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When do deliberative citizens change their opinions? Evidence from the Irish Citizens' Assembly

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Abstract

Many claims have been made for the impact of deliberative democracy in generating change in people's opinions, and often in predictable ways. It is claimed that people involved in deliberation change their minds on important issues. We also know that political participation and attitudes towards certain issues depend on political knowledge and civic education. To what extent are these linked? Do certain types of people react differently to their involvement in deliberation and is opinion change contingent on the varying capacities and knowledge of participants? Using data from a nationwide exercise in deliberative democracy carried out in Ireland we find some evidence that the 'deliberative' citizen, or at least the citizen most likely to shift opinion following deliberation, is under 65, with median levels of knowledge. We also find that heterogeneous groups are important for deliberation to be effective.

Keywords

Deliberative democracy, opinion change, Citizens' Assembly

Introduction

Are societies, groups and individuals differently equipped in terms of their capability to resolve political issues by deliberation? More specifically, do some types of people react systematically differently to others when involved in deliberation? And if so, in which ways? As Ryfe (2005: 54)

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observes, that to the extent rigorous empirical research has been carried out, the focus has often been on the effects of the deliberative process. This research on the impact of deliberation (e.g. Fishkin and Luskin, 1999; Luskin et al., 2002) provides convincing evidence that participation in such fora facilitates political learning, promotes individual opinion change and increases subjective political efficacy. But are all people affected equally and positively, or are there just some groups that it benefits or benefits more? It has been suggested that deliberation is influenced by unequal resources and social status (Sanders, 1997). However, what is not yet clear is whether certain types of people react differently to their involvement in deliberation and whether its impact is contingent on the varying capacities of participants, or indeed on the saliency of the issue under deliberation.

It is also possible to assess capacity at the level of groups, especially with an eye on different group compositions, demographics and prior attitudes and the resulting deliberative dynamics. This should lead to greater insights in defining the characteristics of a 'deliberative citizen' who is willing and able to confront disagreement in a constructive manner. For deliberative theorists, deliberation leads to superior outcomes. We cannot test this as it is subjective, but the central claim of deliberative democratic theorists that deliberation leads people to change opinion (Chambers, 2003: 318) is testable and there is an implication at least that we will see some participants shift their opinion as a result of deliberation. From the perspective of deliberative theorists it should be a matter of profound importance if certain groups are more likely to shift in opinion. Finding evidence of this will inform us about the suitability of using deliberation to make policy decisions, and how it might impact on different groups in different ways, with some groups systematically excluded and some appearing to benefit more from the deliberative process.

This article therefore has two central questions: (1) Are different types of people systematically more or less likely to change opinion as a result of deliberation? and (2) Does group composition matter in a deliberative process?

Answers to these questions are important for the design of deliberative fora, especially given that one of the central tenets of deliberation is that all should have an equal chance to participate and to influence proceedings. To answer these questions we use data from a pilot deliberative assembly in Ireland. Using the data generated from this we can study whether and under what circumstances different types of people are more or less likely to shift attitudes as a result of exposure to and involvement in deliberation. The remainder of this article proceeds as follows: firstly, we examine the literature on deliberation and opinion change and set out our hypotheses; secondly, we introduce the *We the Citizens* experiment in Ireland; thirdly we analyse each of the two research questions; and, fourthly, we conclude.

Deliberation and opinion change

Deliberative democrats often refer to the transformative power of deliberation (Dryzek and Braithwaite, 2000: 242). A mantra for deliberative theorists is that the process of deliberation works and that it promotes greater participation (however, see Mutz, 2006). Chambers defines deliberation as 'discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well informed opinions' (2003: 309). According to this definition the participants should be willing to revise their initial preferences in light of the discussion, and the new information obtained during the process.[1] The pioneering work of Fishkin puts an emphasis on opinion change; 'the punchline of a deliberative poll is a change in policy attitudes' (Fishkin, 2009: 134). Thus, deliberative theory assumes that such discussions have the power to shape opinions by changing people's views and preferences.

We might question whether preference transformation is so central to deliberative democracy. Certainly deliberation should allow the possibility of change as the 'good' deliberative citizen will

be open minded, but the realisation of policy change is not necessary; for instance, it is quite possible for deliberation to strengthen the existing stances held by certain participants. That said, opinion change is possibly the best objectively observable implication available to us.

To reflect our two over-arching questions, our theoretical expectations are developed in two parts.

Differing individual impacts

Proponents of deliberation like Steiner believe that 'as human beings we have a natural cognitive appetite for deliberation' (2012). Others disagree. Posner, for instance, views deliberative democracy as 'purely aspirational and unrealistic… with ordinary people having as little interest in complex political issues as they have aptitude for them' (2003: 107). A common criticism of deliberative theory is that it is unrealistic because most citizens are not political animals and have no wish to deliberate about politics or other policy issues. Empirical research has tended to produce mixed or inclusive results (Chambers, 1996; Delli Carpini et al., 2004; Mendelberg, 2002; Mutz, 2006; Ryfe, 2005; Sulkin and Adam, 2001). According to Elster, deliberative behaviour is generated through the public character of the deliberative process. The 'civilizing force of hypocrisy' (1997: 12), he argues, induces speakers to hide their self-interest, thereby making it more likely that public reason will prevail (over individual preferences) in the deliberative process. Deliberation tests the plausibility of epistemic beliefs and the consistency of argumentation and thus it is expected to enhance the rationality of decision-making (Setälä et al., 2010: 2). Thus, we should expect opinions to change both because the participants become more enlightened and because they are forced to become more other regarding in their views (Barabas, 2004: 687; Himmelroos et al., 2012). Nonetheless, there are good reasons to believe that different people have varying appetites and indeed aptitudes for deliberation based on demographics and capacity (Brinol and Petty, 2005).

There are a number of factors that could conceptually help either underpin or undermine systematic reactions for deliberative participants, including gender, age, education and knowledge, as well as personality variations. Scholars, however, tend to be divided on this. Setäla et al. (2010) and Luskin et al. (2002) find little role for demographics. By contrast, Himmelroos et al. (2012) finds some impact in a Finnish 'mini public', while research by Muhlberger and Weber (2006) and Eveland and Thompson (2006) also shows that education and age can impact on opinion change and knowledge post-deliberation.

Certainly, there is some evidence of gender differences (Norrander, 1999; Shapiro, 1986): for instance (at least in the US) studies have found that men have greater knowledge than women about national politics (Kenski, 2000; Mondak, 2004). In general women are seen as more easily persuadable than men. While it is possible that this conforms to a cultural stereotype, research has tended to find that women respond more to debate and influence than men. The argument is that this may have its basis in early socialisation or indeed the greater message-reception skills of women. However, much depends on the topic of deliberation and the gender effect can be reversed in areas where women have stronger attitudes (greater salience) or more knowledge (Cacioppo and Petty, 1996; Sistrunk and McDavid, 1971).

In a similar fashion it is commonly thought that young people are more open to persuasion than older adults; indeed, laboratory research in psychology has generally confirmed this (Alwen Cohen and Newcomb, 1991), although it is also possible that age is confounded with other variables, such as attitude strength and knowledge. Nonetheless, it would seem to make sense that the very young and the very old may not engage. For example, Visser et al. (2008) found that attitude-relevant knowledge scales are greater in middle than early or late adulthood. With our research design we can control for these factors and test whether there is empirical support for these suggestions in the literature.

This leads us to expect:

H1: Women are more likely to undergo a change of attitude as a result of deliberation.
H2: The relations between age and attitude change will be curvilinear.

A related area of individual-level variation is differences in levels of education. Dryzek (2009) argues that literacy and education facilitate deliberative capacity in as much as they influence the communicative competence of political actors and ordinary citizens. However, this does not necessarily translate into greater ability to influence the thread of discussions. In some ways education can be viewed as a proxy for knowledge. Research provides evidence that variations in political sophistication among individuals leads to differences in political behaviour (e.g. Miller and Krosnick, 2000; Sniderman et al., 1991; Zaller, 1990). This is not an argument that competent democratic citizens need be policy experts, but there is a level of basic knowledge below which an ability to make a full range of reasoned civic judgments may well be impaired (Galston, 2001). Popkin and Dimock (2000) – architects of the low-information rationality thesis – show that citizens with low levels of information cannot follow public discussion of issues, are less accepting of the give and take of democratic policy debates, make judgements on the basis of character rather than issues, and are significantly less likely to participate in politics at all. In their detailed survey analysis of members of the British Columbia, Ontario and Dutch citizens' assemblies, Fournier et al. (2011: 90) find that political information 'does aid in structuring reasoning on a complex problem' (in these cases, the problem being electoral reform).

This leads to a third hypothesis:

H3: The relationship between political knowledge and opinion change will be curvilinear.

We know from psychological research that openness to persuasion (one of the key factors in the 'Big Five' model of personality) is also likely to be a driver of opinion change as a result of deliberation and should be related to affective, cognitive and behavioural processes that are associated with attitudes (Bizer, 2004). We would therefore expect at a minimum that those who claim to be open to new ideas are more likely to shift their opinions. When people are committed to an attitude and are more certain that it is correct, their attitude is more stable, enduring and capable of predicting behaviour (Pomerantz et al., 1995).

Openness refers to the willingness of people to make adjustments to existing attitudes and behaviours once they have been exposed to new ideas or situations (Digman, 1990; John, 1990), distinguishing between those who prefer novelty, variety and intense experience as opposed to those who prefer the familiar, routine and traditional (McCrae, 1996; McCrae and Costa, 1997). Those who have high scores on this dimension tend to be less risk averse and more willing to consider opinions that are different from their own (e.g. George and Zhou, 2001; Lauriola and Levin, 2001; McCrae, 1987). According to Flynn (2005), individuals who are low on openness tend to demonstrate lower levels of divergent thinking because they find comfort in things that are routine. They prefer to adopt familiar ways of doing things so as to reduce uncertainty about the soundness of their decisions (George and Zhou, 2001). Thus, individuals who are more open actively seek opportunities to learn about new ideas that challenge conventional wisdom (McCrae, 1987). Conversely, those who are less open tend to adopt strong opinions and remain correlated with those who are closed to new experiences and less likely to change their minds (Whitley, 1999).

As such our fourth hypothesis is:

H4: Those who are more open to new experiences on a psychological battery will be more likely to see a shift in attitude.

Group composition impacts

Recent research has seen an increasing focus on social influence in attitude change (e.g. Bohner and Dickel, 2011). Deliberation is thought to work best when facilitated through oppositional perspectives: participants must be exposed to differing perspectives while deliberating. According to Sunstein et al. (2003) groups – at least in the mock juries that he examines – routinely tend to polarise, moving further out from the same mid-point as they deliberate. Brown finds that 'members of a deliberating group usually end up at a more extreme position in the same general direction as their inclinations before deliberation began' (1986: 206–207). This phenomenon of group polarisation has been found in many countries including the US, France, Germany and Afghanistan (Sunstein, 2000, 2009). It is more likely to occur where most members lean towards one side initially; they will 'talk themselves' further out to the extremes (Myers and Lamm, 1975). The movement of individuals depends on their initial positions: those who were initially moderate tend to move less than those who hold initially more extreme positions (Myers and Bishop, 1970). However, as Sunstein notes, 'a system of deliberation is likely to work well if it includes diverse people – that is if it has a degree of diversity in terms of approaches, information and positions' (2009: 142). In addition, participants in many deliberative mini-publics have access to expert information on the issue(s) at hand. Sunstein (2005: 1011) suggests that this may prevent amplification of errors because it creates a pool of arguments that is different from what would be generated by the group members on their own.

So the context in which deliberation occurs might be as important as the capacities or prejudices of the individuals engaged in the deliberation. Some research suggests that groups with heterogeneous membership can move to extremes, but equally where controlled deliberation takes place that allows different opinions to emerge it is sometimes found that opinions are moderated. In a controlled experiment in which partisan groups were asked to deliberate to reduce the federal budget deficit and specify which programmes to cut and which taxes to raise, Gaertner et al. (1999b) found that greater interaction across groups reduced bias and increased consensual decision-making.

Our expectation, therefore, is that:

H5: Heterogeneously populated groups are likely to show more movement compared to homogenous groups.

The Irish *We the Citizens* deliberative experiment

This article uses data from a nationwide Irish deliberative experiment commissioned by an organisation called *We the Citizens* and undertaken by the polling company Ipsos MRBI in May–June 2011. Data gathering followed standard practice in that the polling company began by interviewing a random sample of the Irish population, a representative sub-sample of who were invited to participate in a weekend long pilot Citizens' Assembly held in a Dublin location.

The agenda for the Citizens' Assembly weekend was determined by a series of seven nationwide meetings open to anyone. These were open to all to attend, and without any agenda other than to discuss over a few hours the visions of ordinary citizens of what kind of Ireland they would like for the future. The themes emerging from these events were used in the design of an opinion poll whose role was both to measure the opinion of a representative sample of Irish citizens on a range of issues and to recruit the members of the Citizen's Assembly. The recruitment method was quota sampling to take account of gender, age, region and social class. As Appendix Table A1 (available at: http://ips.sagepub.com/) shows, the 100 members represented a good cross-section of Irish society (for more, see Farrell et al., 2013).

The weekend itself was organised into three discrete sessions as follows:

- Saturday morning: Irish TDs (MPs) and their role (discussions about TDs and constituency work, electoral system and its impact on TDs' roles, and the size of the Irish parliament);
- Saturday afternoon: Who are our politicians? (should parties field more women candidates; should there be term limits; should there be external experts in government);
- Sunday morning: In dealing with the economic crisis, should we focus more on tax rises or spending cuts?

Of course participants' attachment to some of their beliefs will be stronger or weaker depending on the substance and familiarity of the belief. For example, it is accepted that an attitude is stronger or more salient if it is based largely on many direct perceptions and weaker if based on fewer perceptions (Mackie, 2006). The survey respondents were polled on a range of attitudes and beliefs. Those attending the Citizens' Assembly were given carefully balanced briefing materials laying out both sides of the several policy issues that were to be discussed by the Citizens' Assembly. During the course of the weekend the participants alternated between discussion at café-style group tables led by trained facilitators and plenary sessions (including brief presentations by the experts who had drafted the briefing documents), before each table compiled a list of recommendations to be voted on by the group as a whole.

In the week following the Citizens' Assembly the participants answered the same survey questions as before. There were also a number of different control groups who were asked the same survey questions in order to determine causality of any detected opinion change (see Farrell et al., 2013, for a fuller discussion and more technical detail on how the samples were drawn up).

A weekend event such as this is obviously unnatural especially given that the participants are in a quasi-laboratory situation. Every effort was made to ensure that the participants felt comfortable about the experience: they socialised with one another over the course of the weekend and indeed some made friends. Thus, we would argue that this deliberative experiment has some external validity in terms of applying to the broader political system. In addition, the outcome of the Citizens' Assembly was not inconsequential as a similar model is being utilised in Ireland to actively change the Constitution (which had been one of the intended outcomes of the *We the Citizens* project; see We the Citizens (2011; Farrell et al., 2013). In late 2012 the Irish government established the Irish Constitutional Convention based on deliberative principles (www.constitution.ie; Farrell, 2013, 2014).

Analysis and discussion

The central question addressed in this article is whether certain types of people react differently to their involvement in deliberation. As the participants are unlikely to have the same deliberative capacity, it is possible that certain groups may be more likely to experience a shift in opinion or that some groups are more likely to change opinion as a result of deliberation than others. In order to examine if opinion change is contingent on the varying capacities of participants we first look at net attitude change between wave 1 and wave 2 of the questionnaire. This enables us to look at the extent of change, the direction of change and whether the observed changes are connected to the various characteristics of participants.

We constructed indices based on the questionnaires administered to participants before and after the deliberative exercise. In line with the deliberative literature we combined responses to questions on the substantive policy questions into scales, which can then be utilised as dependant variables. The various indices are simply the summing of the relevant questions (see Appendix Table

A2, available at: http://ips.sagepub.com/). These are then standardised so that all have a resulting range of 1−7, enabling comparisons. This allows us to discern the extent and direction of overall opinion change before explaining these changes at the group and individual levels in subsequent sections.

The charges index refers to the willingness of people to impose charges for state services that had been provided for free, or for the state to be directly involved in supplying services that the private sector could provide. It is made up of questions on the willingness to pay water charges and student fees and to sell state assets. The taxes question combines responses to questions on the willingness to pay more tax in general and property tax in particular.

The index measuring attitudes on the role of the TD is there because there is a particular debate that Irish legislators spend too little time on national and policy issues and too much time as local promoters. The index combines questions on whether part of a TD's role should include brokering between the constituents and the state and representing their local area. The index on non-traditional TDs includes questions on whether there should be more young people, more women and those from working-class backgrounds in politics. The reform index is comprised of questions on whether the electoral system should be changed, appointing non-politicians as ministers, ordinary citizens proposing legislation, compulsory voting and term limits (all of which can be construed as amounting to radical reforms).

In order to establish whether the opinions also converged as a result of deliberation, standard deviation at T1 as well as the mean change in standard deviation is reported for each item. The standard deviations indicate that information and deliberation had a converging effect on opinions; for all statements standard deviations decreased between T1 and T2. In two cases the change is statistically significant. The fact that standard deviations did not increase implies at least that being exposed to divergent opinions does not lead to polarisation within the small groups.

We can see from Appendix Table A2 (available at: http://ips.sagepub.com/) that there was a statistically significant shift in opinion on many of the topics discussed at the weekend. Furthermore, the changes that took place were most likely to have been as a result of the Citizens' Assembly as there were limited changes in opinion in the control groups (see Farrell et al., 2013). In addition, change was in the expected direction, with attitudes to tax increases and charges moving towards the centre. In terms of political reform participants became more extreme on two out of three measures with the radical reform index the only one showing movement towards the mean. However, to rely solely on these aggregate scores assumes that individual changes are unidirectional, but if individuals are changing directions from opposite ends the differences may cancel each other out.

Differing individual impacts

Turning to our first set of questions relating to individuals we map the individual respondents' starting position or range in order to check the extent to which subsequent change is conditional on prior position. In other words let the *i*th individual's pre- to post-deliberation change on the issue X. The net change is simply the difference of the pre- and post-deliberation means across individuals $x^i_{2\_}x^i_{1.}$ Of course this can be positive or negative, but we are also interested in absolute amount of change, so we use $|x^i_{2\_}x^i_{1}|$. We can then analyse the mean change across sub-groups of age, education, gender and openness. In the following analysis we examine three key variables: charges, taxes and one political reform issue (the role of the TD), which is the one issue that showed significant movement.

In order to delve into the question of who is shifting in attitudes we carry out bivariate tests on each of our indices by sub-groups recorded at time 1 (see Table 1). The full results are reported in Appendix Table A5 (available at: http://ips.sagepub.com/). As well as standard demographics

Table 1. Significant pre- and post-deliberation change.

		Charges	Taxes	TD role
Capacity				
Education	2nd level	**	*	***
	3rd level		**	***
Class	abc1		***	***
	c2de			***
Age	18–24		*	**
	25–34	**	*	
	35–44			**
	45–54		*	
	55–64			**
	65+			
Gender	Male	*	*	**
	Female		**	***
Knowledge	Not		*	*
	Middle	**	**	***
	Inform			**
Personality	Open	*		**
	Mid			***
	Closed	*	*	*

Asterisks report significant mean difference on each variable from wave 1 to wave 2.
*Significant at .05 level, ** at .01 level or lower, *** at .001 level or lower.

(gender, class, age and education) we have included two further explanatory variables that we believe could impact on the likely effect of deliberation (see Hypotheses 3 and 4). These are subjective measures of how well informed the participants felt they were about the political process (knowledge), as well as a measure of openness to new experiences, which is an index comprised of questions on liking to stick to a routine, going to different places, thinking there is one right way to do things, considering different ideas and that people ought to fit in with rules.

If we examine the rows in Appendix Table A1 (available at: http://ips.sagepub.com/) we can see that every category of participant moved to a significant extent on at least two of the indices of interest, with the exception of older participants. In terms of opinions shifting on the substantive issue of tax rises and political reform, there is movement with younger people, women and the median knowledgeable all more likely to report an attitudinal shift. A similar pattern of greater movement among moderates is also clear in terms of openness to change. As expected, the age differences are mixed with the exception of the over 65s, among whom there was no movement at all. It would appear at least at the level of bivariate analysis that deliberation may not be likely to result in a change of mind or efficacy benefits for older participants. In addition, it would appear that there may be a minimum level of prior knowledge that is required in order to benefit from deliberation.

We next turn to multivariate statistical controls to test the robustness of the bivariate relationships. The model we use in Appendix Table A3 (available at: http://ips.sagepub.com/) regresses the value of the attitude measured at wave 1 against the value measured at wave 2. We include the relevant independent variables, that is, knowledge and openness together with age, gender and education.[2] In order to take account of the curvilinear relationship of age we have transformed it using the square root to straighten the line.

Our small sample size means that this is a hard test, which thus makes any positive findings more interesting. Turning first to the substantive policy issue of charges (column 1) we can see that age matters, with younger people more likely to change their mind on charges. This is also the case with tax rises, albeit less significantly. Interestingly, the sign changes for the less salient political reform issue, pointing to the possibility that older people may have been less likely to have previously deliberated on political reform and were thus more likely to change their mind on this topic than on tax rises.

It is notable that gender is not significant for either of the salient charge and tax rise changes, but women were significantly more likely than men to change their mind on political reform. There is a significant amount of change of opinion on both charges and taxes, with those with lesser levels of knowledge moving to a greater extent. In the case of political reform the sign on the knowledge variable is also negative (albeit not significant) and those with less knowledge moved to a greater extent.

Overall, as we would expect the best predictor of attitudes at time 2 is attitude at time 1. Nonetheless, there are significant predictors among some of our independent variables even with the small *N*, thus providing mixed results for our hypotheses relating to individual-level effects. We found that this was the case with larger movements on political reform than on tax and spending and with participants more likely to move to the extremes on the less salient issues and towards the middle on the more salient.

Hypothesis 1 argued that women are more likely to undergo a change of mind post-deliberation. We found that in the cases of political reform and charges women evinced more significant change than men. Interestingly, however, this was not the case for taxes, thus providing mixed support for H1.

Hypothesis 2 suggested that the relationship between age and change of mind will be curvilinear. We found that the middle aged moved to the greatest extent – and certainly to a greater extent than the young – and that the elderly did not move at all. This provides support for H2 and implies that it may be the oldest who do not change their minds following deliberation. In terms of Hypothesis 3, that there is a minimum level of knowledge necessary for deliberation to have an impact, the hypothesis was supported, although the variable moved in different directions in that those with greater knowledge moved to a greater extent on the less salient issue of political reform. In terms of Hypothesis 4, that those who are more open to new ideas and experiences will shift more, the evidence is again mixed. In general there was little movement on the openness variable and where there was it supported the curvilinear model where those between the extremes moved most.

Group composition impacts

We turn now to our second question: Does group composition matter and is a plurality of opinion in a group important? In order to examine this question we also included an experimental component in our project to see if the social context of the deliberation, rather than just the capacities of the individuals, might be important in how information is processed. Of course the context might also affect what information is brought to the table (Stasser et al., 1992), but in this experiment we can control for selective exposure to information and biased sampling of information.

For the most part, the participants in the Citizens' Assembly deliberated in groups with a diverse range of attitudes, and with active moderation to ensure all voices were heard. However, in a small number of tables we purposively grouped together those with similar positions on the left–right self-placement on the outer ranges of the scale. We can examine whether those who deliberated among like-minded people – which some theorists would characterise as inconsistent with deliberation – moved to the same or a lesser extent than those who were in mixed groups, closer to the ideals of deliberation.

In order to test this thesis that deliberation has a greater impact when participants are in mixed groups in terms of views we created three tables that were comprised exclusively of those with subjective left-wing (one table) or right-wing positions (two tables) as measured by their self-placement on a left–right scale. This allows us to compare how the participants in each of these groups were affected by the weekend of deliberation. The participants had been asked the standard left–right question with an 11-point scale. The mean score was 5.96 (where the mid-point on the scale is 6) with a standard deviation of 2.31. The two right-wing tables comprised the following mean, standard deviation and range: 8.0, 2.13, 6−11, 7.4, 1.9, 5−10, while the left-wing table had a mean of 3.0 (s.d. 1.2, range 1−4).

If deliberation with people holding varying opinions is expected to induce a greater accommodation of others' views we should expect to see more movement in heterogeneously populated groups with centrist opinions compared to those with more initial agreement around a peripheral opinion on certain issues (H4).[3] We used left–right as a way to distinguish groups because it has some practical meaning for self-identifying people and it covers a range of issues that we were interested in understanding. We look at three issues that we might expect individuals who self-identify as right or left leaning might expect to have strong opinions on. These are whether there should be specific charges for consumers of state services, such as water, education, etc., whether the government's response to the economic crisis and large deficit in Ireland should be to emphasise tax increases or reductions in state spending, and whether there should be active attempts to promote the entry of non-traditional groups, such as women, young people and the working classes, into politics.

We created a dummy variable that grouped those on the homogenous tables, thus facilitating an analysis by this category as well as separating out the individual tables. We use the absolute changes on the indices that measure respondents' positions on service charges, tax and spending and non-traditional politicians (described above). Absolute values are used because we are interested in seeing the overall level of movement, that is, whether those in groups of like-minded people are less likely to move than those in groups with a variety of people.

Appendix Table A4 (available online at: http://ips.sagepub.com/) shows the differences between the mixed groups and the homogenous groups with more 'extreme' views. We can see that the differences in absolute movement between the individuals at the two types of tables were reasonably small (usually less than 1, on a scale of 1–7). There are no significant differences between the mixed and more homogenously populated tables. When we partition the data to compare just those in right-leaning tables with the rest, we can see than on the issue of 'tax and spend' the more mixed tables were much more likely to move than individuals on the homogenous, right-leaning tables. The same pattern is there for support for measures to encourage non-traditional groups to enter politics, although not as strong. Those on right-leaning tables are less likely to move than others. When we look at the left-leaning tables, these groups are *more* likely to shift opinion than groups in more mixed tables. This might suggest that those who are left-leaning are more open to changing their minds as a result of the deliberative process. However, this could be related to the issues being discussed and does not necessarily provide strong evidence for Hypothesis 5.

Conclusion

This article set out to ask whether certain types of people react differently to their involvement in deliberation and if the resultant opinion change is contingent on the varying capacities or characteristics of participants and if group composition matters.

Our results show that people do change their minds, in this instance becoming more willing to accept tax increases and charges and less extreme in their views on politicians. However, there are variations across individuals and groups in these changes of mind and these variations may be

important for the design of deliberative fora. What we find is that those who may be of higher social standing – that is, those who are older and are more knowledgeable – tend to change their minds less than those with lower levels of knowledge or who are younger. This is particularly the case for more salient issues.

Our analysis suggests that some of this may be due to an element of 'enlightenment' where younger people and those with less initial knowledge are more likely to change their views on salient issues, while the more knowledgeable and the older will change their minds on less salient issues where presumably they have had less prior thought and discussion. In terms of becoming more 'other regarding', this too appears to be borne out by the general move of many groups towards a willingness to pay more tax. This is good news for deliberative theorists, although more work needs to be done to understand fully the interaction of the variables and to examine whether the findings transfer to different institutional contexts.

Finally, we have provided evidence that for participation to work participants need to be exposed to the views of those who are unlike themselves. In other words, some basic disagreement appears to be a prerequisite for good deliberation.

What this research has shown is that certain types of individuals are more likely to change than others. Overall, the picture appears to be that in general the participants more likely to change their minds following deliberation are those who are moderate in opinion and knowledge, at neither extreme in terms of age and who are exposed to a group dynamic of disagreement. However, in the stricter test of multivariate analysis (perhaps in part due to our low *N*) there are less consistent patterns for our control variables. While knowledge emerges as a variable of interest, overall there are no individuals that are consistently either advantaged or disadvantaged by the process (even in the case of the knowledge measure the impacts vary in direction). What all this would seem to indicate is that for deliberation to work generally participants need not be so well informed. However, inevitably, our method of observing deliberation was necessarily crude and centred on attitude change. A more fruitful mechanism for future research would be to test the quality of the deliberation directly using a tool such as the deliberative quality index (Steenbergen et al., 2003).

This article has reported on a deliberative experiment, seeking to build on previous studies by a growing host of scholars working in this field (many of whom have been cited here).

However, experiments like Ireland's *We the Citizens* are of more than just theoretical interest. Demonstrating the capacity of citizens to engage in deliberative fora has important practical implications, not least in buttressing the arguments of those pushing for the use of real, as opposed to experimental, deliberative fora to inform political choice. The citizens' assemblies in British Columbia, Ontario and the Netherlands in the early years of this millennium and the recent work of the Irish Constitutional Convention provide good examples of how citizens are engaging in important first-order policy debates. The politicians who established these fora believe citizens have the capacity to do so; as we have seen, clearly some do.

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Notes

1. It should be noted that while opinion change is a central claim of deliberative theorists it is not the only claim. More specifically, the outcome most hoped for by deliberative theorists is informed issue consensus that best approximates the public 'will'. While this often requires that some people will change their initial views, it can also include the strengthening of existing stances. Change is not a sine qua non. While we accept and acknowledge this, nevertheless, for the purposes of this empirical exercise we see it as a useful proxy.
2. We also tested the other demographic variables and an interaction between gender and knowledge but none proved to have significant impact and are not reported.
3. A different theoretical expectation might be that homogenous individuals with more 'extreme' opinions are as likely to move, but will move more solidly in one direction, to the extreme they lean towards. We looked at the direction as well as the level of movement on these issues. We also just studied the left-leaning and right-leaning tables alone, as we have different expectations of their movement. The results of these tests (not reported) show no support for this expectation. In all but one case the groups move in the same direction as the rest of the participants in the citizens' assembly and at no stage are the differences between the groups significantly different.

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