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Research and Development Note

Should politicians deliberate alongside citizens?

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This paper draws lessons from newDemocracy's experiences operating various citizens' juries in Australia including Byron Shire Council's Byron Model, and experiences from colleagues internationally in Ireland, Belgium and the UK.

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Should politicians deliberative alongside citizens?

What is the question?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of including politicians alongside everyday citizens as active participants in a public deliberation?

What is the usual answer?

Designers of public deliberations have mixed views about involving politicians alongside those citizens who have been selected via a democratic lottery for a public deliberation such as a citizens' assembly (See, Forms of Mini-publics).

Politicians sometimes wish to be included directly in deliberations for reasons that range from maintaining a level of influence to wanting to share their experience and knowledge. These motivations can hinder or improve a process depending upon how they are managed.

There are not many examples of deliberations where the combination of politicians and citizens has been tried but it is possible to look to Ireland's Constitutional Convention, Belgium's Deliberative Committees and the United Kingdom's Citizens' Assemblies on English Devolution for at least a few instances.

What are the advantages?

Including politicians as participants adds authority, credibility and public awareness to a process. They can also offer unique knowledge and political craft that can really benefit deliberations.

Having politicians on board with deliberative processes can also expedite their own understanding of a process. This can come in handy when it comes to advocacy for and implementation of recommendations. Politicians can become fierce advocates for change and help improve democracy from the inside in a collaborative effort alongside citizens.

Their involvement can also cause the wider community and media to pay closer attention, improving everyone's awareness and understanding. Clear communication and public support for a process can effectively explain the meaningful role of everyday citizens.

When politicians participate in a deliberative process such as citizens' assembly, they come to trust the deliberative capacities of everyday citizens. They leave with a new respect for the possibilities of the co-creation of solutions to difficult problems. The Deliberative Committees in Belgium are evidence of this shift from oppositional thinking to a sense of MP/citizen partnership as shown by their willingness to collaborate and seek common ground with citizens and the high adoption rate of the recommendations. By being closely involved, politicians also generally see more clearly what the wider population would decide when exposed to considerable information, not just the polarised views of interest groups.

Involving politicians alongside everyday people also adds credibility to the process. The wider community sees 'people like us' as a result of a democratic lottery and this level of trust may be enhanced when a randomly-selected group mixes with MPs. However, no comparative work has been done in relation to government-initiated public deliberations with and without MP membership. The wider population may decide that politicians who are decreasingly trusted are more likely to be trustworthy if everyday citizens are welcomed

into the political sphere and having some influence (See, The Australian Election Study). Mutual trust is a significant goal for democracies in crisis and any attempts to formulate policies as partners can only be positive.

To continue our speculation, the combination is also likely to enhance the confidence of citizens who have been selected via democratic lottery. They may be more likely to accept an invitation to participate, anticipating that their recommendations are more likely to take effect.

Including politicians will certainly add weight to any recommendations that emerge from deliberative process. The likelihood that those recommendations will be implemented is definitely improved. In Belgium the politicians who were present adopted 43 of the 45 recommendations. This was also evident in Ireland when politicians constituted one-third of participants and carried the recommendations forward to the referendum stage (See, Constitutional Convention).

Politicians are experienced policy makers and legislators. They understand the constraints, the pitfalls and the language of policy making. They can share their knowledge. They know what causes blockages to legislation and they can help the group to avoid any obstacles. Fournier et al (2011) believe that the explicit exclusion of politicians from the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform was one of its weaknesses. Politicians are most-often pragmatists and can ground a public deliberation in probability and curb unrealistic expectations.

Deliberative methods are becoming more frequent and are being integrated into existing institutions in some countries (See, OECD: New Democratic Institutions). But, for many, these processes remain novel and are not yet well understood by the wider public. Given that credibility still remains fragile, it is paramount that they are not instrumentalised by politicians as the latest political fad. This is a risk if independent Citizens' Assemblies are composed only of citizens with limited authority. This could jeopardise all similar processes in the eyes of the wider public, which would only contribute to widening the gap between citizens and their representatives and deepening a growing chasm where trust used to reside. Therefore, involving multi-partisan politicians in assemblies that are independently organised can establish credibility in these types of processes. Like rocket boosters to a space shuttle, MPs were heavily involved in Ireland's Constitutional Convention before stepping aside to allow everyday citizens to carry out the work of the subsequent Citizens' Assembly on their own.

What are the disadvantages?

Politicians are confident and outspoken. Inevitably they have strongly held views, which they traditionally vehemently defend, at least in public. They are unlikely to shift those views, particularly if needing to conform to a policy platform, and are wary of accusations of flip-flopping. Citizens may unwittingly defer to politicians given this imbalance of confidence and certainty. Everyday citizens have no such concerns since they are a diverse group devoid of a policy platform; they have been shown to be willing to change their minds in the face of contrary views or further evidence (Fabre et al 2021).

Citizens are open to learning about the particular processes associated with a citizens' assembly and following guidelines that are set: the need for critical thinking, recognising unconscious biases, interrogating expert knowledge, listening respectfully, sharing speaking time, finding common ground and reaching agreement on final recommendations—even if

this means living with a recommendation that might not have their wholehearted support. Politicians are accustomed to adversarial parliaments and may be likely to treat the process as they would a parliamentary debate with cameras rolling. They may employ parliamentary debating tactics and undermine a process that does not go their way. This happened in Belgium when one party representative tweeted negatively about the process.

There is a power imbalance when politicians and citizens are brought together. Most citizens will be deferential to a politician, and this can lead to conceding their views in the face of more powerful opposition. The citizens' assembly brings together diverse individual views, but politicians bring party affiliations, a history of adversarialism and all the negative electoral incentives that make Citizens' Assemblies necessary in the first place. Good facilitation is essential to mitigate such entrenched partisanship.

Political involvement can take away the neutrality that is inherent in a public deliberation among diverse citizens. This can be particularly unfortunate should a politician with a large audience decide they do not like the way the deliberation is going. They can have a disproportionate effect on a wider audience. Of course, it is possible to secure a commitment to neutrality and non-partisanship. This happened in Ireland where almost full support was achieved across party lines.

Challenge of attendance

Not all citizens who are invited to participate, accept. That's why deliberative designers use stratified random selection or a funnelled lottery—starting with a very large pool of invitations, then taking any acceptances and winnowing that down to those who match community demographics.

For politicians the challenge is very different. They will usually be part of the commissioning authority. If they are to be fellow participants, it is important to match the proportions of party affiliations. But it can also be challenging to have politicians show up. This can be because they have busy schedules and many competing interests, while deliberations are long and time-consuming processes. Often, when politicians attend and are quickly convinced of the fairness and legitimacy of the process, they see less of a reason for their personal involvement.

Ireland and Belgium offer example of deliberative processes where recommendations were to be enacted. In those cases, Ireland had a poor retention rate, Belgium had 100% retention from politicians.

The UK assemblies convened in Sheffield (Assembly North) and Southampton (Assembly South) in 2015 are a case in point (Flinders et al 2015). One included politicians and one did not. The one that did, Southampton, aimed to attract 15 politicians to attend—14 accepted, only six came to the first session and by the second session that number was reduced to three.

With such a tiny sample and very different results it becomes difficult to anticipate retention rates for future projects.

Such high levels of attrition are rare for citizen representatives which typically hover between 90%-95% retention. If less, then organisers would look very closely at flaws in the process. However, the UK project was a research project, privately run and locally focused. It

did not have the imprimatur of government and did not result in recommendations that a government had guaranteed to carry forward. This inevitably affects the likelihood of commitment from elected representative but citizen representatives as well. For that reason, we should be wary of extrapolating from this experiment to real world instances.

Further observations

As deliberative democracy and citizens' assemblies become more popular, it is entirely possible that politicians will see a combination of everyday citizens and themselves as a way to resolve the call for greater democracy. This can be done using robust processes with a genuine commitment to partner with citizens or it could be manipulated if not done independently, to *control* the outcome. While Belgium's experience does not corroborate this, it remains a fear for deliberative designers. Should such a fear be manifested it would be contrary to the spirit of deliberative democracy and will do little to alleviate citizens' concerns about democracies in decline.

Some deliberative designers believe that attending to the proportion of politicians is the key. For example, reducing Ireland's two-thirds citizens (66) and one-third (33) politicians to one-fifth or one-sixth will be a remedy for dominance. Belgium's Mixed Committees are trialling a reduced proportion with three-quarters citizens (45) and one-quarter MPs (15).

Others consider that varying the amount of time that is required of politicians may be the answer. For example, newDemocracy has a deliberative model for parliamentary committees it has prepared for the NSW Parliament that would have politicians attending at the start and the end of the process rather than attending every session (See, New Options for Parliamentary Committees).

Involving politicians in other ways

There are multiple ways in which politicians can make an important contribution to public deliberations beyond joining the randomly-selected group to deliberate together.

Politicians can be members of a steering committee that has oversight of a Citizens' Assembly, contributing content advice as well as helping to think through process design since it will involve their constituents. This is the current Scottish model where politicians are part of a Stewarding Group – providing both process and subject expertise to the secretariat and the design team. For the Irish Citizens' Assembly on the Eighth Amendment (Abortion), politicians were involved from the start via an all-party committee, thus indicating that recommendations would be seriously considered.

Politicians can make a contribution as expert speakers, giving evidence to the assembled citizens, since they know their communities well and also understand the policy making process. Citizens will often ask to hear from them if they are not included in the list of speakers. Belgium organisers are concerned about the idea of politicians as expert speakers. For them, it has the potential to reinforce the stereotype of politicians *with* knowledge, citizens *without*.

It should be noted that politicians are almost always asked to attend a final session when recommendations are handed to them and when citizens can explain their reasoning and answer any questions.

Finally

Some deliberative designers believe that the combination of politicians and citizens should occur only when doing it without politicians would be a sub-optimal solution. It will therefore be interesting to observe the evolution and evaluations that come from mixed deliberative processes, such as those in Brussels, to see whether or not the hypothesis of these designers is confirmed or dismantled. Does involving politicians undermine the creativity and contribution of citizens or, on the contrary, does it help reshape politicians and public institutions as well as bridge the gap of trust between them and the citizens they represent?

There have been some very successful, separate workshops for politicians that have led to impressive outcomes: increasing their understanding of deliberative democracy and becoming advocates for deliberative processes. newDemocracy routinely convened workshops for elected representative prior to any public deliberation. In our experience, this certainly enhances understanding and commitment to outcomes.

Finally, involving politicians should be approached with care, taking into account all that has been described above. It is a delight to hear politicians extol the virtues of democratic lotteries and extensive deliberation once they have watched citizens conscientiously complete their work. But is also disturbing to witness politicians undermining an otherwise-worthy attempt to strengthen democracy. Given that a primary aim to improve trust between politicians and citizens—and this must work both ways—then any kind of policy partnership can only yield dividends for both.

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