The Ideal of Uptake in Democratic Deliberation

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Abstract
This article explores the concept of deliberative uptake, which I define as the fair consideration of the arguments, stories, and perspectives that citizens share in deliberation. Reinterpreting the democratic force of deliberation, I argue that it comes in large part from uptake, rather than inclusion or influence. As I show, however, citizens often struggle to take up what others have to say, especially those with whom they disagree. These issues of what I call limited uptake undermine democratic possibilities in pluralistic societies, but are not adequately captured in discussions about how to enhance the democratic quality of deliberation. In addition to expanding inclusion, we must find ways to broaden the enactment of deliberative uptake. After explaining the nature and significance of fair consideration, I present strategies for improving and assessing deliberative uptake and address the risks of taking up undemocratic inputs.

Keywords
deliberation, uptake, listening, inclusion, difference

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Introduction
This article explores the concept of deliberative uptake. By uptake I mean the fair consideration of the arguments, stories, and perspectives that particular citizens share in deliberation. In what follows, I reinterpret the democratic force of deliberation, showing that it comes in large part from the uptake of participants’ inputs. Efforts to democratize deliberation must go beyond inclusion to consider the extent to which citizens’ perspectives are actually taken up by others. After inclusion, it is uptake that ensures citizens have a say in the laws to which they are held.

The concept of uptake, however, has been undertheorized by both deliberative democrats and their critics. Borrowing the term “securing uptake” from Austin’s (1962) speech act theory, James Bohman (1996: 58) introduced the term to deliberative democratic
theory as a measure of “the success of dialogue.” Bohman’s (1996: 58–66, 116–118) brief but valuable treatment is still the most significant analysis on the subject to date. Iris Young (2000: 25) also mentions the concept, defining it as “when someone speaks [and] others acknowledge the expression in ways that continue the engagement.” Although these two accounts have shed initial light on this aspect of the deliberative terrain, neither provides adequate elucidation of the distinctive significance that uptake has for deliberative democratic theory.

Furthermore, while others have recognized the need for something like uptake in deliberation, for the most part they have stopped short of giving it pride of place in their accounts of the normative power of deliberation. For example, deliberative democrats have long identified the importance of mutual respect among participants as well as the need for citizens “to be flexible and open enough to undertake a genuine evaluation of [others’] opinions” (Chambers, 1996: 100; Gutmann and Thompson, 1996: 79). More often than not, however, these references to something like uptake or fair consideration (I use these terms interchangeably) are presented as background conditions or underlying assumptions of deliberative democratic theory. Uptake, however, is more than a background condition. Similar to the claims others have made in regard to inclusion, I contend that uptake is “not simply an ethic added to democratic deliberation,” but a “central element of what makes deliberative democratic processes democratic” (Mansbridge et al., 2012: 12). Uptake gets at the normative core of meaningfully democratic deliberation.

Further treatment of uptake is warranted not only because of the significant normative weight it carries, but also because of the difficulty we have achieving it. The difficulty we have really considering what others have to say, especially those with whom we disagree, undermines democratic possibilities in large, complex, and diverse societies. Moreover, these issues of what I will call limited uptake are not typically captured in discussions about exclusion, nor are they adequately corrected by efforts to expand inclusion. To date, deliberativists seeking to address concerns of exclusion have focused on expanding access to deliberative fora and increasing opportunities for participation in public spheres. But as we succeed in broadening the diversity of voices included in a deliberative system, we nevertheless must also confront the challenge of uptake: ensuring these voices are actually heard and ultimately considered.

Take, for example, the Black Lives Matter movement, which has used its collective “voice” to protest racial injustice in the United States and resist an unequal status quo. Of particular concern to this movement is the impunity with which police officers use lethal force against Black Americans. As the movement gained attention in popular discourses, however, certain dominant segments of society, including many White middle-class American citizens and political elites, responded by insisting “all lives matter.” This retort, essentially a non-sequitur, reveals an ungenerous reading of the movement. Here, the actual arguments and grievances voiced by Black Americans are ignored or else misunderstood and, as a result, their experiences are rendered invisible and their voices inaudible. Whether disingenuous or not, this response to the Black Lives Matter movement shows the limitations of democratic deliberation and political action when others do not conscientiously engage with a group’s claims. If inclusive deliberation is to have a meaningfully democratic impact, we must search for ways to broaden the enactment of deliberative uptake.

Critics of deliberative democracy, often referred to as “difference democrats,” have consistently contended that certain features of democratic deliberation make it ill-suited for achieving democracy in contexts of deep difference. The difficulty we have securing uptake across difference would seem only to confirm these charges. As I will show,
however, a better understanding of the centrality of uptake can actually help deliberativists address concerns regarding deliberation’s inability to accommodate the deep differences and disagreements in large pluralistic societies.

To develop a better understanding of the significance and character of uptake, especially in deliberation across difference, I proceed in three parts. Part 1, “The Need for Uptake in Democratic Deliberation,” reveals the need for a better understanding of uptake. Specifically, I discuss the difficulty deliberative democratic theory has had in responding to charges of exclusion. While these concerns are valid and undermine the democratic prospects of deliberation, they are not unanswerable. Yet, as I show, previous efforts to make deliberation more accommodating of difference have failed. Leaning too heavily on inclusion and aiming mainly at increasing access and pluralizing inputs, deliberativists have all but ignored the equally vital task of ensuring participants in deliberation understand the importance of adequately considering newly included perspectives and modes of communication.

Correcting for this oversight, Part 2, “Unpacking Uptake,” presents a theoretical account of what uptake entails and shows that uptake is essential to explaining how we might enhance democracy—so that citizens understand themselves as the authors of the laws to which they are held—in contexts of difference and disagreement. As I show, the advantage of making uptake a core deliberative ideal is not that it solves problems of deliberation across difference, but that it allows us to better understand those problems. In Part 3, “The Ideal of Uptake in Practice,” I consider the risks and difficulties of pursuing the ideal of uptake in a non-ideal world. For example, how should we deal with the inputs of democracy’s enemies, e.g. racists and authoritarians? This article shows how uptake can be deployed defensively in deliberation to help citizens identify undemocratic inputs that should be denied influence on democratic decisions.

The Need for Uptake in Democratic Deliberation

In what follows, I lay out the theoretical stakes of deliberative uptake by showing the insufficiency of inclusion for achieving democratic self-rule in large pluralistic societies. Efforts to address problems of exclusion in deliberation will be incomplete until we attend to the question of ensuring uptake. Problematically, neither the importance nor the challenge of achieving uptake in contexts of deep difference and contestation is captured by existing efforts to make deliberation more inclusive.

Since the deliberative turn in democratic theory, deliberation—understood as fair communication and debate among citizens—has been considered as fundamental a dimension of democratic citizenship as voting. Gaining a majority of votes does not necessarily confer democratic legitimacy on a decision. A majority of votes are just as likely to represent the will of the strongest (in numbers) as the will of the demos. As Habermas (1996: 304) explains in his key articulation of deliberative politics, “The means by which a majority comes to be a majority is the more important thing.”

The normative link between democracy and deliberation can be traced back to Habermas’s theory of communicative action, in which he harnesses the potential of everyday communication to validate claims intersubjectively. Through language we can come to mutual understanding with our interlocutors and thus are able to coordinate action legitimately, read intersubjectively through persuasion, rather than relying on force or manipulation.
Developing his research program further, Habermas applies his theory of communicative action to the realm of politics, where the question of interest becomes how we might resolve ruptures in ongoing communicative action that occur when someone challenges the validity of a given law, practice, or claim. In order for disruptions of ongoing communicative action—the stuff of politics—to be resolved democratically, we need communicative procedures that recognize the “moral equality of voice” of all citizens (White, 2017). Only then can all citizens see themselves as meaningful participants in the lawmaking authority.

According to the past 20 years of research in democratic deliberation, the democratic force of deliberation comes from its level of inclusiveness (Chambers, 2018: 268; Mansbridge et al., 2012; Young, 2000: 13). As both critics and defenders of deliberation have pointed out, deliberation’s democratizing potential will be greatly diminished if some citizens, perspectives, or voices are excluded from debate. Indeed, when referring to deliberation’s “democratic function,” Mansbridge et al. (2012: 13) use the terms “inclusive” and “democratic” interchangeably.

Given the importance of inclusion to democratic legitimacy, it is worrisome that critics have raised concerns regarding what they see as deliberation’s inability to accommodate the deep differences and disagreements that exist in large pluralistic societies. These critics, often called “difference democrats,” contend that the narrowly rational means, the consensual ends, and the unequal conditions of democratic deliberation make it inhospitable to diversity.

While these now well-known suspicions of exclusion have led some to dispense with the deliberative ideal altogether, others have tried to correct it. In what follows, I present the challenge, leveled by difference democrats, that deliberation struggles to deliver on democracy’s promise of inclusion. Then, I go on to evaluate deliberativists’ various responses to these concerns, concluding that they are inadequate due to a shared inattention to the challenge of uptake.

**Responding to Charges of Exclusion in Democratic Deliberation**

Those who take issue with the means of deliberation claim that rational argument can be “coercive and exclusive” (Dryzek, 2000: 57). By permitting only certain kinds of reasons and restricting the types of communication in public discourse, models of democratic deliberation run the risk of marginalizing some groups and individuals while privileging others. Similarly, those who take issue with the consensual ends of deliberation argue that the single-minded drive toward agreement creates “remainders” who are ultimately left out of the discussion (Connolly, 1995; Mouffe, 2000; Sanders, 1997). The deliberative ideal of consensus, even when pursued through a variety of means, crowds out difference and disagreement. In a third category of difference democrats are those who take issue with the conditions of deliberation, or what critics identify as the inherent power asymmetries present in society at the time of deliberation. For these critics, social, political, and economic inequality make fair deliberation a naïve and misguided goal (Jackson, 2015; Sanders, 1997; Shapiro, 2003).

Importantly, defenders of deliberation have acknowledged that, if true in either theory or practice, the concerns raised by difference democrats would undermine the normative force of deliberation, affording a deliberative system no greater claim to democratic legitimacy than alternative models. Those seeking to address concerns of exclusion from within a deliberative framework have aimed to identify and then remedy the specific
features of deliberation that thwart the inclusion of minority perspectives or dissenting voices.

For example, those who are worried about the exclusionary tendencies of supposedly neutral procedures or means of deliberation have advocated for a broader conception of what is considered acceptable input (Hall, 2007: 92; Krause, 2008; Young, 2000: 66). Deliberativists, including Habermas himself, have moved away from a preference for rational argumentation, narrowly defined. Other defenders of Habermas have reinterpreted the ends of deliberation, recasting the Habermasian public sphere as inherently contestatory (Martin, 2005). Unlike formal decision-making procedures, the process of public opinion formation that takes place in diffuse public spheres never ends and therefore need not crowd out dissent or difference for the sake of coming to a decision (Dahlberg, 2005). The public sphere not only accommodates, but actually depends on the difference and disagreement found in large pluralistic democracies (Markell, 1997). According to these scholars, deliberative democracy’s perceived problem of consensus may not be as dire as it first appears (White and Farr, 2012).

Finally, responding to the unequal and power laden conditions of deliberation, defenders have begun searching for ways that democratic deliberation can exist within (rather than completely overcome) the inevitably unequal and non-ideal conditions of contemporary politics. For example, some have proposed giving historically underrepresented groups veto power over issue domains that directly affect them (Bohman, 1996: 148). Such a procedural change not only helps mitigate the effects of inevitably unequal deliberative conditions, but could also improve these conditions by ensuring marginalized groups are not ignored out of hand. Deliberativists have also highlighted the potential for using discourse itself to help resist unequal conditions by helping “expose uncomfortable valences of privilege, highlight moments of collective shame, or disrupt cherished communal narratives” (Feola, 2014: 514).

The approach taken by defenders of the democratic force of deliberation is telling. Each of these lines of defense acknowledges that suspicions of exclusion in deliberative democracy are of real importance. Indeed, Habermas’s (1994) model of democracy is specifically intended to work across difference and disagreement. Charges of exclusion, therefore, should worry even the most committed deliberative democrat, as they threaten deliberation’s normative core and undermine its democratizing potential. For these more sympathetic critics, however, exclusion is not an essential feature of deliberative democracy. They depart from more agonistically minded difference democrats, therefore, insofar as they understand the exclusion of difference to be a problem for deliberation, rather than a problem of deliberation. As such, they have focused on making deliberation more inclusive, specifically by making room for contestation and even agonism within deliberative procedures.

Although necessary for addressing the concerns thematized by difference democrats, the remedies discussed above are not enough. The reason for this is because, according to its own normative commitments, deliberative democratic theory is incomplete without an account of the extent to which included perspectives, passions, and dissent are actually received and ultimately considered by those to whom they are addressed. Inclusion, understood as procedural openness, cannot by itself ensure democratic outcomes.

The Insufficiency of Inclusion

In order for all citizens to meaningfully participate in the lawmaking authority, a deliberative system must somehow more effectively affirm the moral equality of each. Citizens’
inputs, therefore, need to be both included and duly considered in processes of collective opinion- and will-formation. Young (2000: 5–6), who literally wrote the book on Inclusion and Democracy, makes a similar point when she highlights the need for citizens not only to be included in deliberation, but to also have the opportunity to actually influence outcomes. Importantly, Young (2000: 55) recognizes that having the opportunity to influence outcomes requires more than just equal access to deliberative forums. Namely, it requires what she calls “internal inclusion.” As Young (2000: 55) explains, when citizens’ inputs are ignored and dismissed because “the dominant mood may find their ideas or modes of expression silly or simple, and not worthy of consideration,” they are denied any real opportunity to influence outcomes and are, thus, internally excluded.

The concept of inclusion, typically understood, does not adequately capture the kind of harm that is done when one is allowed to speak, but is then ignored or not taken seriously. These instances of what I call failed uptake can have a chilling effect on political talk and even reduce a person’s sense of political efficacy (Fedesco, 2015; Grillos, 2018: 122). Why should I spend time and energy sharing my perspective if I know, from past experience, that others are not going to seriously consider it? But more than these indirect negative effects on discourse, failed uptake also leads directly to a democratic deficit insofar as citizens are denied a say in the laws to which they are held.

Helpfully, Young’s discussion of internal inclusion and exclusion actually begins to move the conversation beyond inclusion. Yet, she diminishes the impact of her insight insofar as she describes the opportunity to influence outcomes as simply another side of the same coin of inclusion. Folding the opportunity to influence into the concept of inclusion has the effect of overburdening inclusion with the responsibility of guaranteeing not only equal access, but fair consideration. And as I will show, this overburdening of inclusion is both theoretically and practically untenable.

Wrapping the issue of serious consideration into the concept of inclusion poses practical challenges insofar as the usual strategies we use for improving inclusion are ill-suited for ensuring uptake, something which defies procedural guarantees. Young (2000: 57) even concedes that “no rules or formalities can ensure that people will treat others in the political public with respect, and really listen to their claims.” And indeed, Young is right about this. But instead of tackling this crucial challenge head on, Young turns back to that which rules and formalities can ensure: namely, inclusion or access to deliberation. And so, in a very unsatisfying move, Young proposes combatting the problem of “internal exclusion,” by loosening the restrictions typically placed on the types of reasons and the forms of communication permitted in deliberation. Specifically, Young (2000: 57) recommends broadening our conception of political communication to include greeting, rhetoric, narrative, as well as explicitly disruptive modes of communication. This innovation certainly makes deliberation more accommodating and inclusive. But it remains unclear whether these procedural changes can effectively promote fair consideration. No matter how inclusive a deliberative system, we know that individual closed-mindedness or unequal social conditions can affect which people, groups, ideas, or kinds of communication are seen as worthy of our consideration and thus given a real opportunity to influence outcomes (Fricker, 2007).

Young does not explain why (or even if) citizens would be better able or more likely to listen to these disorderly, disruptive, or annoying forms of communication than the rational and orderly argumentation endorsed by Habermas. Even the most engaging storytelling will not necessarily make a perspective more amenable to being taken up. What I take to be a compelling story may be dismissed by another as mere rhetoric. Of course,
Young’s goal is to change what is considered acceptable input in the first place so that storytelling is not dismissed as an inappropriate way of conveying perspectives in politics. While these concerns are not unanswerable from Young’s perspective, she leaves them largely unaddressed. Missing from her treatment is an account of the conditions of receptivity that will help or hinder citizens’ fair consideration of what is shared.

We should simply admit the insufficiency of inclusion for ensuring that citizens have equal opportunity to influence democratic decisions. Instead of stretching the concept of inclusion to cover all necessary conditions of democratic deliberation, I contend that we get more critical purchase on democratic deliberation if we distinguish between inclusion and fair consideration.

More recently, Andrew Dobson (2014) has joined Young in arguing that the political power of voice depends on others’ receptivity. Furthermore, he has offered listening as the missing ingredient of inclusive deliberation, even calling the dearth of political science research on the topic of listening the “new democratic deficit” (Dobson, 2012). According to Dobson (2014: 12), listening is an essential means of expanding inclusion.

But Dobson (2014: 170–196) dissents from Young in arguing that we can design “rules and formalities” so as to institutionalize listening. By way of example, he discusses the Occupy Wall Street movement’s use of the “human microphone” as a tool for ensuring voices were heard. As Dobson (2014: 180) explains, this technique “enabled unusual levels of inclusion in noisy environments.” But Dobson’s example of institutionalized listening actually refers to the amplification, not the reception, of a particular input. A hearing person who walks by OWS protestors making use of the human microphone does not have to listen. To avoid hearing the message, passersby may cross the street or turn up the volume in their headphones.

Contrary to his stated aim, Dobson collapses questions of receptivity into questions of access and audibility. Making a message audible or accessible is necessary, but not sufficient for ensuring it will be heard. Moreover, even if a person listens, in the sense of auditorily receiving a message, this auditory listening would not necessarily amount to deliberative uptake. Thus, while Dobson helpfully identifies the need to go beyond what we typically understand as inclusion to consider whether messages are received, his treatment of listening nonetheless reproduces an overburdening of inclusion. Still needed is an account of the consideration that occurs after a message has been heard or received.

Just as deliberative democracy replaced more “minimalist” understandings of aggregative democracy by supplementing voting with deliberation, so too must a conception of inclusion be supported by something more. Even after the conceptual overhaul that Young and Dobson offer, inclusion fits within democratic theory like pieces of old plumbing overburdened after a large-scale renovation. Inclusion will not guarantee fair consideration in deliberation across deep difference when encounters with others may be experienced as existential threats or affronts to one’s own identity. If we are to begin to address seriously the issues raised by difference democrats, issues which undermine deliberative democracy’s normative core, we must go beyond inclusion to examine the related, though distinct, issue of uptake.

Like me, Robert Goodin (2003: 194) points to the insufficiency of conceptions of inclusion on offer in deliberative democratic theory when he writes, “once upon a time, ‘democratic inclusion’ was regarded as mainly a matter of expanding the franchise.” Due to persistent problems of “social exclusion,” however, “our faith in that simplistic model of democratic inclusion has waned” (Goodin, 2003: 194). According to Goodin, due to
both problems of scale and issues of social exclusion, mere inclusion is not enough to ensure meaningfully democratic deliberation.

He goes on to ask how we might ensure that citizens’ perspectives are actually taken up and meaningfully considered. Introducing the concept of “democratic deliberation within,” by which he means internal reflection rather than public discussion, Goodin turns deliberation inward. As (Goodin, 2003: 7) explains, his key theoretical innovation “is a new way of conceptualizing democratic deliberation—as something that occurs internally, within each individual’s head, and not exclusively or even primarily in an interpersonal setting.”

But in his attempt to promote reflection through deliberation within, Goodin alters our conception of deliberation such that the communicative component almost completely falls out. As such, instead of strengthening or reinforcing what he calls “mere inclusion,” Goodin waters down the concept further. Imaginative or virtual inclusion replaces the real thing. What gets considered are not so much the actual voices of our fellow citizens, but their perspectives as we imagine them. Relying on reflective deliberation or imaginative perspective taking, we exacerbate the threat of (internal and external) exclusion by making citizens responsible not only for considering others’ perspectives, but imaginatively representing them as well. Goodin, like other proponents of empathetic or imaginative perspective taking, including Michael Morrell (2010) and Hannah Arendt (1968) miss its potential pathologies (Young, 1997: 360).

Consider, for example, that even Arendt’s (1968: 220) concept of “enlarged mentality’,” which necessarily assumes the presence of others and cannot function in strict isolation, requires not actual communication, but merely “anticipated communication with others.” Although real inclusion in actual (not just virtual) deliberative encounters is insufficient, it is still necessary for achieving meaningfully democratic deliberation. Before we can take up another’s perspective, we must first encounter it, whether in face-to-face interactions, a memoir or a documentary. And as I have shown elsewhere, even when practiced within communication, imaginative perspective taking does not always enhance deliberation (Scudder, 2016).

Yet, efforts to promote deliberation within, empathy, or an enlarged mentality, are on the right track insofar as they aim to move beyond “mere inclusion” in order to ensure people give careful thought to the perspectives and opinions of others. The challenge, however, is to encourage reflection and promote fair consideration without weakening the real inclusiveness of a deliberative system.

In turning to uptake, I mean to emphasize not only that a perspective must be considered in order to have democratic effect (hence the insufficiency of inclusion), but also that a perspective must be actually communicated before it can be considered (hence the insufficiency of internal reflection or deliberation within). Efforts to broaden communicative inclusion (like Young’s and Dobson’s) and deepen reflection (like Goodin’s) must be meaningfully linked in contexts of actual democratic deliberation (Ercan et al., 2019). In “Unpacking Uptake” below, I define uptake and explain how it operates within an inclusive deliberative system to generate democratic legitimacy.

### Unpacking Uptake

In this section, I define deliberative uptake and explain its democratic significance. Again, by uptake, I mean giving due consideration to the arguments, stories, and perspectives that particular citizens share in inclusive deliberation. As I argue, it is only by having our
inputs taken up or fairly considered that we achieve moral equality of voice and thus can see ourselves as meaningful participants in a decision-making process. After presenting this theoretical account, I go on to discuss strategies for improving and assessing the quality of deliberative uptake among citizens.

**Defining Uptake**

Bohman (1996: 56), who first introduced the concept of uptake to deliberative democratic theory, argues that in order for an individual engaging in the collective decision-making process to accept the outcome, he must “recognize his own intentions as part of the deliberative activity, even if it is not directly a part of its specific outcome.” Being sensitive to the “dilemmas of difference,” Bohman (1996: 59) knows that deliberation will not always resolve disagreements or reveal common ground. As Bohman (1996: 58) explains, the success of dialogue is measured instead “in the uptake of other points of view and reasons into speakers’ own interpretations of the ongoing course of discussion.”

For Bohman (1996: 55), uptake is the key to understanding how deliberation can repair a “problematic situation” caused by a breakdown in coordination. As Bohman (1996: 59) explains, uptake allows actors divided by disagreement to cooperate once again not by “restoring equilibrium” or “balancing reasons,” but by helping them “revis[e] the common understandings that are operative in ongoing cooperative activity.” While taking up a particular input does not mean it will necessarily shape the output in a direct way, uptake allows us to, at the very least, incorporate others’ intentions and perspectives in a “dynamic process of reflection and revision” Bohman (1996: 59).

As will be clear from the following, my treatment of uptake is not at odds with Bohman’s. In fact, some of the discussion below elaborates on the theoretical insights uncovered in his brief examination of the topic. Yet, compared to Bohman’s focus on uptake as a means to an end, namely, a means to restoring coordination that has broken down, I take uptake to be an end in itself. While uptake is certainly essential to achieving desirable deliberative outcomes, I also contend that achieving uptake is itself a normatively significant outcome, one that infuses deliberative encounters with democratic force. In taking up what others say we recognize their moral equality of voice. As such, uptake is constitutive of the democratic force of deliberation. Put differently, citizens have not meaningfully participated in the lawmaking authority unless they secure uptake from their fellow citizens.

To help explain the constitutive power of uptake in deliberation, let me return to the concept of uptake in speech acts developed by Austin. According to Austin (1962: 116), one must secure uptake in order to act in speaking. But while uptake is required for someone to act in speaking, Austin distinguishes it from the effects or consequences of that speech act. As Austin (1962: 116) explains, “I cannot be said to have warned an audience unless it hears what I say and takes what I say in a certain sense.” Yet, the uptake that is required for me to effectively act in, say, warning people is distinct from and prior to any consequences that my warning may produce, including their judging my warning to be valid. For example, I have not acted in warning people unless they hear me yell “Fire!,” and understand that utterance to be an assessment of our current surroundings. But so long as they hear and understand me, even if they do not heed my warning or otherwise respond, I can be said to have successfully acted in warning them.

When it comes to deliberative uptake, hearing and understanding are essential. For example, you cannot consider people’s input if they do not speak audibly or if, in the
absence of an interpreter, they speak or sign a language you do not understand. In the context of deliberation, however, uptake involves not only receiving and understanding the utterance, but actually considering it as well, in the sense of entertaining it as a serious normative claim. Yet, deliberative uptake is distinct from the result of that consideration. And so, while uptake ensures deliberative inputs are duly evaluated in the decision-making process, it does not guarantee they will be reflected in the decision itself. Importantly, we can consider a fellow citizen’s point of view without integrating it into the structure of what we see as legitimate. Indeed, successful uptake will not always involve reshaping a common understanding among citizens as Bohman suggests it will. But the resulting deliberative output will still have a greater presumption of democratic legitimacy to the extent that all arguments, even those ultimately rejected, have been considered.

Consider, for example, that my deliberation with a White supremacist will not necessarily shape my preferences or alter my thinking regarding the best course of collective action. Our deliberation is also unlikely to produce a “meta-consensus” whereby I accept the legitimacy of my interlocutor’s values (Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2006). Indeed, contra Bohman, my taking up this individual’s input may very well lead to further breakdown in coordination. Yet, even if I walk away from or shout over the person, I do not weaken the normative power of deliberation, so long as I have first considered the sense and meaning of the claims.

Uptake, then appears to be a potentially attainable democratic ideal in a world of difference and disagreement, insofar as we do not have to agree or find common ground with our interlocutors in order to consider what they have to say. Yet, as I explain below, uptake is not always straightforward. Distinct from inclusion, uptake faces its own obstacles, especially in large pluralistic societies in which citizens have to negotiate different experiences and perspectives, as well as competing interests and clashing values when making decisions with real and disparate consequences for citizens.

Securing Uptake

Fair consideration is not automatic and should not be assumed to follow inclusion, especially given the dynamics of identity/difference that characterize the relationships of citizens within large pluralistic societies. When confronted with ideas or life experiences that contradict our own, our initial impulse is often to dismiss, reject, and even delegitimize them (Connolly, 2002). Furthermore, due to the limits of our ability to understand those who are different from us, uptake can fail even when admirably motivated citizens take the time to engage with one another. Like more agonistic democrats, I too accept an ontology of identity/difference as a background condition of democratic engagement. As such, I recognize the ways in which citizens are not only divided, but constituted by their differences. This ontological reality affects not only our willingness, but our ability to fairly consider others’ ideas.

The difficulty we have in securing uptake would seem to present a new challenge to difference-minded deliberativists attempting to rehabilitate deliberation instead of abandoning it in favor of agonism. Inputs in deliberation are not the communicative equivalent of pre-sliced bread waiting to be jammed into our mind-toaster. Meaning is often partially constituted in deliberation itself: speakers do not always start out with a clear message in mind. And a person’s meaning can remain obscure even after others make a good faith effort to hear and understand what they are saying. Indeed, we often struggle to fully
understand, let alone clearly articulate, our own feelings, grievances, or political positions. Understanding, and so uptake, can evade even the most generous of interlocutors.

Despite the challenges to achieving uptake, pursuing it as an ideal still offers our best chance of achieving meaningfully democratic deliberation across difference and disagreement. Importantly, however, we must pursue uptake while remaining sensitive to an ontology of identity/difference. As such, when citizens discuss deep experiential differences that others may never fully understand, we might hope only for a kind of uptake where what the speaker says is comprehended as, at least, an initially legitimate claim in deliberation. In other cases, we might find that uptake was achieved in some sense, even if only partially. For example, perhaps my opposition to a certain policy was registered by my fellow citizens, but they misunderstood my specific concerns or they underestimated the strength of my opposition. Borrowing more of Austin’s (1962: 16) language, we might refer to this as a case of “infelicitous” uptake.

While it is important to recognize these failures of uptake and their impact on our democratic prospects, we should differentiate them from failures of uptake that result from ideological rigidity, willful misinterpretations, and prejudice. In other words, not all failures of uptake are created equal. Failures of uptake that result from our best efforts to understand and consider another’s perspective, for example, may be an inevitable part of deliberating across difference. And the democratic functioning of a polity will not necessarily be improved if we were to somehow remove these “kinks,” say, by avoiding certain topics in debate, or by downplaying differences between citizens through appeals to empathy.

Crucially, our efforts to secure uptake should be aimed at fostering the conditions for uptake, rather than fruitlessly trying to guarantee uptake itself. In other words, instead of trying to transcend the limits of our ability to understand others, we ought to pursue the ideal of uptake by making room for difference in deliberation. And as I will explain, to do so, we ought to encourage and prepare citizens to listen even when understanding is difficult.

Recently, Dobson (2014) has offered the most in-depth look at democratic listening, an otherwise undervalued act of citizenship (see also Beausoleil, 2017; Bickford, 1996; Dreher, 2009). As discussed above, Dobson equates the democratic power of listening to the ideal of inclusion. In contrast, I turn to listening for its role in connecting inclusive communication and reflective citizenship, with the intention of better achieving uptake. While not the same as uptake, listening occurs on the way to uptake.

When it comes to ensuring the conditions of uptake have been met, the disposition of the listener matters as much as the act of listening itself. Importantly, simple listening would not meet the normative threshold of fair consideration. Democratic listening is more than merely letting someone talk, but less than agreeing or complying with what you hear. Democratic listeners listen to their fellow citizens so that they can take their perspectives or preferences into account. Uptake thus requires us to go beyond questions of procedure to consider the dispositions of citizen-listeners acting within an otherwise inclusive and deliberative political system.

Lamenting deliberative democracy’s turn away from individual level analysis in favor of a structural functional one, David Owen and Graham Smith (2015: 221) have proposed reintroducing certain expectations of democratic citizenship. Specifically, Owen and Smith (2015: 229) argue that a democratic system should be judged according to whether it encourages and enables citizens to adopt what they call a “deliberative stance.” Owen and Smith (2015: 229) describe the stance as “a particular type of orientation; one that is
challenging and fragile.” While they do not fill in its content, I would argue that any adequate notion of a deliberative stance would have to include an orientation toward serious and attentive listening.

Once again, successfully encouraging all citizens to adopt a “deliberative stance” and listen to one another will not always result in uptake. Even if uptake is not achieved, however, an attentive and serious disposition on the part of citizen-listeners can still be democratically useful insofar as it helps ensure deliberation continues in the absence of agreement, consensus, or understanding. Furthermore, instances of limited uptake that result from our best efforts to fairly consider another’s input can still confer democratic benefits on deliberation, as when a listening encounter helps a person understand not the other, but instead “networks of privilege and power and one’s own location within them” (Dreher, 2009: 451).

Even when elusive, the ideal of uptake can improve our understanding of the barriers to democracy in large complex societies. Specifically, it can help us identify and diagnose issues of unequal standing and epistemic injustice caused by structural inequalities or prejudice, which unlike the simple presence of difference and disagreement, do represent flaws in a supposedly democratic system.11

Absent appeals to uptake, claims made against a democratic system can only be evaluated according to the norm of inclusion or the expectation of influence. As such, claims of domination that cannot be easily validated by pointing to formal exclusion are often assessed according to whether one agrees with the substance of the input that was rejected. Uptake, which offers a middle ground between mere inclusion and actual influence, is valuable precisely because it encourages us to continually strive to differentiate between times when a person’s voice is ignored and prematurely dismissed, on the one hand, and instances when a group of citizens was included and had their arguments considered, but simply did not see their will reflected in the law, on the other.

**Observing Uptake**

If we are to adopt uptake as an ideal with which to assess the democratic quality of a deliberative system, we must have some way of knowing if and when the conditions for fair consideration have been achieved. Problematically, the limitations of our current understanding of uptake are not only normative, but empirical as well (Bächtiger et al., 2010: 56). Admittedly, it is difficult to know for sure whether someone is listening for the “right reasons.” I contend, however, that we can get a sense as to whether the conditions for uptake have been met by taking into account the perception of speakers, specifically the extent to which they feel that their fellow citizens listened to their input (Srader, 2015). Thus, when it comes to assessing deliberation according to the ideal of uptake, we ought to consider whether citizens feel as if they were given a fair hearing.

Most of us have a sense of when people are really paying attention to us versus merely going through the motions or reloading their next argument or response. As Bickford (1996: 157) explains, “‘Being listened to’ is an experience we have in the world.” Anyone who has given a lecture has probably noticed when a student (or two) tunes out. Even when students perform active listening, feigning rapt attention, professors can usually tell whether they are actually paying attention or surfing the Internet. Crucially, the reason that we—that is, citizens, representatives, and democratic theorists—should care about whether someone feels like they have been heard is not because feeling heard is the goal of deliberation, though it may still be a good in and of itself.12 Instead, we care
about feelings of being heard insofar as they provide a relevant piece of information for assessing the quality of deliberative uptake and thus the extent to which citizens have had a meaningful say in the laws to which they are held.

In the broad informal public sphere, this approach would entail paying attention to discourses and practices of exclusion as well as to repeated complaints of “not being heard” (Elliott, 1994: 431). And when it comes to assessing the quality of uptake in discrete deliberative encounters or small-scale deliberative venues, we would want to ask participants to report whether they feel like their input was given a fair hearing.13

Of course, there will be times when individuals or groups claim (unpersuasively) that their voices have not been heard, when, in fact, their perspectives were heard, considered, and simply rejected. Participant perspectives, in other words, are not always reliable, especially under conditions of “gross ideological domination,” for example, when people with relative privilege interpret advances in equality to be evidence of their own oppression (Bächtiger et al., 2010: 57). But while not definitive, these perceptions, which are currently left out of assessments of discourse quality (see Steiner, 2012), can still help uncover patterns of failed uptake. In the end, the only way to know whether or not uptake has been secured is likely through further engagement (Bickford, 1996: 157). Failures of uptake are not proven so much as they are “revealed” over time through a citizen’s treatment of and interactions with those whose inputs they are supposed to be taking up (Habermas, 1984: 41).

Despite the challenges we face in redeeming claims of failed uptake, framing claims of injustice according to the ideal of uptake can still have a direct democratizing effect on discourse insofar as it reminds us what we owe and are owed according to the expectations of democratic citizenship. While citizens are owed more than inclusion, uptake does not guarantee you will “get your way.” Through appeals to uptake, we are reminded that the principles of democracy do not guarantee influence, nor the right to dictate political outcomes. Indeed, even when an individual or group convincingly highlights failures of uptake, it does not follow that their preferences and demands are themselves worthy of implementation. Rather, it means that they are worthy of our consideration.

**The Ideal of Uptake in Practice**

From the preceding, fair consideration emerges as an essential standard for evaluating claims of exclusion or domination made in a supposedly democratic polity marked by dissensus. In this section, I consider the risks of putting uptake to work as a deliberative ideal. I have presented uptake as a universal deliberative ideal. But we know that, in practice, deliberation will include the input and perspectives of not only the marginalized and powerless, but democracy’s enemies as well. Are all people owed uptake? If so, from whom?

First, does the expectation to fairly consider the inputs of others apply equally to members of a minority or marginalized group as it does to the relatively powerful and privileged members of society? Relatedly, are there circumstances in which uptake harms a democratic system? Inclusive deliberation introduces the demos to the hateful and destructive inputs of White nationalists, misogynists, and authoritarians. Is democracy improved when we take up these messages? Does democracy really require citizens to expose themselves to this kind of hate and enmity? Or, might there be a democratic equivalent of poison that, as a rule, ought to be expelled immediately without being meaningfully taken up? These questions must figure into any discussion of deliberative uptake, and are particularly relevant in light of recent political events in the United States. Here, I am thinking about the rise of White nationalist violence and rhetoric since the 2016 US
The challenges of securing uptake, which exist even across horizontal relations of social distance, are exacerbated by power differentials. The relatively powerful “middle segments” of society are often unaccustomed, if not unwilling, to listen to the voices of the disadvantaged and the oppressed (White, 2017). These refusals to listen seem to present an obvious democratic deficit for deliberative decision-making. But the democratic advantage of encouraging members of less powerful or marginalized groups to listen to dominant discourses is not as clear. For the less privileged, paying attention to the inputs of others is not always a choice, nor is it done for the benefit of the other. Listening has long been a tool of the powerless, used to anticipate the whims of the powerful and to detect deceit or veiled threats. Indeed, not listening is itself an exercise of power. Perhaps, then, our aim should be to encourage dominant segments of society to listen, while empowering others to tune out certain voices, particularly the voices of those who seek to oppress (Dovi, 2009: 1182). On the contrary, I maintain the universality of the ideal of uptake in deliberative democratic theory.

Indeed, I would argue that it is precisely by pursuing uptake as a universal democratic ideal that we can begin to correct for the undue influence of dominant groups and discourses. Importantly, the expectation of fair consideration is not just about being receptive to what others have to say, but being critical as well. According to the ideal of uptake, democracy suffers as much when the voices of the oppressed are included without consideration as when the voices of dominant groups achieve influence without being critically assessed (Button and Garrett, 2016: 48). Pursuing the ideal of uptake, our goal is to prevent citizens from summarily rejecting or accepting what others say, especially those with relative power. This critical processing at the heart of uptake is crucial precisely because inclusive deliberation introduces the inputs of the marginalized and powerless, alongside the inputs of the dominant and powerful (Dovi, 2009).

While it is true that in pursuing the ideal of uptake, we run the risk of normalizing and legitimizing dangerous and undemocratic inputs, it is deliberative uptake that, if functioning properly, allows a democratic system to protect against and deny undue influence to anti-democratic inputs. Indeed, it is only by taking up what others say that citizens can determine which ideas and perspectives ought to be processed out, and therefore denied influence in democratic institutions. Uptake can effectively sound an alarm, helping citizens identify and defend against threats to democracy. In other words, uptake can be used defensively by democratic citizens.

Still problematic, however, are the uneven burdens that an obligation to consider all inputs imposes on those individuals who are targeted by hateful or discriminatory speech and policy proposals. Meeting the requirement of fair consideration is less challenging for citizens who are in the majority or otherwise have a privileged position in society. If we are to accept uptake as a universal democratic ideal, we must continually search for ways to alleviate the uneven burdens that an expectation of fair consideration places on the less powerful and those individuals and groups who are targeted by hateful or abusive inputs.

For one, we must direct energy and attention toward empowering citizens to respond critically and forcefully to inputs they find unacceptable or dangerous. We can begin these efforts by reminding citizens that to be deemed fair, the consideration, and the conversation for that matter, need not carry on forever. Yet, even after I have taken up and rejected a hateful and unpersuasive perspective, it is appropriate (and prudent) to check back in periodically to see what a particular group or individual is saying. In such a case, I may rely on a
trusted ally who is not personally targeted by hate speech to listen for me, in other words, to act as a liaison in future communicative interactions with any group or individual who targets me with inflammatory or discriminatory political speech or proposals.

Democratic deliberation requires a not insignificant level of psychological robustness on the part of citizen-listeners who are targeted by hate speech (Bejan, 2017: 162). It is important to remember, however, that this requirement is not imposed by the ideal of uptake itself, but by the structural inequalities, ideologies of domination, and social pathologies of privilege that plague contemporary democratic politics. Moreover, it is precisely by adopting the ideal of fair consideration that we can better understand and so begin to address these psychological burdens.

In the end, it is only by attending to the question of uptake that we come to understand both the promise and perils of inclusive deliberation. Relying solely on the ideal of inclusion, however, we lose sight of the critical engagement that must occur in meaningfully democratic deliberation. Without recourse to uptake and the critical engagement it ensures, we have no choice but to exclude voices and perspectives that we think could damage our democracy. In doing so, we risk reproducing “simplistic and essentializing binaries of privileged and marginalized, silenced and silencer” and losing “sight of the complexities of the workings of privilege and power, their relational and shifting nature and the ways in which oppression operates differently and is negotiated differently in various contexts” (Dreher, 2009: 451–452). A democratic theory with uptake at its center, on the other hand, emphasizes the need to be critical and vigilant in our processing of inputs, while still aligning with our strong intuitions about the importance of inclusion for democracy.

Conclusion

This article has argued that uptake, or fair consideration, is at the normative core of meaningfully democratic deliberation. Beyond showing that deliberative uptake is essential for achieving the democratic force of deliberation, I also illustrated the challenges of achieving uptake in political contexts of deep difference. Admittedly, the difficulty we have achieving uptake in practice would seem to limit its value as a deliberative ideal. But the value of uptake as a deliberative ideal is not based on it being readily available or a more realistic goal for deliberation than, say, consensus. Instead, I turn to uptake because it is the relevant standard by which to assess the democratic nature of a deliberative system. Far from suggesting that the question of how to democratize deliberative uptake has a straightforward answer, I have shown that it is a question in urgent need of attention. When it comes to meeting the demands of democratic citizenship, my goal is not to minimize those demands, but to vivify them.

Ultimately, the advantage of a deliberative model of democracy that puts uptake at its center is not that it can resolve the challenges that make deliberation across difference difficult. It cannot. Rather, the advantage of uptake is that it allows us to better understand the depth of the challenge that identity/difference poses for meaningfully democratic deliberation in large pluralistic societies. Acknowledging uptake as a deliberative ideal helpfully reveals when full and fair deliberation, and so the promise of democracy, is being enhanced and, just as importantly, when it is not. Without recourse to the concept of uptake, however, we cannot fully understand, let alone address the challenges to the normative core of democratic deliberation raised by difference democrats.

In sum, uptake is a vital, though often overlooked, standard for assessing the democratic quality of deliberation, especially in contexts of deep difference and disagreement.
What it means to consider someone’s point of view, however, is not immediately obvious, and it is certainly less straightforward than counting a person’s vote or even granting people access to deliberative forums. And while there are no unambiguous arguments or empirical indicators to which we can appeal in either redeeming or challenging claims of failed uptake, the key takeaway here is the need to factor the dispositions and capacities of citizen-listeners into any assessment of the democratic force of deliberation.

Despite the difficulty we have in both achieving and observing deliberative uptake, it warrants careful attention and further investigation given the role it plays in determining the democratic nature of political decisions. Indeed, it is the promise of having one’s interests, preferences, or perspective meaningfully considered (and not just tallied) by one’s fellow citizens that makes deliberation, at once, more burdensome than aggregation or “mere majority rule,” but also more meaningfully democratic and even more attractive to citizens (Neblo et al., 2010). Importantly, deliberative uptake gets at the heart of both the advantages and the challenges of a deliberative model of democracy, capturing the hard work that must occur between the inclusion of deliberative inputs and the production of meaningfully democratic outputs.

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Notes

1. I present the challenge to deliberative democracy leveled by difference democrats in greater detail below. For now, it is worth noting that the category of “difference democrat” transcends the typical categories of agonistic versus deliberative democrat. “Agonism” refers to a conception of politics that emphasizes the inevitability and legitimacy of conflict in democratic life. For agonists, difference and disagreement can only be tamed through exclusionary and homogenizing practices, many of which they associate with deliberative democracy’s use of reason and dialogue. While all agonistic democrats are probably rightly understood as difference democrats, not all difference democrats are agonistic democrats. And though some difference democrats have abandoned deliberative democracy in favor of agonism, others have sought to rehabilitate deliberation in light of concerns of exclusion.

2. In fact, Habermas (1996) is quoting John Dewey (1954), quoting Samuel Tilden.

3. According to Habermas (1984: 287), “reaching understanding is the inherent telos of human speech.” But we do not have to accept Habermas’s strong foundationalism in order to make the coordinating power of language into a key component of democratic life.

4. In contrast, Simon Niemeyer and John Dryzek (2007) do not dispute Habermas’s reliance on consensus as a deliberative ideal. Yet, for them, “meta-consensus” rather than simple consensus is the rightful goal of deliberation. Meta-consensus or consensus regarding only the “legitimacy of disputed values” is possible when substantive consensus is not (Niemeyer and Dryzek, 2007: 502).

5. I understand democratic deliberation to include not only the formal deliberation that occurs in official legislative bodies, but also the informal communication among citizens dispersed across public spheres. Uptake must occur within and between these “two tracks” of democratic deliberation (Habermas, 1996: 314). The more informal processes of opinion formation, while not necessarily action or decision oriented, are still a significant part of the means by which the majority comes to be the majority and so a determinant of the democratic force of deliberation (Mansbridge, 1999; Mansbridge et al., 2012).

6. Dryzek and Niemeyer (2006: 642) acknowledge that “any meta-consensus is characterized by exclusions as well as inclusions” and that it need not “strive to cover (say) Nazi values.” Yet, to justify these exclusions without “smuggling” in substantive political commitments” we need procedural norms, including uptake (Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2006: 637).
7. Uptake can also be impeded by certain well-known psychological traits, including an aversion to cognitive dissonance and a general human tendency toward motivated reasoning. It is important to remember, however, that these cognitive issues are not unique to deliberative models of democracy. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that these pathologies of reasoning can be attenuated when we reason “together in interactive, discursive settings” (Chambers, 2018: 40).

8. In introducing the concept of “communicative plenty,” Ercan et al. (2019) identify another potential obstacle to achieving deliberative uptake: the sheer quantity of voices and perspectives included in a deliberative system. While distinct from the issues of identity/difference raised here, the challenges of reflection in an era of communicative plenty support my call to differentiate between inclusion and uptake. Indeed, Ercan et al. show how these two deliberative ideals can even be directly at odds with each other. Importantly, however, remedies to the pathologies of communicative plenty will not necessarily address challenges of consideration that emanate from relations of identity/difference.

9. Supporters of empathy value imaginative perspective taking, in part, for its ability to reduce the distance between citizens, thus implying that such distance can and should be overcome in order to achieve productive deliberation. As I have previously argued, however, a more deliberative ideal would show citizens the importance of reorienting themselves toward their fellow citizens in a way that allows them to communicate precisely with those people with whom they struggle to empathize effectively (Scudder, 2016).

10. Indeed, Sass and Dryzek (2014) have shown how an “ethic of listening” can help spark democratic deliberation and critical exchange even in hierarchical and seemingly undemocratic contexts.

11. For an account of how prejudice can undermine uptake, see Kang and Rubin (2009).

12. Here, I depart from Dobson (2014: 174), who suggests that the goal of listening is to democratize the feeling of being heard.

13. Efforts to promote uptake will vary depending on the context. For example, we can look to a moderator to help facilitate uptake within deliberative mini-publics or other face-to-face interactions. When it comes to promoting fair consideration in broad and diffuse public spheres, however, we would need to look to system-wide cultural and institutional conditions.

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