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Political science

A bridge across the democracy–expertise gap

Mark E. Warren

An innovative algorithm provides a way of fairly selecting representative individuals for citizens’ assemblies to learn about and deliberate on certain topics. Such groups hold promise for closing the gap between democracy and expertise. **See p.548**

There is a growing gulf between experts and citizens. Distrust in science is on the increase, as are conspiracy theories that challenge evidence-based decision-making. Populist attacks on institutions that provide expertise for democratic societies and processes – administrative agencies, universities and research organizations – are on the increase, facilitated by social media. Can we strengthen democracy while also ensuring that governance benefits from expertise? On page 548, Flanigan *et al.*¹ present a way of fairly and democratically selecting representative groups of citizens tasked with advising on issues that often combine politics and expertise. As supplements to the conventional institutions of electoral democracy, these bodies show promise as a means of bridging the democracy–expertise gap.

Citizens’ assemblies, the term used by Flanigan and co-authors, are a form of deliberative minipublic, the term I use here: bodies of 20–500 ordinary citizens selected near-randomly, through a process often known as sortition, and convened to learn, deliberate and make recommendations to decision makers and sometimes to the broader public (Fig. 1). They achieve three things that more-familiar institutions of democratic government do not².

First, because members of deliberative minipublics are selected to mirror a relevant public (they are descriptively representative of the public), they do a better job of representing groups that tend to be under-represented in elected bodies (such as legislatures), or in processes for which participants self-select (such as public hearings, petitioning and lobbying). Second, because a few ordinary citizens are acting as representatives of other citizens, the public tends to like and trust these

bodies, probably because they are non-elitist, and not invested in professional politics. Third, deliberative minipublics integrate expertise, because members are tasked with learning about an issue, hearing from experts and advocates, and then deliberating over recommendations.

There is abundant evidence^{3,4} that, when supported in well-designed processes, ordinary citizens can integrate expertise with moral, value-based and political considerations. On ‘hot’ issues (such as abortion, climate

change and Brexit), deliberative minipublics’ demographically representative samples of citizens tend to be less polarized than are advocates and elected representatives. This is in part because the selection process does not over-represent what are known as motivated reasoners – people who select information to support a pre-conceived position.

Flanigan and colleagues focus on the composition of deliberative minipublics. They propose and test an algorithm that maximizes fairness in selecting members by equalizing the probability of selection. Why is this important? As political entities, deliberative minipublics must be viewed as legitimate representative bodies by the broader public, if they are to bridge the democracy–expertise divide. Although research remains patchy, evidence⁵ suggests that their legitimacy, as perceived by the broader public, is driven by their being representative of people who are ‘like us’ – underscoring the political value of such descriptive representation.

Our current understanding is that people like deliberative minipublics in part because they represent ordinary citizens, and not elites with political agendas. As such, people are more likely to trust the results obtained⁵. Furthermore, recommendations delivered by these citizens’ assemblies often have greater impact on the public than does the same information delivered by experts⁴. To achieve this kind of legitimacy, those who organize deliberative minipublics must ensure the credibility of the selection processes.

But this is easier said than done. Deliberative



Figure 1 | Members of Climate Assembly UK, a citizens’ assembly on climate change. Citizens’ assemblies are a form of deliberative minipublic, in which 20–500 individuals who are representative of the demographics of a broader public are near-randomly selected to learn about, deliberate on and make recommendations on certain topics. Flanigan *et al.*¹ devised an algorithm to select individuals for citizens’ assemblies fairly and in a way that ensures assemblies are demographically representative.

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minipublics are often constituted in a two-step process: invitations are sent to a certain number of people – usually more or less randomly selected from, say, voter lists. As Flanigan and colleagues note, those who respond positively, however, are not representative of the broader population: they are usually older, more educated, more likely speak the dominant language or belong to a dominant ethnicity, and more likely to have stable residence. A random selection from this group would thus not produce a descriptively representative body.

Because of this, organizers typically impose demographic quotas for certain categories when they select a minipublic from a pool of volunteers, so that they can produce a body that looks like the broader public. This is where the algorithm designed by Flanigan and colleagues does its work: using ideas from the field of ‘fair division’, an aspect of game theory, the algorithm equalizes the chances that someone will be selected to serve, even given the quota constraints necessary to correct for bias in the volunteer pool. Doing this maximizes the chances that the body will look like the broader public, without unfairness in the selection process.

Challenges remain. Broader publics, especially those with a high proportion of distrustful citizens, still need to be persuaded that the selection processes used are fair, and few are

likely to understand the selection algorithm itself. Therefore, much depends on the credibility of the organizers, and on their ability to translate the selection algorithm into a visible, transparent process that intuitively makes sense – showing, for example, that the algorithm performs like a lottery. Organizers must avoid perceptions that quotas to remove bias ‘rig’ the process. And it is not only citizens who must have confidence in deliberative minipublics, but also political elites, whose views of citizens’ capacity to understand a topic might be affected by the successes of populist politicians who mobilize ignorance.

Despite these challenges, deliberative minipublics are one of the most promising ways of reducing the widening gulf between democracy and expertise. And they are gaining in use and effectiveness⁶. Although there is no authoritative census of such initiatives, a search on the crowdsourcing website *Participedia.net* (<https://participedia.net>) combining the search terms “random sampling” or “stratified random sampling” with a method involving a “deliberative and dialogic process” returns more than 520 events from around the world in which randomly selected groups learn and deliberate. A report⁶ published last year from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) lists 290 “representative deliberative”

processes in OECD countries, including some that started back in the 1990s, although most were organized within the past decade.

As deliberative minipublics become more widely used, it is crucial that citizens and political elites view them as credible and legitimate. Flanigan and colleagues’ selection algorithm is a key step forwards, and is likely to provide a global benchmark for boosting this promising democratic innovation.

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