

## More or Less: The Challenge of Scale

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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.*

## More or Less: The Challenge of Scale

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

Is it true that having *more* responses during community engagement equates to a better level of representation and more effective inclusion of community voice in a decision? Aren't thousands of items of input in relation to a vexed issue preferable to tens or hundreds? Won't *more* give a decision-maker a better understanding of what the public really wants?

### ***What is a typical viewpoint for a decision maker?***

It's understandable that a decision maker believes that hearing from more people, even thousands of people, is going to deliver more information and provide a *better* gauge of a population's position on an issue. Some well-intentioned reformers advocate for 'click to express an opinion' as a new form of democracy, as a solution to a flawed representative system.

It is also possible that this could be converted into a prediction for a vote in the next election—and that makes numbers particularly alluring. However, while superficially appealing, current practices for large numbers are seen as a very inaccurate electoral barometer.

Nevertheless, given the scale of a nation's (or even a local) population, a poll or a survey seems like a practical way to maximise input in order to gauge a collective view.

### ***What's wrong with this viewpoint?***

Collecting thousands of opinions equates to, well, thousands of disparate opinions—sometimes uninformed, almost-always passionate. It is a noisy collection of either top-of-the-head responses or entrenched views.

Perhaps more importantly, it is an unrepresentative sample. It is a sample of those who are interested and willing to respond. It's like asking bowlers at a bowling alley whether there should be more or fewer bowling alleys and whether the state should subsidise operating them. Only 10-pin bowlers will respond to this, and 10,000 people supporting this expenditure will be highly unrepresentative of the view held across the population about how public money should be prioritised and spent. Unfortunately, despite its unrepresentative nature and even though it is deeply flawed, this method has become the norm.

Daniel Yankelovitch (1991, 1999) writes about the important distinction between public *opinion* and public *judgment*. Consider why we do not use opinion polls for questions of guilt or innocence in a criminal court – we require that people hear a minimum of information from a diversity of sources before exploring jointly the reason/s for their collective judgment. However, we can see no evidence of a Department or Minister making this distinction between opinion and judgment—a distinction that newDemocracy considers is imperative for evidence-based decision making. Citizens have a right to be heard, but there comes with it an obligation to inform oneself and to consider challenges such as trade-offs.

The good news is that there is a way to resolve this challenge. We need only find a microcosm of a population, bring them together to seek information, allow them to deliberate together, and to form a reasoned, collective judgement. Finding this population-in-miniature will require random selection which typically occurs in two rounds: (1) invitations are sent to a random sample of the whole population, asking if the recipient is interested in participating,

and requesting some basic demographic information (usually age, sex, location, education level), then (2) a random selection occurs from those interested people, filling demographic quotas until the entire group resembles the wider population based on the Census profile.

When opinions are sought online, the issue is inevitably simplified. This has unfortunate consequences. Often the wrong question is asked. Instead of being asked ‘Are you okay if we place this highway here?’ people could better spend that time deliberating on the question: ‘How can we satisfy the transport needs of people in your region?’. As long as people solve the underlying problem within agreed parameters (e.g. time and budget), does the decision-maker care if this is a new highway or not? People are reasonable and capable: if the power line is the most efficient solution they will make this recommendation and stand behind this solution with the wider community.

Of course, there is an added problem with this example. Government departments and functions are silos. One department responsible for building roads, another in charge of public transport or the environment. This arrangement can reinforce and exacerbate the default to simplify citizens’ input via opinion polls or focus groups.

Former lord mayor of Brisbane (2004-2011) and premier of Queensland (2012-2015), Campbell Newman also uses the analogy of the criminal jury:

I’ve sat in public office and understand the reality that you can ignore polls for only so long. Suggesting politicians ignore polls is empty advice: they can’t. To be effective we need to replace them with something that is a better proxy for what the public thinks.

“Thinks” is the operative word here. Imagine you or I are facing trial on a serious charge. Would we be happy to rely on a poll of 1000 people? Or would we prefer that a smaller sample of people heard from an array of expert views, discussed them to identify the most reliable evidence, then worked to see if they could find common ground? Yes, we would take the jury every time. Why, then, do we take the poll method for effectively dictating how we spend billions in public money or decide whether to allow drilling for natural gas? (Newman, 2017)

### ***Where’s the evidence?***

The Irish Constitutional Convention is a very successful example of deliberative democracy. However, its attempt to broaden input failed dismally (See, [Irish Constitutional Convention](#)). 13,000 submissions were received and the Secretariat’s attempt to deal sensitively with all input was unsuccessful, despite attempts to code or theme them, because they were hampered by the large numbers. There were many duplications because of the prevalence of ‘form letters’ and ultimately, the submissions were of little value. Thankfully, the randomly-selected participants in the Convention were able to deliberate well without that huge flood of opinion.

In Australia, a multi-billion-dollar road project faced a similar dilemma. WestConnex achieved ~15,000 comments (overwhelmingly opposing the project). If sheer numbers were all that mattered in crafting effective public input, this would have been a triumph of public consultation. In reality, however, people on both sides of the issue felt largely unheard, because, from a citizen’s perspective, there was minimal impact on the project as a result of providing this feedback, while from a NSW Government (political and bureaucracy) perspective, the feedback was uninformed and a predictable NIMBY reflex not representative

of the views held across the wider city. This should act as a warning to abandon this approach and apply the principles of deliberation – especially involving representative samples from the community, but also creating structures which allow and encourage people to hear from multiple sources.

If citizens are brought into the discussion early and are assured that their recommendations will be taken seriously, they are willing to deliberate effectively together, to consider trade-offs and to stand alongside decision makers and defend their reasoning. This has happened regularly with projects that newDemocracy has designed (See, [Projects and Advice](#)).

***Further information***

Newman, C (2017) “Democracy is broken but we can fix it with real people power”, *The Australian*, 29 June, Accessed 29 June 2017

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/democracy-is-broken-but-we-can-fix-it-with-real-people-power/news-story/b9e768323f25ec9b8d4568475bf38fef>

Yankelovitch, D. (1991) *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Yankelovitch, D. (1999) *Magic of Dialogue*, Allen & Unwin