

Shared Commitments and Common Knowledge: The Epistemic Dimensions of Deliberative Democracy

The theory of deliberative democracy emphasises that democracy is concerned not only with aggregating the views of the electorate into a collective point of view but also with the way citizens form—and revise—their values and opinions in processes of deliberation. Deliberation is taken to have a ‘truth-tracking’ function. It ensures that citizens make a collective decision on the basis of good information, thus making the collective decision ‘epistemically optimal’. As a result of this dynamic process, so it is argued, citizens gradually become more committed to the eventual outcome, even if that outcome is not their preferred one.

But can we be sure that deliberation always fulfils its truth-tracking function? What if, for instance, citizens have systematically distorted views on certain social issues? The overall aim of the research project is to investigate how deliberation can be organised so as to enhance its truth-tracking ideal. The question will be addressed both empirically and analytically. In the first subproject the question is examined empirically by applying the new technique of deliberative polling to the issue of neighbourhood safety. This is not only an important social issue but it also forms a challenge to the truth-tracking function of deliberation since individual perceptions of safety differ systematically from actual neighbourhood safety. The second subproject studies the epistemic dimensions of deliberative democracy analytically. Here the focus is on ascertaining the general conditions that enhance the truth-tracking ideal of deliberation.

A multidisciplinary endeavour at the intersection of communication theory, political science, philosophy and public administration, the project is expected to contribute both to a better understanding of democratic deliberation on such issues as neighbourhood safety in the Netherlands and to the further development of the theory of deliberative democracy.

Background and motivation

Deliberative democracy refers to a conception of democracy famously defended by such authors as Elster (1986), Cohen (1989), Fishkin (1991, 1995), Habermas (1992), Rawls (1993), Dryzek (2000), and Gutman and Thompson (2004). It sees the legitimacy of democracy as depending on the extent to which it enables citizens to take part in deliberation concerning collective decision making (see also Benhabib, 1996). On this account, democracy is not only concerned with the aggregation of the views of the electorate into a collective point of view, it is also concerned with the way in which citizens form and revise their values and opinions.

Ideally, the formation and revision of these values and opinions is based on an assessment of relevant information in a process of deliberation. Part of such information comes from experts who inform citizens about the specifics of the issues they deliberate on. Another important source of information is endogenous to the deliberation process itself. Upon hearing the views of others, deliberating citizens arrive at a better mutual understanding. They gain a greater understanding of the implications of their own views, and they may revise their views in light of new information. It is argued that as a result of this dynamic process, citizens gradually adopt a more distanced, more committed perspective on the political issues at stake. Deliberating citizens will increasingly come to sympathise with a common democratic purpose. More information, better information, and a sense of cooperation aimed at resolving problems of collective decision making—it is thus that deliberation obtains a ‘truth-tracking’ potential (Habermas, 2006). Democratic deliberation ensures that when

citizens make a collective decision, they do so on the basis of good or ‘epistemically optimal’ arguments. This is the epistemic dimension of deliberative democracy (Habermas, 2006).

The importance of epistemic considerations is stressed not just by ‘deliberative theorists’. Reviving Dewey’s pragmatism concerning democracy, Putnam (1992) points out the analogy between democratic deliberation and the truth-tracking aspects of deliberation within scientific communities. Stressing the cooperative venture that democratic decision making really is, Honneth (1993) developed a view of democracy (labelled ‘reflexive cooperation’) in which publicly voiced views are tested and possibly falsified (see also Olson, 2006).

While the importance of the epistemic dimensions of democracy and the corresponding emphasis on truth-tracking through deliberation and discussion among citizens forms a cornerstone of recent theories of democracy, several empirical analyses reveal a gap between theory and practice. Deliberation among citizens occurs less frequently than is considered to be desirable. This gap is often seen as a consequence of a more general trend of decreasing political participation and involvement. Many different proposals have been put on the political agenda, seeking to reverse the general trend—that is, to increase political participation and involvement (Putnam, 2000; Elchardus, 2002; Van der Kaap, 2006; Van Holsteyn and Mudde, 2002). Most such proposals are cast in terms of institutional mechanisms. They concern reforms of electoral procedures (Dummett, 1997; Schagen and Kummeling, 1999), changes in election campaign funding (Wertheimer and Manes, 1994), alternatives modes of representation—for example the ‘elected mayor’ or the *burgerinitiatief* ‘citizen’s initiative’—and regulations concerning the role of the media (Biltreyst *et al.*, 2003; Lenten, 2004).

There has been considerable debate about whether these institutional proposals succeed in promoting political participation (Drempel, 2004; Smith, 2001; Zurn, 2007). Apart from the well-documented difficulty of fostering deliberation involving members of minority groups (Wingo, 2003), several scholars and political activists remain sceptical about the feasibility and effectiveness of such institutional reforms. They argue instead for small scale initiatives like the organisation of town meetings, the ‘minipopulus’ (Dahl, 1989), or the ‘minipublic’ (Fung, 2003a). For instance, setting up well-organised assemblies to review a local authority’s budget would, the critics of institutional reform contend, be easier to implement than a reform of the local electoral system.

There is increasing empirical evidence that such small scale initiatives are indeed effective in fostering citizen deliberation (Bächtiger and Steiner, 2005; Baiocchi, 2001). Nevertheless, another *desideratum* of deliberative democracy still has to be fulfilled, another gap to be bridged. Since deliberative democracy emphasises the importance of truth-tracking, deliberation initiatives have to be evaluated for their effectiveness in tracking the truth, too. A large survey of various minipublic initiatives reveals, however, that we should be careful of overoptimism here, and that there is in fact quite some room for improvement of the truth-tracking function (Fung, 2003a). While the initiatives do in fact help the participants to engage in deliberation, their success in providing participants with relevant, dependable information is decidedly more limited.

A typical way in which truth-tracking may go astray is when the perceptions of the individual participants are systematically distorted. An important instance of this phenomenon occurs in relation to safety issues. It is well documented that subjective estimates and objective statistical information about neighbourhood safety diverge widely (Ferraro, 1995; Van den Berg *et al.*, 2006). Emotional responses to reports of crime, incivility, graffiti, and littering, for instance, may be too strong to be counterbalanced by factual information about neighbourhood safety. In such cases the truth-tracking justification of deliberation is of only limited applicability. Yet it is clear that *ignoring* individuals’ opinions based on perceived unsafety and fear of crime would endanger the ideal of truly deliberative democratic decision making. If the truth-tracking ideal has to be embodied and implemented in a truly

democratic context, then forms of deliberation have to be developed that increase the likelihood that individual biases and prejudices (systematically distorted beliefs) will fade—without, however, thereby decreasing the citizens’ democratic freedom or introducing state paternalism about what citizens should believe.

Overall research aim

The overall aim of the project is to contribute to the theory and practice of democratic deliberation. It will provide insights into how citizens can become more committed to the outcomes of political decision making processes by enhancing the truth-tracking function of deliberation. It does so through two different lines of enquiry. The subproject *Democratic Deliberation on Neighbourhood Safety* focuses on the possible emergence of *shared commitments* in the context of the particular issue of neighbourhood safety. A specific deliberation initiative will be conducted using the method of ‘deliberative polling’, a method which has not been used in the Netherlands hitherto. It is examined how communication between citizens, and the dissemination of expert information, affects the commitment of citizens that they feel towards the outcome of the deliberation process. The subproject *The Dynamics of Democratic Deliberation* emphasises the way *common knowledge* is achieved among the participants of a deliberation process. It examines theoretically how democratic truth-tracking can be strengthened by studying democratic deliberation with methods and tools developed in philosophical logic and theories of belief revision.

3. Subproject 1 (postdoc, vacancy): Deliberative Polling and Neighbourhood Safety

From the perspective of deliberative democracy, a match between citizens’ opinions about a definite issue and the collective decision derived from these opinions is not a sufficient condition that allows one to say that the democratic process has been optimal. Deliberative democracy demands in addition that the individual opinions that ultimately form the basis of the collective decision are ‘well-considered judgements’. They have to be formed and revised in a process of deliberation.

But what kinds of deliberation processes do indeed lead to the formation of such well-considered judgements? James Fishkin (Center for Deliberative Democracy, Stanford), who is one of the co-applicants of this research proposal, has developed the method of ‘deliberative polling’. Deliberative polls yield information about deliberative behaviour. A random sample of citizens is brought together in one location and is set to work to deliberate on a given issue in a monitored setting. The individuals are given the opportunity to obtain information about the issue, discuss with each other, and challenge experts and politicians. In the process, individuals revise their beliefs about factual matters on the basis of the information they obtain. They form—or revise—their political convictions as they go along, debating with other participants, and at the end, they vote.

One of the politically relevant findings about deliberative polling is that most individuals who have participated in deliberative polls report that they find the experience very worthwhile. They often report that they have come to possess a deeper understanding, not only of their own views, but also of the other participants’ positions. Even though they will not all end up holding the same views, individuals also report that the deliberation process helps them to identify with the final outcome of the sampled election—even, that is, in cases when their opinion turns out not to ‘win’ the final election. Deliberative polling, in other words, creates support for the final verdict, even among those who disagree with it.

The subproject *Democratic Deliberation on Neighbourhood Safety* will apply the method of deliberative polling to the issue of neighbourhood safety. It will investigate how truth-tracking can be

enhanced and how this in turn affects the commitment of citizens. Neighbourhood safety is not only an important social issue but also forms a challenge to the truth-tracking function of deliberation since, as explained above, individuals' perceptions of safety differ systematically from actual neighbourhood safety. The first step of the project will focus on the issue of agenda setting. As is well-known from political science, the order in which groups deliberate political issues can have a crucial influence on the outcome of the deliberation process (MacCombs *et al.*, 1997). Pauly (2005), for instance, has shown that if the German parliament had set a different agenda for the meeting discussing the future location of the capital, the federal government would still be in Bonn. However, rather than focusing on the path dependencies created by agenda formation, the focus here is on how agenda setting can intensify the truth-tracking function of democracy. That is, the investigation seeks to discover whether different ways of providing expert information can help reduce the discrepancy between subjective and objective feelings of neighbourhood safety.

An investigation will then be conducted on how the political commitments of the participants in deliberation are affected by, on the one hand, obtaining new information (exogenous information input), and, on the other hand, by the process of discussion and debate with other participants (endogenous information input). Studies of neighbourhood safety have shown that citizens allocate different weights to reports provided by victims of crime and expert statistical information provided by police and local government (Ferraro, 1995). However, these different sources of information hardly ever confront each other in conscious deliberation. The deliberative poll on neighbourhood safety will analyse in detail how an exchange between information provided by experts and discussion among the 'laity' influences the final beliefs. Does it, for instance, make a difference whether expert information is provided in a one-shot event (such as watching the news on television) or in an argumentative setting of a temporally extended deliberation process in which the responses of other participants to the expert can also be heard, together with the expert's response?

The project then turns to the investigation of the role of different parties in deliberation. Clearly, the issue of neighbourhood safety involves such diverse parties as individual residents, the local business community, welfare and community workers, housing corporations, and the police, to name but a few. This means that there is a wide spectrum of interests and positions that shape the deliberation processes and, as a result, the actual outcome. Moreover, there is a wide 'non-role-related' diversity of opinions, information and background knowledge. Older citizens, for instance, tend to find accessing information on the Internet more difficult than younger ones, and the same holds for disadvantaged ethnic and socio-economic groups (Davis, 1999). The project will scrutinise the influence on the course of the deliberation of different groups of citizens as well of the different types of views and judgements that are involved. Furthermore, in order to assess the impact of diversity on the quality of the deliberation, it will investigate how the impact of information flows differs between subgroups of citizens, as well as the impact of different types of information (see also van Stokkom, 2003).

The research findings will finally be used to make policy recommendations about the issue of neighbourhood safety. First, the results of the deliberative poll will be used to make *procedural* recommendations about the way actual deliberation processes about neighbourhood safety can best be set up. Second, the outcome of the deliberative poll will be used to assess different policy proposals *substantively* in terms of the arguments that turned out to play a significant role in the deliberative poll and that formed the basis of the well-considered judgements formed in that poll.

4. Subproject 2 (postdoc): The Dynamics of Democratic Deliberation

The study of 'epistemic decision making' is a recently developed area of research that investigates the

procedures through which collective beliefs or convictions can be derived from the beliefs and convictions of individual agents. How, that is, do individual judgements aggregate to group judgements? Interest in the problem of epistemic decision making was sparked by the ‘doctrinal paradox’ (Kornhauser and Sager, 1993); in particular by a subsequent generalisation due to List and Pettit (2002). The doctrinal paradox reveals that a jury deciding by majority vote on the truth of a set of propositions may come to a conclusion that is at odds with a legal doctrine to which all individual members subscribe (hence ‘doctrinal’ paradox). Taking it out of the original legal context, List and Pettit (2002) generalised the result by showing that the majority rule is but one among many aggregation procedures that fail to ensure that consistent individual judgements are aggregated into a consistent collective judgement. Subsequently, a number of further generalisations and extensions have been derived (Bovens and Rabinowicz, 2004; Dietrich, 2006; Gärdenfors, 2006; Pauly and Van Hees, 2006; Van Hees, 2007).

While these results show the difficulties of aggregating individual judgements into a collective judgement, the models are too limited to yield concrete insights into the epistemic dimensions of democratic deliberation. Most importantly, the literature on epistemic decision making has hitherto focussed on *static* forms of deliberation in which the aggregation of individual judgements into group judgements is seen as a one-shot event. Quite a few forms of democratic decision making are, of course, decidedly one-shot, but many other important political decisions depend essentially on the temporal structure of deliberation. Political actors listen to each other in debates, they revise their beliefs and opinions, and they set up highly sophisticated voting procedures to decide on specific issues. This means that, if it is to be applicable to the study of multi-stage deliberative democracy, the theory of epistemic decision making has to turn *dynamic*. The subproject *The Dynamics of Democratic Deliberation* will draw from logical insights on belief revision to obtain a truly dynamic extension of the framework of epistemic decision making. The key objective of the subproject *The Dynamics of Democratic Deliberation* is to apply such a dynamic theory of epistemic decision making to an investigation of the general conditions under which the truth-tracking function of democratic deliberation can be enhanced.

The information that individuals participating in deliberation obtain may come in two forms. First, experts may supply the participants *exogenously* with information concerning, say, empirical data on crime in certain neighbourhoods. Various scholars have developed ways to differentiate the ‘informational value’ and ‘logical strength’ of such information (see Van Benthem and Adriaans, forthcoming). These findings will be used to study the influence of exogenous information on deliberation. Second, deliberating individuals acquire information about the judgements of the other participants. This constitutes a form of information that is *endogenous* to the deliberation process itself, and the relevant theoretical category is the extent to which individual citizens disagree on the issue. Given these two forms of information change, one goes on to examine *how* individuals adjust their opinions on the basis of new information.

The research will make fruitful use of analyses of belief revision from philosophical logic and the philosophy of information (Van Benthem, 2004, 2006). The distinction between exogenous and endogenous information flows is used to investigate the different ways in which (exogenously given) information updates and (endogenously given) disagreements affect the outcomes of the deliberation process. In particular, the study is concerned with the extent to which they lead to the emergence of common knowledge.

Having thus constructed a dynamic model of deliberation, and having laid out in general terms the factors that increase the success of deliberation, the final step of the subproject is to examine the possible institutional consequences of these results. In particular, the exploration considers the ways in

which the results can be used to improve the truth-tracking potential of deliberation at a larger scale. With respect to exogenous information updates, the analysis goes first into how institutional devices can allow for the demarcation of 'relevant' information flows and 'irrelevant' ones. Given such a demarcation, the research then examines which institutions stimulate the incorporation of relevant information flows while closing off irrelevant ones. The investigation into the institutional consequences of endogenous information updates will focus on 'the transparency of discord', the central focus being on the analysis of mechanisms that ensure that individuals will have information about the opinions and beliefs of other participants.

Methodology: coherence and interdisciplinarity

The first, empirical part (*Deliberative Polling and Neighbourhood Safety*) studies the influence of agenda-setting and the dissemination of different kinds of information on (a) perceptions of neighbourhood safety, and on (b) the establishment of shared commitments. Using statistical data on neighbourhood safety in the Netherlands (e.g., Veiligheidsmonitor Rijk 2007, CBS, Voorburg/Heerlen, 2007), two disadvantaged neighbourhoods ('achterstandswijken') will be selected, and in each of them surveys will be conducted to assess perceptions of neighbourhood safety (beliefs) as well as attitudes towards various kinds of policy measures (values). Subsequently, in each of the two neighbourhoods two different deliberative polls will be held. From both neighbourhoods, two samples of about 50 individuals are selected. The participants are informed about the general structure of the poll by means of briefing documents. The participants convene at a central location and are randomly assigned to small groups with trained moderators to deliberate issues of neighbourhood safety. The discussions are alternated with sessions in which competent experts and policy makers give their opinions (the order is reversed in the counterpart polls). In order to establish the final beliefs and values of the participants, the poll is concluded by a second survey. The basis of the analysis is formed, then, by these results together with the findings from the earlier survey and test results concerning control groups that have not participated in the deliberation.

The second, analytic subproject (*The Dynamics of Democratic Deliberation*) studies the relation between democratic deliberation and the establishment of common knowledge. It does so by developing a dynamic model of epistemic decision making which combines the logic of belief revision theory with the (hitherto static) models of judgement aggregation. The methods thus form a combination of logic and decision theory. The questions that will be examined form the analytic counterparts of the questions that are examined in the first subproject. Here, too, the focus is on the relation between characteristics of the deliberation process on the one hand, and the formation of beliefs and the appraisal of various policy proposals, on the other. However, rather than examining the effect of a *particular* deliberation process we here examine *in general* the procedural conditions that enhance the emergence of common knowledge and shared commitments.

The proposal is set up in such a way that each of the subprojects can be carried out in separation: there are no mutual dependencies. Together, however, they yield a unique complimentary perspective on democratic deliberation: the one empirical and practical, the other analytic and theoretical. In both subprojects, the focus is on the way different forms of democratic deliberation affect the formation of shared commitments and common knowledge with respect to policy proposals. On the 'input side' (the deliberation process), the relevant parameters to be distinguished are the order in which different kinds of information are provided, and the degree of generality of that information. On the 'output side' (the views the individuals will end up with after the deliberation), the distinction is between individual perceptions (beliefs) concerning factual matters such as levels of crime, and

individual (value) judgements concerning the appropriate policy measures. In both subprojects, this leads to four clusters of research questions. They pertain to:

- (i) the effects the order of presentation of information has on the formation of beliefs,
- (ii) the effects different types of information have on the formation of beliefs,
- (iii) the effect the order of presentation of information has on the valuation of policy alternatives,
- (iv) the effect different types of information have on the valuation of policy alternatives.

In the first subproject, the beliefs and valuations will specifically concern neighbourhood safety; in the second subproject, they are studied from a general and more abstract point of view.

The similarities between the research questions of the two subprojects give us the unique opportunity to compare results of two very different research methodologies, and rather than offering concrete predictions that could be tested by the first subproject, the second subproject provides insights in structural aspects of democratic deliberation. Furthermore, combining the two subprojects makes it possible to draft different kinds of policy recommendations: the one kind tailored to concrete policy issues concerning neighbourhood safety in the Netherlands, the other zooming in on the general preconditions for policy making and deliberation in democratic societies.

Originality and place in Contested Democracy programme

The proposed research project fits well in the third subprogramme of *Contested Democracy*, namely, the one on *Participation, Mobilisation, and Communication*. The project adds to the programme on *Contested Democracy* the multidisciplinary study of optimally truth-tracking forms of deliberation. The first subproject focuses on a specific, concrete issue—a case study of political deliberation on neighbourhood safety—while the second studies optimal dynamic forms of epistemic decision making at the more general level of larger scale institutional contexts.

Situated in the context of empirical work on deliberative polling and theoretical work on epistemic decision making, the project is highly innovative in a number of ways. It explores new terrain by investigating the truth-tracking potential of deliberative democracy in a context in which citizens have systematically distorted beliefs about neighbourhood safety. It is unique in developing a dynamic theory of epistemic decision making, and it breaks new ground by setting the theory to use in an institutional context. The combination of empirical investigations from communication theory on ‘deliberative polling’ with insights from public administration and methods from philosophy on dynamic epistemic decision making is new, and the project is the first to conduct a deliberative poll in the Netherlands.

The project is expected to contribute to discussions about neighbourhood safety in the Netherlands, as well as to debates on how to improve democratic deliberation in general, aiming especially to inform policy makers and policy researchers about procedural ways to optimise deliberation. A specific focus in this regard will be the assessment and improvement of deliberative instruments as used by the Algemene Rekenkamer (Dutch Supreme Audit Institution).

Organisation and institutional embedding of the research project

The project will be embedded in the Department of Ethics of the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Groningen. The first subproject will be carried out in cooperation with the Center for

Deliberative Democracy, Stanford University (Department of Communication Theory) as well as the Algemene Rekenkamer through the special chair of the Algemene Rekenkamer, to be instituted this year at the Tilburgse School voor Politiek en Bestuur (TSPB, Tilburg School of Politics and Public Administration) of the University of Tilburg. The second subproject will be carried out in cooperation with the Institute for Logic, Language, and Computation (University of Amsterdam) and the Center for the Study of Language and Information (Stanford University).

Research Team

<i>Main Applicant</i>	prof. dr. M. van Hees	philosophy, Groningen	philosophy
<i>Co-Applicants</i>	prof. dr. J. van Benthem	university professor, Amsterdam (UvA)	logic
		philosophy, Stanford	philosophy
	prof. dr. J. Fishkin	communication theory, Stanford	communication theory
	prof. dr. C. van Montfort	Algemene Rekenkamer, University of Tilburg	public administration

Dissemination, policy makers' involvement in execution and dissemination

Policy documents will be used as an instrument to announce the findings of the project to the public, focussing especially on the findings concerning neighbourhood safety. The project will produce recommendation reports to advise organisations how to improve deliberation about issues involving biased beliefs and, in cooperation with the TSPB (Tilburg School of Politics and Public Administration), will organise expert meetings on concrete and actual deliberative problems in the Netherlands.

There will be particular emphasis on the dissemination of the results to the general public, through communication via the public media such as radio and television interviews and op-ed articles in newspapers. In addition, an original website with the provisional title www.dutchdeliberation.nl will be set up to communicate about the deliberative poll on neighbourhood safety (first subproject) as well as the more general findings about the dynamics of deliberation (second subproject).

One co-applicant, prof. dr. C. van Montfort of the Algemene Rekenkamer and Tilburg School of Politics and Public Administration, Tilburg University, plays an important role in the formulation and execution of the first subproject as well as in the dissemination of results by means of the publication of policy documents. The Centrum voor Criminaliteitspreventie en Veiligheid (Centre for Security and the Prevention of Crime) as well as the Verwey-Jonker Institute will be involved in the dissemination of the results.

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