



Communication Matters: The NCA Podcast | **TRANSCRIPT**

Episode 7: Hope for Democracy - Book Highlight with John Gastil & Katherine Knobloch

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Participants:

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Katherine Knobloch

[Audio Length: 0:46:41]

RECORDING BEGINS

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Welcome to *Communication Matters, the NCA Podcast*. I'm Trevor Parry-Giles, the Executive Director of the National Communication Association. The National Communication Association is the preeminent scholarly association devoted to the study and teaching of communication. Founded in 1914, NCA is a thriving group of thousands from across the nation and around the world who are committed to a collective mission to advance communication as an academic discipline. In keeping with NCA's mission to advance the discipline of communication, NCA has developed this podcast series to expand the reach of our member scholars' work and perspectives.

Introduction:

This is *Communication Matters, the NCA Podcast*.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

As we know, this is an election year. Just over a month ago, we were discussing research at the Iowa caucuses on this very podcast. Today we hope to take a moment and highlight a new book focused on political communication and issues of deliberative democracy. Back in 2014, we invited Professors John Gastil and Katherine R. Knobloch to come to DC to present their research at an event on Capitol Hill organized by The Coalition for National Science Funding. At the event, they discussed recent research on an innovative democratic process in Oregon that was funded by The National Science Foundation and which is the subject of their new book, *Hope for Democracy: How Citizens Can Bring Reason Back into Politics*. So, by way of background and context, Dr. John Gastil is a distinguished professor in communication arts and sciences and political science and a senior scholar at the McCourtney Institute for Democracy at The Pennsylvania State University. Dr. Knobloch is an assistant professor of communication studies and the associate director of The Center for Public Deliberation at Colorado State University. Gastil and Knobloch have been studying political reform in Oregon for the past



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decade and their book tells the story of the Oregon Citizens' Initiative Review or CIR which uses a random sample of citizens to evaluate ballot measures then write their findings in a guide distributed to every registered voter. The CIR has been tested in places such as Massachusetts, Switzerland and in Finland. So, hi, John. Hi, Katie. Welcome to the podcast.

Katherine Knobloch:

Hi, Trevor. Thanks for having us.

John Gastil:

Great to be here.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Let's start off by giving our listeners a taste of what they can expect when they pick up your book. So, John, can you share with us a short description of what's going on in *Hope for Democracy*?

John Gastil:

Sure. We're trying to make a much larger argument about, believe it or not, encouraging trends in democratic reform. There have been experiments conducted around the world in different ways of engaging citizens in deliberation that is relevant to policymaking. And the Oregon example is what Katie and I have focused the last ten years of our research on. So, it's the centerpiece of the book but it's really part of a much larger story that we tell through historical threads going all the way back to Athens and contemporary threads of the lives of people who either participated in this Oregon process or actually helped create it. So, the idea is you take the research findings and you put them in this much larger and much more personalized context so that people can appreciate that democratic reforms come from the efforts of real people who want to change their world. And it's encouraging to see one working and it's exciting to think about what could happen next, where we could go from something like the Oregon CIR to potentially bigger and even more powerful democratic reforms.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's a great review or preview I guess of what's going on in *Hope for Democracy* and it seems that you premise some of that on the idea that citizens everywhere feel disengaged from democratic decision-making. And Katie, I'm wondering what some of the factors are that contribute to this disengagement or this disengaged feeling that we see all over the place.

Katherine Knobloch:

Sure. So, in the book, we talk about political alienation. And so, alienation is a little bit different from arguments that you hear about political apathy or kind of the stealth democracy argument that people just want other people to do democracy for them, that they are disinterested in



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democracy. Our argument is different than that. We argue that it's not that people don't want to enact democracy themselves. It's that they don't see the pathways for doing it effectively. So, we talk about a bunch of different factors of political alienation. So, one of them is misinformation. People feel that it's hard to find good information, that they can't always trust the information that they get. Even if they do get information, sometimes it feels like the choices are false choices, that there isn't really differences between the options that they're given.

Another factor is social isolation. So, even kind of before we were all physically separated from one another, we're kind of becoming more socially isolated as a nation and as communities. So, one factor obviously is polarization. We feel that people who disagree with us politically are almost kind of entirely different beings. We often kind of think about them as evil. We don't understand their arguments. We can't find any ways to kind of bridge that gap and that's tearing our communities apart. It's tearing our families apart when we feel disconnected from one another. But we're also just kind of feeling disconnected from our everyday community members. We don't necessarily know our neighbors. We don't trust one another. So, we're feeling isolated.

Another factor that we talk about is commodification and there's a few different facets of this. One of these is simply kind of the way that money interferes with our political life. So, if people see money as the source of offering their opinions and they don't have money, they can feel disenfranchised from the political process. They can feel that there isn't any meaningful way for them to get involved if the way to get involved is by donating money. And on the other side of that, we see an increasing professionalization of the political class. So, all of these working in politics, working in interest groups who are kind of forming public opinion for us instead of asking the public what they need, what they want, how they feel. So, all of these things together, we don't feel like we have good information, we're feeling disconnected from one another, we don't feel like there are real avenues to get involved, that can leave us feeling powerless.

I think there are lots of ways that we can all relate to about feeling powerless. If you're a liberal who lives in a red state or a conservative who lives in a blue state, you often feel that your vote for the President doesn't matter in large part because it doesn't because of the electoral college. And that's different than local elections but there are lots of ways that we are starting to feel like we don't matter in the political process. Lots of efforts like voter suppression lead to this. So, it's not necessarily that people are apathetic. It's that they look at the political system around them and they don't see meaningful ways for them to get involved and then that leads to alienation. So, if people are looking at the political system, they don't understand their place in it, then they check out. And it's not that they don't care. It's that they can't figure out a way to express their voice in a way that matters to them, in a way that makes sense and in a way that they feel can actually make a difference.



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Trevor Parry-Giles:

So, alongside this notion that people are alienated and that they feel disengaged, you all make the argument as well that some studies find that voters make the wrong decision at the polling place. And John, I'm wondering what this means and how this is affected by aspects of the voter's worldviews such as party affiliation, ideological orientation, that sort of thing.

John Gastil:

Well, making the wrong decision can mean a couple different things. In the simplest sense, voters in surveys will tell you that they don't feel well-informed on the ballot measures that appear before them either if they're in a state that has the initiative or referenda or even voting on local municipal county or special transportation district measures. The details of these things can be overwhelming. Sometimes they're even designed to be confusing. In the state of Washington, there was one point where folks had to vote to repeal a law that removed ergonomics regulations and if you're not sure what a yes vote means, welcome to the club. We actually found in a survey that enough people had it exactly backward, that it would've changed the election outcome had they voted the way they intended to. So, extreme cases like that are almost comic. But even if it's a ballot measure on mandatory minimum sentencing for say drunk driving and sex crimes, that the first issue that went before the Oregon CIR, that might seem straightforward. I mean do you want tough sentencing or not? Is there really a wrong decision?

Well, there's a wrong decision if upon reflection as you learn about the issue and think about its impact, you actually vote differently than you did just without thinking about it. And that's the CIR is all about. It's about helping voters get the information they need and just that little bit of pause to ask them to reflect on values. It might make them think about oh, well, there's more than one value at stake here or maybe this isn't the kind of message I want to send. I want to be tough on crime but this isn't what I have in mind. That kind of thoughtfulness is what the CIR is trying to provoke. So, in an important sense, we don't know in advance of an election what the right or the wrong answer is. If we did, why do we need democracy? It's more about making voters feel that they really have the opportunity to get some key pieces of information, some key points of reflection and use those frankly quite quickly before they make their small part of what's often a momentous decision on an election.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Can you tell us a little bit more about how the CIR works?

John Gastil:

Sure. It works like this. In the state of Oregon, there is now a Citizens' Initiative Review Commission. That commission is made up actually mostly of people who have been in the CIR process, just everyday citizens who are now serving on the commission. But there are some other appointed folks to represent a range of different backgrounds and perspectives politically.



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That commission decides in an even numbered year in Oregon what issue or issues need a CIR process. So, the commission chooses one or two issues. Most recently actually they didn't choose one because the CIR is not publically funded at this time. When it was established by the state of Oregon, it was established in the middle of the recession and they said we're going to create this process but we're just going to have to get foundation funding or whatever to pay for what comes next. So, assuming they have the money and hopefully Oregon will change the law to finance it—Massachusetts is considering a similar law that would actually finance the CIR—assuming they have the money and that commission let's say identifies one issue that's particularly important for this process, then the organizers of the process, there's an organization called Healthy Democracy in Oregon that has run all of these in the U.S. so far with sometimes help from different partners and different states. It's like Arizona, Colorado and so on have tried this process too.

They get folks who are advocating for the ballot measure. Let's say it's a corporate tax reform. And they get folks who are opposing it. Finding the opposition can sometimes be trickier if they're not well organized but they can be found. The pro and con side then start kind of marshalling their arguments, thinking about who they'd want to testify before the CIR panelists and meanwhile some neutral experts are also rounded by Healthy Democracy to provide context. Meanwhile, Healthy Democracy is also sending out invitations to a random subsample of the electorate saying hey, we've got this process. It's going to last about four days in Salem, Oregon. We'd like you to be a part of it. Would you be willing? And unfortunately, they don't get a high acceptance rate. It's very small. But it's plenty of people to choose from and then they do a demographic stratification to make sure they wind up with 20 or 24 people who really represent the state in terms of its geographic and demographic diversity. That panel then comes to Salem and meets with all these people we just described, the neutral experts, the pro advocates, the con advocates and they have ample time over several days to get to know the issue in their own minds, to get to talk with each other. They're often breaking into smaller groups but constantly coming back together as a full plenary.

And again, over the course of several days, they're really coming to some conclusions about what they think their fellow voters need to know and those are summarized in three basic sections in the CIR statement. Key findings, these are facts you've just got to know before you vote and what we think are the strongest pro and con arguments. Interestingly, one of your questions about how people's party affiliation factors in. The CIR panelists themselves, they don't tend to think in terms of party affiliation. They often don't wind up knowing each other's party affiliation because even writing the pro and con arguments is sort of done collectively. Everyone pitches in trying to figure out what the best arguments for and against are even though at the end in Oregon they still wind up coming down with a vote. So, you can find out how the panel split on an issue. Other states have not followed that model. They take out that one detail and Oregon may take it out too. So, that's in the end what they've produced. That



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statement then unedited by anyone else goes to the Secretary of State who then drops it right into the voter guide. So, when I as an Oregon voter get my voter guide and my ballot in the mail— we all may be voting by mail this November—I open up that voter guide and I see oh, there’s measure 71. Here’s the official title of the measure. Here’s the fiscal impact statement.

And then very quickly, there I am with this one-page analysis that says at the top how it was produced, what the CIR is. That’s then my information from citizens. I also get the full text of the measure and sort of paid tweets. That is people can actually buy space in the Oregon voter guide to say their pro or con argument themselves. That section obviously is—many voters just dismiss it as ridiculously biased. But that’s the whole package of information you get and that’s how the CIR fits into that package of information. And so, what we’ve been studying is not just the CIR panel that deliberates but also ultimately, the voters who use that page in the course of voting.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That’s interesting because that gets at something that I’m curious about listening to you describe the process, John, is, and Katie, maybe you can weigh in a little bit on exactly what this experience is like both for the citizens selected for the panels. In other words, how does it work for them and how do they get their voices involved in crafting the citizen statements? But then what’s it like for the run-of-mill voter, the average Oregonian who is looking at this information? How does this actually work for them?

Katherine Knobloch:

Sure. I’ll start with kind of the participant’s perspective and then I’ll hand it over to John for the voter’s perspective. When people get selected, they come from all across the state or all across the city or wherever they’re from to the central location and then they meet 19 to 23 people who are totally different from them. So, the participants are demographically stratified in terms of age, gender, education, place of residence, political affiliation, voting history. So, these aren’t just all political junkies. Some of these people don’t think about politics very often. They come from all different parts of the area. But then they get to interact with one another intensely over the course of several days. So, they are in these meetings from 8:30 in the morning till 5:00 p.m. at night, really working together, learning together, learning how to deliberate. And so, those two keys things kind of meeting people who are different from yourself who you might not really ever come into that type of contact with otherwise and then learning to deliberate, those two things can be pretty transformative.

So, they spend a lot of time working together to figure out what it means to deliberate. They do a mock exercise really early on that teaches them how do you vet information, how do you figure out what’s strong and reliable, how do you open up the conversation to make sure that you’re listening to everybody, that you’re staying in learning mode, that you’re keeping an open



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mind. They practice those skills on an innocuous thing. They kind of have this sample scenario that they run through and then they get to apply it to a real measure that's happening in their state. And throughout the process, they're really reminded of their obligation to the wider public, that they are here to give the public the information that they need to know in order to make a good decision. As John said, they rarely kind of even know what the political affiliation of other folks are in the room because they spend so much time really deeply immersed in this work and they take it really seriously.

So, I think kind of for the people in the room, it's different for everybody. I think some people come and they have this really cool experience but then they leave and they don't think about it a ton afterwards. But I think for a lot of folks, it's really transformative. One of my favorite parts of the process is always at the end when they have this closing circle and they ask the participants to reflect on their experiences. I have sat through a number of them and I cry at almost every single one because it is amazing to hear these people talk about their political transformations and it just makes you think about the possibilities that we have if we just really figured out how to harness our skill, our energy, our passion. One of the things that you always hear in those closing circles is that people are skeptical coming in so they don't think that it's possible to learn the information, to have civil conversations, to come together to write this really important statement that requires them to become kind of pseudo experts. A lot of them come in not believing that that type of thing is possible but by the end of their time together, they are blown away by their ability to do that work, their ability to talk across difference, their ability to learn this information. One of the things that we often hear is if we can do this, if we can come together as everyday citizens and make better decisions, then why can't our legislators do it?

So, those are kind of some qualitative examples of what we hear but we also have done post-surveys of our participants and we see a whole host of attitudinal changes that happen to them. So, people leave feeling more efficacious. They feel both more that they are capable of self-government so that they think oh, I can make these decisions. I can learn this information if I just try. They feel that the government has the potential to be more responsive to them. So, one of our really interesting findings is that people rise on two kind of standard measures of political efficacy, the ones that kind of say we have the possibility of influencing government but they don't necessarily believe that they can influence no matter who is in office. So, they don't necessarily increase their trust in typical politicians but they increase their trust in their capabilities for self-government and the potential for self-government. They also leave feeling more connected to one another, more representative of their state or location. And then we see some of those attitudinal changes manifesting in behavioral changes. So, people after the CIR experience are more likely to report that they talk to their neighbors about politics, that they connect with their community members, that they join local organizations and do the work at home.



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Again, they aren't necessarily more likely to join political parties, to kind of work for candidates for office but they're more likely to try to make changes in their own communities. And again, we see this reflected in our conversations with the participants. I've kept touch with a lot of them for several years after their experience. Two of the main characters in the book, Marion Sharp and Ann Bakkensen are great examples of this. They were both interested in politics coming in to the process but they weren't super involved. But after their experience, they actually became advocates for the CIR itself. They were both members of the CIR Commission and helped decide what it looks like, how it's run, what measures get deliberated on. They've spoken on its behalf in front of the legislature and at conferences around the country and they've really just kind of found their political voice in advocating for the CIR. But folks also find ways to continue their deliberative work outside of directly CIR experiences.

So, I had an interview with a man who sat on the CIR and was a city councilor and he said that the staying with learning mode idea, that's kind of one of the primary rules that they learn during their time in the CIR is stay in learning mode. It's okay to have opinions but make sure that you are open to new ideas, that you're incorporating new information into your decision-making process. He said that he came home to his city council and he reminds them of that all the time, that their job is to stay in learning mode to make great decisions. And we've seen lots of examples like that, people going back to school, people joining their local PTA, people forming organizations to host fundraisers for things that they care about. So, it's different for different people but that experience of coming together across difference, learning how to have these political conversations, finding the capability in yourself and also seeing other people that are different than you also finding that capability really kind of transforms the way that you understand your own role in the system and the ways that you understand your connections with your community.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

That's pretty amazing actually to hear about the impact on the individual participants. John, what about the broader electorate? I mean do we know, do you have any information about the impact of the CIR process particularly in the citizen statements that are produced in terms of the broader Oregon electorate?

John Gastil:

Absolutely. I want to give you a little bit of a flavor for the book and how I answer that question. We really did shoot for a narrative non-fiction. We worked with an editor in writing the book, not at Oxford but a separate contracted editor who generally works in fiction. And it was about sort of how you work the narrative threads through it. And what I want you to appreciate about what Katie was just saying was we actually talk in detail about the lives of a couple panelists in particular. You get a broader feel for what it's like to be in a CIR panel but she really follows the threads through of their lives before the CIR and after. And it's so much more compelling in a



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way when you have these detailed personal stories that sort of tie the sections of the book together. Now one of the reasons the book came out from Oxford University Press and not a true trade press is my answer to your question which is I couldn't not put statistics in the backend of the book when we're talking about the impact on voters. So, that part of the story is more statistical. The personal examples are really compelling though. One time we had a usability test in Oregon and Colorado which means you go into a lab and you sit down and you read the CIR statement kind of out loud to yourself and talk about what you're thinking in relation to how you're going to vote and then you answer questions. It's a very detailed interview process. It's often used to test software. So, you get to kind of know what's going on inside people's heads.

Well, we being geniuses, did this in Colorado right when vote by mail started and we timed it a little bit wrong. Most of the people who went in the lab hadn't yet voted but one woman had already voted and we thought well, we're going to have to pay her anyway. So, let's let her read the CIR statement and talk about it. And we have video of that that's what always makes me cry. She stops reading. She pauses and she bites her lip and says I would've voted differently. And you can hear the regret in her voice. I'm choking up just picturing her. And she reads a little bit more and she says yeah, no, I didn't understand. I would've voted differently. And the interviewer asks her questions but she's really upset. Right? And so, that anecdote is an indication of what happens statistically. We've now had actually hundreds of people serve as CIR panelists but thousands be in our surveys and a lot of these are survey experiments where we experimentally change what you're exposed to. So, you may or may not get to see the CIR statement before we ask you a whole battery of questions.

So, some of the simplest findings are these: that reading the CIR statement makes you more knowledgeable in two senses. One, on a battery of true/false questions, you're more likely to get correct answers. How much more likely? It's in the range of, say if it's ten questions, you might go up one or two questions. Well, that's like going one or two grades so that's important. It's not like you're getting everything right after you read the CIR because you may not read it as carefully or find it all credible. A second important change is we also ask how confident you are in your answer and confidence in accurate answers goes up considerably. And I always underscore that because it's one thing to be able to get a true/false question right and you're kind of guessing in an educated way. But as a voter, you need information you're confident is correct, not just that you could guess one way or the other. And so, that's a really important thing the CIR does. It not only maybe corrects some misunderstandings but it also reinforces things that you thought you maybe knew and now you definitely know. And again, it's very helpful when you have to make a binary yes/no choice on an issue.

There are other effects on the voters that go beyond knowledge effects. The CIR does on balance tend to change the direction in which people vote on the issue. They tend to go in line



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with the CIR panel even if they don't know how the panel voted. But that's not always the case and there are some sort of positive civic attitudinal effects of CIR exposure for voters that are smaller but comparable qualitatively to what CIR panelists themselves experience. So, it can be a little bit empowering to realize that your state has created this deliberative process to help you, the voter, and now you've got information that you can use to be a smarter voter. So, not surprisingly in retrospect—though when Katie predicted this, I didn't think she was right—in retrospect, not surprisingly it is a little bit empowering for voters as a whole. Kudos to you Katie. Good hypothesis.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

Well, and kudos to Oxford University Press for allowing you all to write a book that's slightly or somewhat or significantly different from the typical academic book. Are there any other ways that the book works in ways, I don't know, differently than what our listeners, communication scholars, teachers and students are likely to encounter in their garden-variety academic book?

John Gastil:

I'll say a quick one and then hand it to Katie. My favorite one is this is there's not even footnotes. There are 30 pages at the back of the book we call details and digressions. Each chapter has an essay about its sources. So, yeah, as you're reading through a chapter, if you come across something and you're like oh, that's an interesting idea. I didn't know that. That happened in Athens. You go to a relatively short essay about that chapter and you'll find out in a different context what that source is. So, it's funny when you get a footnote, you sometimes don't quite know what the footnote is a reference to. Well, in this case, it's full sentences, it's full paragraphs and we write those 30 pages in a very different voice. That's the voice. It's a first-person, scholarly, often somewhat cheeky voice and Katie and I are basically absent from the entire rest of the book even though we were very present for all this. Well, in those last 30 pages, we're very present. You're hearing about us and why we care about things and how we learned different things and what role we played in terms of testifying to the legislature about the process and so on. So, those back 30 pages are kind of in some ways my favorite part of the book because it's the sort of hidden second book for academics who want to know more.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

John, that sounds really interesting. I'm wondering, Katie, are there any other ways that the book is different from your typical academic book?

Katherine Knobloch:

It's pretty different. I'll be frank with you. It was a little scary as a younger scholar to write a book in this format but it was also pretty liberating. Wow we really try to focus on the story, on allowing readers to connect with it. I think one of my favorite parts about it is that we really hope it speaks to a wider audience so that if you're a practitioner, if you're an interested citizen,



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whoever you are, that you can pick up this book and read it and it makes sense to you and it resonates with you. So, I think just writing it in plain language has been really helpful. Writing it as a story was really helpful for that. I hope that it was good for my writing. I remember struggling with it mightily when we were in the middle of it but feeling better on the other side of it.

But then one of the interesting things is we have these essays in the back of the book that kind of act as our citations. But in writing that an essay format instead of in our traditional kind of AP style or Chicago style or what have you, we really had to be careful about which citations we chose. So, it was who really speaks to this argument, who do we want to represent this argument, who's going to be the most accessible, who's the best person to kind of articulate this underlying thing that we think is important and we want to point our readers to. So, I actually think that in moving to a more narrative style, we probably got a little bit more careful with who we were citing than I think that we are otherwise when we can kind of just throw everything we want and say read this, this and this if you're interested. But now we have to say here's the one thing, if you really want to dig into this, here's the one or two places that you should go.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

It seems to me you're also envisioning new ways of thinking about democracy and I'm wondering, John, beyond Oregon and Massachusetts, do you have any anticipation, have you heard about any other states that are going to pick up the CIR model or do you—I know you have some hope for democracy but how do you think this is going to potentially change American democracy?

John Gastil:

Well, I think it has the potential to change democracies the world over and the uptake in Europe is very encouraging in that regard. One of the ways of thinking about the Citizens' Initiative Review is that it just added one twist to something that existed before it called the mini public. So, in the deliberative democracy of literature, folks sometimes talk about these mini-publics. The idea which has its origin in lots of different people's writings is that you take usually a random sample of the public as some kind of a microcosm maybe as small as a something like a CIR or potentially hundreds of people and you get them together to deliberate on something in particular and then their deliberation has some relevance to the larger political or policymaking process. The deliberative poll created by Jim Fishkin now at Stanford University and in communication is probably the most famous example of such a process and those bodies are usually asked to consider something like immigration policy.

But the CIR's wrinkle is this, the deliberative body now has a very specific political task which is not to advise policymakers or provide some abstract insider recommendation but to provide counsel to fellow citizens who are in a pre-existing sort of quasi deliberative task of voting as an



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electorate. So, it's gotten a lot of attention around the world because folks in England, for instance, after Brexit thought about the CIR and said ah, why didn't we do that? Why didn't we have a deliberative process and then have some kind of a simple statement that goes out from voters to fellow voters? That's the genius is people don't know who to trust but they actually do tend to trust their fellow citizens when they have a special deliberative opportunity like that. So, again, all over the world people are learning about this process and not necessarily replicating the Citizens' Initiative Review but kind of getting that bigger point of oh, we can invent all kinds of things. Sure, mini-publics is one example. Participatory budgeting is another example. We can invent all kinds of new deliberative and engaging processes and we just have to find a way to tether them to political moments that make them relevant and important and then we might actually in effect change the decisions we're making for the better.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

One of the things that strikes me as I hear you optimistically forecast how this would work in both the United States and other countries is I think a lot of voters envision voting as choosing between candidates and I'm wondering how this model might or might not or cannot work for candidate selection.

John Gastil:

It's funny that you asked me that because the book you alluded to earlier, I wrote a book called *By Popular Demand*. University of California put it out way back in 2000 and I argued for candidate evaluation panels. Almost as an afterthought, I had a section on well, probably the logical place to start would be with evaluating not candidates but in ballot measures. It would also be more politically feasible because—and this proved true—legislators though they won't admit it, hate the initiative process and would do anything to try to help voters make better decisions because those decisions impinge on their authority. But my original argument was really the voters need a lot of help choosing candidates. I could see something like the CIR working especially well in non-partisan contexts. So, we often do vote at the local level without the benefit of clear party signals and that's where you might think that kind of information would be more helpful or say in the selection of judges and so on.

An interesting wrinkle to the findings we have from the CIR about knowledge gains is—and this is thanks to a colleague in Iceland who's actually a first author on an article in political psychology that makes this point—the CIR actually shows the biggest knowledge gains in exactly the opposite direction that you would expect if you are familiar with the motivated reasoning literature. People come up with beliefs that are convenient to their ideology. We're motivated to reason in the way that is kind of self-reinforcing. Well, the folks who learn the most on any given issue with the CIR are the folks who are the most wrong because of their ideology. So, if it's a more kind of a liberal friendly fact, the Republicans in our surveys will show the greatest knowledge gains and vice versa. So, that's encouraging but there's a limit to that.



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That's why I think something like the Citizens' Initiative Review would have a much greater challenge if it was trying to help people make judgments in partisan elections. But even then in most cases, there is a large number of people, say roughly a third of the adult population, that doesn't identify with a political party and even if you believe those who say there is no such thing as an independent voter, the evidence really does run contrary particularly when you look at people who don't vote but are eligible to do so. Those folks make up a kind of middle ground often which leaves them feeling, as Katie said earlier, so alienated that they don't even participate.

So, maybe a deliberative process could not only improve the judgment of the electorate but also expand the electorate. In fact, we have found that reading the CIR statement makes people say they're more likely to vote on that particular issue because as you know, people tend to drop off as they fill out their ballot. They come to things they don't feel they know enough about. Well, the CIR also fixes that problem. So, helping voters make better decisions is great but also, broadening the electorate would help as well.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

So, there is hope for democracy. We're in the midst of, of course, this COVID-19 or coronavirus pandemic and I'm wondering what you believe are the connections between what's going on now with the pandemic and the hope for democracy that you all clearly believe is there, I believe, in the work that you all are doing.

Katherine Knobloch:

Sure. I think that the CIR is one of many examples of what democracy could look like if we were open to experimentation. One of kind of our underlying premises of the book, as John mentioned earlier, is that democracy is always an experiment. We are always trying to figure out how to do it better. We are always revising the rules. But I don't think that that's how we often think about it. We often think about democracy as static, that the Constitution was written and that's the way that it works. But in reality, we change things all the time. We change voting laws, we change the ways that our legislature works together, we change local engagement. So, there are lots of examples of ways that we can change democracy. We can make democracy work better for the people. But we have to do the work. So, I'm kind of a moral arc of history type of person. I think that there is hope that we can learn from the past and make better decisions in the future. I think that if we come together, we can do really astounding things and make these connections across difference that we don't think are possible. But that requires a lot of us. It requires us to do the work. I think that the CIR is a great example of a deliberative mini-public and we see lots of great examples of deliberative mini-publics happening in the United States and around the world.



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John mentioned deliberative polling as one example. The Irish Constitutional Convention is another great example where citizens came together to talk about changes to their country's constitution ultimately ending up with referendums that allowed gay marriage and legal abortions in that country. So, kind of really big massive cultural changes stemming from these mini-publics. But that is just one example of what deliberative democracy might look like in practice. Mini-publics are great. They get a small group of people to deliberate really intensely over a pretty long period of time and folks come out changed on the other side similarly to the things that happen with our CIR participants. They feel more efficacious. They feel more informed. They're more likely to engage in their community. But that's a really small sample of folks who actually get to engage in the process. It has lots of good effects for other folks who can learn from the mini-public statements or who can take voting cues from those publics. But they don't necessarily have the magnitude of changes that we see coming out of the participants of the mini-publics. And so, I think we need to supplement these great mini-publics with also lots of local efforts at democracy.

So, I work with the Center for Public Deliberation at Colorado State University and we work with a team of undergraduate and graduate students and community organizations across our region to host public forums. So, we'll talk about everything from climate change to affordable housing to how do we get along across generations, how do we make those connections. And we host all of these meetings that bring people together fairly regularly in our community to talk with one another across difference, to raise their concerns about the issues that matter to them, to learn about different perspectives for things that are happening in our own communities. And we've really kind of seen it transform the way that community engagement is conducted in our community and by our government. Right now I'm working on a process that asks us to think about the relationship between affordable housing and health. We had kind of wrapped one big thing where we sent out community guides to have conversations with folks in their own communities to really make those connections, have conversations with people that make sense to them and that they trust. And then they bring those concerns back to us and we send them off to the city so that they can make better policy decisions.

Right now we are in the middle of a pandemic related to both housing and health. So, we decided to push back the policy. We're probably going to push back the policy development stage so that we can talk to people right now and figure out what their concerns are. Again, engaging in this learning process so that we make better policy decisions by incorporating folks into it. And I think kind of for me, that's the underlying hope of both the stories that we cover in this book and the stories of deliberative democracy happening writ large and large and small-scale all around the world is that we have the potential to come together to make connections, to learn from one another and to make better decisions as a result. But it really takes expanding who gets to do that work. It really takes of meeting people where they're at and figuring out ways to involve them in processes that make sense for them either providing them the



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information that they can process well or hosting them in locations that work or being considerate of the needs of our community members. So, there are lots of options for doing democracy better but it really takes us providing those options, figuring out what does our community need and then designing for our communities.

And I think honestly, in a moment of pandemic, we really need that work. There's lots of research that shows that community resilience is deeply tied to community connections, to community engagement. The stronger our communities are, the more we are already working together when we're not in times of crisis, the easier it is for us to work together in times of crisis, the easier it is for us to connect with one another. So, all of these examples of deliberative democracy are really founded in our ability to work together if we figure out how to design that work well. So, for me, that's kind of where I'm finding hope in this moment is I'm trying to figure out how do I bridge connections in my community, how do I harness all of this energy, all of this passion that I've seen from my students, from my community members, from my city government, from our local organizations. How do we work to bridge them to one another, to connect them one another and kind of utilize all of that momentum, utilize all of those resources in this moment when we need them?

Trevor Parry-Giles:

I think everybody's hopeful in that regard and I appreciate that as a great way of concluding this fascinating discussion. So, thank you both, John and Katie, for joining me today on *Communication Matters*. I think this has been a really important discussion about the possibilities of democratic change and democratic deliberation. And listeners, I hope you've enjoyed this discussion about the new book *Hope for Democracy* by John Gastil and Katie Knobloch.

John Gastil:

Thank you so much for having us.

Katherine Knobloch:

Yeah. Thanks, Trevor.

Trevor Parry-Giles:

In NCA news, NCA's newest C-Brief addresses the educational preferences and experiences of undergraduate students using data from the EDUCAUSE Center for Analysis and Research. The survey results indicate that 70% of students prefer completely or mostly face-to-face instruction while only 9% prefer online or mostly online instruction. You can read the full C-Brief online at natcom.org/CBrief. And listeners, as we continue to process and confront the COVID-19 pandemic, don't forget the resources available from NCA. NCA's Teaching and Learning Council has curated and assembled a range of resources, articles and helpful tips for those



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instructors now tasked with converting their face-to-face classrooms into an online platform. You can check out those resources at natcom.org under the academic and professional resources tab. And in terms of research, NCA members have access to all of the research published in NCA's journals including a special issue of *The Journal of Applied Communication Research* Volume 34 Number 3 that focused on best practices in risk and crisis communication. This research is now over ten years old but it really remains relevant and timely as ever in our current present circumstances.

Also, consider submitting an NCA current commentary piece using your expertise in communication to address a current issue or event. These rapid response articles provide critical insights to faculty, students and the communities we serve. A current commentary essay should be no more than 1,000 words, address a timely issue including maybe COVID-19, include a reference section and comport with NCA's credo for ethical communication. You can read more about the requirements and how to submit a current commentary piece on the NCA website at natcom.org/communication-currents. That's natcom.org/communication-currents.

And listeners, I hope you tune in for next week's episode of *Communication Matters* featuring Professor Tom Nakayama of Northeastern University who is named in 2019 An NCA distinguished scholar at the 105th NCA annual convention last November in Baltimore. Dr. Nakayama researches the areas of critical race studies and intercultural communication and has authored groundbreaking research on whiteness and rhetoric. So, tune in next week's episode to learn more about Dr. Nakayama's interesting and compelling research program. As always, thanks for joining us on *Communication Matters, the NCA Podcast*.

Be sure to engage with us on social media by liking us on Facebook, following NCA on Twitter and Instagram and watching us on YouTube. And before you go, hit subscribe wherever you get your podcasts to listen in as we discuss emerging scholarship, establish theory and new applications, all exploring just how much communication matters in our classrooms, in our communities and in our world. See you next time.

Conclusion:

Communication Matters is hosted by NCA Executive Director Trevor Parry-Giles and is recorded in our national office in downtown Washington DC. The podcast is recorded and produced by Assistant Director for Digital Strategies Chelsea Bowes with writing support from Director of External Affairs and Publications Wendy Fernando and Content Development Specialist Grace Hébert. Thank you for listening.

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