Deliberative democracy: More than just voting

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Deliberative democracy: Giving citizens a say

Western democracies typically rely on representative institutional settings, while some have integrated direct democratic elements, as well. They guarantee citizens the right to vote, but do they also give them a voice? Deliberative democracy puts more emphasis on involving ordinary citizens in decision-making processes outside regular elections. Ideally, the public can take part in an open-ended and inclusive discourse among equal citizens about key issues. As experts on their own environments, they voice a variety of perspectives, raise concerns and discuss facts and different views in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Ultimately, the goal is to arrive 'at views that represent collective, informed consent' (Fishkin 2011) by simply facilitating

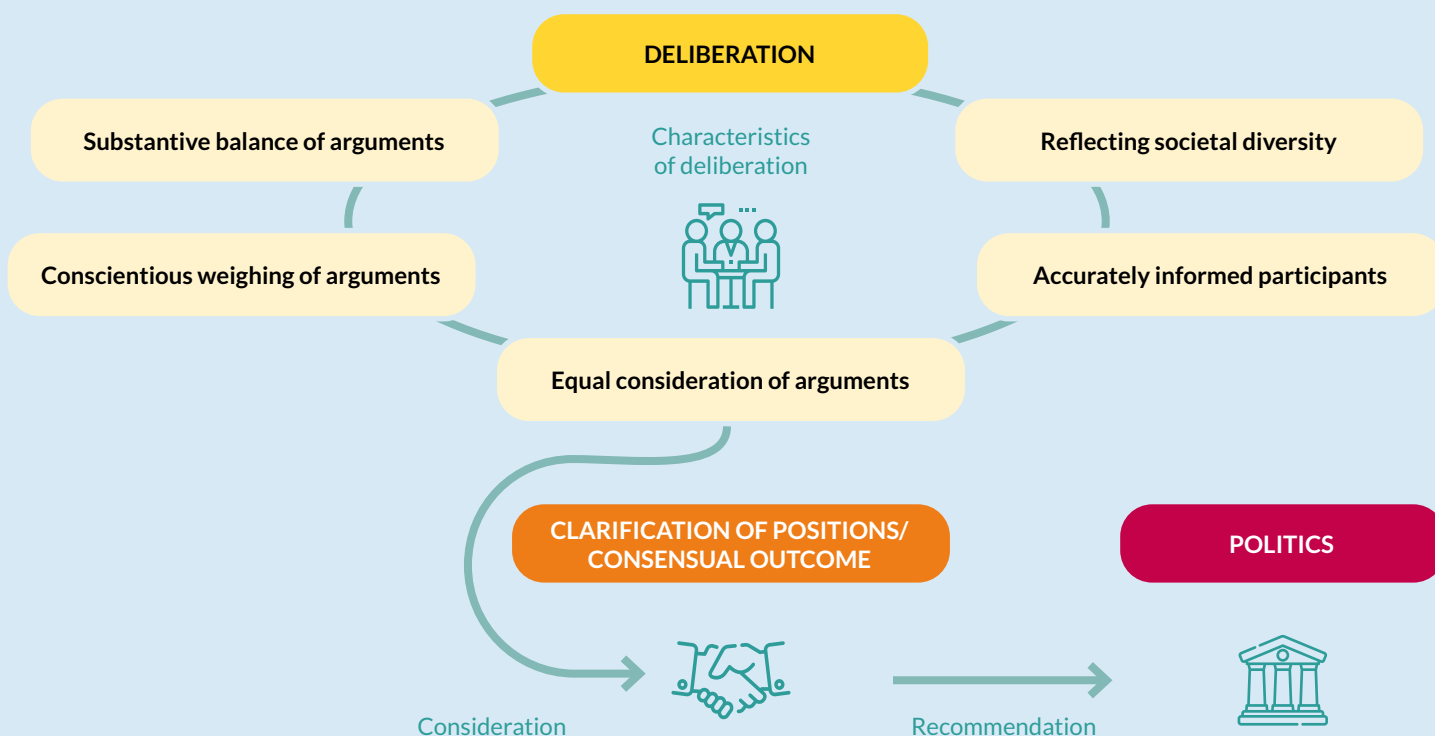### 'the forceless force of the better argument.'
Jürgen Habermas, German Philosopher and Sociologist

In recent years, many of these approaches have been implemented—locally, nationally and in the EU—to improve the quality, transparency and acceptance of decision-making processes, giving citizens a say in matters ranging from urban planning and public budgeting to wider constitutional issues, such as the Irish Citizens' Assembly's involvement in abortion law. Deliberative formats were also used in the European Commission's Citizen Dialogues and in the French *Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat.*

Deliberative democracy: When citizens shape politics

DELIBERATION

Substantive balance of arguments

Reflecting societal diversity

Characteristics
of deliberation

Conscientious weighing of arguments

Accurately informed participants

Equal consideration of arguments

CLARIFICATION OF POSITIONS/ CONSENSUAL OUTCOME

POLITICS

Consideration

Recommendation

Characteristics of deliberation based on Fishkin James S. (2011). When the People Speak, Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation, Oxford University Press

What deliberative democracy can achieve

Ideas about popular political influence and participation in representative democracies are changing. Citizens' expectations have shifted, as well. Surveys show that most citizens want their voices to be heard and they seek inclusion in political decision-making. In Germany, for example, over 80 per cent want greater involvement in political debate and even in making decisions themselves. Deliberative democracy and its various formats create added value for democracy:

It can lead to better policy choices. Research demonstrates that ordinary citizens can exercise high-quality deliberation and decision-making under certain conditions. The politicians receive proposals, can expand their knowledge and improve their decisions. Thanks to this vital exchange, citizens' acceptance of the political system can grow.

It can overcome polarization and bridge societal divides. Research indicates that in deliberative forms of discourse, extreme views tend to decrease. In this spirit, deliberative methods can help to heal today's societal divide by giving equal consideration to all views and seeking consensual solutions to contentious issues.

It promotes a vital and diverse democracy. Deliberative democratic elements can complement a fully-fledged democracy. The various forms of deliberative political participation are mutually supportive and they contribute to the strengthening of the democracy. Citizens involved in citizen dialogues and citizen participation projects are more likely to vote in elections, and vice versa. Given the widespread political disenchantment and rising populism, innovative ways of engaging citizens will re-vitalize democracy.

> 'I especially liked the way the discussion was conducted: being able to exchange, listen, learn, and give one's opinion without being judged, and to be able to change it again having taken into account the information we had received.'

Answer of a participant to the open question 'What did you like about this event?'
Citizens' Consultations on Europe: French Citizens' Panel, 25–27 October 2018, Paris

How deliberative formats work in practice

There are many formats and methods for creating deliberative settings, like **citizens' assemblies, mini-publics, mini-populous, citizens' panels, councils of citizens, future workshops and world cafés,** to name just a few. Digitalization can expand this range.

The *Permanenter Bürger Dialog* in Belgium

Project: The parliament of Belgium's German-speaking community voted unanimously to involve their citizens in political decision-making in February 2019.

Method: A permanent Citizens' Council composed of 24 randomly selected citizens, each mandate lasts 18 months, and makes policy proposals to the elected parliament – on their own initiative or in response to recommendations drafted by regularly convening, independent and randomly selected Citizens' Assemblies. The project has been allocated separate funding.

Outcome: The German-speaking community's parliament is committed to implementing the recommendations of the citizens in their policy-making process.

The Irish Citizens' Assembly

Project: Set up in 2016, the Irish Citizens' Assembly was formed to deliberate on several political matters, notably on the issue of abortion.

Method: Chaired by a judge from the Supreme Court, 99 randomly selected members were a broad reflection of Irish society. The Assembly met 12 times for discussions and to hear testimony from experts and NGOs. Meetings were live-streamed. The Government formally responded to the Assembly's reports.

Outcome: The deliberative process led to a referendum on the legalization of abortion. It was held on 25 May 2018 and passed by a majority of 66.4 per cent.

The EU Citizens' Panel

Project: The first EU Citizens' Panel set up by the European Commission was held in May 2018 in the context of European citizens' consultations.
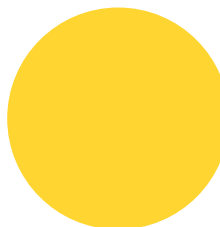
Method: 100 randomly selected citizens from 27 member states met for several days in Brussels and drafted questions for an online consultation on the future of Europe. The Panel was assisted by professional moderators and inter-preters. Participants spoke their own language.

Outcome: An online questionnaire about the future of the EU. The results were discussed by heads of states and governments at their informal meeting in Sibiu in May 2019.

How is deliberative participation successful?

Applied deliberative citizens' participation does not run itself. Quality requirements are needed. To be successful it

•• **must be embedded** in decision-making processes so as to define a clear mandate and help guarantee responsiveness and impact. The results should be part of an open process.

•• **needs to consider the issues, actors and environment.** It requires a careful and competent process design that is tailored to the individual context.

•• **needs to involve diverse participants.** A random selection of ordinary citizens is a good way to ensure an inclusive, broad involvement of citizens in the democratic process.

•• **needs to be based on balanced and ongoing transparent information** for participants as well as the broader public.

•• **requires adequate resources.** Depending on its scope, the participation process needs sufficient human and financial resources (for coordination, information sharing, record keeping, documentation and publications) and enough time to perform the work.

Deliberative democracy in the EU – Much to gain, little to lose

The EU crucially depends on its relationship with citizens. Today, they expect more opportunities for an open exchange of views on an equal footing and want to be involved in important issues. The EU can benefit from allowing citizens to participate more directly in policymaking. High quality deliberative processes are one way to bring Europe closer to its citizens and can in a wider sense strengthen their identification with the European project.

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