Buridan's ass and the calculus of democratic deliberation[1]

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Abstract: Deliberation may make the quality of decisions higher, but it also takes time and effort and hence is potentially costly. But proponents of deliberative democracy as a superior method for making decisions almost unanimously focus on presumed benefits while ignoring the costs associated with investing time and resources in the process of deliberation. We show that there must be a certain point beyond which the costs of deliberating will outweigh the potential benefits. We further show that the aggregate costs of making decisions through further deliberation are likely to rapidly exceed the marginal benefits even with relatively small individual costs. Furthermore the net-value of a deliberative process should be compared with those of its alternatives, e.g., voting, market-solutions or not making any choices at all. In many cases it may be desirable to settle for a sub-optimal decision (including not deliberating at all) rather than spend more time looking for a better.

JEL-codes: D71; D72; H1; H4.

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1. Introduction

In recent years much attention has been paid to so-called deliberative democracy, i.e., "decision making by discussion among free and equal citizens" (Elster 1998b: 1). The argument here is that by letting individuals not simply vote, but meet on equal terms, exchange views, discuss and interact, there will be the potential for making decisions, which have qualities that regular voting (occasionally referred to in this tradition as "aggregative democracy") does not.[2]

The present paper will argue that in reaching such conclusions, proponents of deliberative democracy usually concentrate exclusively on the supposed benefits of increasing deliberation, while they tend almost always to ignore the costs potentially associated with the process of deliberation, or at least do not consider the necessity of comparing the respective costs and benefits of an approach.

But if the costs of doing one thing rather than something else are not considered, things may go quite bad. Consider the familiar story associated with the name of the medieval philosopher John Buridan (ca. 1295 – ca. 1360), where an ass ends up dying of starvation because it cannot decide which one of two haystacks to eat from.

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[1] This is a very tentative first draft and is a work in progress, with many parts only being preliminary thoughts on the issue. Not to be quoted or cited. I have benefited from discussions with Kasper Møller Hansen, Christian List, Mark Pennington, Jens Ringsmose and Michael Wohlgemuth. Any comments and criticisms are most welcome.

[2] There is no one theory of deliberative democracy, but for some major statements, see, e.g., Fishkin 1991; Elster 1998b. For interesting collections of essays bringing together proponents of deliberative democracy, including some who also embrace rational choice-style approaches such as the one adopted here, see, e.g., Elster 1998a; Aaken, List and Luetge 2003.

This story may serve as a useful metaphor for what is usually ignored by proponents of deliberative democracy: That there necessarily are costs associated with deliberation and that after a certain point it must be the case that the costs of deliberating further will exceed the supposed benefits of doing so. In essence: At some point it is better to start eating some hay than considering what pile of hay may taste the best.

In the following, we will first briefly discuss what may be seen as some possible benefits and costs of deliberation (section 2), in order to outline a very simple rational choice calculus of the aggregate costs and benefits of using deliberation for collective-decision making (section 3). Based on this, we will discuss some of the possible implications (section 4). Finally, we will summarize the results and draw some perspective for further research.

2. The benefits and costs of democratic deliberation

The fundamental vision of the normative theory setting out deliberative democracy as an ideal may be said to be that whereas political preferences tend to be in conflict with each other, discussions that take place in arenas characterized by open and uncoerced discussions on the issues considered will tend to result in decisions that in some sense are good—or at least outcomes that are better than those that would obtain without deliberating—and instead just voting on the basis of some initial preferences based in narrow interests, or selecting someone to enforce a solution or leaving the matter to the processes of civil society and the market economy. It is, in other words, argued that a process should be adopted where political actors should engage in a dialogue, where they must listen to each other, show mutual respect, attempt to rationally justify their positions, and be willing and able to re-evaluate and eventually revise their initial preferences in a reasonable deliberation or discourse over alternative claims of validity.

Specifically, in this tradition broadly conceived deliberation is usually seen as having two types of benefits, or at least the arguments being used by proponents may be seen as falling into three distinct classes, which we may somewhat simplified describe as such:

1. *Consensus-seeking*: Deliberating further/getting more decision-makers into the process will change the preferences of the participants and generate "consensus," which will be a good thing in itself.[3]
2. *Brainstorming*: Deliberating further/getting more decision-makers into the

[3] This is more or less the Habermasian position. Cf. the claim for "the transformative effects of deliberation on preferences, and in particular the claim that deliberation is a worthwhile engine for generating social consensus. [Understanding] what others want, and why, can lead to adaptation of preferences in mutually compatible ways. The assumption is that if people talk for long enough in the right circumstances they will eventually be brought to agree, and that this is a good thing." (Shapiro 2002: 198).

process will result in qualitatively better decisions (e.g. a higher probability of making the right decision) (due to more information, less haste, etc.).[4]

3. *Citizen development*: Deliberating further/getting more decision-makers into the process will develop other positive values (beyond the outcome itself) through the process (e.g. citizen virtues, etc.).

Depending on whether the one or the other aspect is emphasized the more, a more or less random listing of the supposed benefits of deliberation could include, e.g., the value of achieving consensus, making the right decisions by having more information, promotion of collective interests rather than narrow self-interest, raising consciousness, legitimating collective action, etc.

Nonetheless, such optimistic—and perhaps somewhat one-sided—jubilations notwithstanding, there may arguably also be costs to deliberation. All deliberation necessarily takes *time*—and some times a lot of time, as the expression "a Polish parliament" seems to recall. In deliberative processes some time may be wasted because discussion goes down one blind alley and then has to go back. In fact, in some cases *all* the time may be wasted (at least when applying exclusively instrumental criteria) because the decision-makers end up making the wrong decision. Sometimes deliberation may take time and end in no decision at all, namely when the situation deadlocks in the form of indecision—which even may be the wrong outcome when considered instrumentally.

The possibility of deliberating may conceivably even also result in a *polarization of the preferences* of the decision-makers rather than the consensus sought after by some, either due to strategic maneuvering, where some individuals become "dishonest holdouts," or simply because the process opens the eyes of the decision-makers to new problems they were not aware of. This may result in more time being used to reach the same decision or no decision at all or even the wrong result, relative to what the outcome would have been in the absence of deliberation, but where those who had the "right" solution are bullied into accepting "consensus."

Several, perhaps all, of these points have been realized by one or another proponent of deliberative democracy. However, only relatively few theorists have explicitly been attentive to the potential costs involved in deliberation, and even in these cases the analysis has been more to outline some concepts than to compare costs and benefits under changing circumstances.[5] Specifically, there seems to have

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[4] This is, broadly speaking, the position often found in many modern political science versions of the argument. Cf. the supposition "that there may sometimes be solutions to conflicts which no party is likely to figure out on her own, but might emanate from collective brainstorming in a context where reason-seeking sets a backdrop of cooperative expectations. Two heads are better than one, three better than two, and so on. … [Arguments] in support of deliberation often proceed on the assumption that there are rights answers on which solicitous discussion will converge at least some of the time, particularly if the parties are committed to finding them." (Shapiro 2002: 199f).

[5] For contrasting treatments of the inclusion of problems involved in democratic deliberation compare, e.g., Andersen and Hansen 2002: 82f (which only considers benefits) and Shapiro 2002 and Hansen 2003: Ch. 4 (for a tentative suggestion of problems corresponding to the benefits). Cf. also "Even if deliberation is a good thing, can there be too much of it? Or too much to justify all

been no systematic attempt at addressing the question of how the relative sizes of the marginal costs and benefits of deliberating further may have an impact on the *net*-value of the process.

But if one is to praise the attractive values of anything—be it a political outcome or a pair of new shoes—one must necessarily also consider the costs involved in realizing these values. It would be meaningless to consider whether, e.g., going to war is a rational course of action without also considering the costs involved in terms of lives and resources. Similarly nobody would buy, say, a pair of shoes simply based on their attractiveness alone, without considering the price at all, or how far to go in the search for them, or what the alternatives are, etc., etc.

This goes for decision processes too. The decision costs are obviously to some extent a function of the decision method; if the decision is made by, e.g., lottery, or only one person can make the decision, the decision costs are low; in contrast, if everyone have to be involved they will be prohibitively costly, because this is a very impractical way of making decisions (cf. Buchanan and Tullock [1962] 1999). If alternatively one would argue that costs associated with particular ways of making decisions should not be considered at all, then obviously there would be no reason not to use unanimity all the time; after all, this is one way of making sure that everyone's opinions may be heard and taken into account.

But this also suggests that we should consider whether a particular decision rule is actually likely to lead to an over-all better outcome than if it had not been applied at all. The basic question to be considered is thus, to what extent there may be a point beyond which more deliberation may simply be "too much," i.e., a point where, as it has been phrased, "deliberation can amount to collective fiddling while Rome burns." (Shapiro 2002: 196).[6] The following analysis will consider this question; it will, however, be kept relatively general, and we will not consider such questions as whether the one or the other deliberative process is superior to others.

3. A simple model

1.1. *Preliminaries*

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the effort and expense, or all the 'decision costs' as economists would say? … How much deliberation is enough?" (Fishkin and Laslett 2002: 127).

[6] The problem identified and discussed here should not be confused with the quite distinct problem of whether deliberation is likely to reduce the probability of cyclical collective preferences; cf. the discussions involving, e.g., Riker 1982; Grofman and Feld 1988; Miller 1992; Mackie 1998; List et al. 2001; Dryzek and List 2003. The two issues may relate (e.g., since more majority-cycles could be seen as potentially increasing decision costs, while a structuration of preferences through deliberation could be seen as reducing cycling) but they are conceptually different. That is, there may potentially be significant costs in collective decision-making (including deliberations), no matter whether there are cyclical preferences or not. It should also be noted that there may be other, quite significant problems related to deliberative democracy as an ideal, when seen from a political economy perspective, cf., e.g., Pennington 2003.

At its most basic the usual assumption made in rational choice analysis of individual behavior is that for it to be rational for an actor to perform an action the benefits must exceed the costs. If we let a_i be the action of a given individual i, then the utility of that action, $U(a_i)$, will be a function of the individual's costs (C_i) and benefits (B_i) associated with that action:

$$U(a_i) = f(B_i, C_i) \tag{1}$$

In order for it to be rational for individual i to perform the particular act, it must then be the case that

$$B_i - C_i > 0 \tag{2}$$

However, when looked at from the perspective of deliberative democracy, the emphasis is not on the value of individual choice but of the collective value. It must, in other words, be the case that for a group considering two alternatives, the sum of all individual benefits outweighs the sum of all individual costs. So, if we let ΣB represent the sum of all the individual benefits of the individuals belonging to a relevant group and let ΣC represent the sum of all the individual costs of the individuals belonging to the same group, then we may then define the net-value to a group of a given decision (ΣD) as:

$$\sum D = \sum B - \sum C \tag{3}$$

In that case the requirement for the process of social choice to be worthwhile must be that

$$\sum B - \sum C > 0 \tag{4}$$

Now, it seems plausible to assume that it is the case that neither the total costs nor the total benefits will be independent of the number of individuals involved in deliberation (or the amount of time devoted to it). The costs of deliberating will necessarily increase with the number of individuals deliberating (just as the costs of deliberating will increase if the same number of individuals use more time deliberating). We will, at least for the present, also assume that the benefits of deliberation similarly will increase with the number of individuals involved, i.e., that more extensive deliberation will in some sense lead to "better" decisions. For the present purposes we will simply assume that a given society needs to make a decision with regard to how much deliberation to engage in and that the latter is measured by the number of individuals participating (n). (We might alternatively conceive of n as representing how much time a given number of individuals should devote to deliberation.) As such, it will be the case that

$$\sum B = f(n) \tag{5}$$

and

$$\sum C = f(n) \tag{6}$$

1.2. *The relative costs and benefits*

So the total costs and the total benefits of deliberation will be increasing with more individuals deliberating. But exactly how will the curves slope? And where, if anywhere, will they intersect?

Now, in the case of costs ΣC will never be zero, since even if we have only one individual there will still be some deliberation involved in every action (including rule-following behavior); even the simplest choice, such as what tie to wear, requires a certain minimum of deliberation, even if only at the individual level and even if quite modest in nature. Hence there will always be some costs, no matter the decision method, i.e. it will always be the case that $C_i > 0$. Accordingly, the total costs will always be larger than zero, i.e. $\Sigma C > 0$. The exact nature of the costs will, however, depend on the number of individuals as well as the particular decision method used.

As for the benefits of deliberating, we may reason that in some cases the individual benefits of deliberating may be non-existent, namely in those cases where the individual deliberation results in the wrong decision being made. We may therefore assume that $B_i \geq 0$ and that the total benefits, even if they typically will be positive, may not necessarily be so, i.e. $\Sigma B \geq 0$.

Beyond this, we will for the present purposes assume that the costs increase with the number of participants and will continue to do so—in fact there are plausible reasons to expect them to increase on the margin, but we shall leave that for the moment.[7] In contrast we will assume that the collective benefits while increasing will be marginally decreasing, i.e., at first there are significant benefits to letting more individuals take part in the deliberation, but over time (e.g. as the group of individuals come to approximate the population more and more) the size of the marginal benefits will be smaller and small until the marginal change in total benefits approximate zero.

Given these assumption, i.e. that $\Sigma C > 0$ and will increase monotonically with the number of individuals, and that $\Sigma B \geq 0$ and will be increasing with the number of individuals, but decreasing at the margin, the relationship may look as in Figure 1.

[7] A more reasonable assumption would however be that the individual expected net-costs will depend on the probability that an individual's contribution will be crucial and hence both on the number of individuals participating and the nature of the good in question. For a discussion of such different types of goods in relation to the supply of collective goods, see, e.g., Hampton 1987.

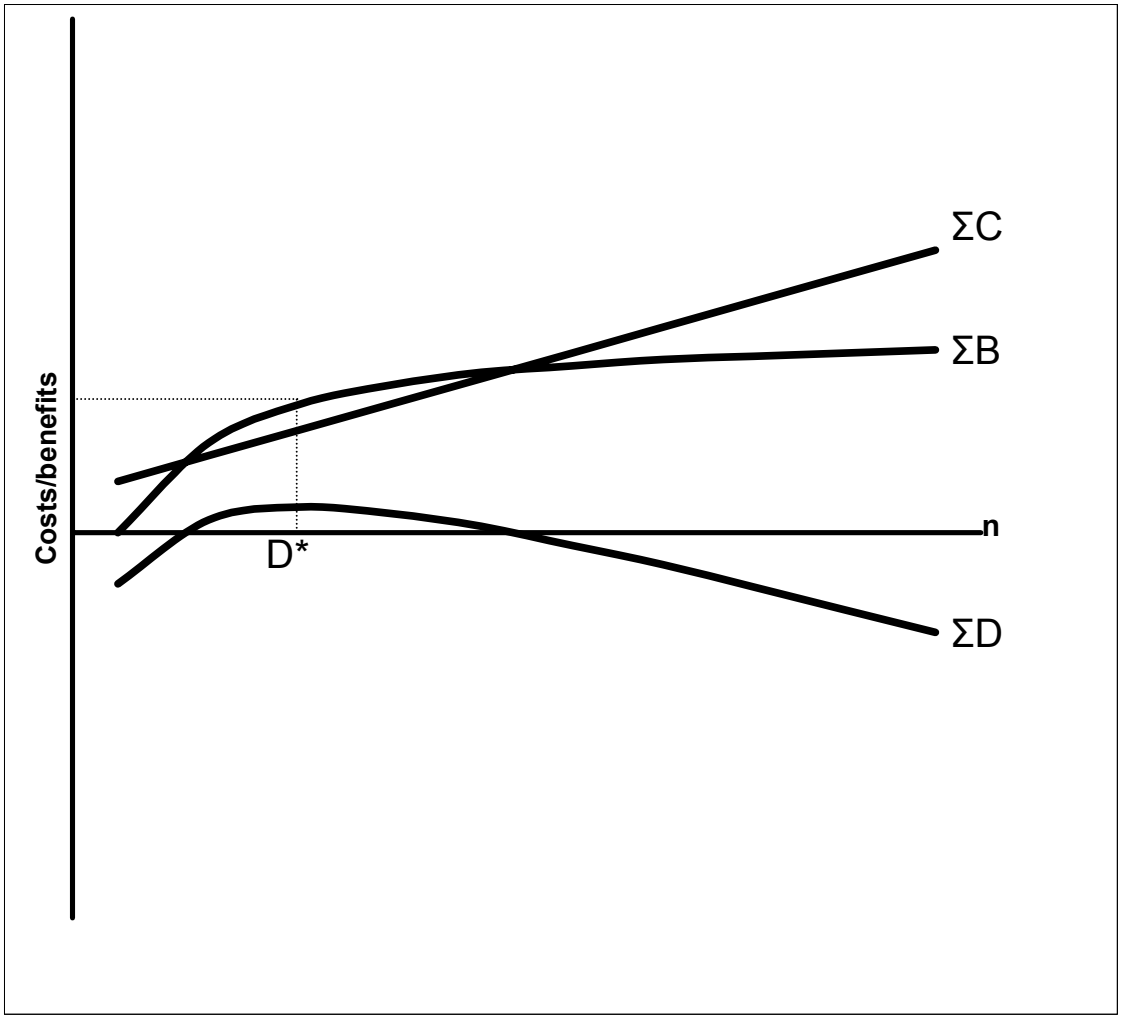

Figure 1. Marginally decreasing benefits and monotonically increasing costs.

The graph illustrates the trade-off to be made. Σ*B* may initially increase much with more decision-makers, but at some point the marginal benefit becomes very small. At some point it will be the case that Σ*C* > Σ*B*. This entails that there will be a point *D**, where the net-benefits of deliberation (Σ*D*) are maximal. This would then be the optimal number of decision-makers (or amount of deliberation) to include. Even though the total benefits from deliberation (Σ*B*) may still be increasing beyond the point *D**, the net-value of doing so will actually be decreasing.

So where is the point *D** in this scenario? This obviously depends on the exact sloping of the curves Σ*C* and Σ*B*. But we may say a few things, even if for the moment making only these assumptions: a) Σ*C* will increase monotonically with increases in *N*, b) that Σ*B* initially will be higher than Σ*C*, and c) that Σ*B* will be declining marginally. Given these assumptions *D** will always be to the left of the point *n"*. In fact, given a very large *initial* rise in Σ*B*, and a relatively slower marginal increase, the further to the left *D** will be. In other words, the relatively *larger* the initial gains from increased deliberation, the relatively *smaller* "investments" in

deliberation are needed in order to achieve the optimum.

But in fact there is no necessity in the three conditions being met. Let us consider two of the most obvious possibilities. First, Σ*C* may actually be increasing marginally with *N*, e.g., exponentially. This could, for example, be due to more strategic positioning/voting/bargaining if more individuals are included in the deliberative process, or if more time is devoted to this. This is shown in Figure 2. This will, ceteris paribus, move *D** further to the left, diminishing the need for investing more in deliberation.

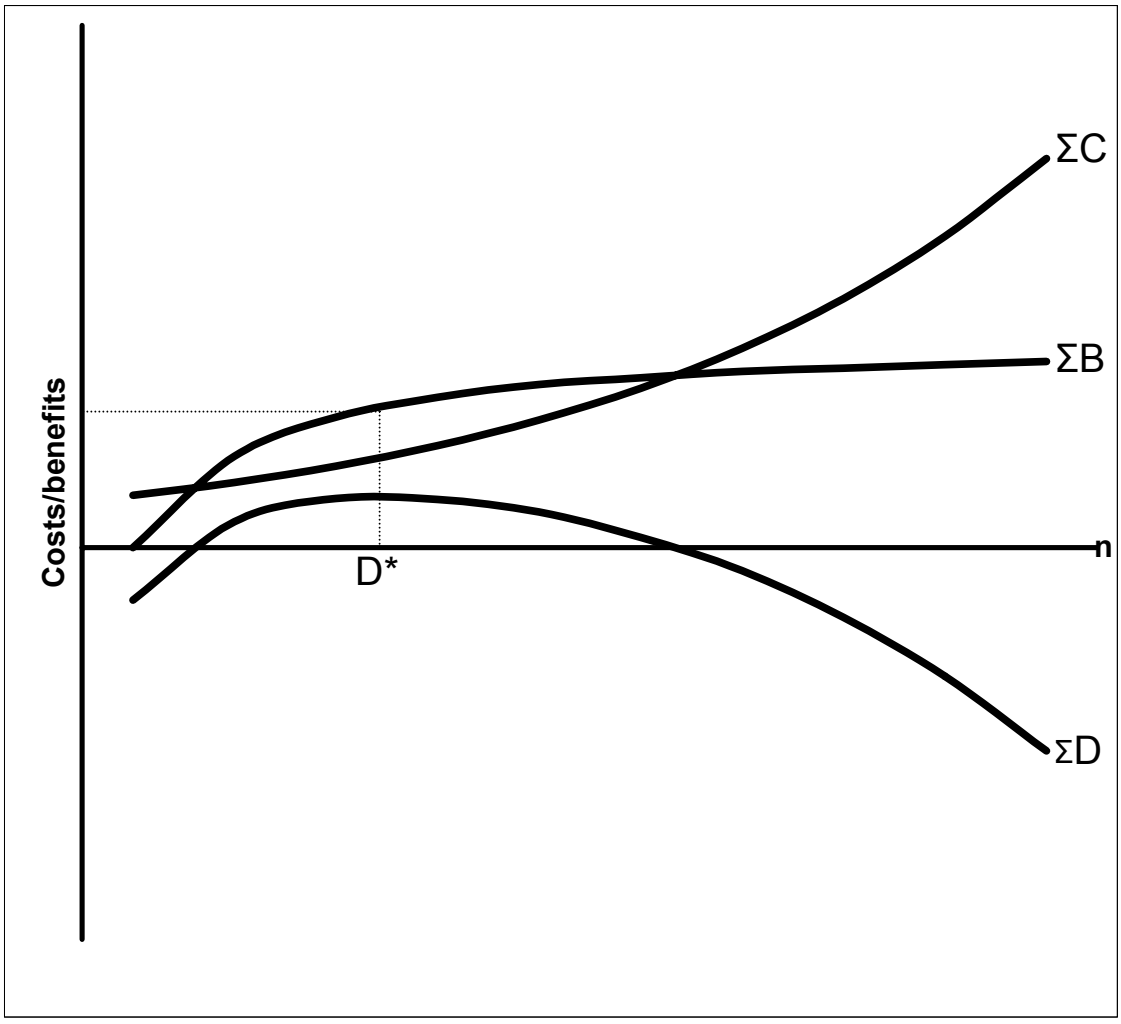

Figure 2. Marginally decreasing benefits and marginally increasing costs.

Second, there is no absolute necessity that more extensive deliberation/more deliberators necessarily will improve the quality of the decisions, not even from the beginning. One could, as mentioned, imagine that there could be circumstances where more deliberators would lead to more strategic interaction, i.e., a strategic radicalizing of the preferences, dishonest "hold-outs," etc.

Furthermore, there may be many cases where the nature of the questions are such that deliberating more or adding more deliberators will add extremely little of positive value or even nothing at all to the quality of the decision. For example, the question of whether I should wear a tie at all, and if so what tie I should wear, might conceivably be a question that could be given considerable attention by other people (with nothing much else to do). But disregarding a few, very fantastic possibilities, the value of the answer to this question to other people is probably quite small, whereas it will necessarily mean some costs to consult them on the issue. In fact, in all those cases where the direct externality effects are insignificant, it is quite likely that there will be a very small marginal benefit of deliberating further.

In other words, the benefits of further deliberation may in fact, under certain circumstances, be consistently *lower* than the costs, i.e., that Σ*B* will be to the right of Σ*C*. This is illustrated in Figure 3. In that case no amount of increase in deliberation will lead to a positive result. Here *D** will be located quite close to the point 0 at the beginning of the scale, and for the group to deliberate will never have a positive value.

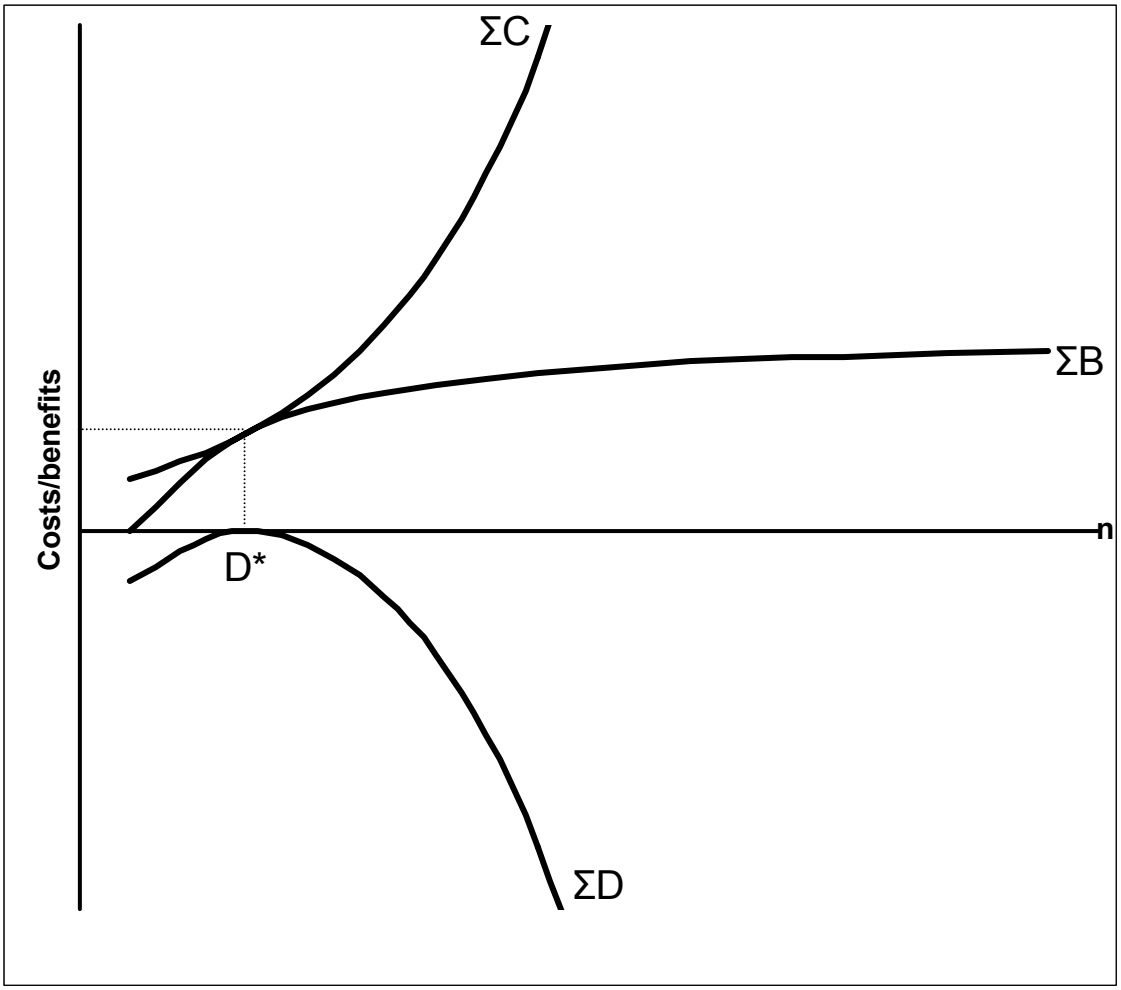

Figure 3. Marginally decreasing benefits and high, monotonically increasing costs.

Against these points, proponents of deliberative democracy may argue that the previous points only relate to the arguments, which previously were classified as being of the "brainstorming" variety, while there are important benefits to be considered relating to how participation in a deliberative process may enhance certain participatory virtues and values (cf. section 2). This is a valid point to consider, but it is easily acknowledged, when considered, that the inclusion of such process related benefits (B_p) cannot function as a *deus ex machina*. If such benefits are assumed to be associated with the participation of individuals and not related to the outcome, then these will have to rise monotonically with increases in *n*. But if other benefits are completely disregarded, then it would have to be the case that ΣB_p always are higher than ΣC, irrespective of changes in *n*, in order for the inclusion of such benefits to completely solve the problem addressed here. However, this certainly seems like an unlikely proposition. But how about including both such process related benefits and the previously considered outcome-dependent benefits (ΣB_o)? This is illustrated in Figure 4.

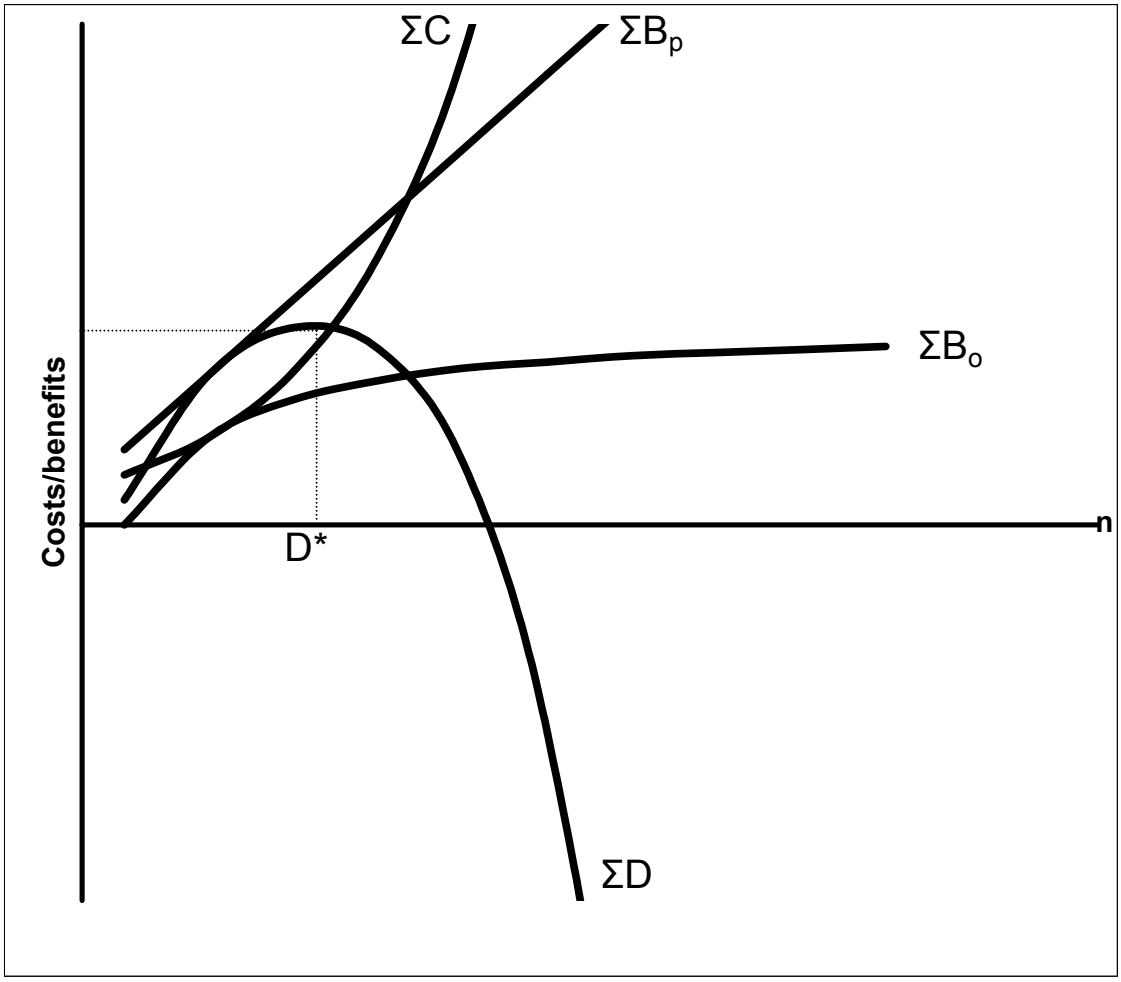

Figure 4. The inclusion of monotonically increasing process related benefits.

In this case, there is now a certain range within which the net-value is positive. But with n beyond D^*, it will still be the case that less deliberation would be preferable and hence that there is a trade-off. Deliberation may sometimes be better than no deliberation, but it clearly cannot solve every problem.

4. Discussion

Some proponents of deliberative democracy might object to the current analysis and argue that they are not as such interested in making "better" decisions in the sense of decisions, which, subjectively or objectively, are somehow "optimal." Rather what they are interested in are some of the benefits associated with the process itself. For example, deliberating may make participants better citizens by developing virtues such as altruism, solidarity, etc., feelings of community, etc., and that the process of deliberation may further these, even if obtained at a cost.

These are certainly relevant considerations, but in relation to the present analysis the question is how exactly to interpret such claims. It surely cannot mean that these supposed values are such that they are to be pursued *no matter* what, i.e. at any cost. First of all, surely no proponent of deliberative democracy would argue that a society would be better off behaving as a Buridan's Ass and pursue deliberation to the point of extinction of all its members? Second, if it is such process-related values that are to be pursued rather than the outcomes of democratic decision-making as such, then a relevant question becomes whether such values may conceivably be pursued in the absence of a democratic process at all.[8] If they may, and if it indeed are these values that are held to be pursued, then this in reality opens the door for rather authoritarian and blatantly anti-democratic possibilities.

On the other hand, if it is something in the process that is assumed to be valuable, then we may actually consider this by simply adjusting the total benefits and redefining these so that ΣB achieves a higher value. However, unless these additional values are of an extremely valuable character, intuition would tell us that the picture, at best, would be one resembling Figure 1. There would, in other words, still be a trade-off to be made at some point.

For deliberation always to be good would require that it always is the case that $\Sigma B > \Sigma C$. However, this certainly seems a most unlikely proposition. After all, that would mean that any conceivable decision always would be better by adding any number of individuals to it—something that is truly difficult to fathom.

5. Conclusion

The previous analysis has attempted to highlight that it may be extremely simplistic of proponents of deliberative democracy to exclusively focus on the supposed

[8] I have made this point in greater detail elsewhere, see Kurrild-Klitgaard 1999.

benefits of deliberation. While such benefits may (or may not) manifest themselves in deliberative processes, this in itself cannot be seen as being sufficient for making the case for the value of the procedure. Furthermore, the theoretical possibility of such benefits do not guarantee that they will be manifested in reality. While too little deliberation in some circumstances of social and political life might lead to suboptimal outcomes, too much deliberation may certainly do the same.

In essence, what we are saying is this: Proponents of deliberation need to show that it is likely (or at least plausible) that the time and efforts invested in deliberation will (a) not be such that these exceed the benefits reached, or (b) even exceed the improvement in the quality of the decision made.

This is not to say that deliberation is of no value, in politics or in other spheres of life. Obviously, many decisions will be better if more individuals participate in them, or if more time and resources are devoted to the process of considering the pros and cons. However, we have here highlighted the fact that choices are not "free," i.e. that choices never are completely costless. Specifically, by focusing on the potential costs of deliberation relative to the potential benefits, we have been demonstrating essentially two things:

First, by only considering the (supposed) benefits of deliberation, the proponents of deliberative democracy may be seen as vastly overestimating the net-value of deliberation. To do so is to paint an unrealistically rosy picture of what may be achieved.

Second, it is quite likely that even with few participants deliberating the costs may become so relatively high relative to the corresponding increase in benefits, that the net-value of deliberation becomes negative. At least the burden of proof must rest on those theorists who would claim that the benefits of deliberation always outweigh the costs. They cannot simply focus on the benefits alone and cannot simply claim that these are all that matter.

The present analysis has been extremely general. By narrowing the assumptions, there will no doubt be the possibility that there may be significant differences in the net-value of deliberative processes depending, e.g., on the specific forms of deliberation adopted. But together the previous points suggest a further one when considering whether or not to use deliberation as a method for collective decision-making, namely that sometimes the best institutional solution (relative to producing the optimal outcomes) may not be one based on deliberation or perhaps not a collective-decision at all; what constitutional set-up will be optimal will essentially be a question whose answer depends on the externalities involved (cf. Bernholz 1986??; Bernholz 1997??). Voting, for example, remains an important democratic alternative, and indeed one that ultimately must be utilized even in deliberative processes. Furthermore, another relevant alternative to consider, when the externalities are not significant is one utilizing market-like structures (cf. Vanberg and Congleton 1992; Kurrild-Klitgaard 2002). So, for example in a question of whether or not public schools in a given community should teach Christianity to the pupils, there might be a wide range of alternative procedures other than to engage in prolonged deliberation that might be relevant, including delegating the decision-making authority to some actor (i.e. hierarchy or representative democracy), letting

the pupils opt-in or -out as they want through the introduction of voucher-schemes, or altogether privatizing the schools and let these decides for themselves (i.e. some form of market-solutions). In a comparative perspective, it might turn out to be the case that any or all of these alternative procedures would result in a more preferable outcome than extensive deliberation—and at least conceivably at a lower cost.

The only way that this over-all picture would be different is if the benefits from deliberation for some reason should be expected to increase more rapidly with the number of participants than the corresponding costs. This cannot be ruled out *apriori*, but there is certainly no compelling reasons to believe so, and no such plausible argument has been suggested by proponents of deliberative democracy, upon whom the burden of proof would certainly have to rest. Absent such an argument one must expect that there is only a certain range of individuals within which it will likely be optimal to use deliberation as a method for making social choices. Beyond this adding more deliberators or spending more time will result in a negative net-value. At some point you just have to stop quarrelling and pick the first the best restaurant—or the nearest pile of hay.

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