



Changes in Public Opinion After A Public-Deliberation Event

LES CHANGEMENTS DANS L'OPINION PUBLIQUE APRES UN EVENEMENT DE LA DELIBERATION DU PUBLIQUE

MAO Yuping^{1,*}; Marco Adria²

¹Ph.D., Assistant Professor. Department of Media and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands

²Ph.D., Professor. Graduate Program of Communications and Technology, University of Alberta, Canada

*Corresponding author.

Address: Erasmus University, L.2-39, P. O. Box 1738, NL-3000 DR Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

E-mail: mao@eshcc.eur.nl

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Abstract

This paper addresses a question related to the increasing interest in using new methods for aspiring to the democratic ideal of public involvement in governance. Previous research has examined the influence of jury deliberation in the justice system and found an increase in and reinforcement of civic attitudes about citizenship for jury deliberators themselves but not for the larger public. This paper reports on public opinion before and after a public-deliberation event ("Citizen Panel") in a major Canadian city. A randomly selected group of 5,000 citizens were asked about (a) the value of public deliberation for gathering informed input into major decisions to be made by the municipal government, and (b) the substantive issues that were discussed in the Citizen Panel. Respondents' willingness to participate in a future public-deliberation event increased in strength from the pre- to post-survey, suggesting that citizens who gained knowledge about the purposes and goals of public deliberation were more likely to be willing to participate.

Key words: Citizen Opinion; Citizen Panel; Public Deliberation; Public Involvement

Résumé

Ce document aborde une question liée à l'intérêt croissant pour l'utilisation de nouvelles méthodes pour les aspirants à l'idéal démocratique de la participation publique dans la gouvernance. Des recherches antérieures ont examiné

l'influence des délibérations du jury dans le système de justice et a trouvé une augmentation et le renforcement des attitudes civiques sur la citoyenneté pour eux-mêmes à délibérer le jury, mais pas pour le grand public. Ce document porte sur l'opinion publique avant et après un événement public de délibération («Panel Citoyen») dans une grande ville canadienne. Un groupe choisi au hasard de 5000 citoyens ont été interrogés sur (a) la valeur de la délibération publique pour recueillir des commentaires éclairés sur les grandes décisions à être prises par le gouvernement municipal, et (b) les questions de fond qui ont été discutés dans le Panneau de citoyen. La volonté des répondants de participer à un futur public de délibération événement augmenté en force de la pré-et post-enquête, ce qui suggère que les citoyens qui ont acquis des connaissances sur les buts et les objectifs de la délibération publique étaient plus susceptibles d'être disposés à participer.

Mots clés: L'opinion des citoyens; Panel Citoyen; Délibération publique; Participation du public

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CHANGES IN PUBLIC OPINION AFTER A PUBLIC-DELIBERATION EVENT

Deliberation is one of the four required components of a democratic society, the other three being political equality, participation, and non-tyranny (Fishkin, 1995; Gastil, 2008). The strength of each of these components varies within a given society and over time, as does the involvement of the citizenry in ensuring the continuing strength of any one component. Deliberation may be

defined as a process in which a wide range of competing arguments is given careful and systematic consideration in small-group, face-to-face discussions. *Public* deliberation is the direct involvement of citizens in making decisions on behalf of society after due consideration of alternative courses of action and using rational methods of analysis.

Deliberative democracy has theoretical and historical roots in the ancient Greek *agora* and *ecclesia* (Behrouzi, 2008). It seeks an alternative to the instrumental rationality characteristic of modern political systems. Instrumental rationality represents the capacity of the state to “devise, select, and effect good means to clarified ends” (Dryzek, 1990, p.14). Approaches to deliberative democracy may involve modification, supplementation, or repudiation of instrumental rationality. They posit an ideal form of public dialogue as an alternative to the logic of instrumental rationality. Public deliberation may be distinguished from the simple feedback mechanisms of media programming. Phone-in radio shows, television talk shows, and web polls seek a response from a mass audience, but they are developed as products for sale. They are less than fully deliberative, because they are formalized. They tend to emphasize etiquette, and their structure is designed to avoid substantive conflict (Habermas, 1989; Gastil & Levine, 2006; Roberts, 2004).

Interest in new methods of aspiring to the democratic ideal has increased in tandem with widening access to the Internet (Citizens’ Assembly, 2008; Kelshaw & Gastil, 2008). Thompson (2005) states that a “new visibility” is a prominent feature of our social environment: “Since the advent of print, political rulers have found it impossible to control completely the new kind of visibility made possible by the media and to shape it entirely to their liking; now, with the rise of the Internet and other digital technologies, it is more difficult than ever” (p.38).

Previous studies have shown that public deliberation does increase the positive regard that citizens have for public deliberation, as well as augmenting the capacities and skills for political involvement. However, the research concerns change in opinion of deliberators themselves, rather than broader changes in public opinion. Morrell (2005) argues that face-to-face deliberation can lead to citizens feeling more competent in their deliberative abilities. Gastil (2004) makes the same case examining the outcomes of the National Issues Forums. In the same vein, much research has examined the influence of jury deliberation, a deliberative activity comparable to public deliberation, on civic attitudes. Such studies have found that jury deliberation does increase and reinforce civic attitudes for those on the jury. Gastil and others (2008), for example, examined the influence of the experience of jury deliberation on a wide range of civic attitudes. Using a panel survey of 2,410 jurors in the U.S., they found high-quality deliberation and satisfaction to be predictors of civic attitude changes regarding the systematic or institutional elements of juries. Citizens whose

experience on a jury was positive experienced new or reinforced feelings of faith in the institutional elements of government. On the other hand, jury deliberation did not necessarily increase the sense of self as a citizen, political self-confidence, or trust in fellow citizens.

It is unlikely that large-scale change in public opinion regarding public deliberation will take place if only the relatively small group of jurors and other citizen deliberators is to be the locus of such change. This study aims to move the focus on increased feelings of efficacy and attitudes towards citizenship experienced by jurors and citizen deliberators, confirmed by previous studies, to examine possible changes in the attitudes held by the broader citizenry. Although not directly involved in the face-to-face interactions of public deliberation, the citizens living within a given city or town, for example, are given the opportunity to observe and indirectly participate in major public-deliberation events. They do this by receiving and responding to media reports, discussing issues with friends and family, and in some cases by attending the event as observers. This study asks whether any change can be observed in public opinion about (a) the value of public deliberation; and (b) the substantive content being discussed in the public-deliberation event. It reports on citizen opinion concerning the perceived value of public-deliberation events for gathering informed input as a contribution to major decisions by a municipal government.

DESIGN AND ACTIVITIES OF THE EDMONTON CITIZEN PANEL 2009

This study concerns public opinion before and after a public-deliberation event called the Citizen Panel, which took place in 2009 in Edmonton, a Canadian city with a population of approximately 700,000 at the centre of a metropolitan population of about 1 million. Elected representatives committed in advance to “seriously considering” the Panel’s recommendations. Approximately 50 citizens representing the population’s ages and incomes devoted six full Saturdays to learning about, discussing, and identifying priorities for the municipality’s annual budget.

The Citizen Panel was organized collaboratively by the City of Edmonton and the University of Alberta. It met for six Saturday sessions, beginning in February 2009, continuing throughout all of the Saturdays in March, and concluding on 25 April 2009. It was constituted by approximately 50 citizens selected to represent the city’s ages and incomes, chosen through telephone invitation from a list created by random selection within selected demographic dimensions. The goal of the Citizen Panel was to gather informed citizen opinion for City Council to consider seriously as input into the 2010-2011 budget process. The Panel was not limited or

constrained to consider any part of the annual budget, which is approximately \$1.5 billion per year. During the six full-day sessions that they met, panelists learned about the City of Edmonton's budgeting process and the processes and strategies underpinning that process. They also learned about the City Vision and the 10-year strategic plan. Information presentations were made to panelists by senior city managers as part of the learning stage of the Panel's deliberations. The Citizen Panel concluded its active stage of participation by presenting six recommendations to City Council in July 2009.

Communicative Design and Communication Strategy

Citizen Panel proceedings were publicized through live webcasting, creation of a Facebook discussion group, and television and newspaper coverage, including paid advertising. These methods of communicating the goals and outcomes of the Citizen Panel were part of two distinct but interrelated categories of communication activities: a communicative design and a communication strategy. The expectation of a possible change in public opinion on public deliberation and about the issues discussed in the Citizen Panel was premised on these two categories of communication activities.

First, the *communicative design* included those dimensions of the Citizen Panel that were constitutive of the Panel itself. They were part of the design of the public-deliberation event that were intended to provide the time and space for public deliberation and the development of democratic dialogue. For example, communicative design features can include systematic framing of the issue to be deliberated upon. Previously gathered statistical data on public opinion about municipal services were the basis for framing the issue to be deliberated upon, and senior city managers and other municipal staff were involved in framing the issue. An issue book with accompanying video was drafted, pilot tested, and provided for use in the Citizen Panel. There were also efforts to ensure that members of the Panel would engage in dialogue, not debate. Training for discussion leaders was provided, and Panelists themselves learned about and practised methods of deliberative dialogue. In addition, live webcasting was used to underline for Panelists the importance of their work, because it was being broadcast for live viewing by the larger public and also being recorded for use as an archive of the proceedings.

Second, the *communication strategy* was devised with the advice and participation of the City's public relations and communications staff. This set of activities represented conventional publicity efforts, which were carried out to ensure that television, radio, and newspaper media would have access to allow coverage of the Citizen Panel's activities. Briefings through face-to-face meetings and email updates were also provided to senior city managers and to academic and administrative staff at the

University of Alberta. The goal of the communication strategy was to encourage and allow for messages about the Citizen Panel's purpose and proceedings to be clearly articulated to key publics but also the broadest public via mass media.

Some communication activities combined elements of both communicative design and the communication strategy. A Facebook site, for example, was established to allow members of the public to observe the proceedings of the Citizen Panel and discuss the issues themselves with other interested members of the public. The Facebook site also provided the potential for raising the public profile and awareness of the Panel. Paid advertising directed members of the public to the Facebook site. The advertising mentioned the topic of the Citizen Panel, which was to create recommendations on the spending priorities for the City of Edmonton, to be expressed through the 2010-11 budget.

With the intervention of the Citizen Panel – together with its communicative design and communication strategy – we anticipated potential change in citizen opinion about public deliberation and about the spending priorities of the City of Edmonton. We would expect a higher level of knowledge and awareness about the Citizen Panel and about the concept of public deliberation, especially in connection to the communication strategy's goals of informing the public about the Citizen Panel's work. We would also expect that the communicative design could inform some members of the public about the distinctiveness of the Citizen Panel, in comparison with the hundreds of other public-involvement activities offered each year by the municipal government. For example, most citizens would be familiar with the town hall meetings held in the months leading up to municipal elections, in which any and all may attend the proceedings as participants. The Citizen Panel would be involving citizens, but only on an invitation basis following a random selection process.

We therefore wanted to answer the following research question: How did the public's opinions about public deliberation as a method of public involvement and about the municipal government's spending priorities differ before and after the Citizen Panel? Answering this question would contribute to addressing the larger question of whether public deliberation has the potential to change the opinion of groups larger than those actually participating as deliberators.

METHOD

The survey questionnaire was sent out about 60 days before the Citizen Panel deliberations began. After the conclusion of the Citizen Panel, the same survey questionnaire was sent to a different group of 5,000 citizens. A total of 1332 respondents completed the pre-survey, with a response rate of 26.6%. A total of 1001

respondents filled out the post-survey questionnaire, with a response rate of 20.0%. The diverse background of the respondents reflect the City of Edmonton's multicultural population. The survey questionnaire was drafted with 20 questions on citizen involvement and another 20 questions about spending priorities by the City of Edmonton. Principal component factor analysis of the survey questionnaire showed that there were 8 variables in the survey. Most part of the questionnaire used a five-point Likert-scale to measure the respondent's agreement or disagreement in response to either a positively or negatively stated assertion. The Chronbach's Alpha reliability estimate showed strong internal consistency for the Likert-scale ($\alpha = .81$). The reliability of the scale could not be improved significantly by eliminating one or more questions.

RESULTS

The quantitative survey-questionnaire data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The Chi-square test was used for determining whether there were significant changes from pre- to post-survey in the channels that citizens used for

gathering information about the Citizen Panel, and in the demographics of the respondents. In the post-survey, slightly more respondents ($n=101$, 10.1%) knew about the Edmonton Citizen Panel than respondents to the pre-survey ($n=114$, 8.6%). There were no significant changes of the channels from which respondents received information about the Edmonton Citizen Panel. Neither were there significant changes in the demographics of the respondents between the pre-survey to the post-survey.

The independent-samples t-test was used to compare citizen opinions to each survey questions and the 8 variables. With one exception, responses did not vary in the 8 variables between the two questionnaires. The exception was "willingness to participate in the Edmonton Citizen Panel" ($t = -2.26$, $p < .05$), which increased in strength in the post-survey ($M=3.26$, $SD=.69$), when compared with the pre-survey ($M= 3.19$, $SD=.68$), suggesting that the more knowledge citizens had about the purposes and goals of the Citizen Panel, the more likely they were to be willing to participate in similar public-deliberation events in the future. Table 1 compares the results of each survey question for the variable of "willingness to participate in the Edmonton Citizen Panel."

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Survey Questions Included in the Variable of "Willingness to Participate in the Edmonton Citizen Panel," Pre- and Post-Survey

Survey Questions	Pre-Survey		Post-Survey	
	M	SD	M	SD
I would be willing to participate in a Citizen Panel.*	3.02	1.12	3.13	1.10
Time, job, and family responsibilities prevent me from participating in a Citizen Panel.*	3.24	1.14	3.09	1.15
The reason for not participating in a Citizen Panel is that I feel the Citizen Panel won't change anything in the decisions made by the City of Edmonton.	2.59	.98	2.58	.96
I would encourage people around me to participate in a Citizen Panel.	3.58	.70	3.59	.72

Scores for the survey questions are based on a 5-point Likert-type semantic differential scale (from 1 to 5). Survey questions with an asterisk are significantly different between the pre and post survey ($p < .05$).

In addition, post-survey respondents' opinions differed significantly from pre-survey respondents' opinions on two other survey questions, although there was no significant change in the strength of the overall variables to which those items belong. Respondents in the post-survey were more willing to invest more personal time and resources to increase Edmonton's livability than were respondents in the pre-survey, as indicated by responses to the following question:

I am not willing to invest more personal time and resources to increase Edmonton's livability (e.g., safe, attractive, inspiring pride).

M (pre) = 2.49, SD (pre)=.87, M (post) = 2.41, SD (post) = .86, $t = 2.382$, $p < .05$

In the post-survey, respondents also indicated that they were more willing to express their opinions and ideas to the City of Edmonton than were those in the pre-survey, as indicated by responses to the following question:

I am not willing to become more engaged by communicating my opinions and ideas to the City of Edmonton.

M (pre) = 2.49, SD (pre)=1.25, M (post) = 2.38, SD (post) = .88, $t = 2.46$, $p < .05$

When we ranked the means of the variables on the three spending priorities in the pre- and post-surveys, respondents were consistent in their ranking of spending priorities:

Rank 1 (accountability): The City of Edmonton should adopt the priority of making its services easy to understand and visible.

$M=3.83$, $SD=.50$

Rank 2 (equality): The City of Edmonton should give priority to services that are intended to improve the quality of life for residents, such as the maintenance of public parks and organizing more festival celebrations.

$M=3.66$, $SD=.50$

Rank 3 (efficiency): Services that support mobility, such as transit and winter road maintenance, should be the priority for the City of Edmonton.

M=3.44, SD=.70

Interestingly, when we explicitly asked respondents to rank those three areas of spending priorities, in both

the pre- and post-survey, respondents ranked efficiency, not accountability, as the most important, equality as less important, and accountability as the least important. More information about respondents' ranking of those three spending priorities in the pre- and post-surveys is provided in Table 2.

Table 2
Ranking of the Three Spending Priorities, Pre- and Post-Survey

Spending Priorities	Pre-Survey Respondents	Post-Survey Respondents
Services that support mobility, such as transit and winter road maintenance, should be the priority for the City of Edmonton.		
Rank 1	62.5%	65.9%
Rank 2	26.7%	24.8%
Rank 3	8.0%	7.3%
The City of Edmonton should give priority to services that are intended to improve the quality of life for residents, such as the maintenance of public parks and organizing more festival celebrations.		
Rank 1	20.2%	22.0%
Rank 2	43.1%	44.5%
Rank 3	33.3%	31.2%
The City of Edmonton should adopt the priority of making its services easy to understand and visible.		
Rank 1	30.6%	28.6%
Rank 2	28.7%	29.2%
Rank 3	37.8%	39.9%

DISCUSSION

This section interprets the results of the survey questionnaire and offers questions for further exploration concerning the potential changes in public understanding of and support for public deliberation which are a consequence of the opportunity to observe, learn about, and indirectly participate in public-deliberation events.

As noted, for most of the variables we found no significant difference in responses to the pre- and post-surveys. In the Citizen Panel project, the communication design and strategy did not have a strong impact on the general public's information recipient on this public deliberation event. However, there were changes of public opinion such as willingness to participate in the Citizen Panel, which might be the result of the slightly increased exposure to the Citizen Panel through the communication design and strategies.

The changes in responses to the pre- and post- survey suggest that there may be opportunities to explore further the question of public opinion and its relationship to public-deliberation events. We want to further discuss two interesting findings in this study.

First, we noted that two questions resulted in opinion changes from the pre- to the post-survey. These questions were:

I am not willing to invest more personal time and resources to increase Edmonton's livability (e.g., safe, attractive, inspiring pride).

and

I am not willing to become more engaged by communicating my opinions and ideas to the City of Edmonton.

Respondents increased their disagreement in response to these questions from pre- to post-survey. An increase in citizens' willingness to participate in future public-deliberation or public-involvement events was therefore found to occur for both of these questions. This increase may have been informed by an increase in public knowledge about the Citizen Panel occurring from pre- to post-survey. The Citizen Panel is a name that may be self-explanatory, to the extent that learning about the Panel may have taken place for respondents simply by completing the survey, considering the value of "citizens" participating in a "panel" about municipal spending priorities, and perhaps taking in one or more of the media messages that circulated before, during, and after the Citizen Panel. In this sense, there may be an inherent value that citizens associate with public participation that was expressed in the change in opinion from pre- to post-survey. This suggests that public involvement through public-deliberation activities may be interpreted as resulting in positive opinion among citizens who have not yet had the opportunity to learn about the existence or possibility of such activities.

Second, we observed that the ranking of spending priorities of equality, efficiency, and accountability was different when respondents answered a series of questions about each of these priorities as compared to when they explicitly ranked the three from a list. Specifically, when

they answered a series of questions about their priorities, they ranked *accountability* to be the most important. When they were given only the list of three, however, they chose *efficiency*. With the experience of the Citizen Panel itself, we can observe that Panelists, too, changed their rankings after having had the opportunity to consider these priorities further through discussion with others and by learning about and considering the priorities from more than one perspective. Members of the Citizen Panel, like the survey respondents, changed their ranking after deliberating – from accountability to equality, based on polls conducted at their first and third sessions (see Figure 1). This is therefore a common change in opinion by both deliberators and members of the larger public. It confirms what has been demonstrated consistently in public-deliberation activities, which is that the opportunity to discuss policy alternatives in a context of access to relevant information, supplemented by interpersonal exchange and deliberation, does change opinions.

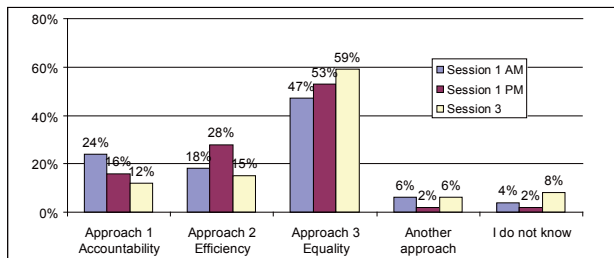


Figure 1
Changes in Ranking of the 3 Spending Priorities by Members of the Citizen Panel, Sessions 1 and 3

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