

Deliberation in Swiss direct democracy: A field experiment on the expulsion initiative

In the past decade, deliberation has become a highly fashionable decision-making tool. A central claim of deliberative theorists is that deliberation produces “better citizens” who become aware of the complexities of politics and policies, resist simplistic policy solutions, and know more about the issues at hand. An NCCR project explores how deliberation can be used in Swiss direct democratic voting.

By *André Bächtiger, Marco Steenbergen, Thomas Gautschi and Seraina Pedrini*

Deliberation can be defined as a rational communicative process of weighing arguments and policy alternatives, leading to the choice of the best policy option. With the exception of Switzerland, numerous initiatives were launched to put deliberative democracy into practice, mainly consisting of forums for citizen deliberation. The most important finding is that deliberating citizens change their opinions quite dramatically, frequently in the direction of more common good-oriented policies. These successes have led to a rapid proliferation of citizen deliberation; not only has citizen deliberation been successfully applied to the non-Western context (especially to China) but also to divided societies such as Northern Ireland. But do these positive experiences of citizen deliberation also apply to direct democratic voting in Switzerland, where the level of policy contestation is frequently very high and citizens are exposed to vigorous campaigns? And can deliberation be a cure against populism, making citizens aware of the dangers related to simplistic populist initiatives?

The NCCR project “Deliberative experiments and direct democratic voting”, in collaboration with the market and social research institute *LINK*, conducted in 2010 the first deliberative field experiment in Swiss direct democracy.

The topic of the field experiment was the expulsion initiative (“*Ausschaffungsinitiative*”) of the Swiss People’s Party (SVP) and the counterproposal of the Swiss government and parliament. The expulsion initiative asked for a quasi-automatic expulsion of foreigners who have committed a number of designated crimes. The counterproposal was also committed to the expulsion of criminal foreigners, but tried to come up with a systematic list of crimes (depending on the severity of the crime rather than on a relatively arbitrary list of crimes as in the initiative) and to align deportation with the requirements of international and basic law. Our research question was whether deliberation has a transformative effect on citizens’ preferences in the context of such a highly contested vote.

Experimental Design

Our field experiment draws from James Fishkin’s “Deliberative Opinion Polls” (DPs), but has a number of innovations. First, in accordance with DPs, the participants were recruited via random sampling in a two-fold process: the *LINK Institute* conducted online interviews with 1670 randomly selected Swiss citizens who are entitled to vote; at the end of the survey, participants were invited to participate in an online discussion. Contrary to previous experi-

ences with DPs, only 15% (rather than the predicted 30%) were willing to participate.

Second, we tried to establish a causal relationship for deliberation’s effects. To date, many deliberative experiments (including Fishkin’s DPs) have not qualified as true experiments since they either lack a true control group or create control groups out of those participants who are not interested in participating in the deliberative event. This, however, leads to comparisons among people with very different motivation profiles and does not allow extracting the true causal effect of deliberation. At the same time, we wanted to isolate the effect of deliberation from other effects, especially those of balanced information, which generally plays a crucial role in citizen deliberation. To achieve these two goals, we focused, on the one hand, only on those survey respondents who were willing to participate in the deliberative event. On the other hand, we randomly assigned survey respondents into three groups: one group getting information based on carefully balanced materials and discussing the issue in small groups; one group getting only the balanced information material; and one group getting nothing (thus being merely exposed to the campaign). The three groups were re-surveyed in the experimental week one month prior to the vote as well as immediately after the vote on November 28, 2010.

Third, and contrary to the usual DP setup, deliberation took place in an online chat. Online deliberation has two major advantages compared to face-to-face deliberation: it is much cheaper and,

somewhat paradoxically, online chatting better matches the classic deliberative ideal than a face-to-face setting since all participants can stay anonymous. Thus, there will be a prime focus on arguments while personal characteristics of participants, which psychologists consider to have major effects on opinion change, only play a very minor role.

The online discussion

The field experiment took place one month prior to the vote. The online discussion comprised three sets of questions regarding the initiative and the counterproposal: namely criminality of foreigners, the list of crimes and its potential conflicts with international law. A total of 49 persons (German and French speakers) took part in the online discussion (99 persons were invited) and there was a total of 10 discussion groups. Even though the major goal of our field experiment was to extract deliberation's causal effect, questions of representativeness and external validity still loom large. Compared to the initial sample, participants in the online discussion did not differ much with regard to sex and age; however, participants in the online discussion were a bit more oriented toward the right, more frequently had a university degree and had a slightly higher political interest.

First Results

In order to check whether the online discussions satisfied a number of crucial

AJAX Chat - Logs

Logout Raum: Channel02 Datum: 2010-10-25 Uhrzeit: -- Stil: prosilver Sprache: Deutsch

(2010.10.25 - 19:05:21) moderator2: ⚠️ Trotz engagierter Diskussion kommen wir nun zur letzten Frage.

(2010.10.25 - 19:05:36) moderator2: Die Ausschaffungsinitiative will einen automatischen Entzug des Aufenthaltsrechts, und zwar ohne Prüfung des Einzelfalls. Auf diese Weise könnten gemäss Initiative kriminelle AusländerInnen konsequent ausgeschafft werden.

An der Ausschaffungsinitiative wird kritisiert, dass der automatische Entzug des Aufenthaltsrechts zu erheblichen Konflikten mit dem Völkerrecht führt.

Was ist aus Ihrer Sicht zentral: die konsequente Ausschaffung von kriminellen AusländerInnen oder die Einhaltung von völkerrechtlichen Prinzipien?

Bitte begründen Sie Ihre Antwort und haben Sie einen Moment Geduld, bis alle Teilnehmenden Ihre Beiträge geschrieben haben! Die Teilnehmenden können sich in folgender Reihenfolge äussern: user1 user3 user9 user15 user2 user12

(2010.10.25 - 19:08:35) user9: Ich finde es viel wichtiger die Prinzipien des Völkerrechts einzuhalten. Ich bin sehr dankbar, in der Schweiz leben zu dürfen, ich wurde als Kind und Jugendlicher

(2010.10.25 - 19:09:37) user15: da finde ich auch die prinzipien des völkerrechtes wichtiger. kriminelle ausländer kann man ja auch in der schweiz bestrafen, ohne dass sie ausgewiesen werden

(2010.10.25 - 19:09:49) user3: m.E. geht unsere Sicherheit vor, d.H. Die Ausschaffung. Natürlich ist das Thema Völkerrecht in der ganzen Welt ein Thema. m.E. können wir Schweizer machen was wir wollen, wir werden von anderen Staaten immer kritisiert. (Dies ist aber ein anderes Thema)

(2010.10.25 - 19:10:12) user1: Damit ich nicht falsch verstanden werde: Ich bin für die Ausschaffung Krimineller. Aber ich finde, wir müssen das Völkerrecht beachten, damit wir nicht zu Gunsten von einem Gesetz quasi ein anderes Gesetz missachten. Die Schweiz ist stolz auf ihre Vergangenheit und ihre humanitäre Tradition. Es musste doch einen Weg geben, um beides unter einen Hut zu bringen. Man sollte den Ermessensspielraum der Richter beschränken, damit die Lage nicht nach Gutdünken beurteilt werden kann. In diesem strengeren Rahmen lassen sich Ausschaffungen konsequent und fair regeln.

(2010.10.25 - 19:10:30) moderator2: User9, möchten Sie Ihre Antwort noch vervollständigen?

(2010.10.25 - 19:10:41) user9: zweiter Teil)nicht von Armut und Krieg geprägt, ich durfte in einem friedlichen Land aufwachsen und wurde dadurch geprägt.

(2010.10.25 - 19:12:04) user9: Die Schweizer benehmen sich manchmal, als ob sie etwas dafür können, in diesem Land geboren zu sein

(2010.10.25 - 19:12:22) user12: soll ich meine antwort abgeben, oder auf user2 warten?

(2010.10.25 - 19:12:38) user2: Für mich ist die konsequente Ausschaffung wichtig - mit dem Zusatz dass die Strafe auch wirklich gerecht verhängt wurde. Dann kann meines Erachtens das Völkerrecht eingehalten werden.

Extract from the online discussion on the expulsion initiative.

deliberative standards (i.e. participation equality, justification rationality and respect), we asked participants to assess the quality of the online discussion themselves. About 70% stated that they could present their arguments in detail, 70% reported that a sufficient number of reasons were presented, and 80% viewed the discussions as respectful. Thus, in the participants' view, the online discussion was fairly deliberative.

With regard to preference transformation, first results show some intriguing patterns. What stands out is that the online discussion group became more favorable to the counterproposal, especially compared to the control group with no balanced information where the approval score steadily declined from the first to the last survey. At the end, almost 70% of the participants in the online discussion group were in favor of the counterproposal, whereas the corresponding figure in the two control

groups was only 45%. At the beginning, the approval rate to the counterproposal of all three groups was between 40-45%.

Thus, despite the highly contested nature of the vote, deliberation had an effect on citizens' preferences. It pushed them towards the counterproposal that tried to overcome some flaws of the initiative and combine the popular demand for the expulsion of criminal foreigners with the requirements of international and basic law. This is good news for advocates of deliberation arguing that deliberation drives citizens in the direction of less simplistic and more balanced policy solutions. But preference transformations via deliberation occurred in more complex ways than previous studies have found. Preference shifts did not materialize immediately after the online discussion but happened before the discussion, as a result of information as well as internal reflection. This is suggestive of the philosopher



The NCCR project team also organized a public discussion round on the expulsion initiative, chaired by André Bächtiger, at the University of Lucerne in November 2010. Participants were (from left) Lathan Suntharalingam (cantonal MP Lucerne, Social Democratic Party), André Bächtiger, Hansheiri Inderkum (President of the Swiss Senate, Christian Democratic Party) and Yvette Estermann (national MP, Swiss People's Party).

Robert Goodin's concept of "deliberation within". He claims that the discussion component may be less important for opinion change than the information phase and the internal-reflective process in participants' heads prior to discussion. However, deliberation still had a direct effect on citizens' preferences by *consolidating* these preference shifts: while the online-discussion group kept its support for the counterproposal after the discussion, the two other groups experienced a decline in their respective approval score in the period between the experimental week and the vote. We found a similar effect for knowledge gain. We asked participants a difficult knowledge question regarding the content of the initiative ("Are economic crimes part of the initiative?"). Initially, all three groups had a large proportion of incorrect answers. After being

exposed to the information material, both the online discussion group and the group with balanced information had a higher proportion of correct answers than the group with no balanced information. However, when re-surveyed after the vote, only the online discussion group could keep the knowledge gain, while the group with balanced information slid back to a lower proportion of correct answers. Again, the discussion process seems to have consolidated the initial knowledge gain.

The next step of our research will be to better understand these intriguing results. For instance, did the participants of the online discussion support the counterproposal because they became convinced of related arguments, such as a better adherence to international law? Or was the support merely due to subtle framing effects during the online discus-

sion? To shed light on these questions, we shall analyze the wealth of survey questions as well as the discussion transcripts.

Contact

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Publications

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