaver (eds.) *Pragmatism in Law and Society*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, pp. 217–243.

Richardson, H. (2002) *Democratic Autonomy: Public Reasoning about the Ends of Policy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Schumpeter, J. (1950) *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. New York: Harper and Row.

Shapiro, I. (1999) *Democratic Justice*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Westbrook, R. (1991) *John Dewey and American Democracy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Westbrook, R. (2005) *Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Truth*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Wolin, S. (1989) *The Presence of the Past: Essays on the State and the Constitution*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.

Wolin, S. (1993) Democracy: Electoral and Athenian. *PS: Political Science and Politics* 26(3): 475–477.

Wolin, S. (1994) Norm and Form: The Constitutionalizing of Democracy. In: J.P. Euben, J.R. Wallach and J. Ober (eds.) *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, pp. 30–58.

Wolin, S. (1996a) Fugitive Democracy. In: S. Benhabib (ed.) *Democracy and Difference: Contesting Boundaries of the Political*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 31–45.

Wolin, S. (1996b) Transgression, Equality, Voice. In: J. Ober and C. Hedrick (eds.) *Dēmokratia*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 63–90.

Wolin, S. (2004) *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University.