

How to Talk to Citizens. Using Civic Dialogue as a Tool for Progress

As is well known, in the recent years Germany has been going through a political crisis, which originates in matters of representation of the people and responsiveness. In large parts this crisis does not originate from a lack of actual performance on behalf of the political system, but rather a lack of successful communication. This communication is a two-sided process that needs to be balanced out, including political leadership, in the way of explaining policy (top-down) and responsiveness to the diverse demands of the people (bottom-up). It isn't surprising that in the wake of right-populist movements, the old emancipatory, democratic slogan from the 1989 "We are the people" was widely used again. In the recent two years I have studied intensively how the German political system reacted to this crisis.

Most interesting are the reactions of the local level. This is where public protests were most visible during the 2014/15 refugee situation, which deeply divided our society in an enthusiastic welcoming culture of open borders versus an anti-immigration, anti-open borders populace, which gave rise to a new right-wing populist movement and what we termed "angry citizens".

That's where the crisis started. Crises emerge from aggravated and perpetuated conflicts - conflicts where the standard political problem solving procedures prove insufficient in tackling the problems. Without intervention and learning, those types of crisis-laden conflicts potentially threaten the existence of the political system. That's because over time, they erode the normative consensus in society, central elements of civic culture and ultimately deprive the political order of legitimacy.

In 2015 in many towns and cities, the local authorities were hopelessly overwhelmed to solve this crisis. Nevertheless, they had to fix it somehow. And how did they do it? Dialogue.

Dialogue is the central mechanism through which competing social groups can engage with one another in a peaceful way. Specifically, what we need, are forms of communication, which even in sharp crisis-laden conflicts won't decline further into polarization, radicalization and hostility. Instead, we need to transform the conflicts into commonly acceptable decisions at the local level and beyond. We also need to make sure that not only the results, but also the process of communicating itself, will work towards the enhancement of social cohesion.

So how can we utilize dialogue between the political class and the people? Approximately 50 different models of dialogue can be used to connect citizens and political leaders. Each model creates specific modes of interaction between humans. Each model comes with a set of rules regarding desired proceedings, behavioral expectations for participants and - if they exist – for moderators and facilitators, as well as goals. Some aim at creating solutions to practical problems, some stimulate intellectual debate, some focus on building empathy. Each model of dialogue provides a framework to what is happening, what is allowed to happen and what is inappropriate in a communication setting. What a political system thus needs to do, is work out, how a particular version of organizing dialogue works in a specific context. This research is not only of practical relevance, but also highly interesting for social constructivist theory building and Ethnomethodology.

There are 4 different types of talking to citizens: first preventive dialogue formats e.g. dilemma discussions and salons as well as civic education, which increase the chances that in a societal crisis, people can cope with diverging viewpoints and controversial discussions. They teach to tolerate ambiguity and heterogeneity.

Then, secondly, there's discussion formats, like town-hall meetings, fish-bowl discussions and panel discussions, which are used when a problem needs to be placed in the public sphere and worked on. A dialogue format in that stage faces the task of distributing information,

working on disparities and keeping the formation of the political will open. The benefit of those formats is a clearer overview of different dispositions in society. That's where the major focus of deliberation and consultation usually lies for local politicians in Germany.

Third, there are formats which are used in times of increased polarization to de-escalate. De-escalation formats are the ones who work towards re-establishing common ground and decreasing polarization. What these dialogues do, is healing emotional injuries, building appreciation and trust. The final objective is enabling the conflict parties to compromise again. This helps regain the ability of decision-making in the political system and strengthens bonds in society. Those dialogue formats all have one thing in common: They provide channels for the need to articulate oneself in a small-group or even one on one setting. They reduce distance, literally. World Cafés and Transformational Social Therapy are some examples that have been used in local citizen dialogues in recent years.

And last, there are escalation formats that on the one hand serve to increase in-group cohesion, coalition building and the closing-of-ranks. More unity within the group allows clearer distinction from the opposition group and a more effective use of power resources. Using such a typology that looks at communication in the context of where it is used gives insight, why traditional participation methods for citizens fail in situations like the angry citizen protests.

Until recently, most formats of voluntary citizen participation were developed within infrastructure projects. You wanted to build a new tunnel, so you created a task group and had citizen join and consult with the administration. You were debating the local budget so you included citizens as stakeholders either online or offline. It might have been controversial, but in the end, the debate was about policy, not society and its cohesion as a whole. The situation 2015 showed clearly, that issue-based deliberation methods didn't work in emotion

based conflicts. That's because they called for an unobtainable high level of objectivity and neutrality. The more citizens felt, that their emotion driven demands weren't met by the types of dialogue the local officials had to offer, the more hostile the angry citizens became. So if we want to use dialogue as a tool for progress, we need to increase knowledge in the political system about how communication can be organized effectively, what great variety of formats there actually are and how each of them works. That's what we can learn from the German situation.

On the other hand, I want to inquire into the mechanisms of consultative socialist democracy in China, especially at a local level. China is a particularly important case. Though it is led by the Chinese Communist Party, its government is permeated with a wide variety of participatory and deliberative practices. Last year during the Humboldt-Forum, our Chinese Chair Prof. Ping, talked a little bit about this, which sparked my interest for further inquiries into this topic.

It seems clear that since the early 1980s China went through decentralization to a number of collective power centers, where compromise and persuasion play an increasing role and where there is no single authority. One reason is that a ruling party can forego the use of powerful revolutionary force if there is a significantly large congruency between the ruling party and the people. Another is the increased power of political and societal institutions, who can rightfully demand consultation in a political process. This long standing focus on communication is furthered by the patterns of economic development in modern China that multiply veto players.

Local village level elections, public hearings, deliberative polls are normalcy in China as well as initiatives that give citizen rights to sue the state, initiatives to make government information

public, an increasing use of Peoples' Congresses to discuss policy, and various kinds of autonomous civil society organizations. Due to the size of the country and the developmental differences between urban and rural areas, those deliberative elements appear uneven in scope and effectiveness, but many of these innovations appear to have genuinely deliberative elements, from which political leaders take guidance, and upon which they rely for the legitimacy of their decisions.

This connects to classical Chinese political thought, especially Confucian, which holds leaders to high moral standards. As we know, the ruler's main function in the Confucian state was to educate and transform the people. Under good circumstances this was done not by legal regulation and use of power, but by personal rule, moral example, and mediation in disputes by the emperor and his officials. Chinese political thought has long emphasized conflict resolution through deliberation and consultation, rather than through the application of abstract rules in order to achieve social harmony.

Especially the public hearing system, encouraging the general public to express their opinions, has been widely used on various issues, like educational charges, restrictions on fireworks, and price adjustments of civil airplane tickets. Thousands of public hearing conferences had been held all over China. Some important national ones, such as the adjustment of the personal income-tax threshold (2005) were broadcast live on TV and the internet

Similar to Germany, it is again the local level, that I find of particular interest. Citizen dialogues in China come in three different formats. First, consultative and deliberative meetings: Organizers, often leaders, announce and explain the agenda on a topic as an introduction. Participants express their opinions. At the final stage, leaders will answer questions raised by participants. On some occasions, a final decision will be made. These meetings aim at a

consensus, rather than using voting as a solution. When a consensus cannot be attained, multiple rounds of deliberation may be used.

Second, there are citizen evaluation meetings: These meetings provide citizens with opportunities to evaluate their leadership. The format is mostly that of a deliberative poll. After a performance report, citizens raise questions for clarification, comment on the report, exchange opinions, and discuss the policies and performance of the evaluated leaders. Evaluation forms – essentially a confidence vote – can be used as well, which closely connects to the long Chinese tradition of merit based considerations in top leadership selection. The results affect the bonus and political prospects of leaders.

Third are residential or village representative assemblies: These assemblies can make collective decisions on issues like the use of collective land or the establishment and development of village enterprises. In the city, residents from the same community organize a Residential Representative Assembly to discuss public issues such as security and community environment.

All these deliberative practices have been institutionalized by being written into laws.

So what can we learn from those two countries?

Evidence suggests, that any political system requires consultative procedures as input channel if it wants to shape progress. Although deliberation is usually associated with Western democracy, they are distinct phenomena. That is, why I argue that the linkages between Western democracy and deliberation are contingent rather than necessary.

This is also why I think some Western literature on the nature of hybrid regimes, which interprets increased citizen involvement through deliberation as part of a trajectory towards Western democracy, as parts of competitive authoritarianism, gets it wrong. Western scientist often kind of wish for a “spill-over” of people's attitudes and behaviors from deliberative

participation in the local village or the work place into democratic pluralistic Western style political system. That is not sensible.

True, Western democracy involves the inclusion of individuals in matters that affect them through distributions of empowerments such as votes and rights in a pluralistic system. Deliberation and consultation is a mode of communication involving persuasion-based influence. Now, electoral Western democracies need consultation to stabilize themselves, because the institutional mechanisms of re-election require a channel of input from the potential voters to an elected official as to what their demands and expectations are. Democratic quality in a pluralistic and liberal society is increased through consultation and there are important structural and institutional relations between democratic empowerment and deliberative influence: democratic systems ensure that actors are able to resolve conflicts by means of arguments and votes.

This includes protection from coercion, economic dependency and traditional authority if citizen dialogues are to function as a means of resolving conflict and making decisions. Institutions provide these protections by limiting and distributing power in ways that provide the spaces for persuasion, argument, opinion, and demonstration. In those public spaces the formation of will and opinion happens as well as political bargaining, sometimes consensus. Relative to other kinds of regimes, Western democracies are also more likely to have a high number of organizations that enable deliberative influence in politics. That is a remarkable sign of progress.

However, consultation also stabilizes any other political system, like Chinese socialist democracy, because it provides crucial input about problems to be solved and public opinion which has to be taken into account for any political system. Having such eyes and ears into

the populace reduces the chance of public unrest and produces better problem solving capabilities.

China creates strength through reforms that increase the adaptability, complexity, autonomy, and coherence of state organization. Deliberation and consultation are one tool for that.

It seems to me, that political elites in China follow slightly different kinds of incentives, such as more functional than normative needs for cooperation and legitimacy. When rule is legitimate, the ruled accept it because they originate in traditions, valued leaders or because the ruled accept the reasons provided by rulers. Deliberation can occur under those conditions when rulers decide to use it as a means to form preferences and policies, but do so without institutionalized distributions of powers to those affected.

The key point here is persuasive influence through deliberation. In his work *The System of Modern Societies* Talcott Parsons describes such influence as “generalized symbolic medium of interchange in the same general class as money and power. It consists in the capacity to bring about desired decisions on the part of the other social units without directly offering them a valued quid pro quo as an inducement or threatening them with deleterious consequences. Influence must operate through persuasion, however, in that its object must be convinced that to decide as the influencer suggests is to act in the interest of a collective system with which both are solidary”.

Finding the right channels for that, finding the channels in talking to citizens, will foster progress in China, in Germany and elsewhere in the world. There’s no alternative to citizen dialogue.