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Q3(b)

Deliberative democracy seeks to promote democratic decision making about public issues among the citizens. Discuss.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · PSIR GS 1 · 15 marks · Democracy: Classical and contemporary theories; different models of democracy

Democracy: Classical and contemporary theories; different models of democracy - representative, participatory and deliberative.

Core demand of the question

- Define deliberative democracy (15 marks)
- Show how it promotes decision-making among citizens on public issues
- Name **Habermas**, Cohen, and Dryzek
- **Discuss limits:** inequality, scale, and existing representative institutions

Revision summary

Deliberative democracy treats legitimacy as public reasoning among free and equal citizens about common issues.

Habermas's discourse ethics and public sphere, Cohen's institutional principles, and Dryzek's authenticity thesis are core statements.

It promotes citizen decision-making through reasoned debate, citizens' assemblies, Gram Sabhas, and public hearings, not through votes alone.

Rawls's public reason is a related liberal constraint on what counts as an acceptable political argument.

Inequality, Gramscian hegemony, and the scale of the modern state are the main limits; deliberation should improve representation, not pretend to abolish it.

Introduction

Deliberative democracy holds that democratic legitimacy comes not only from counting votes but from public reasoning among free and equal citizens about what they ought to do. It seeks to promote decision-making on public issues by talk that can change preferences, not only by bargaining among fixed interests. **Jürgen Habermas** is the central theorist of this claim.

Body

The idea

Habermas locates legitimacy in the public sphere and in discourse ethics: norms are valid if they could meet the agreement of all affected as participants in a practical discourse. **Joshua Cohen** stated institutional principles: deliberation is reasoned, inclusive, and aimed at a rationally motivated consensus, with voting as a fall-back. **John Dryzek** stressed authentic deliberation against manufactured consensus. The contrast is with **Schumpeter**'s elite competition and with a market model of the voter as consumer.

- **Promotion of citizen decision-making takes several forms:** parliamentary debate that must give reasons, citizens' assemblies, Gram Sabhas under the **73rd Amendment**, public hearings on projects, and media that is not only propaganda. **Rawls's** public reason in Political Liberalism is a cousin: citizens offer arguments that others can accept as free and equal, not only sectarian comprehensive doctrines.

Discussion of the claim

The claim is right that democracy is more than aggregation. A budget hearing that forces officials to answer, or a panchayat that debates a road against a liquor shop, is decision-making among citizens. Deliberation can reveal information and can civilise conflict.

Limits are equally part of a discussion. Economic and educational inequality distort who speaks, which returns to the last question's point about economic equality. **Gramsci** reminds us that the public sphere can be hegemonic rather than free. Scale makes a nation-state unlike a Greek assembly; representation remains necessary. Identity vetoes can freeze talk. India's experience with public hearings in environmental clearance, and with noisy television, shows both the promise and the capture of deliberative forms.

Deliberative democracy therefore seeks to promote citizen decision-making. It does so best as a standard for existing representative and local institutions, not as a replacement of elections by endless talk among those already advantaged.

Flow diagram

Deliberative democracy -> Habermas public sphere

Deliberative democracy -> Reasons among equals

Deliberative democracy -> Forums: parliament Gram Sabha hearings

Limits -> Inequality and hegemony

Limits -> Scale and representation

Conclusion

Deliberative democracy promotes public decision-making by requiring reasons among citizens, not only votes among consumers. **Habermas**, Cohen, and related theorists state the ideal. Inequality, hegemony, and scale limit it. The practical task is to build forums - from Parliament to the Gram Sabha - in which those limits are reduced rather than ignored.

Facts & figures

Habermas

Between Facts and Norms and the structural transformation of the public sphere locate democratic legitimacy in communicatively achieved agreement.

73rd Amendment

Gram Sabhas are statutory local publics in which villagers are meant to deliberate on development and common resources.

Schumpeter contrast

Elite competition for votes is the rival model; deliberative theory refuses to reduce democracy to that method alone.

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