

Who wants to deliberate with politicians? More than some expected, study finds

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Conventional wisdom suggests that average citizens hate politics, loathe hyper-partisan gridlock, balk at voting even in presidential election years and are, incidentally, woefully ill-informed.

Given that, the thinking goes, it's reasonable to conclude that citizens want less, not more, involvement in politics.

But that widely accepted theory does not survive empirical scrutiny, a team of researchers that includes a University of Colorado Boulder [political scientist](#) found.

Rather than rejecting political discourse, most people express strong interest in deliberating with real [politicians](#), the team found. Further, when citizens are offered the chance to discuss political issues with their legislators, significant numbers do.

The view of the American public as desperate to avoid politics is "deeply misleading," the team wrote in a recent edition of [American Political Science](#) Review. The work joins a growing number of studies applying empirical analysis to political theories of deliberative democracy.

The team was led by Michael Neblo of Ohio State University and included Kevin Esterling of the University of California, Riverside, Ryan Kennedy at the University of Houston, David Lazer of Northeastern University and Harvard University, and Anand Sokhey of CU-Boulder.

Sokhey and his colleagues suggest that some political theorists reached an erroneous conclusion because they started with the wrong question, namely, "Who actually deliberates?"

The answer, of course, is that few people engage in deliberative democracy.

But Sokhey's team essentially posed a different question: "Who is willing to deliberate?" The team found that large majorities of citizens, even those disgusted by politics, are willing to participate—and, when given the chance, many do.

Sokhey puts it this way: "If people perceive politicians to be more responsive and less corrupt ... would people be more willing to be involved?" The answer is yes. "They're happy to be involved."

That was surprising, he says, adding that the kinds of people who wanted to participate also was unexpected. The traditional view is that people who are older, wealthier, well-educated and white are more likely to become engaged in politics.

"We don't find that a lot of that holds here," Sokhey says.

The team found that younger people and non-whites were willing to join political deliberations.

The researchers set out to test two competing theories of political involvement. One theory, dubbed "stealth democracy," holds that people are often disgusted by politics, believe politicians are generally corrupt, and that when they do join the political process, they do so largely to thwart political corruption.

If politics were less corrupt, the theory holds, citizens would happily

retreat to their private lives and let government run quietly and efficiently in the background.

But the theory of stealth democracy contradicts one of the deliberative theory's central claims: that citizen apathy is actually caused by frustration and disempowerment in the system. "If the political process could be rendered more rational and responsive in their eyes, then they would be more inclined to engage in it robustly," the authors write, adding:

"The disagreement between the stealth thesis and the deliberative thesis could hardly be clearer, and the stakes on which is right could hardly be higher."

The research team began with hypothetical questions posed to 404 subjects.

For instance, they asked the following: "If politics were [less/more] influenced by self-serving officials and powerful special interests, do you think that you would be more or less interested in getting involved in politics?" Respondents indicated their interest on a 1-5 scale.

Those who would participate less if politics were less corrupt fit the stealth-democracy thesis. Those who would participate more fit the deliberative thesis.

The results were significant. Eight times more people fit the deliberative profile than the stealth profile, suggesting that the "stealth" view is not widely held.

But that was just the response to items about stealth vs. deliberative attitudes. When the researchers made a real offer to deliberate with a real member of Congress, 65 percent agreed.

The study's participants were offered the chance to deliberate online with their congressional representative. The members of Congress came from 12 congressional districts spread across four major geographic regions. The politicians included five Republicans and seven Democrats who were ideologically diverse.

Most surprisingly, the authors note, both those holding "stealth" and "deliberative" views were eager to discuss politics with real politicians. But according to the stealth thesis, such eagerness should have been found mostly among deliberative democrats.

The explanation, the authors conclude, is that "People do not really hold stealth democracy as their first preference. Instead, they will settle for stealth democracy if the civics-textbook version of deliberative representative [democracy](#) is not achievable."

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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