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Democracy, autonomy and persuasion

Groen-Reijman, E.

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Summary

Deliberative Political Campaigns: Democracy, Autonomy and Persuasion

This thesis is a philosophical treatment of political campaigns, and asks the normative question to what extent the use of modern persuasion techniques in campaigns, particularly those adopted from or inspired by marketing practices, affects the legitimacy of democracies. In answering this question, this thesis argues for a deliberative conception of democracy, which takes the free, equal and inclusive exchange of information, arguments and proposals as the required democratic procedure. According to deliberative principles, the persuasion techniques used by modern campaigns can, under certain conditions, play a constructive role in the representative processes that befit modern democracies. However, when they do not meet deliberative standards they can constitute forms of deception or manipulation, and thus should be abandoned for the sake of democratic legitimacy.

The thesis is comprised of two parts, each consisting of four chapters. The first part develops the philosophical argument in favor of a deliberative conception of democracy and specifies the ways in which the normative principles of this model should apply to modern democracy's institutional arrangement and modes of communication. It thus makes clear what standards a deliberative conception of democracy prescribes for legitimate political persuasion. The second part discusses several related yet distinct political persuasion techniques, drawing from insights in the communication research literature, and applies the standards developed in the first part to them.

The first part begins with a chapter on the deliberative model of democracy. Political decisions can only be justified to all when they are grounded in procedures which consider the viewpoints of all members of society equally. As reasons are vital to the substance of politics, this idea requires more than a procedure of one person, one vote: it asks for a

democracy which facilitates and encourages a free, equal and inclusive exchange of information, arguments and proposals. Such an exchange grounds the legitimacy of the outcomes not only because it is free and equal, but also because, as a procedure, it has epistemic value: given the diverse and uncertain nature of knowledge in politics, a socially inclusive and critical procedure can in itself give foundations for the rightness of democratic outcomes.

The second chapter explains the normative relationship between a deliberative democratic model and the autonomy of citizens. This relationship works in two ways: on the one hand, the respect owed to autonomous others justifies why politics should be conducted through deliberative democratic procedures, and on the other hand, theories of what being autonomous consists of clarify what a respectful treatment of citizens entails. If citizens are to participate in deliberation and endorse decisions they really agree with, then democratic procedures must respect and further their capacities for deliberation and decision-making, authentic value-orientations and perspectives, and attitudes such as self-trust and self-esteem. Attempts at influencing citizens can disrespect autonomy in different ways: in some instances, they simply ignore their rational capacities, while in other instances they intentionally attempt to distort citizens' decision-making processes in hidden ways, thus creating inequality between the person influenced and the person influencing. The latter case constitutes a paradigm case of manipulation, even if in practice these cases may sometimes be difficult to demarcate.

The deliberative norms as developed in the first two chapters need to be applied on two levels: the way society is organized on the institutional level as a democratic system, and the kind of interpersonal communication that takes place within procedures and institutions. In the third chapter, a deliberative model of the systemic level is developed, which shows that representation is an important part of deliberative politics, but that this does not exclude strong citizen participation; in fact, both are required for a legitimate deliberative system to function. The political system should allow for and encourage reflexivity and inclusivity. The normative role of political campaigns is shaped by the specific value of representation in deliberative democracy: campaigns should offer legitimate grounds for the choice of representatives by persuading citizens in a deliberative way. This would also strengthen the deliberative quality of the public debate, which is influenced pervasively by political campaigns. Moreover, as deliberation inside parliaments and throughout society should be ongoing, the

arguments made throughout a campaign should be viewed as the basis not for fixed mandates, but rather for political priorities, perspectives and values.

The interpersonal level of deliberation, discussed in the fourth chapter, raises the question whether the model developed so far prescribes that democratic communication should be limited to rational exchanges. It answers this question in the negative, by showing how different forms of speech, such as the exchange of emotions or rhetoric, have democratic value by promoting inclusivity, political motivation, attention and social knowledge. However, this is not to say that these forms of speech should be understood as alternative forms of deliberation, but rather that they are necessary components of the political process in a deliberative democracy.

In part II of the thesis, the norms of this model are applied to persuasive techniques which are currently used in Western democracies: political marketing and micro-targeting, framing, spin, and emotional, personal and negative campaigning.

The fifth chapter evaluates marketing techniques in politics, such as the use of focus groups, big data and targeting. Political marketing is a broad approach to campaigning which takes its cue from commercial marketing techniques and lets research precede and determine what is offered in terms of political 'products' or services. This approach to campaigning has, with the help of digital informational technologies, developed into the potential of highly personalized forms of micro-targeting. In order to answer whether the use of such techniques can be legitimate, the chapter first analyzes the media environment in response to which campaigns develop their communication techniques. Within such an environment, organization and professionalization are necessary to effectively fulfill a campaign's democratic function. However, even if campaigns employ many strategic considerations and techniques, they should not become strategic all the way down. When campaigns are understood as communicative, that is, as attempts to reach understanding and therefore reasonably persuade citizens of claims and proposals, the limits to strategic ways of organization, approaching voters and interactions with the media become clear. Under some conditions, then, marketing techniques may support the democratic function of campaigns. For example, voter research and targeting may be used to more efficiently match the political positions that a party supports with citizens who are interested in the same considerations, provided that these techniques are used in a way that is respectful of the privacy of citizens, which is a

democratic value. However, when political position taking and persuasion practices take on a fundamentally instrumental nature because of the marketing approach, campaigns become purely strategic rather than (mostly) communicative endeavors, and this diminishes the legitimacy of the democratic system overall.

The technique of framing, taken up in the sixth chapter, raises different questions regarding the legitimacy of persuasion. Frames are analyzed here as an implicit form of making claims. For this reason, the legitimacy of frames should partly be judged on the basis of the legitimacy of their content, and whether they promote or impair democratic principles such as inclusivity and respect for autonomy. From a deliberative perspective, the implicitness of the content of frames presents a problem, as implicit claims are more difficult to identify and criticize. On the other hand, framing political perspectives can help to communicate them efficiently, which is of value in the context of large-scale, monological communication channels such as mass-media. Moreover, frames help to connect factual claims with values and political perspectives, which under certain conditions can improve understanding and democratic involvement. The construction of frames on the basis of voter research, as often occurs, should meet the same conditions as laid out in the previous chapter, but does not in itself impair the sincerity that is required from political representatives, as long as these representatives can be held to their commitment to their claims, implicit or not, in their actions.

The seventh chapter discusses the technique of spin, which here is taken to indicate the practice of attempting to influence journalists and their reporting. Importantly, in large-scale democracies communicative processes rely on mass media, which function as bridges between different institutional levels by making deliberations accessible and setting the public agenda. They should provide for inclusivity and reflexivity. However, the media system functions according to its own logic, communicating stories on the basis of conflict, personalization and dramatization, which is related to its functional limitations but which counteracts a fully deliberative role of the media. Therefore, the extent to which the media supports deliberation is limited, and for this reason the opportunity for journalists to take a critical and independent stance in political debates is even more pivotal. On the other hand, competition and advocacy by political parties also serve important democratic functions. Consequently, the interaction between political actors and journalists should be the subject of normative critique. This chapter argues that whether spin is

legitimate depends on its impact on the public debate, on the power relation between the political actor and the journalist, and on whether spin is practiced in order to correct or to take advantage of deliberative failings in the media system.

Finally, the eighth chapter discusses the deliberative role of emotional, personal and negative campaigning. As in framing, the legitimacy of these persuasion techniques depends in part on whether the persuasive claims, which often remain implicit, could, when challenged, be justified in deliberative terms. Therefore, these persuasive strategies need to be used in forums that offer room for critique and responsiveness. Moreover, personal campaign techniques should address politically relevant virtues only, and negative campaigning must not resort to personal attacks. Under these conditions, emotional and personal campaigning can contribute to the political involvement of citizens and thus strengthen deliberative democracy, whereas negative campaigning that focuses on issues instead of persons can possibly clarify political contrasts between candidates.

This thesis concludes that modern political campaign techniques can meet deliberative standards for democratic communication, and even strengthen democratic systems. However, these techniques need to meet throughout and consistently the systemic and interpersonal norms of deliberation.

Samenvatting

Deliberatieve Politieke Campagnes: Democratie, Autonomie en Overtuigen

Dit proefschrift geeft een filosofische beschouwing op politieke campagnes, en stelt de normatieve vraag in welke mate het gebruik van moderne overtuigingstechnieken de legitimiteit van democratieën beïnvloedt. Daarbij richt het zich vooral op die technieken die zijn overgenomen van of geïnspireerd door marketing. In antwoord op deze vraag pleit dit proefschrift voor een deliberatief model van democratie, dat de vrije, gelijke en inclusieve uitwisseling van informatie, argumenten en voorstellen beschouwt als noodzakelijke procedure voor een democratie. De overtuigingstechnieken die gebruikt worden door moderne campagnes kunnen, onder bepaalde voorwaarden, volgens deliberatieve principes een constructieve rol spelen in het representatieve proces dat hoort bij moderne democratieën. Echter, als hun gebruik niet voldoet aan deliberatieve criteria kan dat leiden tot vormen van bedrog of manipulatie, en in zulke gevallen mogen ze in het belang van democratische legitimiteit niet worden gebruikt.

Dit proefschrift bestaat uit twee delen, die elk vier hoofdstukken omvatten. Het eerste deel is een filosofisch betoog voor een deliberatief democratiemodel, en analyseert op welke manieren de normatieve principes van dit model vorm moeten geven aan de instituties en wijzen van communiceren in moderne democratieën. Zo wordt duidelijk gemaakt aan welke criteria politiek overtuigen moet voldoen om volgens een deliberatief democratiemodel legitiem te zijn. Het tweede deel bespreekt, in het licht van de criteria die in deel I zijn ontwikkeld, een aantal verschillende maar gerelateerde politieke overtuigingstechnieken en maakt daarbij gebruik van inzichten uit de communicatie-wetenschappelijke literatuur.

Het eerste deel begint met een hoofdstuk over het deliberatieve democratiemodel. Politieke beslissingen kunnen alleen worden gerechtvaardigd tegenover iedereen als ze gegrond zijn in procedures die

de perspectieven van ieder lid van de samenleving gelijkelijk overwegen. Omdat redenen een wezenlijk onderdeel zijn van de inhoud van politiek, moet deze procedure meer zijn dan één persoon, één stem: een democratie moet een vrije, gelijke en inclusieve uitwisseling van informatie, argumenten en voorstellen faciliteren en stimuleren. Zulke uitwisselingen geven de uitkomsten van dat proces legitimiteit, niet alleen omdat ze vrij en gelijk zijn, maar ook omdat ze als procedure epistemische waarde hebben: gegeven het karakter van kennis in de politiek, die divers en onzeker is, kan een sociaal inclusieve en kritische procedure als zodanig de basis zijn voor de juistheid van democratische besluiten.

Het tweede hoofdstuk legt uit wat de normatieve relatie is tussen een deliberatief democratiemodel en de autonomie van burgers. Deze relatie werkt twee kanten op: het respect dat we verschuldigd zijn aan autonome individuen rechtvaardigt aan de ene kant dat politiek op een deliberatieve manier bedreven moet worden, en aan de andere kant verduidelijken theorieën van persoonlijke autonomie hoe dat respect er uit moet zien. Als burgers moeten kunnen deelnemen aan deliberatie en die beslissingen moeten kunnen steunen waarmee ze het daadwerkelijk eens zijn, dan moeten democratische procedures respectvol en stimulerend zijn voor hun vermogen tot delibereren en beslissen, en het ontwikkelen van een authentieke waarde-oriëntatie, een eigen perspectief, en van houdingen zoals vertrouwen in en waardering voor zichzelf. Pogingen om burgers te beïnvloeden kunnen op verschillende manieren disrespectvol zijn: soms negeren ze eenvoudigweg de rationele vermogens van burgers, terwijl ze op andere momenten proberen het besluitvormingsproces van burgers op verborgen manieren te verstoren, waarmee ze ongelijkheid creëren tussen de persoon die beïnvloed wordt en degene die beïnvloedt. Het laatste geval is er duidelijk sprake van manipulatie, al kan het in de praktijk lastig zijn om scherp onderscheid te maken tussen de twee.

De deliberatieve normen die in de eerste twee hoofdstukken zijn ontwikkeld hebben betrekking op twee niveaus: de organisatie van een democratische samenleving op het niveau van haar instituties - het systeem - en de manier waarop interpersoonlijke communicatie verloopt binnen die instituties en procedures. Het derde hoofdstuk ontwikkelt een deliberatief model voor het systemisch niveau en laat zien dat representatie belangrijk is voor deliberatieve politiek, maar dat dit sterke participatie van burgers niet uitsluit; wil een deliberatief systeem legitiem kunnen functioneren, dan zijn beide nodig. Een politiek systeem moet reflexiviteit en inclusiviteit faciliteren en aanmoedigen. Politieke campagnes hebben een normatieve

rol, die is ingegeven door de waarde van representatie voor een deliberatieve democratie: door burgers op een deliberatieve manier te overtuigen moeten campagnes legitieme gronden bieden voor de keuze van vertegenwoordigers. Dit versterkt ook de deliberatieve kwaliteit van het publieke debat, dat in belangrijke mate beïnvloed wordt door politieke campagnes. Daarbij geldt dat deliberatie continu moet plaatsvinden, zowel in het parlement als in de samenleving, en dat de standpunten en argumenten in een campagne dus niet moeten gelden als basis voor een gefixeerd mandaat, maar voor politieke prioriteiten, perspectieven en waarden.

Het interpersoonlijk niveau van deliberatie, dat besproken wordt in het vierde hoofdstuk, richt zich op de vraag of het model zoals tot nu toe ontwikkeld voorschrijft dat democratische communicatie beperkt moet blijven tot rationele uitwisselingen. Het hoofdstuk beantwoordt deze vraag negatief, en laat zien dat verschillende communicatievormen, zoals retorica of de uitwisseling van emoties, waardevol zijn voor democratie omdat ze inclusiviteit, motivatie voor politiek, aandacht en sociale kennis bevorderen. Dit betekent niet dat deze communicatievormen begrepen moeten worden als alternatieve vormen van deliberatie, maar wel dat ze in een deliberatieve democratie noodzakelijk onderdeel zijn van het politiek proces.

In deel II van het proefschrift worden de normen van dit model toegepast op de overtuigingstechnieken die tegenwoordig gebruikt worden in Westerse democratieën: politieke marketing en micro-targeting, framing, spin, en emotioneel, persoonlijk en negatief campagnevoeren.

Het vijfde hoofdstuk evalueert marketingtechnieken in de politiek, zoals het gebruik van focusgroepen, big data en targeting. Politieke marketing is een brede benadering van campagnes, die zijn basis heeft in commerciële technieken en onderzoek als leidend beschouwt voor wat als politieke 'product' of dienst wordt aangeboden. Deze benadering van campagnes heeft zich, met de hulp van digitale informatietechnologieën, ontwikkeld tot potentieel sterk gepersonaliseerde vormen van micro-targeting. Om te beoordelen of het gebruik van zulke technieken legitiem kan zijn, analyseert het vijfde hoofdstuk eerst de media-omgeving waarin campagnes hun communicatietechnieken ontwikkelen. Binnen zo'n omgeving zijn organisatie en professionalisering noodzakelijk om de functie van een campagne effectief te kunnen vormgeven. Aan de andere kant moeten campagnes, ook wanneer ze veel strategische overwegingen en technieken inzetten, niet fundamenteel strategisch worden. Als campagnes

begrepen worden als communicatief, dat wil zeggen als pogingen om tot overeenstemming te komen met burgers en hen op redelijke gronden van claims of voorstellen te overtuigen, dan wordt duidelijk wat de beperkingen zijn voor strategische vormen van campagneorganisatie, het benaderen van kiezers en de interactie met de media. Onder bepaalde voorwaarden kunnen marketingtechnieken de democratische functie van campagnes ondersteunen. Kiezersonderzoek en targeting kunnen bijvoorbeeld gebruikt worden om de politieke standpunten die een partij onderschrijft op een efficiënte manier te 'matchen' met burgers die dezelfde overwegingen belangrijk vinden, mits deze technieken worden gebruikt op een manier die de privacy van burgers respecteert, want dat is een democratische waarde. Echter, wanneer door een marketingbenadering het innemen van politieke posities en het overtuigen van kiezers een fundamenteel strategisch karakter krijgt worden campagnes strategische in plaats van communicatieve ondernemingen, en dit beschadigt de legitimiteit van het democratische systeem als geheel.

De techniek van het framen, het onderwerp van het zesde hoofdstuk, roept verschillende vragen op over de legitimiteit van het overtuigen. Frames worden hier geanalyseerd als impliciete manieren om claims te maken. Om die reden moet de legitimiteit van frames deels worden beoordeeld op basis van hun inhoud, en of ze democratische principes als inclusiviteit en respect voor autonomie versterken of verzwakken. Vanuit deliberatief perspectief is het impliciete karakter van de inhoud van frames een probleem, omdat impliciete claims moeilijker zijn om te identificeren en bekritisieren. Aan de andere kant helpt framen om politieke perspectieven efficiënt te communiceren, en dat is waardevol in grootschalige, monologische communicatiekanalen zoals massamedia. Bovendien helpen frames om feitelijke claims in verband te brengen met waarden en politieke perspectieven, wat onder bepaalde voorwaarden begrip en betrokkenheid in een democratie kan bevorderen. Het construeren van frames op basis van kiezersonderzoek, zoals vaak gebeurt, zou aan dezelfde voorwaarden moeten voldoen als ontwikkeld in hoofdstuk vijf, maar beperkt op zichzelf niet de oprechtheid die vereist is voor politieke vertegenwoordigers, zolang zij in hun handelingen maar gehouden kunnen worden aan hun commitment aan de claims die ze maken, impliciet of niet.

Het zevende hoofdstuk bespreekt spin, de techniek die hier wordt begrepen als de praktijk waarbij een poging wordt gedaan journalisten en hun verslaggeving te beïnvloeden. In grootschalige democratieën verlopen

communicatieprocessen in belangrijke mate via massamedia, die daarmee fungeren als brug tussen verschillende institutionele niveaus, door deliberaties toegankelijk te maken en de publieke agenda te bepalen. Ze voorzien in inclusiviteit en reflexiviteit. Aan de andere kant functioneren mediasystemen volgens hun eigen logica, en worden verhalen vaak geselecteerd op basis van conflict, personalisering en dramatisering, keuzes die zijn ingegeven door de functiebeperkingen van deze systemen maar die een volwaardige deliberatieve rol voor de media belemmeren. De mate waarin de media deliberatie ondersteunen is daarmee beperkt, en hierom is de ruimte die journalisten krijgen om een kritische en onafhankelijke houding aan te nemen in politieke debatten des te crucialer. Aan de andere kant hebben competitie en het actief uitdragen van standpunten door politieke partijen ook een belangrijke democratische functie. Daarom moet de relatie tussen journalisten en politici onderwerp zijn van normatieve kritiek. Dit hoofdstuk betoogt dat de legitimiteit van spin afhangt van haar effect op het publieke debat en op de machtsrelatie tussen de politicus en de journalist, en van de oriëntatie: wordt spin beoefend om deliberatieve zwakten in het mediasysteem te corrigeren, of om er juist van te profiteren?

Ten slotte bespreekt het achtste hoofdstuk de deliberatieve rol van emotioneel, persoonlijk en negatief campagnevoeren. Net als bij framing hangt de legitimiteit van deze overtuigingstechnieken gedeeltelijk samen met de vraag of de gemaakte claims, die vaak impliciet blijven, in deliberatieve termen gerechtvaardigd zouden kunnen worden wanneer ze werden bekritiseerd. Daarom moeten deze overtuigingstechnieken gebruikt worden in forums die ruimte bieden voor kritiek en respons. Daarbij mogen persoonlijke campagnetechnieken zich alleen richten op deugden die politiek relevant zijn, en moeten negatieve campagnes zich niet schuldig maken aan persoonlijke aanvallen. Wanneer ze aan deze voorwaarden voldoen kunnen emotioneel en persoonlijk campagnevoeren bijdragen aan de politieke betrokkenheid van burgers en op die manier deliberatieve democratie versterken, en biedt negatief campagnevoeren, mits gericht op onderwerpen in plaats van op personen, de mogelijkheid om politieke contrasten tussen kandidaten te verhelderen.

Dit proefschrift concludeert dat moderne politieke campagnes kunnen passen binnen deliberatieve criteria voor democratische communicatie en democratische systemen zelfs kunnen versterken. Echter, deze technieken moeten altijd volledig voldoen aan de systemische en interpersoonlijke normen van deliberatie.