PUBLIC LECTURE

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A Problem-Based Approach to Democratic Theory

ABSTRACT

Over the last few decades, democratic theory has grown dramatically in its power and sophistication, fuelled by debates among models of democracy. But these debates are increasingly unproductive. Model-based strategies encourage theorists to overgeneralize the democratic functions of ideal typical features of democracy, such as deliberation or voting. Here I sketch an alternative strategy based on the question: What kinds of problems does a political system need to solve to count as “democratic”? I suggest three general kinds: it should empower inclusions, form enable collective will-formation through communication, and have capacities to make collective decisions. We can then view common practices such as voting and deliberation as means for addressing these problems, and theorize mixes that would maximize their democratic problem-solving capacities. The resulting theories will be both normatively robust and sufficiently fine-grained to frame democratic problems, possibilities, and deficits in complex polities.

Mark Warren holds the Harold and Dorrie Merilees Chair for the Study of Democracy in the Department of Political Science, University of British Columbia. He was the founding director of the Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions at UBC, and the co-founder of the Center for Democracy and Civil Society at Georgetown University. A political theorist, Warren is especially interested in democratic innovations, civil society and democratic governance, and political corruption. He is author of Democracy and Association (Princeton University Press, 2001), which won the Elaine and David Spitz Book Prize awarded by the Conference for the Study of Political Thought, as well as the 2003 Outstanding Book Award from the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action. He is editor of Democracy and Trust (Cambridge University Press 1999), and co-editor of Designing Deliberative Democracy: The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly (Cambridge University Press 2008). Warren’s work has appeared in journals such as the American Political Science Review, the American Journal of Political Science, the Journal of Politics, and Political Theory. He is currently directing a project funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Partnership Grant entitled Participedia (www.participedia.net), which uses a web-based platform to collect data about democratic innovation and participatory governance around the world. Participedia will enable data-driven comparative research into this rapidly developing area of governance, as well as serve as a resource for governments, democracy practitioners and advocates.