

## Concerns About Citizens' Abilities

*15 June, 2018*

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*This paper draws lessons from newDemocracy's experiences operating various citizens' juries in Australia including, the South Australia Nuclear Fuel Cycle, Democracy in Geelong, and Infrastructure Victoria's 30 Year Plan.*

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*\* newDemocracy is an independent, non-partisan research and development organisation. We aim to discover, develop, demonstrate, and promote complementary alternatives which will restore trust in public decision making. These R&D notes are discoveries and reflections that we are documenting in order to share what we learn and stimulate further research and development.*

## Concern's About Citizens' Abilities

### ***What is the question?***

Mini-publics are typically convened to deliberate on complex or complicated issues (See, [Forms of mini-publics](#)). During a research project commissioned by newDemocracy, citizens were asked about the appropriateness of this form of citizen involvement in decision making (See, [Pollinate survey](#)). They indicated strong support for citizens' juries, but a notable minority expressed concerns about their fellow citizens' capabilities. Are people smart enough, and willing enough, to do this important work? Won't they be manipulated or corrupted?

### ***What are the concerns?***

In short, the concerns were these: (1) respondents cast doubt on citizens' ability to handle vast amounts of technical or budgetary data; (2) they were worried that randomly-selected citizens would not have access to the right information; and (3) they suspected that these citizens would be vulnerable to manipulation or corruption (weaknesses that respondents believed are endemic among politicians). Of less concern was (4) apathy—that citizens would be unlikely to give their time for such pursuits.

The newDemocracy Foundation has extensive experience with mini-publics—we know how well they work and how capable citizens are. Our research has also uncovered limitations of the approach, enabling us to continually learn from experience. newDemocracy adopts an action research approach, in order to refine and benefit future projects. We have considerable evidence at our fingertips and feel confident in addressing each of these concerns and offering practical examples of the methods we use.

### ***Citizens ability to handle complexity***

It is understandable that people might doubt that everyday citizens could handle very complicated financial, scientific, or infrastructure matters. Topics like these are unlikely to be the subject of their daily reading or conversing, and when they are, citizens may be encountering the type of fact-free tone that can be found too often in media comments. If it's a diverse group, such as a citizens' jury, not all would have tertiary education and some will, inevitably, be more intelligent than others. It may be counter-intuitive, but none of these are impediments for an effective mini-public.

One may doubt the *individual* competence of particular citizens to handle complexity, but it is *group* competence that really matters (See, [Group diversity trumps ability](#)). Diversity is an essential aspect of a group's ability to deal with complexity because collective intelligence can out-strip one person's reasoning, or even the thinking done by a group of like-minded people (Hartz-Karp & Carson, 2013). Scholars are investigating the superiority of cognitive diversity over ability, indicating that when problem-solving, or making predictions, diversity matters (see, for example, Landemore, 2012, or Page, 2007). newDemocracy seeks a mix of abilities and talents, and random selection delivers that.

Yes, a diverse group is likely to include those who know very little (at first), but the naïve questioner or devil's-advocate can make an extremely useful contribution throughout a public deliberation. Further, we are aware of the untapped potential of a diverse group and have experimented with many ways to avoid the traps that groups can fall into, e.g. groupthink. We have developed and now routinely use critical thinking exercises to prepare

group members for the difficult work of interrogating expert knowledge (See, [Critical thinking](#)).

Mini-publics delve deeply into a topic or issue; they are not skimming across its surface. Our mini-publics are engaged in public *judgement*, not a collection of public *opinion*. They are not opinion polls or focus groups. A mini-public is convened over many days. Participants listen to experts of their own choosing. This ‘judgement over opinion’ was very evident during the South Australia jury which looked at nuclear waste storage (See, [Learnings from the South Australia Nuclear Fuel Cycle Jury](#)). Jurors worked in small groups that regularly rotated so that minds did not shut down among like-minded people. Instead, jurors checked facts, and identified gaps in their knowledge or understanding. Because of such deliberative citizen involvement in the policy process, newDemocracy sees such public deliberations as an antidote to the populist ‘form of politics that promises unworkably simplistic solutions to complex problems’ (Hartcher, 2017).

newDemocracy has been involved with projects that have dealt with extremely complex matters: [energy or water use](#), [nuclear waste storage](#), [infrastructure](#), local governance, and [government budgets](#), including a 10-year, \$4billion one (See, [City of Melbourne](#)). We have no doubt that a diverse sample of a population can handle complicated or complex matters.

### ***Access to sufficient information***

It makes sense to be sceptical about access to information. Observers and those selected for mini-publics should be asking: Who decides what information will be available and how much is enough? Who chooses expert speakers?

Here’s how a mini-public usually works:

Baseline information is provided, most commonly by the commissioning authority such as a local government, or sometimes by an independent third party, such as the Jefferson Center (USA) who prepared a briefing booklet for the South Australian nuclear jury. Often a group of stakeholders or special interest groups will advise which experts should be sought to provide a comprehensive overview of the issue and also provide their own position responding to the remit. Later the group itself will request particular experts who can answer specific questions (See, [Choosing experts](#)). This is an important point which should be emphasised: jurors can select experts they wish to hear from. The group is not dependent on an ‘authority’ making those decisions. Other deliberative models give greater scope to activist interests working together to prepare competing responses for consideration by a randomly-selected group.

As mentioned, newDemocracy and facilitators who support mini-publics use exercises in critical thinking to equip inexperienced citizens with methods for interrogation of expert knowledge. The citizens quickly become critical inquirers.

newDemocracy is also currently testing ways to expose *personal* or cognitive biases of participants at the start of mini-publics to develop an enhanced awareness of the impediments to hearing from experts (See, [Hearing from experts](#)). Of course, there is no such thing as an absence of bias when it comes to presentations by experts. What is important is to ‘spot the bias’ (Carson, 2013).

Further, a group comes to appreciate that there is no 'one perfect source' of information on which to base a decision; instead there is usually a realisation that multiple and diverse sources are essential.

### ***Vulnerability to corruption or manipulation***

People see daily examples from around the world of political corruption. Cynicism about vulnerability to corruption is entirely rational. So, too, is concern that randomly-selected citizens could be manipulated by unscrupulous organisers or facilitators. These concerns can be addressed.

Having a diverse, randomly-selected group means that the people who are gathered are motivated by an interest in deliberating on an important topic. They want to do this for both the common good and their own self-interest. Identification with the group happens fairly quickly as they listen to the experiences of others, and *personal* preferences soon expand to encompass *public* interest. Participants start to question who else will benefit or be affected negatively by a decision they might make.

Supporting their deliberations is a facilitator, and the group is aware that this role is meant to aid its work, not to direct it, or impede it. A group is remarkably good at 'sniffing out' any subtle or unconscious manipulation by either the facilitator or organisers and will not hold back in questioning this. This includes the way the initial remit is framed. Facilitators work with these questions and ensure that they are answered before enabling the group to find its own way.

Mini-publics are open to the public. There is usually a 'public gallery' from which interested parties can observe presentations by experts and questioning of those experts. In newDemocracy's experience any cynicism by special interest groups is usually allayed when they watch the process. They quickly realise that citizens, in a group deliberation, are well-equipped to handle complicated matters and their judgement is taken more seriously than the lobbying of an interest group. Advocates are not absent from public deliberations, they simply play a different role—as expert speakers, informing the randomly-selected group. Some scholars have condemned this devaluing of special interest groups (see, for example, Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012) but members of special interest groups who observe mini-publics overseen by newDemocracy have appreciated the value of a miniature-population making recommendations.

It is difficult to imagine that an entire group could be corrupted or bought. No-one knows who they are until day one of deliberations. There is so much small group activity that it would surely become very evident if there was a sudden shift in attitude or worldview to indicate that their view had been bought. Views *do* change, of course, but participants discuss those shifts, which typically occur because of new information that has been heard or read. It may be possible for corruption to occur, but newDemocracy has never seen it.

### ***Apathy***

There are regular reminders that many citizens don't care—along with claims that they would not vote unless it was compulsory. Citizens are busy people, and they can be, understandably, more concerned about their own backyards than the common good, particularly when they have few opportunities for their voices to be heard. In combination

with cynicism about the political process and frustration at trying to influence it, it seems to make sense to address matters closer to home, matters over which citizens can exercise far more control.

So, it may be a surprise to find that more than a third of Australians from across the country who received an invitation to participate in the lengthy Australian Citizens’ Parliament in Canberra accepted the invitation (Lubensky & Carson, 2013) (See, [Australian Citizens’ Parliament](#)). Citizens are unused to being asked to participate in a meaningful deliberation (“meaningful” being when they believe their involvement is likely to make a difference). Citizens are more used to an open call for their opinion or attendance at a rowdy public meeting from which they stay away in droves. One could liken this absence of enthusiasm for civic engagement to an unused muscle, atrophied through lack of use. Research has shown that people become more politically efficacious as a result of deliberating and are overwhelmingly in favour of public deliberations once they have experienced them (Christensen et al, 2017; Gastil & Dillard, 1999), and even if they have not.

Mini-publics are intensive, over many days, spread over many weeks, at times designed to suit otherwise-busy participants. Mini-publics are not permanent committees that require considerable, ongoing time commitment. Having participated, citizens consider a mini-public as a most worthwhile pursuit. In summary, people do want to be involved and respond to invitations once assured that (a) the public deliberation will run over a fixed period, (b) it will have clear authority—making their attendance worthwhile, and (c) they will be deliberating with others who are equally reasonable and not the rabble rousers that they may have encountered at public meetings.

### **Finally**

In summary, the common concerns about the ability of randomly-selected citizens to address hard technical questions are understandable and rational. However, newDemocracy has found strategies to address these concerns. We have tested mini-publics on multiple occasions over many years. We are confident that mini-publics can be used for public decision making for the benefit of all.

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