newDEMOCRACY

Incorporating deliberative methods to strengthen the *Community Independents* movement

22 February 2022

Lyn Carson

Research Director, The newDemocracy Foundation
lyn.carson@newdemocracy.com.au

Incorporating deliberative methods to strengthen the *Community Independents* movement

What is the question?

How can deliberative methods strengthen the *Community Independents* movement? (e.g., Voices of…)

Background

The rise of community-supported independent candidates for elected office in Australia appears to result from dissatisfaction with the political system and a desire to change how politics operates at a local community level. This emphasis on 'localisation' is arguably where both major parties have failed to keep pace and seen membership levels and share of the primary vote fall as a result.

Independents face considerable barriers in Australia. Among those are funding and a mildly negative bias by the media (e.g., an emphasis on two-party preferred voting, inferring that any votes outside of that are effectively wasted). Having seen a successful independent candidate emerge in Indi (formerly a safe Liberal seat), others are seeing that such an approach can be repeatable, standardised and show a way to change the political landscape away from major parties and potentially to genuine democratic reform. The most prominent such approach appears to be emerging in the *Voices* movement.

Voices groups are being recognised as a growing political force in Australia with independent candidates standing in local, state, and federal elections. For example, there are now at least 30 *Voices* groups some of which have selected their candidates, declaring their intention to stand in the forthcoming 2022 federal election. They include the *Voices of Kooyong, Voices of North Sydney, Voices of Mackellar, and Voices for Indi* with more being identified for state and local government elections.

Criticism has been made that *Voices* candidates are solely targeting Liberal-held seats on the Right of politics. It is a trend to be followed over time to see if similar groups emerge targeting ALP seats following a period of ALP government. This would offer evidence behind the idea that any new political competitor is largely motivated by dissatisfaction with the government of the day, so a skew of this kind is inevitable. It is worth noting that The Greens establishment as a national party occurred in 1992 after nine years of an ALP government.

This recent emergence of community independents looks different from the independents that have self-nominated in the past and offers an opportunity to combine two forms of democratic innovation: *Voices* and deliberative democracy

What role could deliberative democracy play?

There are three areas where deliberative democracy and its methods have the potential to strengthen the *Voices* movements:
   a) the candidate pre-selection process,
   b) agenda setting,
   c) what role the MP can secure for citizens in the electorate.

Candidate pre-selection: How should candidates for political office be pre-selected? In particular, how can pre-selection be a sufficiently robust method so that candidates cannot

be accused of being either a stooge for a political party or self-selected to advance their own individual interests? Can we offer a regular member of any community an opportunity to be a candidate rather than someone with a recognisable name? How can a community best 'own' their local candidate?

Agenda-setting: How should agendas be set? In particular, how can an agenda be established before and after an election that genuinely reflects the needs and wishes of any local community? How can a large group of community members be heard and find agreement on issues for their candidate to champion?

Constituent role after elections: What role (if any) should constituents play after elections? In particular, is there a role for citizens post-election that can lead to real support and accountability of an elected member of parliament or local council?

What are the usual answers, and why are they insufficient?

Candidate pre-selection

Traditionally, party candidates are chosen by ballots of branch party members, by panels or committees elected by the state party, or by a combination of these. Independents typically self-nominate, with some public media profile or personal platform seemingly being a prerequisite.

In Australia, the lack of diversity among MPs and local councillors (age, gender, background) indicates that pre-selection for a political party is skewed toward advisors, staff, or influential party members. Occasionally a well-known person might also be urged to run for office if the electorate is hanging on by a narrow margin.

Independent candidates are typically not so different. They are usually high-profile people from the political-media class who have risen to popularity through their role in their community or as a celebrity (See, [Zali Steggall](#) and [Allegra Spender](#)). Sometimes this is built on rising to the national level from the ranks of local or state governments (See, [Ted Mack](#) and [Tony Windsor](#)).

When parliaments and local councils lack diversity, they reflect a narrow field of experience. Diversity strengthens decision making so this is to be encouraged to resolve pressing issues (See, Landemore 2012, and [Diversity Trumps Ability](#)). Furthermore, self-selection runs the danger of replicating existing powerful elites. Self-selected candidates may have tenuous links to their communities because of their small supporter base – though this will have an impact on their electability and so a balance is struck.

Agenda-setting

Party selections and self-selection lead not just to a lack of diversity in the ranks but also narrow agendas. If party-selected, the candidate, MP or councillor must follow the party line. This adherence to the party line means, for example, that if a Coalition MP thinks a national commission against corruption is necessary, and this position reflects the MP's community's view, but the MP's party is opposed, the MP often has no choice but to support the party. Similarly, the Gillard government took a position that there would be no change to the Marriage Act, which required MPs to toe the line regardless of the view of their local community.

Self-selected independent candidates will inevitably adhere to the passionate cause that led to their self-nomination, with the rest of their agenda often determined by their parliamentary relationships and community feedback.

This inflexibility for individual party members is being used as a major argument by *Voices* candidates to encourage people to vote beyond traditional parties. They respond to the real disconnect between communities and their political leaders. For example, a *Voices* candidate can provide strong evidence that members of parliament who espouse support for strong action on climate change are duty-bound by the party and have voted consistently along party lines and have defied their electorate's wishes (See, [Sophie Scamps on Jason Falinski](#)). Similarly, individual members within the ALP might champion higher levels of welfare but vote consistently with the more limited budget put forward by their Shadow Cabinet.

In Australia, there is little evidence of policy ideas (or even the importance of a topic) being generated through robust methods that are derived from local party branches or individual electorates and being aired by a Minister or Shadow Minister.

Constituent role after elections

The usual role for constituents after elections is "practically none." After an election, MPs and local (party) councillors are obliged to attend branch meetings which attract very few party members. MPs attend and listen to those loudest voices, drawn from within a membership pool that is no longer representative of the population. MPs also pay close attention to the results of uninformed, top-of-mind opinions extracted via opinion polls. Petitions and constituent correspondence have a minimal impact unless paired with well-resourced campaigns. The decreased levels of trust in Australian politics can be attributed to this disconnect (Edelman 2018). It is also true that some party MPs would like to do more active constituency work, but they find that the party brand gets in the way of forming authentic connections.

What new answers have Voices groups provided, and why are they better?

Candidate pre-selection

Voices candidates have a different trajectory. They are usually community-selected, not self-selected or party-selected—some being more democratic than others, but they share an espoused goal: that the candidate should emerge from a community-led process with ample opportunities for any community member to participate.

Cathy McGowan set the pattern in 2013 with *Voices for Indi* (she represented the electorate of Indi in the Australian Parliament 2013-2019, having had previous experience as an advisor to Liberal MP Ewen Cameron). Indi's approach has been emulated closely by some—for example, her successor Helen Haines—but not others who may have erred more on the side of self-nomination, then set about gathering support, rather as independents candidates have in the past. Indi used kitchen table conversations (KTC) (See, [Victorian Women's Trust](#)) and more until it became uncontested that McGowan was the most suitable candidate.

One glaring difference between the selection of *Voices* candidates and those from political parties is the number of their *active* supporters within their electorate. Groups that are coalescing around the *Voices* movement have far greater numbers than political parties can currently muster in any given location. An individual electorate for a *Voices* candidate

typically has 300-500 *active* people who are willing to letter-box drop or hand out voting slips for an election (See, [Zali Steggall](#)). In contrast, a political party is likely to attract only a handful of people to a party meeting in an electorate and may be forced to pay people to do the leg work for an election. This is good for any pre-selection method, to have such a large and diverse pool of possible candidates. It opens candidacy up to those who are not narcissistic or self-promoting but instead have a genuine commitment to reflecting their community's views, not their own.

There are minor parties that have a more grassroots orientation—for example, The Greens—but even minor parties are not community-led. *Voices* groups devolve power to local hubs whereas The Greens are very top-down (See, [ACT Greens bylaws for preselection](#)).

Agenda-setting

Community independents may or may not have narrow policy objectives—but these can be best identified by the entire community through a representative sample. To date, because there are few *elected* independents, it is unclear how closely their agenda is being set by their community beyond their initial candidacy except through informal conversations with supporters and the use of social media.

Constituent role after elections

Indi's current elected representative, Dr Helen Haines, continues to involve her community in the activities of the Parliament. Unlike party politicians, she takes a strong stance on accountability and ongoing community involvement: publishing her voting record, explaining her decisions, relating those decisions to her community's needs, and drawing upon an impressive troupe of volunteers (Hendriks et al 2020).

Though this is representative of one of the *Voices* groups, they do not all follow the exact same processes and so the role of constituents may vary.

How could these new approaches be further improved using deliberative methods?

As a community-led movement, community independents like *Voices* may see value in starting with agenda-setting and then also taking time to define the qualities one would wish to see in a candidate. With this known, they are then able to seek a candidate best aligned to these priorities. Some are already using this approach which should become standard practice. Prioritising the selection of candidates over agenda-setting is a flaw in our current system of representative government and could be rectified here.

Agenda-setting

Agenda setting is more than the expression of opinion, usually a mere for/against response to proffered ideas. Agenda setting is about policy direction and should precede any engagement with a community to determine a policy's support. What does each community care about, what are its pressing goals, what are the current representatives ignoring, or perhaps not ignoring but are effectively constrained?

The City of Madrid experimented with one way of doing agenda-setting differently (See, [Learnings from Madrid](#)). What if a community offers an online platform for ideas from the entire community for a prospective candidate to pursue? A randomly selected sample of

that community could use a deliberative method to weigh up the strengths and weaknesses of that input and determine the best ideas for a candidate to establish a policy platform.

Picture 20-24 people, drawn at random in a Democratic Lottery which is a rough match to the Census. One half will be *Voices* members, and another half from the wider community – an act to reach out to the next layer of people who are interested in the world around them but turned off by traditional mechanisms of politics. They work together for 4-5 Saturdays spaced a fortnight apart to weigh up the ideas that have come in from the community, and subject them to fact-checking and basic costing as they seek to find common ground on a shortlist to be presented to the candidate. This would come with their reasoning for prioritising those and the evidence they relied on to reach the decision. This sees a substantial part of the opaque 'backroom' part of politics brought out into the open.

An agenda can be formulated using other deliberative methods and has been in some locations. Kitchen table conversations provide one method for doing so but there are others: for example, listening posts, citizens' juries, world café, wisdom councils, street corner gatherings, online deliberations and many more (OECD 2020).

When a citizens' jury, as one example, is convened via a democratic lottery among all constituents in a community it could follow this format: what qualities do we want from a candidate, what do we care about most, how would we find the right candidate who would represent our interest effectively throughout their tenure? How can the community support them and hold them accountable?

Candidate pre-selection

The desired pre-selection model aims to offer a fair chance to everyday people who lack a traditional made-for-politics background in the media or advocacy while providing a structure where those people can be drafted in if that is the desire of a given local community.

Having first tuned in to the community's priorities, candidates will begin to emerge. The process should not start with a self-selected candidate. It becomes evident who strongly supports the community's agenda and is dedicated to being continually answerable to that community. Throughout this early organising and agenda-setting phase, suggestions for prospective candidates can be requested and may ultimately be, sometimes reluctantly, encouraged to nominate.

This method comes some way toward overcoming the likelihood that a political advisor will be pre-selected. This is evident in the *Voices* movement, which is fielding candidates, almost all women to date, among them a doctor, economist, lawyer, businesswoman, broadcaster, community organiser and more, delivering much-needed diversity to parliaments and local councils, albeit professional women chosen with the intent that they contrast against male Liberal party opponents.

Given that this is the start-up phase for the *Voices* movement it is no surprise that some have erred toward name recognition and the professional class. In time, more grassroots pre-selection is likely to occur and is to be encouraged, leading to more diverse candidates. Though this depends heavily on their electability.

A deliberative approach could see more potential candidates nominate and come from non-political careers. The community should own this selection process if trust is to be built. Only then will the community back that candidate through their vote in the election.

One way of avoiding a tap-on-the-shoulder situation would be to call for availability from the entire community: who is available to be nominated? This would avoid the search for a 'brand name' and uncover the enormous potential that exists in any community among people who would be excluded from party nomination because they lack such influence.

Imagine starting with kitchen table conversations and/or other community gatherings until a shortlist of potential candidates is agreed upon. Then a citizens' jury/assembly is convened to decide on the candidate, with jurors drawn from the *entire* community. The potential candidates could offer reasons for their election, and others could offer their support or opposition.

The big advantage is that decision making is shared with a genuine cross-section of the community, not just the group which might have been most active in identifying a candidate and therefore coalesces prematurely around a single candidate. The latter could be in danger of replicating existing, narrow party selection processes. By drawing in disparate voices using a democratic lottery and lengthy deliberation, the result is likely to lead to stronger community support. This will be essential if the candidate is to genuinely reflect their community and, later, to stay connected with their community.

Constituent role after elections

Once a candidate is elected through the formal election process there will be opportunities to repeat these deliberative processes: helping an elected representative refine an agenda, undertaking research for the MP, offering ideas about future actions, developing policy options and more.

Given that independents lack the resources available to government representatives, it will be important to work toward the institutionalisation of better deliberative methods. Elected candidates could lobby for deliberative methods as a routine way a representative does their business—for the benefit of all. For example:

a) use a deliberative process for a hard issue as a single trial (imagine deliberation on tax reform or housing affordability or responses to a changing climate)
b) seek a commitment to trial a more permanent structural approach (Belgium, for example, offers a model for a people's panel that runs alongside a formal body)
c) ask that areas where the public perceives a conflict (reviewing the rules of democracy – donations to candidates and parties, allocation of government grants, planning decisions, the structure of a corruption commission)
d) use this as an opportunity for all MPs to drive democratic reform, using constituent input to improve trust in government.

Finally…

The *Voices* project has been well funded by a wealthy individual, Simon Holmes a Court, who has an interest in stronger policies to address climate change, but it has expanded beyond that single issue and that funding source. Funding is now being acquired through multiple donors, many via crowdfunding and local fundraising. It will be of interest to continue to measure the size and breadth of donations secured.

Tony Windsor, a former independent representative offers advice about (1) avoiding how-to-vote recommendations (Windsor 2021) and (2) only ever guaranteeing to abide by the community's needs, not any commitment to vote with a particular party once in office—to be truly independent of political parties.

As a movement matures, it strengthens and grows. This has occurred in the field of deliberative democracy: for example, the movement's current attention to defining minimum standards and best practice principles. This was accelerated by the creation of a network (See, Democracy R&D). The *Voices* movement could emulate this by creating a network to begin to discuss minimum standards among the emerging crop of independents. Informal networks have already begun to emerge, for example, the Community Independents Project (See, CIP). A strong network of loose affiliates is an effective place to share research and to evaluate and refine various practices.

The *Voices* model is a clear improvement on current practices of political parties because of the emphasis on community interaction, particularly in rural and regional areas like Indi where a shared sense of place is evident. In contrast, political party membership is in decline and its representatives are attracting criticism for their tendency to adhere to a party-line over faithfully acting on their constituents' views. Currently, this particularly affects issues such commissions against corruption, action of climate change, and diversity in parliaments. Inaction on these issues is galvanising an alternative approach that can only be enhanced using robust deliberative methods.

References

ACT Greens bylaws https://greens.org.au/sites/default/files/2018-
06/6._Preselection_of_candidates_2018.pdf

CIP (Community Independents Project) https://communityindependents.com.au

Edelman (2018), *Edelman Trust Barometer 2018* https://www.edelman.com/trust/2018-
trust-barometer

Hendriks, Carolyn M., Ercan, Selena A., & Boswell, John (2020). *Mending democracy:
Democratic repair in disconnected times*. Oxford University Press, USA.

Independent voices for the Senate (https://independentvoices4senate.org)

Landemore, H. E. (2012). Why the many are smarter than the few and why it matters.
Journal of Deliberative Democracy. 8(1) doi: https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.129

OECD (2020) Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the
Deliberative Wave, OECD Publishing, Paris
https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/innovative-citizen-participation-and-new-
democratic-institutions_339306da-en

Victorian Women's Trust https://www.vwt.org.au/projects/kitchen-table-conversations/

Voice for Indi (https://voicesforindi.com)

"Voices of" ignites 30 independent movements across Australia
https://www.michaelwest.com.au/voices-of-ignites-30-independent-movements-across-
australia/ Michael West Media

Windsor, Tony (2021) "A letter to future community independents", *The Saturday Paper,* 11-
17 December