



Supporting representative democracy through local citizen deliberation

A concept to improve community participation in democracies.

November 2021

“It is worth keeping in mind that democracy isn’t just about elected or appointed officials in government. It is more than the clash of political parties in election contests. It is more than all of our institutions, nongovernmental as well as governmental, important as they are. Democracy is us—The People.”

~ “With’ David Mathews

Executive Summary

Our democracy faces a significant risk of crisis due to a lack of trust in politicians, governments, and institutions and an increasingly polarised community.

The combination of these phenomenon is making substantial reform by governments very difficult, and creating substantial risks to our system of democracy.

Giving citizens a way into the political process through large scale collective engagement methods offered by deliberative democracy offers a way forward. However, to date those with the fundamental task of giving citizens a way into democratic politics have to various extents failed to use these methods effectively.¹ There are several issues underpinning this failure including, a lack of understanding & knowledge of engagement practice, philosophical perspectives on representative democracy and bureaucratic structural constraints.

We know that both Australians and politicians want to address the problems of polarisation and distrust, however they have very different perspectives on 'how' to do it.

We think that one solution - which knits the needs of both parties - is to apply the principles of deliberative democracy within electorates; providing local members a new approach which aids how they represent their communities, whilst providing local community members with genuine & meaningful ways to participate in their democracy between elections.

¹ How Australian Federal Politicians would like to reform our democracy”
<https://www.democracy2025.gov.au/documents/Democracy2025-report5.pdf>

By creating local deliberative forums (“Voices of ... Forums”) elected members can better understand the place where their diverse communities can deliberate & agree on the way forward, providing the local member with important intelligence about how to meet their community’s diverse needs.

We are proposing a trial of the local voice forums in 4-6 electorates across the country – including a diverse cross section of political parties, jurisdictions, and federal/state MPs.

An evaluation of this trial will allow us to refine the approach and to develop a ‘kit’ for local members – to enable broad scale rollout of the approach, as well as the development of a training program to support electorate offices.

Background and Context

Forging an opportunity from the problem

Local Members want to represent the needs and interests of their communities.

On the face of it, this sounds simple enough, however it is of course challenging in any community because the views are not homogenous. It is also getting harder because our communities are also becoming increasingly polarised – with views moving to the right and the left of the centre.

Local members also most commonly only hear from loud voices when people are upset, it can be challenging to hear from the full diversity of the electorate.

Given this, (and due to simple logistical issues of representing such a significant group of people), it can be hard for local members to easily determine where the weight of the views of their community are or better yet, where their community might be able to find ‘agreement’ / common ground on a way forward. As it stands, local members hear different views from their communities and are left to either choose sides, guess at a possible middle ground, or not act at all. Local members use their best judgement, given their personal knowledge of their

community, to decide what is best. Sometimes this is enough, but often members feel that they would like to have a deeper level of understanding & insight.

There are also challenges associated with disparate levels of information / knowledge and understanding of the 'facts' or 'truth'. It is not uncommon for local members to be party to information (research, scientific analysis, etc) that most people don't have access to and hence they develop a different level of understanding than most of the community they represent.

Further amplifying these problems, is that we know Australians don't have high levels of trust in their parliamentarians- those very people who they elect every few to represent them!

In a recent study undertaken by the Museum of Australian Democracy (MOAD) and the Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis (IGPA), nearly 1500 Australians were surveyed to understand their trust in the political system and in our democracy.²

Key findings include:

- Satisfaction with our democracy is at its lowest level since 1996
- The trust we have in government and politicians is the lowest since 1993
- Baby boomers no longer trust their politicians
- People don't care who represents them
- We don't trust Federal, State or Local Governments – however of these three we trust local government more than the rest

These findings are reinforced by the 2019 Australian Electoral Study, which found

- Trust in government has reached its lowest level on record in 2019, with data covering a 50-year period since 1969.
- Trust in government has declined by nearly 20% since 2007.
- 56% of Australians believe that the government is run for 'a few big interests', while just 12% believe the government is run for 'all the people'.³

It is this combination of factors – a keenness from local members to reach a deeper level of connection and understanding of their communities and the need to improve trust and respect in the institutions of government that have spurred us to develop the concept we outline here.

² <https://www.moadoph.gov.au/blog/who-do-you-trust-to-run-the-country/>

³ Ian McCallister and Sarah Cameron, "The Australian Electoral Study 2019", <https://australianelectionstudy.org/wp-content/uploads/The-2019-Australian-Federal-Election-Results-from-the-Australian-Election-Study.pdf>

What do politicians want vs what Australians want?

A survey by the Museum of Australian Democracy of 98 Federal members of Parliament found that

- Federal MPs are sufficiently concerned about the trust divide between citizens and politicians to favour substantial actions to improve confidence in our institutions⁴.
- On balance Federal MP's want to adjust and strengthen the way that representative democracy works; to make parties better at performing their three roles in providing community linkages, effective governance, and democratic integrity.
- Our Federal political appear to have limited desire to open up the system to direct influence from the public. At the same time parliamentarians embrace other reforms that enhance the community-linkage role including: less voting on party lines based on manifesto promises and more free votes (46%)

Only 13.5% of Federal MPs thought citizens juries based on the criminal jury system and comprised of a random sample of up to 15 Australian citizens should be used to solve complex policy problems that the Australian Parliament can't fix.

The report concludes by stating that, ***“Historically, reform choices have been presented as a binary choice between reforms that strengthen the representative system of government and reforms that extend greater public participation. It is increasingly evident, however, that both Australian citizens and politicians think that participatory reforms can be used to bolster the legitimacy of representative democracy and enhance trust between government and citizen.”***

⁴“How Australian Federal Politicians would like to reform our democracy”
<https://www.democracy2025.gov.au/documents/Democracy2025-report5.pdf>

How does the field of deliberative democracy help?

Deliberative democratic processes involve - a diverse group of people having time to consider evidence (information, facts, perspectives) on an issue and come to a decision about what to do (judgement) ... and there is a commitment by the commissioning agent to respond.

Because of these features, deliberative democratic processes are particularly effective in:

1. **Addressing polarisation** – by bringing together people with diverse values/experiences in a positive, constructive environment and supporting them with information (research / facts / evidence). Deliberative processes help people to find a place they can agree (a middle ground).

This in turn provides greater legitimacy to make hard choices. These processes help policy makers to better understand policy priorities, the values and reasons behind them, to identify where consensus is and is not feasible, and to overcome political deadlock.⁵

2. **Building trust** – In relationships, a good way to start building trust is to demonstrate trust.⁶ So it can be expected that trust will be built where governments or leaders show faith and trust in their communities. Trust is also built where governments are willing to be open with information and communicate effectively and honestly. Involving communities in policy making is also cited as a solution to distrust. Central to deliberative engagement practice is government's demonstrating trust in communities, government being open with information (improved transparency) and honest communication on important policy issues, so it can be expected that deliberative practice is one useful tool for addressing trust issues.⁷ Unfortunately, there is limited specific research into whether deliberative processes build trust between governments and communities, however democracyCo have asked our own participants about their trust in the government when they come into the process and then about their levels of trust at the end and we note substantial improvements.

⁵ OECD, <https://www.oecd.org/gov/open-government/innovative-citizen-participation-new-democratic-institutions-catching-the-deliberative-wave-highlights.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/blog/trust-the-new-workplace-currency/201206/10-behaviors-demonstrate-trust>

⁷ Apolitical, https://apolitical.co/en/solution_article/trust-government-falling-can-stop

In addition, citizens are more likely to trust the decisions of people in their community or network over the decisions of politicians. So, trust can be built around the solutions on that issue being deliberated on by the deliberative forum.⁸ This will assist in building a social licence for reform on the issue being deliberated on.

3. **Addresses knowledge asymmetry** – by virtue of their position, members of parliament have access to more information than the public – and it is their job to make sure that they are across this information. On the other hand, the public are typically time poor and in part because of this most often aren't across the current research, data or facts on any given issue. Deliberative democratic practices equalise this knowledge asymmetry substantially – providing the public with access to the different perspectives, facts, research, and data in a way which is well organised and easily accessible, as well as quarantining time to adequately consider the issues.

A notable outcome of deliberative processes is that the outcomes or recommendations from the community involved in these processes are almost always strategic – taking a long-term view of the issue and the appropriate long-term solutions. In this way deliberative processes can help address the forces driving 'short termism' within governments.

The Method

So, let us co-create a solution.

We want to create a solution that strengthens our democracy from the ground up for local communities. One that supports considered dialogue between MP's and their constituents. One that builds on the system of representative democracy - better enabling MPs to represent their local communities with integrity and authenticity. One that informs parliamentary debate to enable trust and confidence to increase about our law-making process.

And we'll achieve this by focusing on local electorates and the incredible assets which reside in them.

Instead of community members complaining about mistrust and disengaging from politics (and from their democracy) we want to create an active role by strengthening how they work with their direct line to it – their local member.

And we think this can be done without making wholesale changes to our parliamentary system.

By bringing MPs and their constituents together to have a considered, ongoing dialogue, it will:

- Strengthen the bond between communities and their Member of Parliament

⁸ OECD, <https://www.oecd.org/gov/open-government/innovative-citizen-participation-new-democratic-institutions-catching-the-deliberative-wave-highlights.pdf>

- Deepen the understanding of what an electorate needs – identify the big issues which need government attention in a community
- Work through the ‘trade-offs’ around these issues – by deliberating with people with diverse views and insights
- Enable MP’s to better represent their communities – enabling them to better understand where their communities ‘sit’ on different issues, or gaining ‘instructions’ from them (where desired)

“We need to get more involved but they [government and politicians] don’t have time for us and our views. Apart from election time. Then they’re interested in us. Maybe that’s what needs to change. They need to be as interested in our views when they’ve been elected.”

~ First Time Voter⁹

Process at a glance

We are proposing that 20-40 citizens of the electorate are randomly selected to achieve diversity, meet with their local member for a period of 18 months (every 4-6 weeks).

The agenda for the group is set collaboratively – MP’s might request they provide advice on a topic that interests them (or which they know is going to be the subject of some debate in parliament) and/or they work together to identify electorate issues of note that the electorate would like to be represented on.

In setting the agenda there is an opportunity to use an electorate wide survey to help inform the group.

The goal is that the group will help to identify and work through issues of relevance to a local community – enabling MPs to take a collective, informed voice to Parliament.

⁹ http://www.governanceinstitute.edu.au/magma/media/upload/publication/408_Democracy100-report-IGPA.pdf

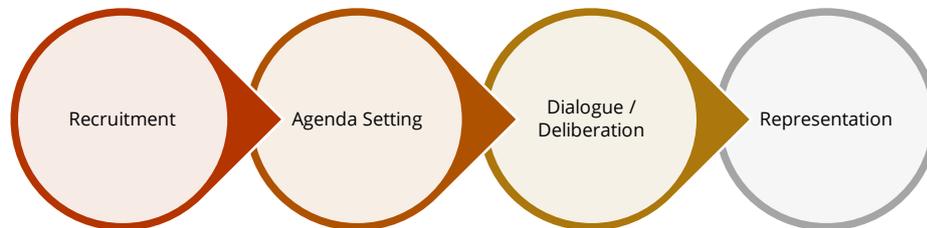
How this might benefit the local MP

We think that this approach will have a series of benefits and opportunities for the local MP including:

- Help them to deliver for their electorate
- Better enabling them to hear from the diversity of their electorate – and proactively understand what people are thinking – rather than just hearing after the fact (complaining)
- Build community cohesion – address polarisation on key issues in the community, improving the resilience of the community
- Confidence that when they go to Parliament the MP understands the breadth of where the community lies on an issue
- Demonstrate to the community that they are valued and that they are being open with them about the challenges and opportunities
- Provides an opportunity to demonstrate mutual trust – and secure a stronger mandate for action – where desired
- Opportunity to hear from voices they might not otherwise hear from proactively– open events hear from the same types of people (old / retired (because they have time) or grumpy/ frustrated (because they are disgruntled)
- Legacy – improving Australia’s democratic systems
- Leadership – establishes them as a leader amongst your peers – enabling you to set a new path for MP’s to follow

Process in detail

We propose a model which includes the following 4 steps



Recruitment

We would be looking to recruit a group (ie 20-40 people) which represent a diversity of the electorate.

A direct invitation would be sent to a randomly selected group accessed through the Members electoral roll. The process of random selection makes people feel special – like they have been chosen, encouraging them to get involved when they might otherwise not bother. The process of random selection helps to get a diverse group.

Using stratified random sampling, we would seek to establish a group diverse in age, gender, geographic location, cultural diversity (in line with local demographics), as well as a diversity of household environments and employment types. In addition to demographic sampling, we would also be aiming to establish a group which is diverse in values and perspectives. If required sampling could also include political persuasion.

Agenda Setting

The group will be governed by a term of reference which is signed off / endorsed by the group on its establishment.

The group would then enter into a process where it determines its forward agenda - supported by advice & input from the MP.

We recommend that the group is supported by deliberative facilitation techniques.

It is critical to point out here that this group's focus is not on small issues, complaints, or news bites – this groups' value and focus will be on 'working through' complex issues which the MP and the community identify together require a deeper amount of collaborative consideration.

We recommend that this agenda will identify 3-5 topics/issues of importance and will develop a program for deliberation on these, including a prioritisation process.

Dialogue / Deliberation

We recommend that the group meet 'regularly' (monthly / bimonthly), but we don't recommend lengthy breaks between meetings. Momentum is key and consistency will ensure that the MP and the community gets the most value from the process.

This facilitation approach will include:

- An evidence / learning phase – information, 'witnesses' and people with important perspectives can contribute
- A deliberation phase – the group 'identify and work through'
 - understand the issues,
 - identify the preferred outcome for their community
 - identify the key trade-offs which need to be worked through, and work through them (either on their own or by testing solutions with the community)
- A consensus exercise + recommendations finalised

Facilitators would need to step back from the process as the group determines its ability to self-direct through this deliberative process. This 'stepping back' will be supported by a handbook, tailored for them and the MP which includes details about methods to deliberate effectively – facilitation tips and approaches, discussion structures, what to do when you can't agree and so on.

Representation

Once complete, the MP undertakes their elected representative role informed and aware of the community's needs and expectations of them

What next - making it happen

Are you interested in this concept? Either because you are standing for parliament, are a member of parliament or you are interested in supporting this initiative - We want to hear from you!

Please contact either Emily Jenke or Emma Fletcher on

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We are hoping that together we can make this happen!