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# Assessing the impact of deliberation and information on opinion change: a quasi-experiment in public deliberation

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**ABSTRACT** Deliberative democracy has become fashionable for many and it has been used in some places to solve real-world policy problems. However measuring the 'success' of deliberative democracy is not clearly achievable. For most 'success' is measured in terms of opinion change, but these are only rarely measured against control groups, and in particular there is no way of knowing if the opinion change took place because of the deliberation or because of information they received through the deliberation process. Exercises in deliberation seem to represent one big treatment. But we would want to separate out the component parts of the treatment. This paper outlines the results of an experiment in which deliberation took place in a pilot Citizens' Assembly in Ireland. As part of this we measured the impact using pre and post-test controls, including a control group given the information the CA participants received, but without the deliberation. The results of the experiment reveal that there is a deliberation effect separate to the information effect.

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## **Introduction: deliberation and opinion change**

When people form or change opinions they are widely thought to do so on the basis of information and predispositions, and the interaction of the two (Zaller 1992). Other people's opinions could matter but only insofar as they introduce new information or perhaps if their superior cognitive capacity enables information to become meaningful. However there is little empirical support for the model of atomised humans weighting new pieces of information in order to update their opinions.

When we think about how public opinion is formed it is not as the result of people individually and rationally evaluating a problem, weighing the pros and cons of different proposals, and establishing their preferred position. Ordinary people deliberate all the time – at the kitchen table, in the pub, at work – about public issues. When new information is given to us, many of us will deal with it in different ways, but often it is in how others react to the information that it becomes important. Information or events are interpreted for us and certain interpretations or 'spin' take over. Therefore opinion formation, rather than being an individualistic exercise, is more likely the conscious and subconscious collective behaviour of society as a result of deliberation.

Some theories of public opinion formation (for instance the Spiral of Silence) support the idea that people's interactions are important. These are directly concerned with how people perceive others' opinions and how those opinions affect their own opinions. In this way opinion formation is dynamic and people's exchanges of views are as important as exchanges of information. The act of deliberation with others then should be at least as important as any new information when forming opinions or choosing, say, how to vote on a particular issue.

Testing how people form opinions in a dynamic setting is difficult, although the field has made some progress recently with advances in communication and social network analysis (Huckfeldt 2007). These allow us look at connections but often not the nature of the contact between these connected individuals. Other forms of studying opinion change, even panel studies, do not allow the investigator to look at exactly what elements might cause opinion change. We use an experiment in deliberative democracy to see if we can better understand the impact of information and deliberative contact between individuals on opinion formation and change.

Deliberation is regarded as important for democratic decision making, with many scholars arguing that decisions made after deliberation are 'better'. Deliberative democracy is then for many a normative ideal but possibly also an empirically testable theory. But even for those for whom it is a normative ideal, this is based on some assumptions of what deliberation does. If we find that deliberation does or does not in fact achieve these goals support for deliberative democracy as a way to make decisions might change.

On the face of it, there is little anyone could argue against deliberation. Most contemporary political theorists argue that where decision-makers deliberate they are likely to make better decisions because they subject proposals to much greater scrutiny. Where decision makers deliberate they reveal their positions to one another and they should through collective discussion pool their information and thus increase the informational level for each member. This is thought to enrich the quality of democracy. This assumes certain things about the participants, not least that they are reasonable, and that they have sufficient knowledge and capacity to deliberate. These assumptions are not usually a problem in representative democracy, where those elected by their peers to deliberate and decide on the public's behalf are likely to be the elite in society. But whether ordinary citizens are, or even need to be, well-informed is a matter of some debate (Lupia and McCubbins 1998).

The central claim of deliberative democratic theorists that deliberation leads us to make *better* decisions is a bold one, but also one that is difficult to test as whether one decision is better than another is essentially subjective. Looking at opinion or preference change is less so. Deliberative theorists also expect to see that there will be a greater degree of change as a result of good deliberation (itself a subject of some controversy). One problem for those interested in testing the impact of deliberation on people is that we do not know exactly what parts of it are important. Empirical studies rarely distinguish between deliberation and information; For instance, Fishkin et al. (2000: 660) find that 'after a weekend of information and discussion....changes in opinion have often been substantial'.

This short quote encapsulates two problems with deliberative democracy as a theory. One is the problem of causal inference. As Mutz notes a 'difficulty with

drawing causal inference about the power of deliberation from deliberative polling is that several independent variables are manipulated at the same time' (Mutz 2006: 59). A second problem is the way deliberative theorists often regard opinion change as evidence that deliberation works. Of course change might be in the *wrong* direction; they could move in the direction of making a *worse* decision.

In this paper we report the results of an exercise in deliberation that took place in Ireland in 2011. As part of this we explore the results of a quasi-experiment in which we separate out the effect of information from the impact of deliberation on opinion change. As such we regard this research as having a contribution to make in two distinct literatures, that on opinion formation and that on deliberative democracy. We subjected different groups to different treatments, one group received just information, whereas the other received both information and the opportunity to deliberate with other randomly selected citizens. We found that opinion change was much more substantial among the group who had the information and deliberated, whereas those with just the information changed very little. This suggests that how people interact with others and discuss political issues is more important in people's opinion formation than merely the information they receive.

The paper sets out the arguments for the effects of deliberation generally, and then more specifically at the literature on information and deliberation. We then set out how we seek to test our argument that deliberation is important. This describes in detail the operation of an exercise in deliberation. We then provide the results and conclude with a discussion of their implications.

### **Deliberation and its effects on opinion**

When we think now about deliberative democracy, we often now associate it with mini-publics – ordinary people deliberating on some issue of public importance. But there is no reason why it should be restricted to ordinary people and Steiner et al. (2005) have shown how we can study deliberation in elites. The democratic aspect to deliberative democracy implies that it should be undertaken in order to make a decision. We can think of a number of types of ways of making decisions by groups of people. Elster (1998: 5) names them as arguing, bargaining, and preference aggregation, where arguing is deliberation in which there is an exchange of views

and an exchange of information. Participants seek to convince others of the rightness of their opinions. Decision-making through bargaining sees the power of each actor comes to the fore. Preference aggregation is decision-making as the result of a vote. In real-world politics all three of these decision making forms are used.

And so deliberative democracy is far more common than we usually assume. Parliaments and cabinets, we hope, engage in deliberation all the time. Policy making without argument seems ridiculous – but there might be questions as to whether the positions put in argument are sincere or strategic. Then is the deliberation genuine in the sense that the participants' minds can be changed, or is modern politics so well-scripted that no real debate takes place? The sincerity and genuineness of the deliberation is often questioned in elite politics. Many actors have incentives not to be sincere. Professional politicians seek re-election above most other goals, experts have interests in certain outcomes, lobbyists have financial interests, media may have an agenda that could make these actors not best placed to make decisions for the common good. The public seem not to trust politicians to make decisions for them at times. An illustration of this is the recent rejection of a proposal to empower the Irish parliament to conduct public inquiries; though most voters claimed to have wanted a stronger parliament, many did not trust their elected representatives with strong powers of inquiry and the proposal was rejected (see Marsh, Suiter, and Reidy 2012).

It is thought that ordinary citizens affected by a decision, while they might have interests are much less likely to game a discussion and decision, and so for that reason we are now much more likely to think of deliberative democracy as a mini-public forum. It is thought to be good because people are more equal in such forums. Depending on the nature of the deliberation, people might be more public motivated rather than interest motivated. So we would expect to see that the discourse becomes public-spirited, more co-operative, more accommodating, more constructive and that within the small group involved there is a broader involvement in discussion than normally happens in society. Whether ordinary people are more likely to be earnest and non-strategic in their deliberation and decision making is an empirical question. One might reasonably say that a problem with involving ordinary people is that they may have incoherent, ignorant, biased, factually incorrect, partial

or inconsistent opinions. Supporters of deliberation argue that these problems, if they exist, might be alleviated by deliberation. These and many other claims for what deliberation does that can be tested empirically.

We might also expect that there is greater trust in decision, the decision making system and that decisions made in such a way have greater legitimacy. For Fishkin (2009: 103-5) there is an expectation that there will be changes in policy attitudes and/ or vote intentions. There are many reviews of the theoretical literature on deliberation, and one list of the empirical expectations of the theory (Delli Carpini, Lomax Cook, and Jacobs 2004: 320) sets out the following:

1. More engaged and active citizens
2. More tolerant citizens, who appreciate the value of other points of view
3. Citizens will be better able to understand and argue for their own preferences
4. Less adversarial approach to political debates
5. More faith in the democratic process
6. Decisions will be more considered
7. Decisions might be more consensual

Chambers (2003: 318) argues 'a central tenet of all deliberative theory is that deliberation can change minds and transform opinions.... [M]any believe that deliberation under the right conditions will have a tendency to broaden perspectives, [and] promote tolerance and understanding between groups.' This idea that minds are changed, we have seen is of critical importance to many advocates of deliberative democracy. But how it changes minds and opinions is not as clear.

### **Deliberation and information**

One of the most useful ways of thinking how deliberation of mini-publics works in practice is that of the jury system. Juries take (semi) randomly selected groups and ask them to make a binding decision that has consequences for the rest of society. It is also interesting in how juries treat information. Juries are disbarred from deliberating until all the evidence (information) has been given them. Therefore the information and deliberation are somewhat separate. In order to measure the impact

of deliberation as compared to that of information we might want to measure the opinions of jurors after the evidence has been presented and then before deliberation and then after deliberation in the jury room. Of course this may not perfectly measure the impact of deliberation as there is some incentive for jurors to vote strategically in the jury room – they might vote with the majority view in order to be allowed go home.

But despite Mutz's (2006: 59) reasonable plea to separate out the treatments in deliberative democracy, deliberation and information cannot be separated out completely. It is difficult to conceive of the deliberation in the jury room being of use without the evidence. For Fishkin (1995: 41) the quality of the discussion and information are linked, as he argues, 'when information that would be required understand the force of claim is absent, inter alia, then the process is less deliberative'.

And deliberation might also provoke new information. Skyrms' (1990) idea of dynamic deliberation sums up the issue of deliberation and information. Deliberation will often generate new information which then feeds back into the deliberative process. Information on its own, without deliberation will not have this dynamic effect. So we should expect that deliberation will generate more change than where information alone is available.

But the nature of the impact of information and deliberation is not clear from the empirical literature. Gaertner et al. (1999) found that while discussion increased consensus, this may have been the result of a simple exchange of information. Other research suggests that this simple exchange of information may not even occur. Experimental research on candidate evaluations by Stasser and Titus (1985) found that participants failed to share information where deliberative theorists might have expected. Goodin and Niemeyer (2003) report the results of a citizens' jury in which they found that the information phase was most important. They re-questioned each of the 12 jury members between receiving evidence and starting the public discussion. This, they argue, shows that deliberation starts with the consideration of new information, even in people's heads.



So does the deliberation matter or is it that the participants are more interested (by virtue of a level of self-selection), more exposed to information, the framing of the questions, or the choice of experts?

### **The test**

There are some concerns as to whether deliberative democracy theory is empirically testable (see Mutz 2008). Many normative theorists when confronted with evidence that exercises in deliberative democracy do not produce the results expected by them can simply retort that then the exercise must not have been conducted properly, it was somehow not 'deliberative' enough, arguably rendering the theory unfalsifiable.

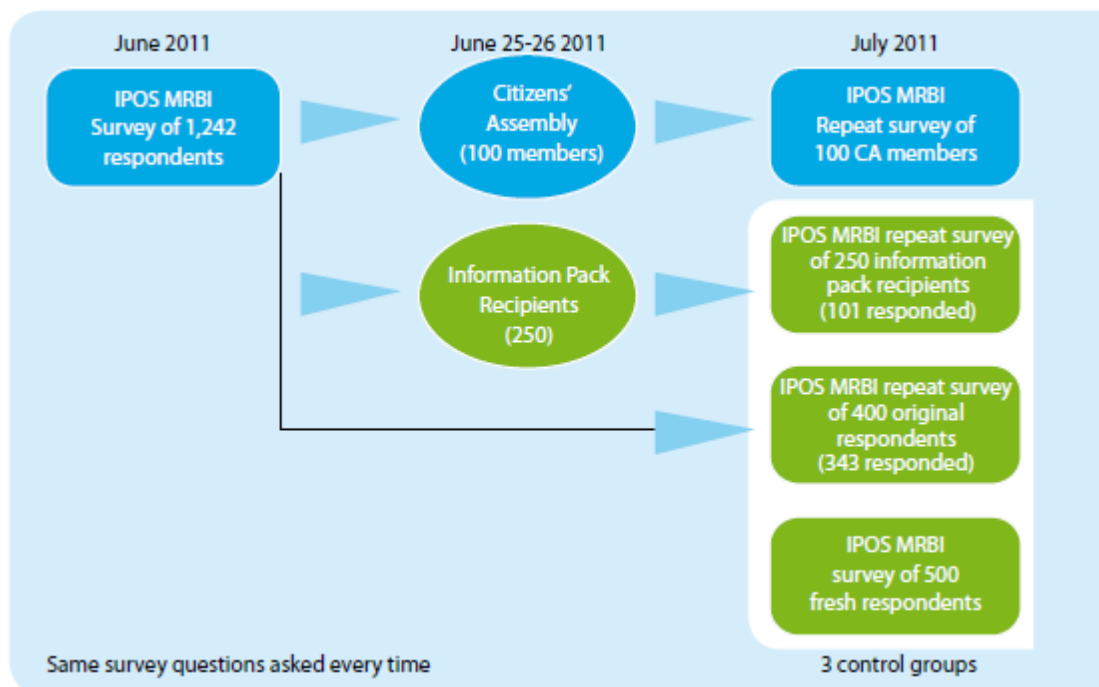
But there are also problems with the way some empirical testing is carried out. Most specifically what concerns us here is the way in which deliberation is 'one grand treatment' (Luskin, Fishkin, and Jowell 2002) where no attempt is made to separate out information, deliberation, or treatment effects. Deliberative polling carried out and reported by Fishkin (2009) include no control groups or even tests for statistical significance. Karpowitz and Mendelberg (2011) argue that an experimental approach to citizen deliberation will be of most use for answering questions on the relative impact of treatments in deliberative democracy.

We can find few examples of where the treatments are separated out adequately. Price and Capella (2005, 2007) do so for an online discussion forum, which finds that exposure to information cannot explain all aspects of opinion change. But this research had no control groups. In Denmark on the question of Euro membership Andersen and Hansen (2007) found that change was greater in the time between the recruitment interview and the one after receiving the briefing materials three weeks later, than that change between the interviews just before and after the deliberative weekend. There were some problems with this research not least the impact of different modes of delivering the questionnaires and the absence of control groups.

In our test we attempt to separate out some of the treatments by using a quasi-experimental design (see Figure 1) in which the information given to those involved in the deliberation is also given to another treatment group who just receive that

information and a further control group who receive no treatment beyond the two interviews. Exercises in deliberation are often criticised for their non-natural settings. This is hardly how people deliberate in everyday life. There are of course two elements to deliberative democracy. The deliberative aspect has been discussed, but there is also a democratic aspect. In a democracy there is an assumption that a group comes to a single decision binding on others within the group. Ours is also a non-natural setting; But we think that it has some external validity for deliberation in natural settings and can tell us something about the impact of information and deliberation. The WtC exercise was not decision-oriented; we did not require groups to agree a decision. So this possibly tells us more about opinion change and deliberation more generally.

Figure 1: recruitment and surveys



*We the Citizens* (WtC) was a pilot of a constitutional convention to demonstrate how such a convention might operate and learn about how to operate one properly. *We the Citizens* started with a fully randomised national survey carried out by phone using random digit dialling of 1200 people (for a full description of this see Farrell, Suiter & O'Malley 2012). Having completed the survey these were asked if they would be interested in taking part in a weekend of deliberation on some of the topics. 45 percent of people initially indicated an interest, but this dropped to below 30

percent when a specific weekend was mentioned. Of the 30 percent (360 people) we invited 160 people to take part in the WtC weekend. Of these invitees, most accepted and turned up, although some indicated that they now could not make it or did not show up. In total 100 turned up and took part in the weekend although two left before it had finished. Figure 2 shows that this group was broadly representative of the Irish population in terms of key demographic characteristics. In other terms, such as interest in politics the group, being partially self-selected (hence ours being a quasi-experiment rather than a fully randomised experiment), the WtC group had more interest in politics than the rest of the population, but their opinions on the substantive issues did not differ markedly.

*Figure 2: Demographic characteristics of WtC group and population*

<b>GENDER</b>	Citizens' Assembly %	Population %
Men	50	49.5*
Women	50	50.5*

<b>REGION</b>	Citizens' Assembly %	Population %
Dublin	34	28
Munster	25	28
Leinster	22	26
Connaught / Ulster	19	18

<b>AGE GROUPINGS</b>	Citizens' Assembly %	Population %
18-24	6	12
23-34	20	23
35-44	19	20
45-54	18	16
55-64	19	14
65+	18	16

<b>SOCIAL CLASS</b>	Citizens' Assembly %	Population %
AB	18	13
C1	30	27
C2	23	23
DE	23	27
F1-F2	6	7

\*CSO preliminary figures for 2011

The 160 invitees were given informational materials in advance of the meeting on all aspects of the discussions that were to take place. The agenda for the CA was determined by the survey responses, resulting in all of Saturday being devoted to political reform-related issues and Sunday morning to taxation vs. spending. Expert

witnesses were recruited to draft brief position papers, setting out both sides of the argument in question. These papers were circulated to the CA members in advance.

The CA weekend was organized into three discrete sessions as follows:

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

The 100 CA members were distributed around the hall in tables of eight, with a trained facilitator and note-taker at each table. At the start of each session the expert witness (one for each of the Saturday sessions, two for the Sunday session) gave a brief presentation summarizing their main points. There then followed an initial period of deliberation at each table, with the experts on hand to provide answers of fact or detail as required. Once these discussions concluded there was a brief round of plenary discussion, the objective being to give CA members an opportunity to hear about the tenor of discussions generally. The tables were then asked to complete another round of deliberations at the end of which they could make a series of recommendations.

Another group of 250 (see Figure 1) who had indicated an interest in the deliberative weekend, but had indicated that for practical reasons they could not commit to taking part agreed to receive some informational materials about some of the questions that were being discussed at the weekend. 101 of these were then reinterviewed. The information they received related to just one of the sessions, on a separate topic to the other two sessions during the deliberative weekend. This was so as not to overload them with information making them less likely to read and respond in the next survey. It also ensured that we were comparing like-with-like, as the other session would have been so closely connected that one's presence in the linked session may have contaminated the session under investigation. The materials the

information-only group received on this topic were the same as those received by the deliberative treatment group. There is of course the possibility that those who received only the information did not read the materials. However given their willingness to agree to receive them and then be reinterviewed after having received them we consider it likely that those who responded did read the information we sent them.

Two further control groups were also interviewed. One group of 400 was interviewed twice, but with no treatment and a second group of 500 was just interviewed after the deliberative weekend. This latter group we do not use here, but an analysis of it compared to the first set of interviews shows that there was no other event which might have caused a large shift in opinion between the first and second interviews. All interviews took place by phone using random-digit dialling in the first instance where certain quotas related to gender, age and region were to be met. The interviewing was carried out by tnsMRBI a well-established market research company in Ireland.

## **The results**

In this experiment we expect to see that deliberation is a more important determinant of opinion change than information. This would be consistent with many theories of opinion change which emphasise the impact of other people's opinions in forming one's own. We also see that there is an expectation that deliberation will generate more information, and so again should be more powerful. The paper also speaks to the literature on deliberative democracy and whether deliberation works. One of the central aspects of deliberation is that it might cause opinion change. But we have seen deliberative democratic theorists also have expectations on participants' efficacy and interest in politics. There are other expectations that deliberation should lead to more tolerance and more consensus-oriented in groups. The WtC experiment allowed us to test these claims empirically.

*Efficacy & Interest:* For interest in politics the group that chose to go on the deliberative weekend, unsurprisingly was much more interested in politics than the other groups (mean 5.2 on a 1-7 scale, n=97). Those who expressed an interest in attending but said they could not attend had initially more interest (4.65, n=101) than

the control group (4.2, n=353). After the treatments of information and deliberation, the information-only group's interest in politics fell to 4.5, though the drop is not statistically significant and the control group remained the same. The interest in politics for the group that received both information and deliberation treatments rose to 5.7 (one tailed t-test,  $p=0.0017$ ) as deliberative theorists would expect to see.

People's enjoyment of discussing political issues sees similar results. The information and deliberation treatment group increase their self-declared enjoyment of discussing politics with others (5.2 to 5.64,  $p=0.005$ ), whereas the information only group see a fall in their interest (4.7 to 4.48,  $p=0.06$ ). Here the control group report a rise in this measure (4.16 to 4.32,  $p=0.04$ ). On a subjective knowledge question ("I think I am better informed about politics and government than most people") there is no significant movement for any of the groups. On a subjective political efficacy question the deliberative treatment group starts with a lower subjective efficacy than the other groups but moves significantly in the direction we expect 4.43 to 4.01,  $p=0.048$ ), whereas neither other group moves significantly. The final question on interest in political issues, asked respondents their willingness to get more involved in political issues than they currently are. Perhaps unsurprisingly the group that volunteered for the deliberative weekend started off more willing 4.53 (compared to 3.90 and 3.10 for the information only and control groups) and became much more willing (5.74,  $p>0.0001$ ) whereas there was just random movement in the other groups.

*Opinion Change:* On the questions of efficacy and attitudes to politics we would not expect that the information treatment would be very different from the control group. However in those areas that the information was directly pertinent, this should provide a more robust test of whether deliberation or information is more important in opinion formation and change. The information received by each participant in the deliberative weekend and by the group of 101 people who received the information and were reinterviewed, related to the economy and in particular how Ireland should close its budget deficit. On these issues the deliberative treatment group's members were not much different to the other groups. For instance 58 percent of the deliberative treatment group were opposed to the introduction of a property tax compared to 53 and 59 percent in the other groups. This fell to 40 percent for the deliberative group ( $p=0.0007$ ) whereas the other two groups saw no significant

change. The number in favour of introducing water charges went from 62 percent to almost 85 percent ( $p < 0.0001$ ). It rose slightly among the control group 49 percent to 54 percent,  $p = 0.03$ ), but there was no movement among the information only group.

On the sale of state assets all three groups started off in broadly similar places (49, 53 and 50 percent opposed), but after the treatments on the deliberative group saw any significant change. 91 percent opposed after the treatment compared to 49 and 46 for the other two groups. This is despite the fact that the information-only control group received the same information from the same experts as the deliberative group. A similar pattern continues on the other questions; on the reintroduction of students' fees, though starting with broadly similar views, the deliberating group shifted opinion significantly.

How Ireland should react to the economic crisis was asked in more general terms as well: whether the country should concentrate on increasing taxes or cutting spending to address the fiscal deficit. Initially 66 percent of the deliberation group supported cutting spending, similar to the 61 and 63 percent in the information-only and control groups. The group subjected to deliberation increased its support for cutting spending to 74 percent ( $p = 0.0364$ ). The other two groups support for cutting spending also rose but by less, to 66 and 68 percent respectively. One of the claimed advantages of deliberation is that subjects have more consistent or more realistic attitudes to the choices facing policy makers. We often see ordinary people are opposed to cutting spending but equally opposed to raising taxes. If deliberation does make people's views more consistent we should see that those who are more opposed to cutting spending should be more in favour of increasing taxes. The three groups opposed increasing taxes: 64, 61 and 69 percent respectively. After deliberation this fell significantly among the deliberation group (to 49 percent,  $p = 0.0075$ ) but remained stable with the other two groups. So yes, the group subject to deliberation is more likely to move to a more consistent position.

These results strongly indicate that deliberation is more important in opinion change than just information. However this may not be necessarily the case. Deliberation within a group, we would expect would have the same effect on individuals in the group, whereas information might have differing effects on different people. The positions of the other people in the group will be important. One thing we might be

seeing is that the deliberative group's opinion change happened in the same direction whereas the information-only group's opinion shifted in a non-uniform way. Then we should look at the absolute (rather than the net) level of change.

In the eight questions which dealt with topics covered by the information provided to both the deliberation and information-only groups, in seven of these the absolute level of change was higher in the deliberation group than the information group. However in only two cases was the absolute level of opinion change statistically significantly higher. These were in the more specific questions on the state of state assets and reintroduction of third-level student fees, both subjects on which the two advocates agreed. So change is, at very least, just as likely as a result of deliberation.

*Increased consensus:* This analysis assumes that opinion movement is a normatively 'good' thing. Does opinion movement really mean an improvement? One other way in which we might think about the impact of deliberation is that it provides an understanding of the public in public opinion. Opinions formed as the result of deliberation are more like public opinions than just an aggregate of private opinions. We would expect if deliberation is good at 'public' opinion formation then there should be increased consensus as a result of deliberation.

In order to establish if there was increased cohesion within the groups, we can simply look at the change in level of spread. In the eight questions where we can meaningfully compare the groups, i.e. where there was information on the topics, in six of the eight questions presented the spread of opinions is reduced for the deliberation group. This compares with three out of eight for the information only and the control group. So we seem to see a trend to greater agreement. But is this trend statistically significant? By taking the ratio of the two standard deviations we can see that in general there is no statistically significant reduction in the spread of opinions, except on two questions. These are the questions on the introduction of water charges and the sale of state assets. Here the F-statistic was 1.9 ( $p=0.0009$ ) and 2.67 ( $p<0.0001$ ). In the two other groups none of the changes in spread were statistically significant. Generally there does not seem to be extensive moves to an agreed opinion, but these are somewhat more likely among the group that deliberate compared to other groups.



## **Conclusion**

We often think of people's opinions as determined by information and predispositions or stereotypes. So old fashioned media which imparted information was often thought to have a major impact on people's opinions. This was rejected by a good deal of research, but Zaller (1996) claims that this research underestimated the impact of political campaigns. But we do not know to what extent the campaign matters because of the information it generated or because of the conversation it sparked. But the research reported here indicates that information may be much less important than we might think and that it is the feedback loop of information and the interpretation of events that makes deliberation and hence the context in which people are making decisions.

The paper also has something to say on the question of whether deliberation works. Here it seems to provide strong evidence that deliberation, rather than information is the cause of the opinion change seen in many empirical studies of deliberative settings. Whether this is necessarily a positive result for deliberative theorists might be open to question. Hirschman (1989) noted that '[v]acillation, indifference, or weakly held opinions have long met with utmost contempt, while approval and admiration have been bestowed on firmness, fullness, and articulation of opinion.' Perhaps people think it a 'good' to have opinions, and not having an opinion is more difficult in a public deliberative setting. That said there seems little to debate as to whether deliberation matters.

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