



Changing hats: how deliberation impacts citizens

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Executive Summary

We know that deliberative dialogue processes can have valuable impacts on policy making, but what impact do they have on the citizens who take part?

Deliberative theory has emphasised the ability of citizens to take on information and approach issues rationally and with greater regard for others when in a deliberative setting. This thought leadership piece examines the evidence of how being part of a deliberative dialogue affects participants, and considers what it means for Sciencewise and others engaged in dialogue processes.

It finds that participants' opinions can change as a result of deliberation, but that this is more likely on issues that a participant has not already considered, and is likely to be due to internal deliberation as much as deliberation with others. Where opinions have already been formed – particularly on value-laden issues – individuals can be prone to fit the available evidence to their views, rather than change the views themselves. This presents an interesting challenge for experts (who, after all, are citizens too), who will by definition be approaching dialogue with pre-formed views, and may have to make particular effort to be open-minded and reflexive about the benefits deliberation can bring to their own thinking.

Whether the nature of participants opinions change or remain stable, being part of deliberation is likely to strengthen the attachment that individuals' have to those views, which should mean that they are taken more seriously by others. This suggests that the 'value add' of deliberation is not solely in the extent to which participants learn new things and potentially change their views - it also can work to deepen the legitimacy of public positions.

There are several examples of where deliberation leads to greater empathy among citizens, with more 'pro-social' outcomes and participants becoming more considerate of others' needs through the dialogue process. This is not true of every context, and it should not be assumed to always be a good thing.

High quality deliberative dialogue can overcome, at least in part, the challenges of cognitive bias. By creating a forum of open discussion; providing balanced information; forging a common objective; and critically, bringing together a diverse and balanced group of participants, dialogue can be a means to address and correct biases that may be present in other forms of social enquiry.

There are no hard and fast rules about how being part of a deliberative process will impact on citizens. It is often an opportunity to learn, to reflect, to engage and to change - and participants may find the experience transformative whether or not their own views shift during the process. Those commissioning and designing deliberative processes have enormous influence on whether the processes are good quality, legitimate and robust, and have particular responsibility to address issues of bias. But perhaps the most exciting thing about dialogue is that the nature of its impact on citizens depends, above all, on citizens themselves.

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1 Introduction

The impact of deliberative engagement has received significant attention that can be traced back at least as far as the observations of Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill in the nineteenth century. Tocqueville and Mill both considered participation in civic activities to be essential to the development of individuals as democratic citizens. Tocqueville, for example, considered political and civil associations to be 'to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within the people's reach, they teach men [sic] how to use and how to enjoy it.'¹

However, while much theoretical attention has been paid to the impacts of deliberation, empirical research, on the other hand, has lagged far behind the speculative arguments for its benefits and limitations.²

Sciencewise practises a particular form of deliberative engagement – public dialogue – that is explicitly intended to have an impact on the policy process:

'Dialogues bring together a diverse mix of citizens with a range of views and values, and relevant policy makers and experts, to discuss, reflect and come to conclusions on complex and/or controversial issues.'³

The emphasis Sciencewise places on public dialogue being linked to a particular policy window is a critical aspect of its approach. Indeed, it is this opportunity for impact on a policy process that makes dialogue worthwhile from the perspective of both policy makers and citizens. However, the theoretical underpinnings of deliberative forms of democratic engagement have often emphasised the impact on citizens more than policy.

Understanding these potentially wide-ranging effects is important for evaluating the full impact of a programme such as Sciencewise (i.e. the impacts on civic engagement, social capital, trust in government, compliance with decisions). But more than this, understanding the impact that deliberation has on citizens, and conversely that citizens have on deliberation, is critical to understanding the impact that public dialogue can have on policy.

As deliberative engagement practitioners, we need to be mindful of how deliberation affects the opinions and policy preferences of citizens. Does the process of becoming more informed about an issue and discussing it in a facilitated process lead participants to change their opinions and look beyond their own interests, as deliberative theory suggests? Does it make citizens more 'pro-social' (i.e. they are more sensitive to the views and interests of others), and if so, does this shift in viewpoints mean they are no longer 'ordinary' members of the public? Or does deliberation make established views more entrenched?

In short, what hat do we expect citizens to wear when they deliberate (e.g. citizen, consumer, resident, tax-payer, parent, student, pensioner, patient, etc.) and what hat do they actually wear?

This paper reviews some of the evidence of the impact of deliberative engagement on citizens, and discusses what this might mean for the practice of deliberative engagement and future of the Sciencewise programme. It is by no means an exhaustive account, with much other evidence from a range of different disciplines that could be brought to bear on understanding the benefits and limitations of deliberative engagement.

2 What effect does deliberative engagement have on participants?

Deliberative theory has emphasised the ability of citizens to take on information and approach issues rationally and with greater regard for others when in a deliberative setting. The argument goes that,

¹ Tocqueville, 1838, Democracy in America

² Carpini, et al., 2004, Public Deliberations, Discursive Participation and Citizen Engagement

³ Hughes, 2012, What is public dialogue?

'through discursive interaction and as a result of reason giving, participants will come to conceptualise their preferences differently' and become 'more public spirited'.⁴ According to Simone Chambers:

'[A] central tenet of all deliberative theory is that deliberation can change minds and transform opinions. [...] Although few adhere to the view that deliberation inevitably leads to consensus, many believe that deliberation under the right conditions will have a tendency to broaden perspectives, promote tolerance and understanding between groups, and generally encourage a public spirited attitude. [...] There is a widespread belief that deliberation and publicity associated with deliberation will have a salutary effect on people's opinions.'⁵

The Sciencewise experience is certainly that participants in public dialogues are able to contribute meaningfully through a deliberative process:

'Experience has shown that given the right information, support and time, the public can participate in discussions on complex and/or contentious subjects. Many policy makers and experts have been impressed with the speed at which public participants can pick up complex issues and the interest they show.'⁶

This section reviews the wider evidence of the impact that deliberation has on participants, exploring:

- Whether participants do take on new knowledge and change their opinions as the result of deliberation
- Whether participants become more considerate of the views and interests of others as the result of deliberation

2.1 Does deliberative engagement make participants' opinions more informed?

One of rationales for deliberation put forward by deliberative democracy theorists is that it improves the quality of the public's opinion. According to Tina Nabatchi and colleagues, this view draws on 'several decades of public opinion research that paints a picture of a rationally ignorant or uninformed public, who express meaningless doorstep opinions and non-attitudes, or form their opinions through irrational and short-sighted processes that are reinforced through homogenous networks and highly susceptible to a constant onslaught of elite manipulation tactics'.⁷

Deliberative engagement is therefore offered up as a solution to this; the process of delving into a topic and discussing opinions with others is thought to make those opinions more informed, consistent and durable.

2.1.1 Knowledge gain and opinion change through deliberation

There is good evidence to suggest that participants do learn information from deliberative engagement, including information that is contrary to their opinions, and change their opinions in line with this new information.⁸ A good deal of supporting evidence for this has been provided from analyses of Deliberative Poll events. James Fishkin, for example, reports evidence of significant change in policy attitudes across fifty-eight indices in nine national Deliberative Polls, with 72% showing significant change between participants' answers on first contact and after the deliberation.⁹

For example, a Deliberative Poll held in Australia at the time of a constitutional referendum on whether the country should become a republic resulted in significant knowledge gains among participants, which was found to drive opinion change. It also resulted in the favouring of an option (for indirect elections of a president) that had not initially been appealing to the participants.¹⁰

In Denmark, a deliberative poll held in 2000 on whether the country should join the Euro found that support moved from 45% before to 56% after the deliberation, while opposition moved from 37% to 43%. During the deliberation, it was found that at least 20% of participants changed their minds more than once, and that their knowledge significantly increased, beyond that of the general public who gained some knowledge through the referendum campaigns. Importantly, this increased knowledge

⁴ Nabatchi, et al., 2012 Democracy in Motion

⁵ Chambers, 2003, Deliberative democratic theory

⁶ Hughes, 2012, What is public dialogue?

⁷ Nabatchi, et al., 2012, Democracy in Motion

⁸ Luskin et al., 2002, Considered opinions; Barabas, 2004, How Deliberation Affects Policy Opinions; Fishkin, 2009, When the people speak

⁹ Fishkin, 2009, When the people speak

¹⁰ Fishkin, 2009, When the people speak

included that of the arguments that they disagreed with, as well as those they agreed with. A follow up survey three months following the event found that this knowledge had lasted.¹¹ In a study of this case, Andersen and Hansen found that:

'Deliberation and information increased the participants' ability to form opinions, and many participants changed their views after engaging in the deliberative processes. The participants were capable of forming a reasoned opinion on a complex issue such as the single currency. Their knowledge about the issue, as well as their capabilities to engage in political debates, increased. In this sense, deliberation created "better" citizens based on a normative judgment of active, informed and participating citizens.'¹²

While there is evidence that participating in a deliberation can change the opinions of citizens, there is some disagreement over the exact mechanism that brings about this change of opinion. Some have linked it to the receipt of information and internal deliberation,¹³ whereas others have shown that the actual deliberation with other citizens is the cause of much of the opinion change.¹⁴

Either way, and notwithstanding possible issues of cognitive bias and social dynamics (see section 3), there is good evidence that participants in a deliberation can tackle complex policy issues and will shift their opinions based on the knowledge they gain.

This presents an interesting challenge for experts (who, after all, are citizens too), who will by definition be approaching dialogue with pre-formed views. Experts may have to make particular effort to be open-minded and reflexive on what benefits deliberation can bring to their own thinking – and find that the back-and-forth of exchanges with the public is valuable in itself. The challenge of conveying information, fielding misunderstandings, defending established positions and being held accountable can be an important means to substantively improve expert approaches and identify where there are conflicts with the viewpoints of others.

2.1.2 Strengthened views and deliberation

Though there is often a presumption that opinion change is a positive outcome of deliberation – as it suggests that a citizen has critically engaged with an issue – this is of course not necessarily the case. A study of a citizens' panel for health goal priority setting found that increased levels of deliberation made participants views more amenable to change in some cases, but made them more entrenched in others.¹⁵

On the one hand, opinion change may result from social pressures to conform, rather than the strength of alternative arguments. But on the other hand, as Fishkin highlights, deliberation may also strengthen a pre-existing view or policy preference:

'If the public thinks X should be done, but has not thought about the issue much, has not tested its views in comparison with alternative policies and reasons for them, then there is an issue about how seriously, from a standpoint of normative legitimacy, one should take those views. There is a kind of deliberative discount. It does not disqualify the opinions. After all, these are the views that people actually have. But those views should be viewed within the category of "top of the head" opinion, of impressions of sound bites and headlines that are incompletely rationalised. They reflect very little thought and little consideration of opposing possibilities. On the other hand, if those views survive a serious deliberation unchanged, then the deliberative discount should be lifted. Those views have been tested in a context of opposing arguments with good information. Hence, regardless of change, the conclusions at the end of a well-constituted Deliberative Poll represent the public's considered judgements'¹⁶

Therefore, even if citizens do not change their views during deliberation, the fact that these opinions have survived greater scrutiny through a dialogue process means that the opinions should be taken more seriously both by outsiders and by citizens themselves. Citizens are more likely to promote and defend their views; and decision-makers should respect these opinions as sincerely held and systematically thought through.

¹¹ Fishkin, 2009, When the people speak

¹² Andersen & Hansen, 2007, How deliberation makes better citizens

¹³ Goodwin & Neimeyer, 2003, When Does Deliberation Begin?

¹⁴ Farrar, et al., 2010, Disaggregating Deliberation's Effects

¹⁵ Abelson et al., 2003, Does deliberation make a difference?

¹⁶ Fishkin, 2009, When the people speak

2.2 Does deliberation make participants more pro-social?

The type of opinion change that deliberative theorists and practitioners are typically most interested in is where citizens become more sensitive to the views and interests of others, which has been termed pro-social behaviour. As John Stuart Mill argued, the expectation is that when a citizen participates in public discourse:

'He is called upon, while so engaged, to weigh interests not his own; to be guided in case of conflicting claims, by another rule than his private partialities; to apply, at every turn, principles and maxims which have for their own reason of existence the general good.'¹⁷

It is not only that citizens are expected to approach deliberation in a particular way, but that deliberation itself affects how citizens approach an issue and interact with others. According to Mendelberg, for example, deliberation 'is expected to lead to empathy with the other and a broadened sense of people's own interests through an egalitarian, open-minded and reciprocal process of reasoned argumentation, [which in turn results in] other benefits: citizens are more enlightened about their own and others' needs and experiences, can better resolve deep conflict, are more engaged in politics, place their faith in the basic tenets of democracy, perceive their political system as legitimate, and lead a healthier civic life.'¹⁸

If borne out through the evidence, this would suggest that when citizens deliberate, they do indeed put the hat of a citizen on – considering issues with a collective rather than individualist approach.

2.2.1 Social dilemma and deliberation

An area of research particularly relevant to the question of whether deliberation makes citizens more considerate of common interests is that on social dilemma and collective action problems. This refers to where, 'the pursuit of narrow self-interest, while rational for individuals, is irrational and harmful for the group. The group is better off if everyone cooperates for the greater good, but individuals are tempted to pursue their individual self-interest instead'.¹⁹ The evidence from social dilemma experiments shows that face-to-face communication is the best intervention for encouraging cooperation,²⁰ which suggests that deliberation may lead individuals to be more considerate of common interests. According to Mendelberg:

'Talk in social dilemmas can serve several good deliberative purposes. First, members use talk to reveal their genuine commitment to cooperation and their trustworthiness and to discover others. When talk leads individuals to perceive a consensus to cooperate, it becomes a powerful predictor of actual cooperation. Second, talk can create a norm of group-interest in which individuals come to see their own self-interest as consonant with the self-interest of every other member of the group. This norm in turn causes individuals to act with the goal of maximizing the group's interest. Through discussion people change their identity to include the group in their self-concept. The group's interest comes to serve as a heuristic to self-interest. [...] A still more encouraging finding is that the more deliberative the discussion, the more cooperation it produces.'²¹

However, as Mendelberg highlights, it is not necessarily the case that this means individuals are more empathetic or altruistic, as acting in the group interest could also be considered to be the result of a self-interested motive and/or the social pressure to conform. She concludes therefore that, '[w]e do not know for sure whether discussion in social dilemmas serves to transform individuals from largely self-regarding to more other-regarding.'²²

2.2.2 Empathy and deliberation

While the social dilemma research might not provide conclusive evidence on this, there is evidence from elsewhere that suggests that deliberation can cause citizens to become more pro-social. For example, there is evidence from Deliberative Polls conducted by the Centre for Deliberative Democracy that participants became more considerate of the needs of others through the deliberative process; for example:

- In Texas, the percentage of participants willing to pay extra on their electricity bills to support

¹⁷ Mill, 1861, Considerations on representative government

¹⁸ Mendelberg, 2002, The deliberative citizen: Theory and evidence

¹⁹ Mendelberg, 2002, The deliberative citizen: Theory and evidence

²⁰ Mendelberg, 2002, The deliberative citizen: Theory and evidence

²¹ Mendelberg, 2002, The deliberative citizen: Theory and evidence

²² Mendelberg, 2002, The deliberative citizen: Theory and evidence

wind power for the community increased by approximately 30%;

- In New Haven, support for revenue sharing between towns to support developments beneficial to the region increased significantly;
- In China, participants chose infrastructure projects that would serve the broader community.²³

Similarly, a study of a public budgeting discussion held in a politically conservative state in the US found that the deliberative process led to residents proposing tax increases. The authors report that:

'The face-to-face, deliberative discussions resulted in residents recommending that taxes be increased in order to preserve programs. In an era of concern that the American public will not willingly pay for tax increases, the recommendation was surprising. Our work finds that the public welcomes the invitation to participate in governance, has high levels of trust and confidence in government, and is willing to endorse policy options that have been thought to be unpopular among the American public.'²⁴

Participants have also been found to espouse more collectivist ideals. In the UK, for example, agreement with the statement "when voting, people should always put the interests of the public as a whole before those of themselves and their family" was found to increase significantly as a result of a Deliberative Poll.²⁵

In a review of attitude change during Deliberative Polls it was found that 'Poll respondents tend to move toward more cosmopolitan, egalitarian, and collectivist value orientations.'²⁶ This suggests, as the authors discuss, that the deliberative process itself is not neutral, but rather promotes a cosmopolitan, egalitarian and collectivist set of values through its structure and principles. While from a theoretical standpoint this is what many advocates of deliberative democracy would want to see, it does raise questions about how the outcomes of deliberative engagement might be perceived by those external to the process if they are based on a change of values. While a group of citizens might be working in the wider public interest through a deliberative process, they are arguably no longer representative of the wider public.

However, there is some evidence to suggest that the involvement of citizens in a decision-making process can increase the legitimacy of that decision making process in the eyes of the wider public.²⁷ This might suggest an important role for deliberative engagement in tackling collective action problems (e.g. climate change) and issues of social justice in a way that achieves public support.

2.2.3 Common interest, self interest and deliberation

While deliberative theory has typically emphasised the importance of common interest, this has been challenged more recently by theorists who argue for the importance of self-interest in deliberation. Karpowitz and Mansbridge, for example, warn against focusing too heavily on seeking common interests through deliberation as it can result in self-interests not being probed:

'It is true that participants should try to forge common interests where this is possible – when they can create new value by expanding the pie or when they can reach a higher goal by transforming their own interests and identities in way that they will later approve. Yet participants also need to try to discover and probe one another's interests as they appear at any given time. In addition to being an important ingredient in creating more enlightened self-understanding (for example, by allowing parties to see that they really wanted A rather than B), the intensive unpacking involved in the discovery process also aims to minimize obfuscation and manipulation. Too great an emphasis on forging common interests generates unrealistic expectations and obfuscates real conflict.'²⁸

Likewise, Mansbridge with eight other deliberative theorists in 2010 argued that, 'deliberation should clarify conflict as well as help participants to discover and forge common interests. Although we want to stress the importance of seeking a genuinely common good, we argue that deliberation can and should in certain conditions include both self-interest and the negotiation of conflicting interests.'²⁹

This suggests that although more empathetic and altruistic opinions and policy preferences can be the product of deliberative engagement, it is not always necessarily desirable. This raises the challenge

²³ Fishkin & Luskin, 2012, Deliberation and "Better Citizens"

²⁴ PytlíkZillig et al., 2012, Trust in Government

²⁵ Fishkin & Luskin, 2012, Deliberation and "Better Citizens"

²⁶ Gastil, et al., 2010, Is deliberation neutral?

²⁷ Herian et al., 2012, Public participation, procedural fairness, and evaluations of local governance; Grimes, 2006, Organizing consent

²⁸ Karpowitz & Mansbridge, 2005, Disagreement and Consensus

²⁹ Mansbridge et al., 2010, The Place of Self-Interest and the Role of Power in Deliberative Democracy

for deliberation practitioners to design processes that both uncover self-interests and seek out common interests. As other researchers observed from a Deliberative Poll event:

'While deliberating, the participants also dealt with coalitions, self-interest and domination. These core and defining elements of politics are not eliminated from the political process – and, thus, not from the Deliberative Poll either. However, in the context of the Deliberative Poll, the participants were aware of them. This suggests that the setting of the Deliberative Poll succeeded in making these elements visible and public in the deliberative process. What is needed is an elaboration of how these features of politics interact with deliberation and how they are interrelated. The lack of such an elaboration is one of the main critiques raised against more normative approaches to the theory of deliberative democracy. [...] Our objection is that too little focus has been placed on interest and power in deliberative processes.'³⁰

The danger is that deliberation focuses too much on either self-interest or common interest. While too much focus on self-interest may entrench positions and lead participants to talk past one another, too much focus on common interest can lead to minority voices feeling pressure to conform to the views of the majority. Both will likely result in the socially powerful dominating discussions.

3 What impact does cognitive bias have on deliberation and opinion change?

While there is significant empirical evidence to suggest that participants can become more informed, change their opinion and become more “pro-social” as a result of deliberation, there is also a large body of research that suggests that individuals may also do the contrary – entrench and make the available information fit with their pre-existing and self-serving opinions. Mendelberg reports that:

'In a literature known as motivated reasoning, social and cognitive psychologists have documented the variety of innovative ways that people who are strongly committed to a predetermined view find to interpret evidence to support their view. This bias occurs at every step of information processing, from setting goals, to gathering and evaluating evidence from the outside or from memory, to constructing inferences and judgments [...]. People not only fail to attend to evidence that disconfirms their view, but they readily accept evidence as valid if it agrees with their view while questioning and ultimately rejecting the validity of information that challenges it [...].'

3.1 Confirmation bias

This phenomenon of people taking information to fit pre-existing beliefs is commonly referred to as confirmation bias. In a famous study from the behavioural economics literature, participants with strong views on capital punishment were given research on its impact as a deterrent. Rather than using the evidence to challenge their pre-existing beliefs, not only did participants use it to reinforce their prior views, they used the language and reasons from the research to support their argument.

Some research into the effects of Deliberative Polling supports this finding, suggesting that the more salient an issue is, the less likely participants in a deliberation are to change their views on it:

'If respondents have already processed an issue, even with fairly imperfect and unbalanced deliberation in their daily lives, they are less likely to change their views.'³¹

As discussed earlier, reinforcing existing views is not necessarily an illegitimate outcome of deliberation. Indeed, it might be of even more concern if participants were found to change their pre-existing views unreservedly due to deliberation. However, this does challenge the traditional theoretical underpinnings of deliberative engagement that emphasise rationality and the salutary effects of deliberation on participants' opinions:

'Motivated reasoning has considerable power to interfere with the motivation that deliberative theory cherishes the motivation to be open-minded, even-handed and fair. Deliberators can hardly

³⁰ Andersen & Hansen, 2007, How deliberation makes better citizens

³¹ Fishkin, 2009, When the people speak

pursue truth and justice if they view everything in favour of their priors through rose-tinted glasses and everything against it through dark ones.³²

However, rather than undermining the practice of deliberation itself, this might instead suggest that we need a more nuanced view of the purposes and outcomes that deliberation can achieve under different conditions. Theorists have recently suggested the need to combine deliberation with other forms of democracy in order to deal with irresolvable conflicts in opinions and interests. We should not mislead ourselves into thinking that those designing a deliberative process can control 'the whole process' from start to finish, because people will engage with the issues before and after a dialogue in ways that are outside the facilitators' control.

Rather than imagining dialogue processes as hermetically sealed units that citizens can come to fresh, we should actively acknowledge citizen engagement that pre-dates a dialogue, and that participants may pursue other pathways for democratic voice after dialogue processes have finished.

3.2 Can deliberation overcome cognitive bias?

Some studies suggest that the qualities of a deliberative process may overcome, at least in part, the effects of cognitive bias. Barabas, for example, argues that the obligation on citizens participating in a deliberation 'to open up to the possibility of attitudinal change' and the structure of deliberation that means 'people with diverse views commingle' mean that deliberation is different from typical discussion.³³ Through his research into how a deliberative forum affected policy opinions, he finds that, 'deliberation increases knowledge and alters opinions, but it does so selectively based on the quality and diversity of the messages as well as the willingness of participants to keep an open mind'. Specifically, Barabas finds that greatest opinion changes result from groups that find a significant degree of consensus on an issue, and concludes that:

'Keeping an open mind, along with exposing ourselves to new information and diverse perspectives, is the essence of deliberation. It is what separates deliberation from discussion and other opinion influences. In two different studies, I have shown that citizens learn when they deliberate but not when they discuss politics. Deliberation is unique in that citizens discard their inaccurate factual perceptions as well as rigidly held political views. Deliberation represents an opportunity for opinion change, in the spirit of enlightenment and consensus, but there are no guarantees.'³⁴

An evaluation, conducted by Esterling and colleagues,³⁵ of a deliberative event on long term planning for the US federal budget, presents similar findings. The deliberative process, which was held over a day in June 2010 across 19 communities, involved 3,000 individuals from a cross section of society, in discussing how to balance the US federal budget. The concern/expectation, based on the motivated reasoning literature, might be that liberals and conservatives would leave the deliberation with more extreme opposing positions than when they arrived. In fact, what was found is that liberals, conservatives and neutrals were able to take part in a constructive discussion and moderated their policy views on spending cuts and tax increases. The evaluation suggests that this was, at least in part, due to the organisers being able to create a forum for open and balanced discussion.

The authors also propose that another force at work that encouraged the moderation of individuals' views was the common objective of agreeing a strategy to reduce the deficit. They observe that:

'On different policy items, liberals and conservatives seem to have given ground on their specific priorities in order to help achieve this goal over the course of deliberation. For example, conservatives became more supportive of raising taxes on the very wealthy (liberals began with high levels of support for this measure and didn't change much). To a similar degree, liberals became more supportive of a 5% across the board cut to discretionary programs after one day of deliberation.'³⁶

The success of this deliberative engagement on such a value-laden and emotive subject is surprising considering that a significant amount of evidence (e.g. on group polarisation) suggests that cognitive biases and social pressures are most prevalent on issues of value. This literature suggests that deliberative engagement is best suited for issues that are technical, and do not require the discussion of competing values between groups of participants. Mansbridge goes so far as to argue that:

³² Mendelberg, 2002, The deliberative citizen: Theory and evidence

³³ Barabas, 2004, How Deliberation Affects Policy Opinions

³⁴ Barabas, 2004, How Deliberation Affects Policy Opinions

³⁵ Esterling et al., 2010, The Difference that Deliberation Makes

³⁶ Esterling et al., 2010, The Difference that Deliberation Makes

'On matters of value, opportunities for deliberation are likely to turn anti-deliberative. And if they manage to turn argument-centered, they are unlikely to change minds. Advocates of deliberation would do well to promote deliberation on issues of fact but to advance alternatives to deliberation on issues of value.'³⁷

The question of how an issue is framed, however, might go some way to explain how cognitive biases can be overcome even on issues that are heavily values laden. Returning to the example, the evaluation observes that the small group discussions were not strongly ideological in structure. Participants are reported to have been nearly unanimous that discussions were constructive and engaging, even where they were in groups with people very different from themselves. This would suggest that it is possible to hold a constructive deliberation on what would typically be a valued-laden subject when discussions are facilitated in the right way (e.g. avoiding ideological conversations and working towards a common objective). Esterling and colleagues, the evaluation authors, conclude:

'When asked to discuss policies with their fellow citizens, participants tended to set aside their ideological commitments to work toward the common goal of fiscal responsibility. If one were to rely exclusively on individual survey responses to gauge public opinion, one would be misled to believe that our society can only consider policy options through a rigid ideological lens. But public opinion surveys have their limits in helping us understand the structure of public opinion. Public deliberation helps to reveal the considered opinions of citizens, a kind of opinion policy makers should care about as well.'³⁸

Further evidence reported by Mendelberg suggests that the diversity of a group has an important bearing on whether it falls victim to cognitive biases; while homogenous groups will typically use information to confirm their pre-existing views, heterogeneous groups are less prone to this:

'Groups, especially if they are homogenous, are much more prone than individuals to search for information that confirms their preliminary preference [...]. One group mechanism that exacerbates the individual tendency to search for confirming evidence is the group's ability to heighten individuals' "defense motivation" - the feeling that once one has made a decision, one should commit to it. Homogenous groups also work by increasing members' confidence; when a group agrees on what to do, the members are much more confident in that decision than they would be if making the same decision or when the group fails to agree [...]. Heterogeneous groups are much less susceptible to these group biases.'³⁹

The design of deliberative process, therefore, can have a significant bearing upon the degree to which cognitive biases are present and how individuals approach a discussion. The perennial concern to ensure a balanced and appropriately mixed group of participants in dialogue is therefore not only important in terms of 'representativeness', but also for minimising the risk of cognitive bias. Without such careful design, the impact of being part of a dialogue process may be to entrench citizen views in biased positions. Conversely, with a well-run and carefully balanced group, dialogue can be a means whereby biases are addressed and corrected.

4 Conclusion

The impacts that deliberative dialogue can have on citizens are as diverse as the people who participate in them. But whilst there is no way to definitively predict how being part of a dialogue process affect those who take part in it – including citizens, policy makers and experts – we can identify a number of common themes. We conclude by highlighting the key trends, alongside their implications for Sciencewise and others engaged in deliberative dialogue:

- Participants' opinions can change as a result of deliberation. The evidence suggests that this is more likely on issues that a participant has not already considered, and is likely to be due to internal deliberation as much as deliberation with others. For those organising deliberative processes, it is important to bear in mind how much participants have already invested in learning and thinking about the issues prior to the dialogue process and ensure that different starting points are acknowledged. Arguably the science and technology emphasis of

³⁷ Mansbridge, 1983, Beyond adversary democracy.

³⁸ Esterling et al., 2010, The Difference that Deliberation Makes

³⁹ Mendelberg, 2002, The Deliberative Citizen: Theory and Evidence

Sciencewise, which often means the public are deliberating on “new” issues, offers a particular opportunity for deliberation to add value.

- Where opinions have already been formed – particularly on value-laden issues – individuals can be prone to fit the available evidence to their views, rather than change the views themselves. Those organising dialogues should take particular care to promote open mindedness and self-awareness among participants where issues have already been well rehearsed. Recent dialogue work on fracking, a highly contentious issue where participants do not begin dialogue with a ‘clean slate’, is an example of where such issues are particularly pertinent for Sciencewise.
- Whether the nature of participants’ opinions change or remain stable, being part of deliberation is likely to strengthen the attachment that individuals’ have to those views, which should mean that they are taken more seriously by others. This suggests that the ‘value add’ of deliberation is not solely in the extent to which participants learn new things and potentially change their views - it also can work to deepen the legitimacy of public positions. It may be worth commissioning public dialogues where there are serious doubts over the legitimacy of perspectives being posited as ‘public views’ – even if policymakers already think they know what the public will say.
- There are several examples of where deliberation leads to greater empathy among citizens, with more ‘pro-social’ outcomes and participants becoming more considerate of others’ needs through the dialogue process. This is not true of every context, and it should not be assumed to always be a good thing. Facilitators must be careful to balance both self-interests and common interests to avoid participants either talking past each other on the one hand, or eliding conflict on the other.
- High quality deliberative dialogue can overcome, at least in part, the challenges of cognitive bias. By creating a forum of open discussion; providing balanced information; forging a common objective; and critically, bringing together a diverse and balanced group of participants, dialogue can be a means to address and correct biases that may be present in other forms of social enquiry. The irony is that because mindfulness of bias is the most important mechanism through which dialogue practitioners can guard against it, the most high quality and least biased processes are those where bias is talked about the most. Dialogue practitioners should be aware of this risk and consider the context of the broader ‘evidence marketplace’ in policymaking, to ensure that input from public dialogue is not undervalued.

There are no hard and fast rules about how being part of a deliberative process will impact on citizens. It is often an opportunity to learn, to reflect, to engage and to change - and participants may find the experience transformative whether or not their views shift during the process. Those commissioning and designing deliberative processes have enormous influence on whether the processes are good quality, and particularly on issues of bias. But perhaps the most exciting thing about dialogue is that the nature of its impact on citizens depends, above all, on citizens themselves.

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