CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Perceived discourse quality in the Irish Citizens' Assembly deliberations on abortion
Authors	Farrell, David M.;Suiter, Jane;Cunningham, Kevin;Harris, Clodagh
Publication date	2022-04-01
Original Citation	Farrell, D. M., Suiter, J., Cunningham, K. and Harris, C. (2022) 'Perceived discourse quality in the Irish Citizens' Assembly deliberations on abortion', ConstDelib Working Paper Series, 17, pp. 1-23. Available at: https://constdelib.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/WP17-2022-CA17135-1.pdf (Accessed: 16 May 2022)
Type of publication	Working paper
Link to publisher's version	https://constdelib.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/WP17-2022-CA17135-1.pdf
Rights	© 2022, the Authors.
Download date	2026-11-06 08:20:44
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/13182



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Working Paper 17 | April 2022

Perceived Discourse Quality in the Irish Citizens' Assembly Deliberations on Abortion

David M. Farrell,
Jane Suiter,
Kevin Cunningham &
Clodagh Harris

Working Paper Series

https://constdelib.com

Funded by the Horizon 2020 Framework Programme of the European Union

COST Action CA17135

COST Action 17135, in short ConstDelib, focuses on "Constitution-making and deliberative democracy" and carries out research with the support of the European Union's Horizon 2020 Framework Program. The Action is active until 2022 and includes members from over 40 countries. Its main aim is to bring together researchers, public servants, elected officials, experts, citizens, participatory consultants and civil society organizations to discuss and reflect on the democratic challenge of reforming a constitution through democratic deliberation.

The Working Paper Series

The ConstDelib Working Paper Series publishes work in progress aiming to contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the broader field of democratic deliberation and in particular with reference to Constitution-making. The works cut across a wide range of research areas, demonstrating both the depth and breadth of research being undertaken by members of the COST Action. We also offer the opportunity for researchers outside the Action to publish with us their work related to the topic of the Action.

Managing Editor:
Sergiu Gherghina (University of Glasgow)

Editorial Board:
Venetia Argyropoulou (European University Cyprus)
Paul Blokker (University of Bologna)
Marie Dufrasne (University Saint-Louis Brussels)
Raphaël Kies (University of Luxembourg)
Sergiu Mișcoiu (Babes-Bolyai University Cluj)
Monika Mokre (Austrian Academy of Sciences)
Ioannis Papadopoulos (University of Macedonia)
Min Reuchamps (Catholic University of Louvain)
Yanina Welp (Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy, Graduate Institute)
Oya Yeğen (Sabanci University)

Logo and cover design:
Alexandros Kyriakidis (University of Macedonia)

Abstract
This paper contributes to a growing interest in process related approaches in the study of deliberative mini-publics. Its focus is on the perceived quality of deliberation in the Irish Citizens' Assembly's discussions on Ireland's constitutional ban on abortion, which occurred over the course of five weekends of meetings from late 2016 through to the spring of 2017, culminating in recommendations for a referendum to remove Ireland's constitutional ban on abortion. This paper makes use of survey data to examine the Citizens' Assembly's members' perceptions of the quality of the deliberative process. We find that, by one measure of discourse quality (individual access to the conversation), levels of satisfaction were greatest among the less educated. Over time the levels of discourse quality (again by this measure) rose particularly among the minority of Assembly members who were 'pro-life'.

Keywords
deliberation, citizen assembly, discourse quality, abortion, Ireland

Authors

David M. Farrell is a Professor of Politics at the School of Politics and International Relations, University College Dublin. His current work is focused on deliberative mini-publics, party organizational reform, and electoral systems. E-mail: david.farrell@ucd.ie

Jane Suiter is a Professor in the School of Communications at Dublin City University. Her research focus is on the information environment in the public sphere and in particular on scaling up deliberation and tackling disinformation. E-mail: jane.suiter@dcu.ie

Kevin Cunningham is a Lecturer in Politics at the School of Media, Technological University Dublin. His current work is focused primarily on voting behaviour. E-mail: kevin.cunningham@tudublin.ie

Clodagh Harris is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Government & Politics, University College Cork. Her research interests deliberative and participatory democracy, citizen and community engagement, and climate change. E-mail: clodagh.harris@ucc.ie

To cite this paper
Farrell, David. M, Suiter, Jane, Cunningham, Kevin & Harris, Clodagh. 2022. "Perceived Discourse Quality in the Irish Citizens' Assembly Deliberations on Abortion", April, *ConstDelib Working Paper Series*, no. 17, pp. 1-23.

Disclaimer
All views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not represent the views of COST Action CA17135, COST Association, or the EU. The copyright rests with the authors.

Introduction[1]

In their study on *Mapping and Measuring Deliberation*, Bächtiger and Parkinson (2019) distinguish between 'black box' and 'process' related approaches to the empirical study of deliberation. The former is by far the most established, associated particularly with the Deliberative Polls® pioneered by James Fishkin and his team, in which the focus is on measuring the impact of deliberation in a mini-public on its members in terms of opinion shifts on the issues being considered, increased levels of interest, and feelings of efficacy (e.g. Fishkin 2009). Until relatively recently black box approaches were *de rigueur*: little if anything was known about what went on inside those boxes, making the empirical research of deliberation an easy enough target for critics such as Ryfe who in a 2005 review essay noted that 'the process… [of] deliberation itself remains essentially unexamined' (2005: 54; also Sanders 1997: 348). As recently as 2014, Bächtiger and his colleagues observed that: 'while we do know quite a lot about the input and output dimensions of mini-publics … we know surprisingly little about their internal functioning' (2014: 227). For the fact is that process related approaches to the empirical study of deliberation in mini-publics, while of growing interest, are still in their infancy.

This paper makes a contribution to this growing interest in process related approaches. Its focus is on the perceived quality of deliberation in the Irish Citizens' Assembly's discussions on Ireland's constitutional ban on abortion, which occurred over the course of five weekends of meetings from late 2016 through to the spring of 2017, culminating in recommendations for a referendum to remove Ireland's constitutional ban on abortion and for legislation to dramatically liberalize abortion access in Ireland. The Assembly's recommendations were accepted by government and the parliament, resulting in a successful referendum to remove the abortion ban in the summer of 2018: legislation to allow for abortion followed soon after.

This paper makes use of a unique data set to examine perceptions of the quality of the deliberative process in the Irish Citizens' Assembly – a series of surveys of the members over the course of the five meetings that tapped their perceptions of 'discourse quality'. We start in the first section by setting the context of the Irish process, outlining the origins of the Citizens' Assembly, how it operated, and its treatment of the abortion debate. The subsequent section

[1] Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the annual conference of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, September 2017, and at a research seminar at the Université of Lausanne, December 2018. This research (designated as the 'Research Leader for the Citizens' Assembly') was co-funded by the Irish Research Council and the Secretariat of the Irish Citizens' Assembly, in a grant awarded to David Farrell and Jane Suiter. We are grateful to the Chair and Secretariat of the Citizens' Assembly for giving us access, and to the members for responding to our surveys.

reviews the factors that might influence levels of discourse quality. We then describe our dependent variable – *perceptions* of discourse quality – its underlying dimensions, and how it trended over time. This leads to our analysis of variations in perceived discourse quality and the factors that influenced it.

The Irish Citizens' Assembly and its discussion of Abortion

The Irish Citizens' Assembly[2] was established by the Irish government in October 2016; its work concluded in the late spring of 2018. The resolution establishing the Citizens' Assembly gave it five items to consider: abortion, the challenges and opportunities of an ageing population, fixed-term parliaments, the manner in which referenda are held, and how the state can make Ireland a leader in tackling climate change.[3] The focus of this paper is on the first of these items, which dominated the Assembly's work over the course of five weekends from November 2016 to April 2017, culminating in a report that proposed a removal of Ireland's constitutional ban on abortion; in the referendum that followed, in May 2018, the ban was removed with a two-thirds majority vote. (For more detail about the CA and its treatment of the abortion topic, see Farrell et al. 2019.)

The design underlying the Citizens' Assembly was a deliberative mini-public, characterized in particular by two main features. First, the 99 members were regular citizens selected randomly from the wider population in a stratified sample based on four demographic targets – sex, age, social class and region – with the market research company recruiters cold calling door-to-door to select the members, and at the same time 99 substitute members. In part perhaps reflecting the nature of the topic, not all members turned up for the sessions: 77 members were in attendance in the first weekend, 81 in the second, 89 in the third, 86 in the fourth, and 92 in the final weekend. Underlining this was a turnover in membership, particularly among the younger age groupings, requiring some further rounds of recruitment: in all there were 24 replacements of members over the course of the five weekends.

The second feature that marks this process out as a mini-public was its mode of operation. The members were arranged in circular tables of seven-to-eight. At each table there was a trained facilitator and a note-taker. The role of the facilitator was to ensure that roundtable

[2] Details about the Assembly are available at: www.citizensassembly.ie)

[3] http://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie/debates%20authoring/debateswebpack.nsf/takes/seanad2016071500002?opendocument#T00100

discussions kept to the point and were respectful, and that every member had an equal opportunity to speak. In surveys of members after each meeting there were a battery of questions on the quality of facilitation and the small table discussions (some of which are used in the analysis that follows), thus ensuring a strong element of quality control of the process. The table allocations were rotated after each weekend so that members were mixed around.

Table 1: Summary Schedule of the Five Weekends

	Weekend 1 (%)	Weekend 2 (%)	Weekend 3 (%)	Weekend 4 (%)	Weekend 5 (%)
Passive role for members					
Administrative/organizational	17.1	11.7	7.6	10.1	35.6
Presentations by experts	20.0	20.5	23.9	8.0	--
Presentations by advocates	--	--	--	22.6	--
Personal testimonials	--	--	--	8.0	--
Total passive	37.1	32.2	31.5	48.7	35.6
Active role for members					
Roundtable discussions	37.1	39.2	33.3	13.3	18.8
Question and answer sessions	25.7	26.4	32.4	30.6	33.6
Private reflective exercises	--	1.9	2.5	7.3	11.8
Total active	62.8	67.5	68.2	51.2	64.2
Length of meeting (minutes)	525	510	585	750	505

Note: Based on the published schedules for each weekend. This does not account for timetable over-runs, which proved to be pretty acute in weekend 5.

The five meetings to consider abortion took place roughly once a month, lasting for most of the weekend (all day Saturday and all of Sunday morning; on some occasions the Sunday sessions stretched into the mid-afternoon). The itinerary (which was agreed by a steering group made up of the members, and advised by an expert advisory group) generally consisted of the following main types of activity (this is illustrative):

- Presentations by legal, ethical and medical experts (between 15-30 minutes in length each). Briefing papers were circulated days in advance so that the members had an opportunity to read them. The briefings and presentations were designed to be as objective as possible; though on occasions – notably when dealing with ethical matters – there were experts with differing perspectives pitched against each other.
- There were also presentations by advocacy groups and personal testimonials by a number of women.
- Question and answer sessions.
- Small group roundtable facilitated discussions in closed session (i.e. no cameras or recording).

- Private reflective moments in which the members were invited to write their personal responses to a series of questions.

The itinerary varied from one weekend to the next, as shown in Table 1. In summary, the first four weekends involved a mix of information gathering, education and discussion, whereas the fifth weekend was devoted entirely to a complex series of discussions about ballot paper design and a sequence of votes. In general, there was good proportionality between 'active' roles for members (the roundtables, question and answer sessions, and private reflections) and more 'passive' listening roles: across four of the weekends there was a ratio of 2:1 between active and passive roles; the one exception was in weekend four, when the ratio was 1:1.[4]

Factors influencing perceived deliberative quality

Critics of deliberative democracy's standing as a normative ideal highlight the empirical difficulties in validating its claims. Indeed, as Setälä and Herne note 'a consensus on how to operationalise and measure a deliberative process and outcomes has not been reached' (2014: 71-72). However, the emergence of broader understandings of deliberation in the literature has provided for varied flexible approaches to empirical verification. The most notable advance has been the Discourse Quality Index (DQI), which aims to operationalise and measure the core features of Habermasian discourse ethics (Steiner et al. 2004; Steenbergen et al. 2003). It codes discourses on participation, levels of justification for demands, respect (for other groups, demands, and counterarguments) and constructive politics. It has been applied by a range of scholars to examine debates within formal debating chambers of established democratic institutions (Steenbergen et al. 2003; Spörndli 2003; Bächtiger et al. 2007) as well as in deliberative mini-publics and experiments that include members of the public (Caluwaerts and Kavadias 2014; Isernia and Fishkin 2014; Gerber et al. 2012).

Other approaches to empirical analysis of deliberation continue to emerge (see Dutwin, 2003; Holzinger, 2004; Stromer-Galley, 2007). The measure that we use in the analysis that follows is the perceived discourse quality index (PDQI) (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps 2014; Caluwaerts 2012). This is principally because of limitations on how we could measure the quality of the deliberative process in such a real-world setting. Unlike other empirical studies of

[4] This active vs. passive distinction probably overstates the differing roles of the members (e.g. listening and learning can be quite an 'active' role), but more than anything else it is intended to separate out those moments in the schedule when it was the activity of the members themselves that was at the forefront.

deliberation in practice (Farrell et al. 2013; Isernia and Fishkin 2014; Karpowitz et al. 2012) the Assembly did not conduct its work in 'laboratory' settings. This presented challenges, not least that the roundtable deliberations (which took place in camera) were not recorded.[5]

The PDQI is designed to capture individual perceptions of freedom to participate, respectful listening, openness to preference transformation and justification of demands, and so on. In setting out the rationale behind this approach, Caluwaerts and Reuchamps note that: '[t]he perception of deliberation might actually be more important than the actual quality of the deliberation' (2014: 106-07). They are not alone in arguing in favour of perceived measures of deliberation (see also Black et al. 2011; Steiner 2012). But while it may have certain advantages over actual measures of deliberative quality, it does however mean that, by definition, our analysis is based on members' perceptions of how things went rather than our assessment of that as independent observers. This, in turn, influences our theoretical expectations.

The first angle of interest focuses on the characteristics of the individual members, whether defined by demography or by some measure of attitudinal or cognitive differences. We know from voter studies that imbalances in society have an impact on political behaviour: the logical corollary, therefore, is that we should see this reflected in the members of a mini-public; indeed, this forms the basis for a common criticism of deliberation, namely that the differing capabilities among the participants in a deliberative process result in some dominating over others (e.g. Lupia and Norton 2017; Rosenberg 2014). A response to such criticisms is to point out that more usually than not they are based on observations of institutions (such as juries in courts) that do not necessarily follow best deliberative practices, whereas in a well-designed mini-public, with well-trained facilitators, many of these problems could be mitigated (see Druckman and Nelson 2003; Bächtiger and Beste 2017; Curato et al. 2017).

The recent development of tools to assess deliberative quality (such as the DQI) have made it possible to test the veracity of the criticisms more directly. The findings have been quite mixed. First, on demographic differences, there is evidence in some studies that women

[5] There were some quite significant limitations on our research design. The topics for discussion (in this case the abortion topic) were set by the government, as were details relating to timescale and deadlines, and the resourcing of the operation. The Citizens' Assembly secretariat (civil servants seconded from other duties) were responsible for recruiting the members, tendering for the facilitation process and monitoring how that operated, and the detail of how the Citizens' Assembly would be run week-by-week. The expert advisory group and the steering group were responsible for selecting and briefing the expert witnesses, agreeing the schedule for each meeting, and the members' seating arrangements. We were not privy to the details of any of this. Furthermore, our survey questions had to be cleared with the secretariat.

members can be disadvantaged either in terms of lower levels of participation in discussions, or by their arguments not being given equal consideration (Hansen 2010; Himmelroos 2017; Karpowitz et al. 2012); in her study of the Europolis DP in 2009 Gerber (2015; also Gerber et al. 2016) finds that working class and older participants experience lower levels of discourse quality; and there is evidence that less educated participants can also be disadvantaged (Himmelroos 2017). There is also some evidence of variations in deliberative quality related to attitudinal, knowledge or other cognitive differences among the members. For instance, in her Europolis study, Gerber (2015) finds that participants with strongly held conservative positions are more likely to have their views listened to. However, these differences were not found consistently across all studies; indeed, in her comprehensive study of five deliberative polls across the US, Siu finds no consistent evidence of demographic or attitudinal differences between participants having a bearing on deliberative quality. Her conclusion is that 'when citizen deliberations are well structured, the many social patterns that we might expect from inequalities in the world around us are, to some degree, negated (2017: 125; see also Dutwin 2003; Harris et al. 2020).

As we have noted, the nature of our dependent variable means that our consideration of differences between the Assembly's members is focused on their (subjective) *perceptions* of the discourse quality rather than the (supposed) *actual* (or objective) quality of discourse. It is possible to envisage two competing sets of expectations. First – and in part reflecting the 'new politics' thesis associated particularly with Dalton (e.g. Dalton et al. 2001; Dalton et al. 2004) and Norris (1999) – there are reasons to expect higher perceptions of discourse quality among those Assembly members who are better educated, more informed, and more interested in politics. These are the types of individuals who are likely to feel more confident about putting their view across, more likely to be prominent in the discussions.[6] But an alternative expectation could be the opposite. This builds on a point made by Siu in her comprehensive study of five deliberative polls, where she noted that:

> [T]he groups with more white, highly educated, and older participants did not provide as many reasons for their arguments as the groups with more nonwhite, less-educated, and younger participants. If offering reasons is the quintessential Habermasian characteristic of good deliberation, it seems that the less traditionally privileged groups in these Deliberative Polls acted in the most Habermasian manner. (Siu 2017: 125).

[6] As we do not have measures of democratic satisfaction we are not in a position to separate out the two perspectives proposed by Dalton et al (2001): the new politics perspective in which those who do well enthusiastically embrace greater engagement, and the dissatisfied democratic perspective in which the drive for greater engagement results from disenchantment with the state of democracy. This also precludes consideration of the debates surrounding the 'stealth democracy' thesis (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Neblo et al. 2010).

It is possible to envisage a scenario where the more traditionally privileged groups might feel somewhat superior and find the deliberative process (with its emphasis on equality of voice) quite frustrating. In this context, then, the higher perceptions of discourse quality may be found among those members who are less well educated, less informed and less interested in politics.[7] This leads to the following competing hypotheses:

H1a Levels of perceived discourse quality will be greater among members from traditionally more privileged groups.
H1b Levels of perceived discourse quality will be greater among members from traditionally less privileged groups.

A second area of interest is the impact of the process itself over time. The bulk of the studies of mini-publics have been of single-shot events – mini-publics that may have occurred over one or two days. The Irish Citizens' Assembly discussions on abortion occurred over the course of five weekends of meetings, allowing us to examine how the quality of the deliberation may have varied over time. Prior to the the only other cases of mini-publics extending over a long period of time were the British Columbia and Ontario citizens' assemblies and the Dutch *Burgerforum* – each of which met over the course of several months (Fournier et al. 2011). The studies of these assemblies did not consider the issue of deliberative quality as such; nevertheless, they did track members' views about the process, and this revealed high levels of satisfaction throughout: 'over the entire span of the proceedings, great proportions of individuals felt that the project was important, that they were not wasting their time, and that the next step was exciting' (Fournier et al. 2011: 47; see also Ratner 2008).

The authors put this down to a number of reasons including: the importance of the issue (in each case, this was whether to reform the electoral system), the sense the members had of their powerful role (notably in the Canadian cases where their recommendations went straight to a referendum), the well-organized nature of the operation as a deliberative mini-public, and '[a]n extensive residential context [that] provided ample opportunities to socialize, trade joyous and less happy stories about life, and understand each other's perspectives' (Fournier et al. 2011: 49). The Irish Citizens' Assembly shared most of these features, but with one significant

[7] In this regard, it is instructive to note the findings in studies of attitudes to democracy that it is among the less educated (not the more educated) that there is support for democratic innovations that move beyond representative democracy (Coffé and Michels 2014; Bengtsson and Mattila 2009; Goldberg et al. 2018).

difference, and that related to the topic being discussed – abortion, which is a much more value-laden subject matter than electoral reform. Another important point of difference is that the Irish Citizens' Assembly schedule was more tightly constrained: whereas the members of the Canadian and Dutch assemblies each met over at least 20 days, in the Irish case it was just 10 days, perhaps providing fewer opportunities to 'trade joyous … stories', and greater potential for tension and disagreement to creep in. This discussion leads to two further competing hypotheses:

H2a Levels of perceived discourse quality in the Citizens' Assembly increased over time.
H2b Levels of perceived discourse quality in the Citizens' Assembly declined over time.

Before testing these hypotheses,[8] we need to set out the characteristics of our dependent variable in more detail.

The dependent variable: perceived discourse quality

Informed by Caluwaerts and Reuchamps (2014), we elaborated a series of PDQI questions as follows:[9]

1) Overall, I believe that good arguments were brought to this weekend's discussion
2) The facilitator made sure that opposing arguments were considered
3) My fellow members respected what I had to say, even when they didn't agree
4) At my table some members tended to dominate the discussions
5) Most people had made up their minds and the discussion had little effect on them
6) I didn't always feel free to raise my views and ideas for fear of others' reactions
7) I was given ample speaking opportunities during the table discussions
8) I changed my views as a result of the table discussions
9) During the discussions, many people just stated positions without justifying them

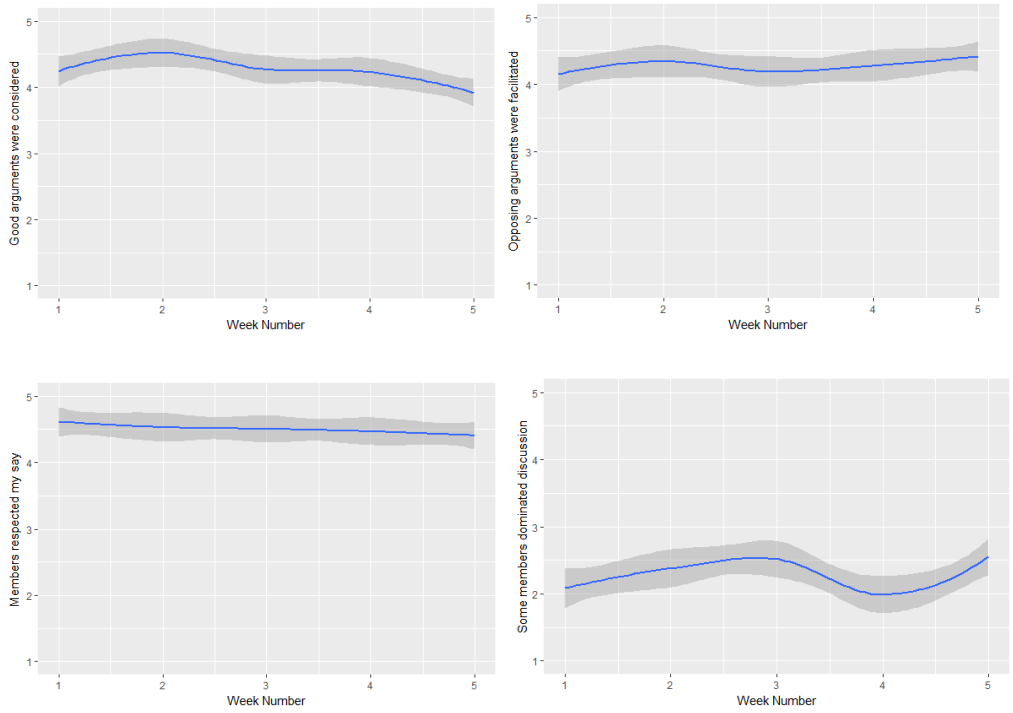
[8] A third area that we had intended to include was group-related effects (Bohner and Dickel 2011; Mutz 2002). According to some studies deliberation works best when facilitated through oppositional perspectives (e.g. Sunstein 2009: 142; Suiter et al. 2016: 208; see also Lindell et al. 2017). But it can depend on the balance between different groups. Farrar and her colleagues refer to the 'dark side of group dynamics' (2009: 616), in how minorities in deliberative settings may not be listened to, and, indeed, may feel pressured to accept the majority group norms. Some studies point to sub-optimal outcomes from mixed group interaction, with minorities feeling discouraged from participating fully (Karpowitz et al. 2012; Mutz 2002). We were unable to include group-related effects in this paper, however, due to a finding that the vast bulk of the Assembly members were in favour of the constitutional change from the start of the process (cf. Farrell et al. 2020): the tiny portion of members on the other side was too small a group to make meaningful use of.

[9] Some of our PDQI measures had to be modified because of worries of the CA Secretariat that certain items might jar with the members.

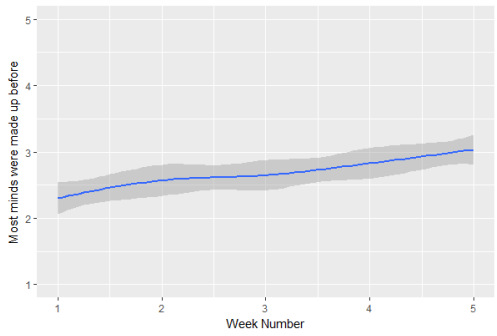
10) Most people genuinely cared about the common good rather than their personal situation or interests
11) Most people appeared willing to change their minds during the discussion

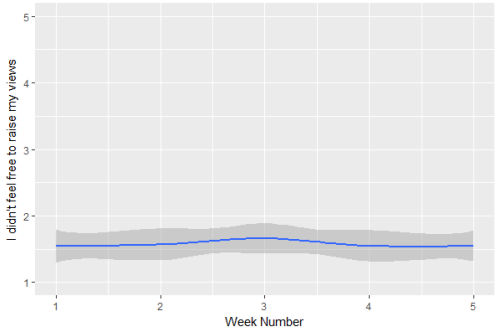
These PDQI statements were included in paper-based surveys of the Assembly members across each of the five weekends: the members were asked to mark the statements from 1-5, where 1 was strongly agree, 3 was neither agree nor disagree, and 5 was strongly disagree. Figure 1 shows the average trends for each of the 11 items over the course of the five weeks.[10] For the most part, the trends are quite stable (and quite positive), but overtime there is a notable increase in the number of members that believe that most minds were made up before. In week 4 fewer people believed that some members dominated discussions (perhaps in part reflecting the lower proportion of time given over to roundtable discussions that weekend – see Table 1).

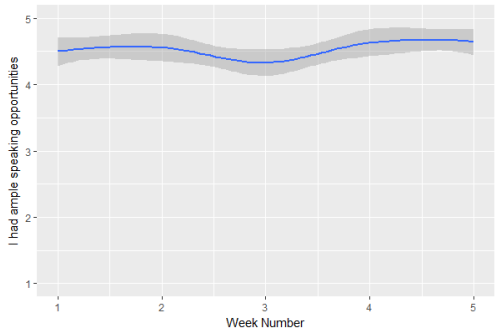
Figure 1: Over time trends on the individual PDQI items

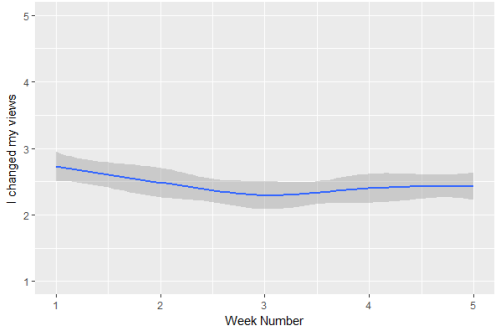


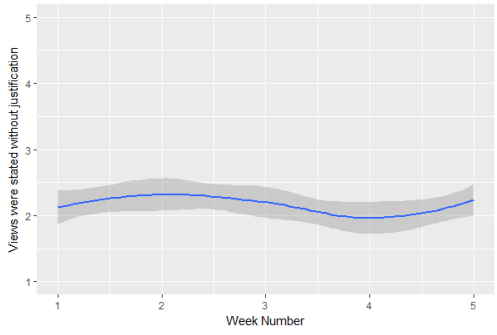
[10] Note that the scales are reversed here for ease of interpretation, that is, 1 is completely disagree and 5 is completely agree.

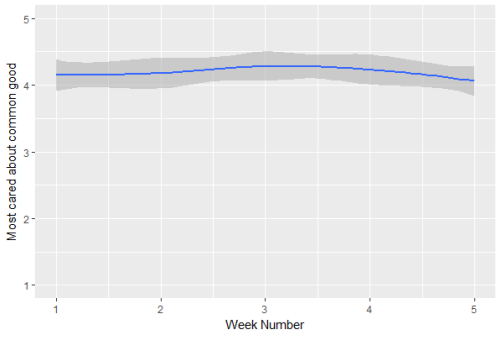


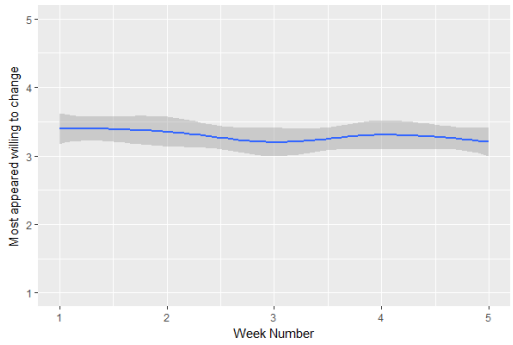












Following Caluwaerts and Reuchamps (2014) we conducted a factor analysis of the variables to tease out underlying latent factors driving PDQI. To understand whether there were latent factors we undertook a Kaiser-Meyer Olkin test, which is an estimate of the proportion of variance among our variables that might be common across them. This indicated that the data had an overall MSA ('Measure of Sampling Adequacy') value of 0.78 which is regarded as 'middling' to 'meritorious' that a factor analysis would produce factors that account for a

substantial amount of the overall variance. Our initial statistical analysis of eigenvalues and the proportion of the variance explained suggested that three factors was optimal; however, given that there was little practical difference between the second and third factors we decided on theoretical grounds to model PDQI in terms of two factors. The first factor may be described as '*access to the conversation*', centred around a conflict between 'Members respecting my say' versus 'I didn't feel free to raise my views'. This relates to the individual member's perceptions of: their access, the inclusiveness of the process to other participants, and the issue of whether some members were dominant over others. Interestingly, whether they believed that they themselves changed their views is unrelated to this factor.

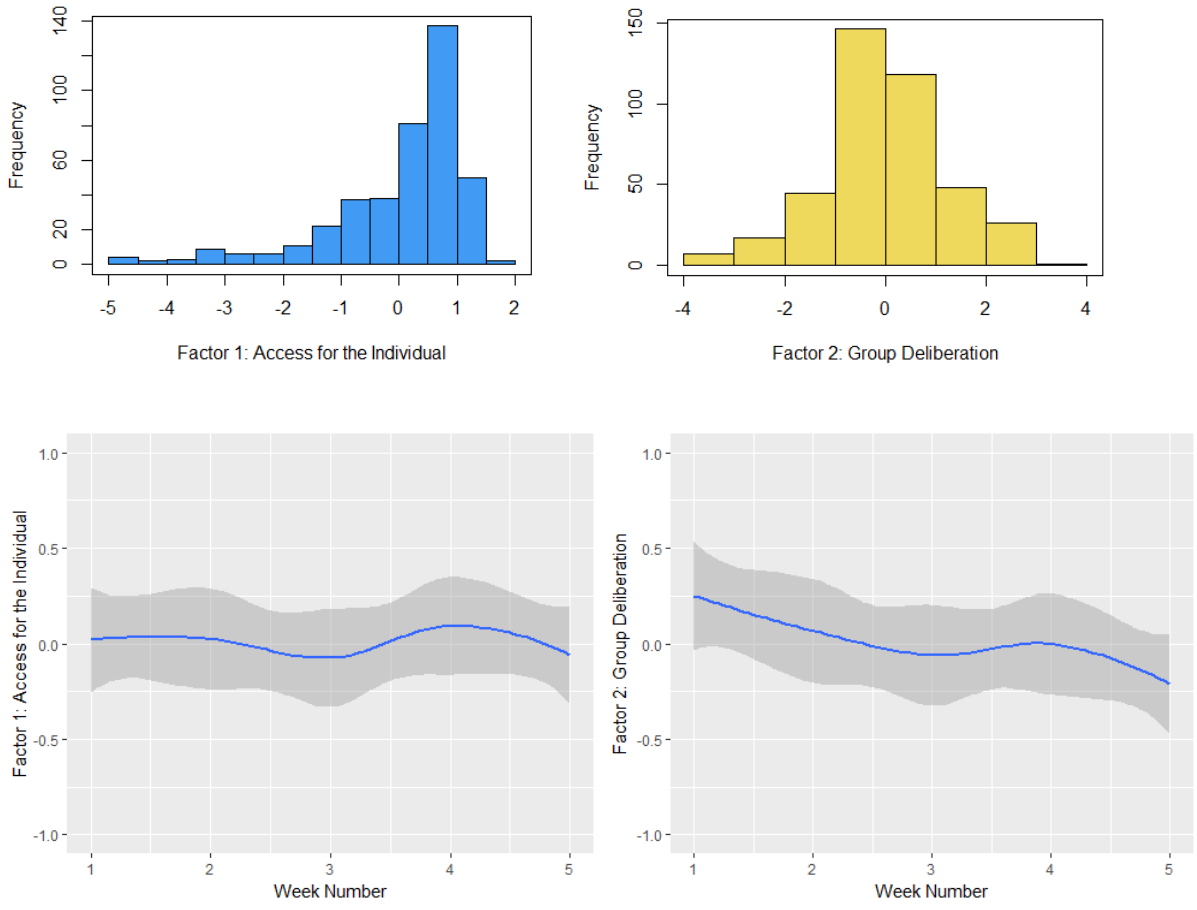
Table 2: Factor Loadings describing the composition of Individual Access and Group Deliberation

	Factor 1: Access to the conversation [Individual]	Factor 2: Perceptions of deliberation [Group]
Members respected my say	0.78	0.11
I had ample speaking opportunities	0.51	0.06
Most appeared willing to change	0.17	0.77
Good arguments were considered	0.37	0.11
Opposing arguments were facilitated	0.33	0.04
Some members dominated discussion	-0.40	-0.25
Most minds were made up before	-0.1	-0.48
I didn't feel free to raise my views	-0.41	-0.22
I changed my views	0.02	0.29
Views were stated without justification	-0.40	-0.20
Most cared about common good	0.29	0.47

The second factor may be described as the respondent's '*perceptions of deliberation*' within the group, most clearly defined as the conflict between 'Most appeared willing to change' versus 'Most minds were made up before'. It is notable that while this factor is positively related with 'I changed my views' (0.29), it is the group perception of change that is more prominent. Table 2 highlights the relationship between each question and the factors that our analysis has extracted. Highlighted in green are the factors that have a large (>0.40) positive relationship with the factor. Highlighted in orange are the variables that have a large (<-0.40) negative effect on the factor.

Caluwaerts and Reuchamps (2014) used factor analysis to identify the dominant variables for each of the two factors from which they developed an additive scale to combine related variables. This approach is valid if the factor loadings are very similar to one another. In our case the factor loadings reveal variations in the relative importance of the variables to each of the factors, with several variables both negatively and positively associated with each of the two factors to varying degrees. To maintain the relative importance of different variables we extract the weighted scores from the factor analysis using Bartlett's weighted least-squares regression. This method is preferable as it is more attuned to accounting for small sample sizes, which we have here. Both factors are scaled to have a mean of 0 and a variance of 1, revealing important differences in the distribution of estimates, as we see in Figure 2, which shows how individual access is *right-skewed*, indicating that a relatively small number of members were particularly negative about the level of access that they had to the discussion.

Figure 2: Average spread and overtime trends for Perceptions of Individual Access and Group Deliberation



As the bottom half of Figure 2 reveals, perceptions of access for the individual do not appear to change very much over the course of the Assembly aside from a minor improvement in week 4.[11] By contrast, perceptions of group deliberation appear to decline over the course of the Assembly falling from an average score of +0.25 in weekend 1 to -0.21 in weekend 5 (which was entirely devoted to the voting stage of the process by which time minds were certainly made up).

Accounting for variations in perceived discourse quality

Our first hypothesis relates to the individual characteristics of the members. In terms of demographics, we have data on their age, sex, education, region, and average family income.[12] In order to measure attitudinal and cognitive issues we use the following three variables: 'Association' (those members who claimed to have been active in women's groups, labour unions or religious associations in the past five years; we might see this as a proxy of political interest), 'Knowledge' (how knowledgeable they felt subjectively on the issues they are discussing), and attitudes towards abortion. This last item is a measure of how liberal the members were on the issue being discussed, taking account of each member's average position across weeks 3-5.[13]

The first model in Table 3 reports on how these variables impacted on our individual access PDQI measure. For this analysis, we use a multi-level model grouped at the level of the individual members: the reason for this is because our sample consists of repeated observations of the same individuals. In Table 3 of the demographic variables education is significant: those with higher levels of education tend to have a lower view of their individual access. Age is also marginally significant: those that are older have a marginally more positive view of their individual access. Abortion position is significant: the more pro-choice a member is the more they felt that they had access to the discussion at the roundtables. Knowledge is also somewhat significant: those with greater knowledge of the issues being discussed also felt that their views were being listened to. The sign and slight significance of the knowledge variable would seem consistent with H1a, but this is out-weighed by the greater significance for education which

[11] We can only speculate, but one possible explanation for this might be due to one unusual feature of that weekend (as Table 1 shows) in that there were a large number of presentations by advocates (who a member might relate to more as an 'ordinary person') and less by experts.

[12] The date of birth was used as the individual designator for each member, allowing us to track individual-level shifts over time.

[13] The Secretariat prevented us from asking any questions on abortion until the third weekend.

moves in the opposite direction, showing stronger levels of individual access PDQI among those with lower levels of education.

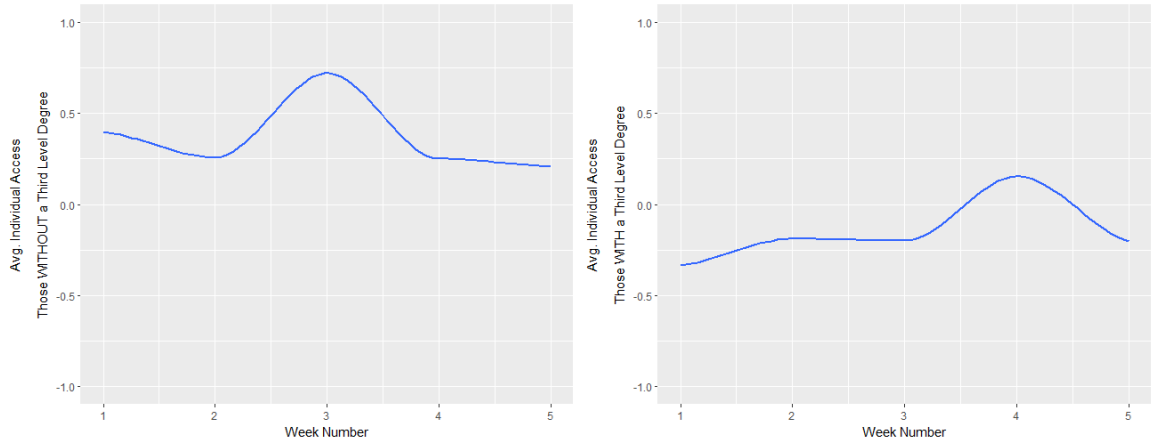
Table 3: Multi-level models accounting for variations in Individual Access PDQI

	Model 1				Model 2			
Variable	Estimate	Std. error	P-value		Estimate	Std. error	P-value	
Intercept	-1.644	0.690	0.018	*	-2.652	0.878	0.003	**
Abortion position	0.236	0.102	0.024	*	0.467	0.164	0.006	**
Association	-0.295	0.214	0.173		-0.299	0.214	0.167	
Knowledge	0.071	0.043	0.095	†	0.063	0.043	0.142	
Male	0.048	0.172	0.780		0.052	0.173	0.766	
Age	0.010	0.006	0.095	†	0.009	0.006	0.104	
Income: €40-60k	0.357	0.249	0.157		0.369	0.250	0.144	
Income: €61k+	0.036	0.203	0.859		0.038	0.203	0.851	
Income: no response	0.050	0.295	0.866		0.048	0.295	0.870	
Education: University Degree	-0.464	0.199	0.023	*	-0.468	0.199	0.022	*
Education: No Data	-0.207	0.266	0.440		-0.214	0.267	0.426	
Region: Dublin	-0.194	0.270	0.473		-0.191	0.270	0.480	
Region: Leinster	-0.327	0.255	0.203		-0.328	0.255	0.203	
Region: Munster	0.177	0.237	0.455		0.193	0.237	0.416	
Participant session					0.376	0.202	0.063	†
Par. sess. x Abr. pos.					-0.080	0.045	0.078	†
	Const.	Resid.			Const.	Resid.		
Participant ID	0.482	1.010			0.484	1.007		
Individuals	80				80			
Observations	334				334			

*** significant at the 0.001 level, ** significant at the 0.01 level, * significant at the 0.05 level, † somewhat significant at the 0.1 level

To get a clearer picture on the education finding, Figure 3 shows the average trends over time, revealing a pretty steady trend over the course of the five weekends. Those with a third level degree appear to have a lower level of PDQI with respect to individual access throughout the process, whereas those without a third level education appear to have a higher level of PDQI with respect to individual access. There are, however, two interesting 'bumps' in the trends: those with a university education felt their access was better in week 4, whereas those without felt their access was better in week 3. The latter is hard to explain, but the bump in week 4 for the more educated members is interesting given the significant drop in the proportion of (roundtable, small-group) deliberation that weekend compared to the weekends preceding it (see Table 1). What that meant was that the bulk of the members' contributions that weekend came in the form of plenary discussions in public with microphones and cameras.

Figure 3: PDQI trends over time based on levels of education

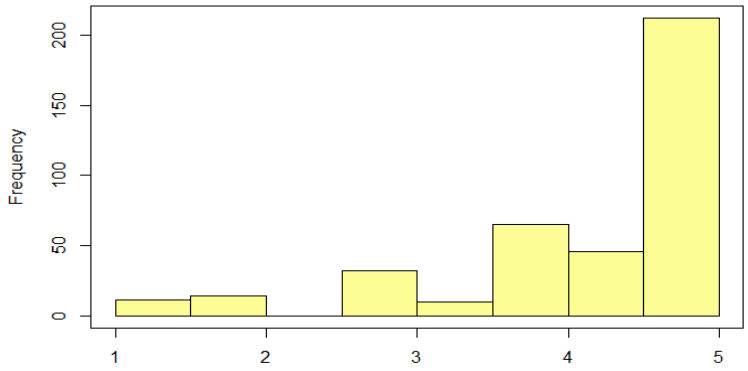


The fact that the more educated members were happier about their levels of individual access in the weekend when there was little deliberation would tend to tally with Siu's finding (2017 – cited above) that perhaps the more educated members are not quite so enamored of deliberation as less educated members. High quality, well-facilitated deliberation in small groups, which means that all members should have equal voice, may be frustrating for better educated members who feel they have more to say; by contrast, perhaps they feel less frustrated in plenary sessions where there is more scope to have a dominant voice. This would seem to lend support for H1b, suggesting that the deliberative process resonated more with less-well educated members.

Our second hypotheses relate to how views on PDQI may have trended over time. We have already seen in Figure 1 that, at least on some measures, there is evidence of declining PDQI (e.g. in terms of the proportions of members who felt that minds were already made up). The point at issue now is whether there is a consistent pattern to this in terms of our overall measures of PDQI. The second model in Table 3 is designed to tap this dimension, adding 'Participant session' (which takes account of the number of weekends that each member attended) to the demographic and attitudinal measures. We also interacted that variable with members' attitudes towards abortion: we might expect that those in the majority camp (in favour of liberalizing abortion) will feel more positive about the process generally. Participant session is somewhat significant, showing that the more sessions a member attended the more included they felt in the roundtable discussions. Abortion position is even more significant on this occasion. In both cases the relationship with the PDQI measure are positive. However, when we interact the two measures something unusual happens: the sign changes and the relationship is somewhat significant. Figure 4 gives a clue to what is at issue: it reports the spread of members' attitudes

towards abortion across the final three weeks of discussion of this topic – revealing a high degree of support for abortion in general. There is only a tiny proportion of the members who favor the status quo.[14]

Figure 4: Members' average positions on abortion



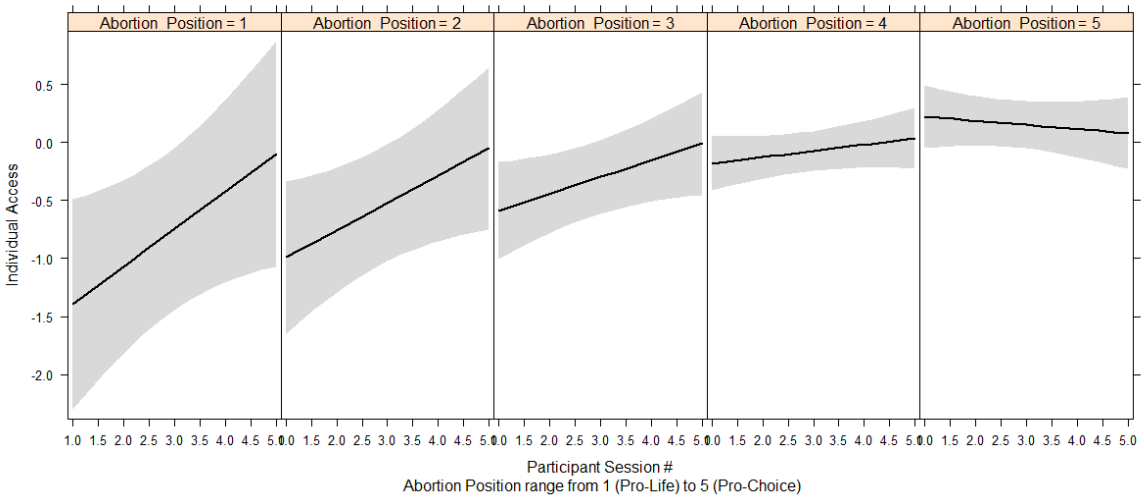
Note: The average position of members across weeks 3-5. Question wording: 'The current constitutional position on abortion should remain as it is.' 1=strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree.

The relationship between participant session and abortion position suggests an interesting underlying dynamic, which we explore further in Figure 5. This provides the effects plots on these two items over the course of the five sessions of discussion of deliberation. This shows in the first weekend a notable difference in levels of satisfaction on this individual access PDQI measure between those (as we know, few) members who were against changing the constitutional position on abortion (we refer to these as pro-life) who were far more inclined to believe that their voices were not been heard in the roundtable discussions than was the case for those in favor of changing the constitutional position (pro-choice). In the weekends that followed gradually this difference between the two sides dissipated so that by the end of the process the pro-lifers were now far more confident that their voices were being heard. It is hard to know what is driving this, but one possibility is that it reflects the impact of a well-run process of facilitation, with all members becoming more confident of being heard over time and more comfortable about the process generally (Christensen et al. 2017; Christensen and von Schoultz

[14] We were unable to gather members' views on this matter in the first two weeks: as a result, it is difficult to tell whether the strongly liberal view is an outcome of opinion shifts that occurred prior to week 3 or whether it reflected an original sample of liberals among the Citizens' Assembly members – an issue we examine elsewhere (Farrell et al. 2020).

2018). Overall, then, the evidence is consistent with H2a: levels of discourse quality increased over time, and this was particularly evident among the minority of members who were pro-life.

Figure 5: Effects plots of relationship between abortion position and individual access PDQI across weeks 1-5



Note: Average abortion position of each member across weeks 3-5; Individual access PDQI for each week.

The strongly pro-choice position of the members (at least from week 3) helps to explain the lack of any significant effects in Table 4, where we use the same variables to examine trends in our group deliberation PDQI measure. In model 1, none of the variables are significant: age comes closest to being significant falling just outside of our most borderline measure of significance (as it does in Table 3), but apart from that no other variable approaches significance. Similarly, in our second model, none of the variables are significant. If we recall (from Table 2) the items that have most impact in determining this factor relate to opinion change: 'most appeared willing to change' (0.77), and 'most minds were made up before' (-0.48). While, there is a third important item ('most cared about common good,' 0.47) that is not related to opinion change, the fact that opinion change features so prominently is significant. As we have seen, by week 3 (at least) most minds were already made up on the issue of abortion; therefore, it was quite likely that members realized this. Indeed, as we saw in Figure 1 there was a steady rise over time in the belief that most minds were made up.

Table 4: Multi-level models accounting for variations in Group Deliberation PDQI

	Model 1			Model 2		
Variable	Estimate	Std. error	P-value	Estimate	Std. error	P-value
Intercept	0.223	0.788	0.777	0.183	0.964	0.850
Abortion position	0.095	0.117	0.420	0.150	0.176	0.395
Association	-0.400	0.247	0.109	-0.396	0.248	0.114
Knowledge	-0.069	0.046	0.136	-0.062	0.046	0.182
Male	0.226	0.198	0.258	0.205	0.199	0.308
Age	-0.008	0.007	0.235	-0.007	0.007	0.309
Income: €40-60k	-0.037	0.287	0.897	-0.034	0.289	0.906
Income: €61k+	-0.257	0.233	0.274	-0.245	0.235	0.301
Income: no response	0.098	0.339	0.773	0.108	0.341	0.752
Education: University Degree	-0.073	0.230	0.752	-0.081	0.231	0.726
Education: No Data	0.386	0.306	0.211	0.375	0.308	0.227
Region: Dublin	0.294	0.309	0.342	0.259	0.311	0.405
Region: Leinster	0.329	0.293	0.265	0.301	0.294	0.311
Region: Munster	0.212	0.272	0.436	0.202	0.274	0.460
Participant session				0.000	0.205	0.999
Par. sess. x Abr. pos.				-0.022	0.046	0.632
	Const.	Resid.		Const.	Resid.	
Participant ID	0.617	1.027		0.625	0.102	
Individuals	80			80		
Observations	334			334		

*** significant at the 0.001 level, ** significant at the 0.01 level, * significant at the 0.05 level, † somewhat significant at the 0.1 level

What all this suggests is that, in this instance of a deliberative process that took place over an extended period of five meetings, the second factor may not actually be measuring perceived discourse quality, but rather the growing perception that most minds were already made up. One lesson we take from this is that perhaps some of the items that comprise the PDQI measure are more appropriate at the start of a deliberative process but – particularly in a process that continues over an extended period – their value reduces over time.

Conclusion

Abortion is a high-profile, highly emotive issue to be considered by a constitutional mini-public, and certainly so in Ireland. And yet it succeeded. On the announcement of the outcomes of the Citizens' Assembly deliberations, the media for the most part lauded it as a triumph. One

commentator referred to the recommendations of the Assembly as a 'landmark call'.[15] An editorial in the *Irish Times* referred to how the Assembly had 'performed an important service in setting out a bold agenda for reform of our abortion laws'.[16] That the Assembly's recommendations in large part were accepted by the parliament and the government (as reflected in the legislation they produced) and the referendum vote that followed so decisive speaks to the important role the Assembly played in moving the political agenda along, and helping to frame the terms of debate in the referendum campaign. Survey evidence indicates that the Assembly also had an impact on those voting in the referendum (cf. Elkink et al. 2020). In short, the deliberative process worked in terms of policy outcomes. But what about the process of deliberation itself, which has been the focus of this paper?

The survey data indicated consistently strong approval of the process from the members overall (Figure 1). Using measures of perceived discourse quality we have explored how this varied across different members and over time. There was some support for our hypotheses but only with respect to one of our measures of perceived discourse quality – individual access to the conversation (i.e. the voice of members within the process). Apart from education, the demographics of the members had no impact on perceived discourse quality, nor did attitudinal or cognitive measures (with the exception of attitudes to abortion). The manner in which education affected perceived discourse quality was consistent with H1b: it was the less-well educated who felt that they had access to the conversation; the more educated were perhaps less enthusiastic about engaging in the heavy lifting of involvement in a mini-public – the small group deliberative discussions.

The evidence on how perceived discourse quality trended over time is consistent with H2a: levels of satisfaction with the process increased at least for those from a pro-life perspective. The high salience of the issue being considered may have been a factor behind these trends. It could also be that the very small number of pro-life respondents among the members (at least by week 3) meant that there was just very little variation to measure. But another reason could simply be that it reflected a well-organised deliberative process that ensured that members felt they had equal voice, thus providing further evidence in support of Bächtiger and Beste's contention that in a well-run deliberative process 'many well-known psychological biases tend to be reduced or wither away' (2017: 111).

[15] Leah McDonald, 'Citizens' Assembly: 64% want abortion without restriction', *Irish Daily Mail.* 24 April 2017.
[16] 'Putting it up to the politicians', *Irish Times.* 25 April 2017.

List of References

Bächtiger, André and John Parkinson. 2019. *Mapping and Measuring Deliberation: Towards a New Deliberative Quality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bächtiger, André and Simon Beste. 2017. Deliberative citizens, (non)deliberative politicians: A rejoinder, *Daedalus.* 146: 196-18.

Bächtiger, André, Maija Setälä, Kimmo Grönlund. 2014. Towards a new era of deliberative mini-publics, in Kimmo Grönlund, André Bächtiger, Maija Setälä (eds), *Deliberative mini-publics: Involving citizens in the democratic process.* Colchester, Essex: ECPR Press.

Bächtiger, André, M. Spörndli, Marco Steenbergen, Jürg Steiner, 2007. Deliberation in legislatures: Antecedents and outcomes, in S. W. Rosenberg (ed.), *Deliberation, participation and democracy: Can the people govern?* Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bengtsson, Åsa and Mikko Mattila. 2009. Direct democracy and its critics: Support for direct democracy and 'stealth' democracy in Finland, *West European Politics.* 32: 1031-48.

Black, L., Burkhalter, S., Gastil, J. and Stromer-Galley, J. 2011. Methods for analyzing and measuring group deliberation, in E. Bucy and R.L. Holbert (eds.), *The Sourcebook of Political Communication Research*. New York: Routledge, pp. 323–346.

Bohner, Gerd and Nina Dickel. 2011. Attitudes and Attitude Change. *Annual Review of Psychology* 62: 391–417.

Caluwaerts, Didier. 2012. *Confrontation and communication: Deliberative democracy in divided Belgium.* Bern: Peter Lang Publishers.

Caluwaerts, Didier and Min Reuchamps. 2014. Does inter-group deliberation foster inter-group appreciation? Evidence form two experiments in Belgium, *Politics.* 34: 101-15.

Christensen, Henrik, Staffan Himmelroos and Kimmo Grönlund. 2017. Does deliberation breed an appetite for discursive participation? Assessing the impact of first-hand experience, *Political Studies.* 65: 64-83.

Christensen, Henrik and Åsa von Schoultz. 2018. Ideology and deliberation: An analysis of public support for deliberative practices in Finland, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research.* doi/10.1093/ijpor/edx022/4841890 (accessed 16 August 2018)

Coffé, Hilde and Ank Michels. 2014. Education and support for representative, direct and stealth democracy. *Electoral Studies*. 35: 1-11.

Curato, Nicole, John S. Dryzek, Selen, A, Ercan, Carolyn, Hendriks and Simon Niemeyer. 2017. Twelve key findings in deliberative democracy research. *Daedalus.* 146: 28-38.

Dalton, Russell, Wilhelm Bürklin and Andrew Drummond. 2001. Public opinion and direct democracy. *Journal of Democracy*. 12: 141-53.

Dalton, Russell, Susan Scarrow and Bruce Cain. 2004. Advanced democracies and the new politics. *Journal of Democracy*. 15: 124-38.

Druckman, James N., and Kjersten R. Nelson. 2003. Framing and deliberation: How citizens' conversations limit elite influence, *American Journal of Political Science*. 47: 729-45.

Dutwin, David. 2003. The character of deliberation: Equality, argument and the formation of public opinion, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research.* 15: 239-64.

Elkink, Johan, David Farrell, Sofie Marien, Theresa Reidy, Jane Suiter. 2020. The death of conservative Ireland? The 2018 abortion referendum, *Electoral Studies.* 65.

Farrar, Cynthia, Donald Green, Jennifer Green, David Nickerson, Steven Shewfelt. 2009. Does discussion group composition affect policy preferences? Results from three randomized experiments, *Political Psychology.* 30: 615-47.

Farrell, David, Eoin O'Malley and Jane Suiter. 2013. Deliberative democracy in action Irish-style: the 2011 *We the Citizens* pilot citizens' assembly, *Irish Political Studies* 28: 99-113.

Farrell, David, Jane Suiter, Clodagh Harris. 2019. 'Systematizing' constitutional deliberation: The 2016-18 citizens' assembly in Ireland, *Irish Political Studies.* 34: 113-23.

Farrell, David, Jane Suiter, Kevin Cunningham, Clodagh Harris. 2020. When mini-publics and maxi-publics coincide: Ireland's national debate on abortion, *Representation* (online first).

Fishkin, James S. 2009. *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Fournier, Patrick, Henk van der Kolk, R. Kenneth Carty, André Blais, Jonathan Rose. 2011. *When citizens decide: Lessons from Citizen Assemblies on Electoral Reform.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gerber, Marlène. 2015. Equal partners in dialogue? Participation equality in a transnational deliberative poll (Europolis), *Political Studies.* 63: 110-30.

Gerber, Marlène. André Bächtiger, Susumu Shikano, Simon Reber, Samuel Rohr. 2016. Deliberative abilities and influence in a transnational deliberative poll (EuroPolis), *British Journal of Political Science.* 2016: 1-26.

Goldberg, Saskia, Dominik Wyss, and André Bächtiger. 2019. Democratic preferences and deliberation: A survey experiment with German citizens, presented at the third Deliberative Democracy Summer School, Turku, June.

Hansen, K. M. 2010. The Equality Paradox of Deliberative Democracy: A Review of Theoretical

Concepts and Empirical Findings, in M. R. Wolf, L. Morales and K. Ikeda (eds), *Political Discussions in Modern Democracies*. New York: Routledge, pp. 26–43.

Harris, Clodagh, David Farrell, Jane Suiter, Mary Brennan. 2020. Women's voices in a deliberative assembly: An analysis of gender rates of participation in Ireland's Convention on the Constitution, 2012-14, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*. (online first).

Hibbing, J. R. and E. Theiss-Morse. 2002. *Stealth democracy: Americans' beliefs about how government should work.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Himmelroos, Staffan. 2017. Discourse quality in deliberative citizen forums: A comparison of four deliberative mini-publics, *Journal of Public Deliberation.* 13(1): article 3.

Holzinger, Katharina. 2004. Bargaining through arguing: An empirical analysis based on speech act theory, *Political Communication*. 21:195-222.

Isernia, P. and James Fishkin. 2014. The Europolis deliberative poll. *European Union Politics.* 15: 311–27.

Karpowitz, Christopher, Tali Mendelberg, Lee Shaker. 2012. Gender inequality in deliberative participation, *American Political Science Review.* 106: 533-47.

Lindell, Marina, André Bächtiger, Kimmo Grönlund, Kaisa Herne, Maija Setälä, Dominik Wyss. 2017. What drives the polarisation and moderation of opinions? Evidence from a Finnish citizen deliberation experiment on immigration, *European Journal of Political Research.* 56: 23-45.

Lupia, Arthur and Anne Norton. 2017. Inequality is always in the room: Language and power in deliberative democracy, *Daedalus*. 146: 64-76.

Mutz, Diana. 2002. The consequences of cross-cutting networks for political participation, *American Journal of Political Science.* 46: 838-55.

Neblo, Michael, Kevin Esterling, Ryan Kennedy, David Lazer, Anand Sokhey. 2010. Who wants to deliberate – and why? *American Political Science Review.* 104: 566-83.

Norris, Pippa. 1999. *Critical citizens: Global support for democratic governance.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ratner, R. S. 2008. Communicative rationality in the Citizens' Assembly and referendum process, in Mark Warren and Hilary Pearse (eds), *Designing deliberative democracy: The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rosenberg, Shawn. 2014. Citizen competence and the psychology of deliberation, in Stephen Elstub and Peter McLaverty (eds), *Deliberative democracy: Issues and cases.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Ryfe, David. 2005. Does deliberative democracy work? *Annual Review of Political Science.* 8: 49-71.

Sanders, Lynn. 1997. Against deliberation, *Political Theory.* 25: 347-76.

Setälä, Maijan and K. Herne. 2014. Normative Theory and Experimental Research in the Study of Deliberative Mini-Publics, in Kimmo Grönlund, André Bächtiger, Maija Setälä (eds), *Deliberative mini-publics: Involving citizens in the democratic process.* Colchester, Essex: ECPR Press.

Siu, Alice. 2017. Deliberation and the challenge of inequality, *Daedalus*. 146: 119-28.

Spörndli, M. 2003. Discourse quality and political decisions: An empirical analysis of debates in the German Conference Committee, Discussion Paper, WZB Social Science Research Centre Berlin.

Steenbergen, Marco, André Bächtiger, Markus Spörndli and Jürg Steiner. 2003. Measuring political deliberation: A discourse quality index. *Comparative European Politics.* 1: 21-48.

Steiner, J., André Bächtiger, M. Sporndli and M. Steenbergen. 2004. *Deliberative Politics in Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Steiner, J. 2012. *The Foundations of Deliberative Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Stromer-Galley, J. 2007. Measuring Deliberation's Content: A Coding Scheme. *Journal of Public Deliberation.* 3(1).

Suiter, Jane, David Farrell and Eoin O'Malley. 2016. When do deliberative citizens change their opinions? Evidence from the Irish Citizens' Assembly, *International Political Science Review.* 37: 198-212.

Sunstein, Caas R. 2009. *Going to extremes: how like minds unite and divide* New York: Oxford University Press.