Improving access to information and restoring the public's faith in democracy through deliberative institutions

Advocates for public deliberation claim that increased citizen involvement in political decision-making can improve democratic governance. Studies have shown that deliberation can be beneficial for participants, but less is known about its impact on the wider public. Looking at the case of Citizens' Initiative Reviews in Oregon, **Katherine R. Knobloch** *shows that knowing about or using the information provided by deliberative institutions can improve the public's faith in self-government.*

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Both scholars and citizens have begun to believe that democracy is in decline. Authoritarian power grabs, polarising rhetoric, and increasing inequality can all claim responsibility for democratic systems that feel broken. Democracy depends on a polity who believe that their engagement matters, but evidence suggests democratic institutions have become unresponsive to the will of the public. How can we restore faith in self-government when both research and personal experience tell us that the public is losing power, not gaining it?

Deliberative public engagement

Deliberative democracy offers one solution, and it's slowly shifting how the public engages in political decision-making. In Oregon, the Citizens' Initiative Review (CIR) asks a group of randomly selected voters to carefully study public issues and then make policy recommendations based on their collective experience and insight. In Ireland, Citizens' Assemblies are being used to amend the country's constitution to better reflect changing cultural norms. In communities across the world, Participatory Budgeting is giving the public control over local government spending. Far from squashing democratic power, these deliberative institutions bolster it. They exemplify a new wave in democratic government, one that aims to bring community members together across political and cultural divides to make decisions about how to govern themselves.

Though the contours of deliberative events vary, most share key characteristics. A diverse body of community members gather together to learn from experts and one another, think through the short- and long-term implications of different policy positions, and discuss how issues affect not only themselves but their wider communities. At the end of those conversations, they make decisions that are representative of the diversity of participants and their ideas and which have been tested through collective reasoning.

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Extensive research has found that participation in democratic deliberation can offer numerous benefits. After deliberating, participants often report higher levels of issue-specific knowledge, faith in government, and confidence in their ability to make good policy decisions. Deliberative participation can lead to a civic renewal for some, who may be more likely to engage in their local communities, contact public officials, or vote as a result of their experience.

The number of people who can directly participate in such processes, however, remains relatively insignificant. At most, deliberative forums will gather a few thousand people for simultaneous deliberations in diverse locations, but more often a few hundred or a few dozen get the chance to take part in these singular events.

The Citizens' Initiative Review

Thankfully, many of these processes aren't designed exclusively to influence the people in the room. Instead, they are intended to link up to larger systems of decision-making in which the wider public can take part. In the case of the Irish Constitutional Convention, this meant placing a referendum on the ballot on which the public can vote. The Citizens' Initiative Review (CIR) takes a different path. The CIR was first piloted in 2010 and has since become an official part of Oregon's initiative elections, which ask the electorate to vote on specific policy proposals. The CIR gathers twenty randomly selected community members (chosen to be representative of the local population in terms of demographic and political factors) to hear from experts and advocates about why the measure is needed and talk about how it might impact the community. Using this information, the citizen panelists write a summary of the measure, including important findings and arguments for and against it. The summary statement is then published in the statewide Voters' Pamphlet so that the electorate can use it as a reference point when casting their own ballots. This provides voters with information vetted by their fellow community members and offers an alternative to the polarising and highly strategic information provided by campaigns.

Research conducted by our team of colleagues investigated the impact and effects of the CIR as it was implemented in Oregon and other locations. Those who read the summary produced by their fellow citizens gained new information about ballot measures and were more likely to cast their vote on initiatives they may have otherwise skipped. CIR participants became more confident in government, themselves, and their fellow citizens, and are more likely to participate in community-based politics. But what does the wider public think of this addition to the electoral process? To find out, we asked voters how knowing about and making use of the information provided by the CIR influenced their confidence in government and themselves.

Measuring the public's faith in self-governance

Using a two-wave panel survey of registered Oregon voters, we asked participants whether they thought the government was responsive to the public and if they had faith in their own ability to make good governing decisions. The first wave was conducted in August of 2010, before voters were likely to have heard about the CIR. The second wave was conducted in October and November of that year, as voters were returning their mail-in ballots and casting votes on measures that CIR panelists had reviewed. Our results, recently published in *Political Studies*, suggest a clear change to how participants felt about their governing system. Knowing that the CIR existed increased participants' faith that the government cares about the public and works in its interest. Responses from those who read the information in the CIR's summary statement revealed further benefits: their belief that they understood policy and could make good decisions increased. A follow-up survey in 2012 confirmed these results.

Our study shows that deliberative institutions can act as a counterbalance to degrading civic confidence. Over the course of the 2010 election, Oregon voters who were unaware of the CIR lost political efficacy; those who knew about the introduction of deliberative governance gained it. Though the changes were small and limited to a single context, they provide hope for those who fear the declining faith in democracy. Since 2010, CIRs have been piloted in locations across the US and Europe. Ireland continues to seek public input on constitutional reform, and both same-sex marriage and abortion have been legalised as a result of that engagement. Participatory Budgeting has spread to school districts and municipalities across the globe. The proliferation of these new governing structures might restore the public's faith in their institutions and in themselves as democratic decision-makers. Civic reformers and public officials interested in defending democracy should take note. Reclaiming democracy, one in which the public trusts in themselves and their government, likely means reimagining it.

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This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of Democratic Audit It draws on the article by Katherine R Knobloch, Michael L Barthel, John Gastil "Emanating Effects: The Impact of the Oregon Citizens' Initiative Review on Voters' Political Efficacy", published in Political Studies.

About the author

Katherine R. Knobloch is an assistant professor and the Associate Director of the Center for Public Deliberation in the Department of Communication Studies at Colorado State University. Her research and teaching focus on civic engagement and political decision making, exploring deliberative process design and the impact of public engagement on participants and their communities.

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