

Mending the Bridge

Repairing political justification in American society

By: Jacob Feldgoise

American democratic institutions have begun to degrade without a robust and secure connection between representatives and constituents—their purpose lost. Most work has either sought to exclusively define the extent and source of a lack of political justification in American politics or propose general solutions to the problem. However, this work has not yet drawn a connection between source and solution in a broad, aggregated analysis. This paper first presents innovative interpretations of (1) the reasons for a lack of political justification and (2) previously proposed methods for improving political justification. Then, I suggest methods to solidify deliberative democracy that increase justification in American politics. In doing so, the paper establishes a clear link between the greatest reasons for a lack of political justification in American politics and my solution to the deficiency. My synthesis reveals that the deficiency of political justification in American politics is a result of popular disinterest and political institutions that perpetuate the problem. Therefore, my intervention suggests implementing programs that simultaneously increase popular interest in political justification and modify American political institutions to support instead of hinder political accountability. All Americans who feel a persistent disconnect between their own beliefs and the policies supported by their elected officials should take great interest in this work. These feelings stem from a systemic lack of accountability in political representation, the very issue I aim to address.

Keywords: deliberative democracy, political justification, deliberative polling, institution-based solutions, individual-based solutions

1. Introduction

Political justification is the bridge in American society between representatives and constituents, and much like American roads and bridges, it is in a state of chronic disrepair. Without a robust and secure connection between representatives and constituents, American democratic institutions have begun to degrade—their purpose lost. This sentiment is wholly echoed by Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson’s definition of “democracy.” Specifically, the authors claim that “justifying decisions” (Gutmann 7) is of key importance to the function of deliberative democracy. They state that elected officials must justify their decisions to constituents, and those same constituents must demand justification as a right of political representation. If our political institutions do not satisfy those criteria, they are simply non-democratic.

If we think about “democracy” in this way, then political feasibility emerges as a problem. Gutmann and Thompson’s claim is essential but idealistic and likely infeasible. In a political atmosphere dominated by partisan loyalty and powerful lobbyists, politicians are more reluctant than ever to justify their actions. In reality, political justification is underdeveloped in American society.

Most work in this field has either sought to exclusively define the source of a lack of political justification in American politics or propose general solutions to the problem. However, existing work has not yet drawn a connection between source and solution in a broad, aggregated analysis. The existing field of work can be greatly supplemented by an extensive synthesis of the challenges that plague the practical implementation of deliberative democracy, specifically exploring those challenges that limit political justification.

A thorough assessment of potential solutions to this issue is also lacking. Many authors have designed solutions to improve political justification, but they rarely put their solutions into play

with the proposals of their colleagues, and the resulting intellectual echo chamber is ineffective. Efforts to increase political justification in American society would greatly benefit from a clear, innovative interpretation of potential solutions.

This paper first presents innovative interpretations of (1) the reasons for a lack of political justification and (2) previously proposed methods for improving political justification. Furthermore, I will suggest methods to solidify deliberative democracy that increase justification in American politics. In doing so, I establish a clear link between the primary reasons for a lack of political justification in American politics, and I propose a comprehensive solution that melds together a number of specific policies.



Reflection of the U.S. Capitol. Credit: Kendall Hoopes

2. Origins of Our Lack of Political Justification

A number of writers have argued that American deliberative democracy and political justification is far from perfect. For example, Nelson and Hersh agree that deliberative democracy is flawed with regard to its practical application. Authors such as Nelson lay the

blame for our crumbling democratic institutions at the feet of the institutions themselves. Nelson essentially argues that the Office of the U.S. President has continuously accrued power over time to the extent that it no longer needs to justify its actions. She asserts that this imbalance of power has led to an American culture that supports strong leaders who offer little political justification. Furthermore, she argues that this culture has become institutionalized in our systems of education. Hersh argues that the American public is directly responsible for failing to engage with deliberative institutions. While both authors agree that political justification is flawed, they disagree about the source of the flaw.

Furthermore, authors such as Fishkin & Mansbridge allude to a recent breakdown in reason-giving by politicians, suggesting that political justification was more strongly observed in the past. The authors imply that the degradation of political justification in American democracy may be time-dependent, fixed to particular political climates. However, while insightful, the authors do not concretely point to a specific cause for this lack of political justification; they only provide examples of the kinds of political climates that are conducive to strong and weak justification.

Political justification stems from public desire for political accountability. A core system of our American democracy is that political representatives, once elected, must work ceaselessly to fulfill their campaign promises and represent their constituents; this principle is the foundation of political justification. However, political justification can only operate at capacity when the American public *believes* that political justification is an essential American right; for political justification to succeed, we must believe in holding politicians accountable. Therefore, political accountability is intrinsically linked to and positively associated with political justification.

I agree with Fishkin & Mansbridge's interpretation of political justification as a function of time, and I strike a balance between defining the cause of our lack of political justification as purely individual or institutional. Specifically, the American deficiency in political justification is caused by a combination of general political disinterest and governmental incentives that perpetuate political disinterest.

The average American citizen doesn't want to worry about politics on a daily basis. Americans want to elect representatives who share their values, and we want to trust in those elected officials to effectively run our government. When governmental failures become the focus of the national conversation, Americans begrudgingly allocate time away from leisure activities to discuss the situation. Simply put, American culture does not place an emphasis on deliberative democracy or political justification.

The deficiency of political justification is further compounded by political institutions that have no incentive to support political justification en masse. It is easier for Congressmen and Senators to navigate the political channels of Washington when they are not wholly accountable for their actions. Essentially, lack of political justification allows for mutually beneficial agreements that otherwise would not be possible if representatives were always held to their promises. This misaligned incentive system decreases the likelihood that political representatives will promote political justification, as reform would make their work more difficult.

3. Proposed Improvements to Political Justification

There exists a separate, but related discussion of ways to increase American political justification. In general, proposed solutions tend to vary depending on the perceived source of deliberative failure, but few take the form of fully conceived programs. Solutions-proposers

typically recommend small-scale individual action that will barely impact American political justification as a whole.

List & Sliwka propose “Deliberative Polling” to policymakers as one potential solution to the failures of deliberative democracy. Deliberative Polling is a method that seeks to educate a test group about a controversial subject and measure changes to the subjects as a result of that education. List & Sliwka found that Deliberative Polling increases the informedness of participants, the rate of successful meta-consensus, and can help participants “develop an understanding of real processes of democratic communication and decision making.” (List & Sliwka 14) Greater understanding and investment in the deliberative process would naturally lead to a greater degree of political justification.

However, this academic solution to improving political justification is not the norm. Spengler targets a different audience when he offers average Americans five solutions to improving accountability, such as following your representative’s voting patterns and showing up to community events. These individual actions are small in scale, but they can make an aggregate difference if a significant proportion of U.S. population participates.

Solution-proposers rarely establish a clear link between a specific reason for the failure of political justification and their solution. For example, Spengler offers his five solutions without context. He makes the implicit assumption that political justification can be best improved by increasing the political activity of individual Americans, however he never shows that public political inactivity is the cause of weak political justification.

4. My Intervention: Bridging Individuals and Institutions

My synthesis in section 2 revealed that the deficiency of political justification in American politics is a result of popular disinterest and political institutions that perpetuate the problem. Therefore, my intervention must present both individual-based and institution-based solutions. Specifically, this entails simultaneously increasing popular interest in political justification and modifying American political institutions to support instead of hinder political justification.

I suggest that U.S. States implement Deliberative Polling programs to specifically target politically-apatetic populations. List & Sliwka found that Deliberative Polling is an effective tool for increasing understanding of and support for democratic deliberation. By extension, Deliberative Polling must also increase participants desire for political justification, because political justification is a byproduct of political engagement. Deliberative Polling is an effective short-term policy for increasing political justification in politically-apatetic populations.

Implementing mandatory high school curriculum in political justification is a complementary long-term policy to Deliberative Polling. Many schools already have American government and civic education programs, so this policy would not require a major reorganization of educational systems. These political justification programs should specifically seek to engage students in holding their elected officials accountable, both on a local and national level.

I also recommend election law reform such that candidates and incumbents for local and state political positions must fulfill a set of requirements on penalty of criminal prosecution. I recommend targeting state and local governments instead of Congress, because most Americans

know so little about these institutions. For example, Americans typically vote for state legislators without considering the actual qualifications of the candidates. This means that state legislators are essentially held accountable for the national success of their party but not for their own successes and failures (Masket).

First, at the beginning of each term, politicians-elect should be required to submit an official agenda to their constituents and the relevant political body, stating the deliverable goals for their tenure in office. At the end of each term, incumbent politicians should submit an annotated copy of their original agenda, specifying which goals were accomplished and which were not. Politicians will likely modify their final agendas to seem unrealistically successful, however this policy will still advance the conversation around political justification. Candidate websites should also include a page—accessible from the main menu bar—that educates readers about the importance of political justification. These proposed institutional policies will help transform local governments from political institutions that hinder justification to the bedrock of American political accountability.

5. Conclusion

Ultimately, my analyses have confirmed a few concepts that apply to many different scenarios beyond the scope of political justification. First, complicated situations are typically caused by complicated problems. There is no one source at the root of America's deficiency in political justification. Instead, the deficiency is caused by a combination of fundamental popular disinterest and failing institutions. There are rarely simple solutions to such complicated problems. A single short-term policy initiative will ultimately lack the temporal scope to realize

Deliberative Polling should only be implemented where political justification is weakest. Currently, no empirical studies exist that measure levels of political accountability by U.S. geographic region, but we can use political “integrity” as a close estimate; states that perform poorly in political integrity rankings will likely also perform poorly in political justification rankings. The Center for Public Integrity’s 2015 State Integrity Investigation found that states such as Delaware, Wyoming, and Michigan had the worst levels of political integrity. Therefore, those three states would make ideal locations for pilot programs of my proposed policy.

Readers that want to take direct action should focus their efforts around organizing Deliberative Polling events and improving access to civic education programs for public school students. Ideally, we would simultaneously seek to reform American culture and political systems, however, we are ultimately limited by human capital. In order to maximize the impact of the time, money, and effort devoted to this cause, the contributions of political justification activists must be highly focused. Purely individual activities such as engaging with political representatives are important, but they lack the scope of Deliberative Polling and public civics education. Readers who live in ideal locations for Deliberative Polling (mentioned earlier) should organize events with the help of national deliberative democracy organizations such as the Center for Political Accountability. Where Deliberative Polling is unlikely to advance political justification, readers should instead campaign to create or enhance their public school civics programs. The path to truly effective political justification is long and hard, but the reward for success is nothing short of preserving American democracy.

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