

The Virtues of Deliberation

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Rough words have been thrown around aisle of the Montana house this legislative session. Many seasoned political commentators noted an increase in divisive and mean-spirited rhetoric in our deliberative bodies, at both the state and national levels. This may strike many people as “nothing new in the world of politics.” But while we might expect strident and aggressive language during tough campaigns, when policymakers get down to the business of making policy, we want more reasonable and cooperative discourse to prevail.

In a recent conversation on leadership and ethics with students at The University of Montana, Missoula Mayor John Engen made some interesting connections between the use of political rhetoric and ethical behavior. Mayor Engen described an ethical leader as a person who listens with an open and respectful attitude, uses accurate language, and is humble.

The use of language in political discourse isn’t often discussed as an ethical issue. Normally, ethics is talked about in terms of violating rules conduct: for example, receiving inappropriate gifts, misuse of funds, or sending lurid text-messages to congressional pages. However, I think Mayor Engen is right to focus on the attributes of a good deliberator as a key component of the qualities of an ethical leader. I’d like to use the next few minutes to clarify the distinction between debate and deliberation, and then explain why the practices of a good deliberator are also moral virtues.

One can distinguish between debate and deliberation by their goals. On the one hand, the goal of a debate is to win. The opposing sides in the debate try to persuade the public that their view is right, and their opponents’ is wrong. Each side enters the debate sure that their opinion is right, and their opponent’s is wrong. On the other hand, the goal of a deliberation is to select the most appropriate course of action or policy. The various parties in the deliberation may offer policy solutions, but no one is certain that theirs is correct from the outset. Deliberation involves assessing alternative policies to reach goals, while debate involves persuading the public of one’s rightness by whatever means works.

Popular culture promotes adversarial debate over cooperative deliberation. This is obvious in the format of political TV programming, where talking heads pop up on the screen, take sides and argue on cue. Since the goal of debate is to win, the competing sides use whatever techniques work. Unfortunately, distortions, insults, and half-truths seem to be effective tools of debate. As a consequence, where policymakers should be deliberating, they are often quarreling.

The problem is many of the techniques that win political debates are spurious, mean spirited and immoral. If we had a clear ethics of public debates, perhaps political discourse would not degenerate. But instead, debaters often use whatever techniques they can get away with, and there seem to be few consequences for using such unscrupulous tactics.

The culture of our deliberative bodies should, by definition, promote deliberation, and the virtues of a good deliberator are not the same skills of a successful debater. In a recent book on deliberative democracy, political philosopher Robert Talisse provides a list of the virtues of deliberation. His list includes honesty, modesty, charity and integrity. Excellent deliberators are honest because they are willing to admit that their position might turn out to be faulty or need revision. They are willing to consider all the evidence and to give all proposals a fair appraisal before deciding on a policy. Modesty is required because even the best intentioned plans and policies can be ineffective or fail in practice. Modest deliberators understand that political proposals are not ultimate solutions. Hence they are able to admit error and seek correction. Charity means listening to the proposals of opponents. This means rejecting simplistic labels like "pro" and "con", "left" and "right". Excellent deliberators see these polarizing categories as obstacles to deliberation and are willing to give their political opponent's position a fair hearing. Finally, the deliberator who "embodies the virtue of integrity understands that, however divided he and his fellow citizens otherwise may be, they nonetheless are joined in the common and continuing undertaking of self-government." This requires commitment to the ideal of self-governance through the reasonable exchange of ideas.

Of course, the master of statecraft described above is rare, and the acquisition of these virtues is the product of a long process. We should be aware that our current culture promotes adversarial debate and quarrelling over reasonable and cooperative deliberation, and will not foster the development of these virtues. In other words, we want to make sure that we create a society that promotes the habits of a good deliberator over those of a crafty debater. Because in the end, this is more than a political issue: it is an ethical one.