Understanding Deliberative Integrity

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Problem

The gain in popularity of deliberative mini-publics means they face increasing challenges to integrity, such as poor organisation, vulnerability to manipulation or co-optation, and use as a one-size-fits-all solution without consideration of local contexts.

Purpose

The ultimate aim of the deliberative integrity project is to develop a mechanism for assessing deliberative integrity. To develop something that will be used and is useful, we first need to understand what the integrity of deliberative mini-publics actually looks like.

Approach

In this paper I identify three bodies of literature that can inform our conceptualisation, and outline three key insights for deliberative integrity.

Findings

First, integrity is not only found within a process but in the surrounding actors, systems and structure. Second, the actors and groups involved in deliberative mini-publics bring different goals, expectations and motivations to the table that might inform how integrity in conceptualised in practice. Third, we need to consider who is best placed to assess integrity, given the variation of deliberative practice across contexts.

Value

These insights help flesh out the possible dimensions of the debate on deliberative integrity.

Introduction

Deliberative mini-publics are being rolled out with greater media and political attention on them than ever before. What has been building for several decades is now a 'deliberative wave' (OECD, 2020). For many deliberative democrats in theory and practice, this is a cause for celebration – finally people in power are paying attention to the power of meaningful deliberative participation. Nonetheless, there are reasons to be cautious. A number of key questions remain in both theory and practice that threaten to remain unresolved as more take up the deliberative baton. The question of upholding deliberative integrity is particularly acute given the current expansion and interest in these processes. Their gain in popularity means that mini-publics face increasing challenges to their integrity, such as poor organisation, the possibility of manipulation or co-option by commissioning authorities, and their use as a one-size fits all solution without consideration of local contexts. The increased media interest in high-profile citizens' assemblies and other similar processes means that processes lacking in quality and integrity could be understood by broader publics as legitimate representations of public deliberation (Curato et al 2021: 128). The concern for integrity relates not only to the internal quality of a process, but also to the external context in which it is situated and how the broader political system responds.

With these concerns in mind, the deliberative integrity project will conceptualise and propose a mechanism for assessing and enhancing the integrity of deliberative mini-publics. The project contains three strands of theoretical, empirical and practice-based research and will involve close collaboration between theory and practice in order to produce something that is ultimately useful and will be used in deliberative practice. This paper is an initial step to begin scoping the concept of deliberative integrity, building on insights from existing literature.

Deliberative mini-publics (DMPs) are processes involving a random and often stratified sample of the public as participants who are tasked with deliberating on an issue, policy or proposal (Curato et al 2021; Ryan and Smith 2014). In practice of course, there are a rich variety of designs and formats for mini-publics (e.g. Nabatchi et al 2012; Fung 2003) as well as a colourful palette of other participatory democratic innovations that sit outside the mini-public rubric. Given their shared features, DMPs face specific issues relating to their 'process design integrity' (OECD 2021) such as the recruitment of participants, and the time and quality of deliberation they enable, as well as threats take are enacted outside of the process. These concerns have different implications for a range of different groups involved in deliberative practice: practitioners, advocates,

politicians, public servants, activists, scholars, participants and broader publics. These groups all have different stakes, motivations and expectations around mini-publics which may affect their understanding and interest in upholding integrity. Assessing integrity is therefore also political and sensitive, given the potential impact it can have for the practice and reputation of our field. This is a territory on which we tread mindfully. The final section of this paper lays our next steps in the research with this in mind.

The paper proceeds as follows. I first identify three literatures that can help inform our conceptualisation of deliberative integrity and offer a preliminary literature review that draws on three different strands of literature: the evaluation of deliberative processes, electoral integrity and open governance. I utilise these works because the concept of integrity is discussed in depth within research on elections and democracy and with open governance, and it is worthwhile exploring which elements of these discussion can (and cannot) be borrowed and applied to the context of deliberation. The evaluation of mini-publics is also key to assessing integrity, but they are not synonymous. The concept of integrity is entangled with a number of factors which are relevant to evaluation, and diving into this literature can help us to make sense of those entanglements. In the final section I outline our next steps and considerations.

Three Literatures

I draw on three strands of literature that are relevant to discussions of deliberative integrity: evaluating deliberative processes, electoral integrity and open governance. From an initial reading, I then outline three key points that are important for developing the concept of deliberative integrity before moving on how to how can we address them.

The concept of e███████ ████████ has been developed and rigorously studied by Pippa Norris and colleagues (Norris, Frank and Coma 2014; Norris 2014). The concept itself is derived from existing global norms and standards around electoral democracy, and is then assessed through a global survey of experts familiar with local contexts (Norris, Frank and Coma 2014: 79). In the electoral integrity project, elections are evaluated through a survey of expert perceptions because the existing variety of bodies and perspectives evaluating elections around the world make systematic comparisons difficult. The electoral integrity project relies on the established nature of the concept, which in our case does not yet exist. Nonetheless, the electoral integrity project can serve as a rich source of inspiration and learning for its deliberative counterpart.

Likewise, integrity is central to debates on open government in a number of ways. The main principles of open government are transparency, participation and accountability (Open Government Partnership Australia 2021), all of which are connected to and potential indicators of deliberative integrity. These principles also relate to areas of governance far beyond civic participation and include a focus on corruption, service delivery and corporate business (Global Integrity 2021). However, these are areas that could be relevant to mini-publics depending on context. The OECD bases situates its principles for best practice in deliberative processes within open government frameworks and principles, with integrity included as one principle (OECD 2020). Like the electoral integrity project, open government frameworks offer detailed guidance and methodologies for the assessment of integrity which will be useful for developing an assessment mechanism for deliberative integrity (e.g. Global Integrity 2021).

This leads us to evaluation – another principle cited by OECD – and the consideration of how it connects to integrity. In practice, evaluation of deliberative mini-publics has most often focussed on the experience of participants and their perceptions and experience of the process (Jacquet and van der Does 2020). These might include questions relevant to deliberation such as the variety of perspectives and sources of information offered, the neutrality of the facilitator, and opportunity to speak. These practical points are possible indications of the quality and integrity of the deliberation itself, but evaluation can also be outcome-focussed, looking to what happens to a mini-public's recommendations, or how the process is received and responded to by public officials or stakeholders (Gastil, Knobloch and Kelly 2012; OECD 2021) . This wider context can also have implications for integrity, but it's important to note that there are a number of interrelated concepts at play here that are neither synonymous not easily disentangled: integrity, quality, evaluation and impact. We can imagine a situation where a process has integrity, but for some reason might not impact on policy. The converse is also true: a process lacking in integrity that has a massive impact. Likewise, we ask whether it is possible to have a high-integrity but low-quality process, or whether integrity is a precondition for quality. Of course, this also hinges on how quality is defined in evaluations.

In the following section I identify three key insights from the above literature and explain how these relate to understandings of deliberative integrity.
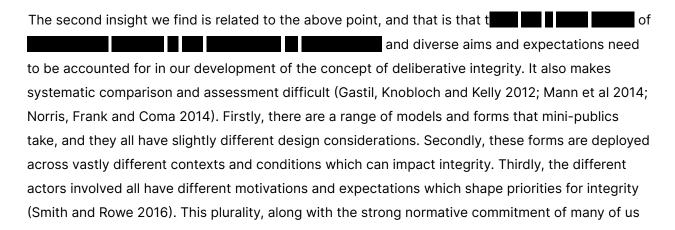

Three Key Points

Our first key insight is that assessments of i██████ ████ ██ ██ ██ ██ ██ ██ ███ but also what happens before, beyond and outside the mini-public. The electoral integrity project finds

that whilst much media and popular focus is on polling day, the greatest threats to integrity come from political and campaign finance issues which form the electoral backdrop (Norris, Frank and Coma 2014: 796). In the same vein, frameworks for evaluating deliberative processes tend to include both process and outcome as foci. Best practice in evaluation would then "link process faults to any failures in achieving desired outcomes." (Gastil, Knobloch and Kelly 2012; Smith and Rowe 2016). However, as mentioned above, standards of integrity are not necessarily tied to whether a process achieves its desired outcomes and expected impacts – and even this will also depend on what kind of outcomes we are talking about: democratic goods and policy impacts are also not synonymous.

Here we begin to see the challenge in disentangling integrity from other relevant considerations for evaluation such as impact. It is possible that responsiveness, rather than impact, could be an indicator for integrity, where we can assess the extent to which the commissioning authority responds effectively to the mini-publics' recommendations and demands. Other possible indicators are also found outside the process itself, such as the robustness and transparency of the recruitment of participants, the framing of the issue and the specific remit given, and the establishment of an oversight board (Curato et al 2021: 54). All of these constitute issues for design integrity (Gastil, Knobloch and Kelly 2012; OECD 2021) that occur before the process itself and involve actors external and internal to the process.

The inclusion of integrity indicators before, beyond and outside a mini-publics pose a practical and political challenge. When do we stop judging the integrity of a process, and start judging the integrity of the broader political system within which it sits? And concomitantly, where does responsibility lie? Do we need to disentangle a process from its surroundings to evaluate integrity? These questions are important from a normative perspective but also pragmatically speaking: when we assess deliberative integrity, we are passing judgement on the work of our colleagues who design, implement and evaluate deliberative mini-publics.

The second insight we find is related to the above point, and that is that t█████ ██ █ ████ ██████ of ██████ ████ ████ ██ ██ ███████ ██ █████████ and diverse aims and expectations need to be accounted for in our development of the concept of deliberative integrity. It also makes systematic comparison and assessment difficult (Gastil, Knobloch and Kelly 2012; Mann et al 2014; Norris, Frank and Coma 2014). Firstly, there are a range of models and forms that mini-publics take, and they all have slightly different design considerations. Secondly, these forms are deployed across vastly different contexts and conditions which can impact integrity. Thirdly, the different actors involved all have different motivations and expectations which shape priorities for integrity (Smith and Rowe 2016). This plurality, along with the strong normative commitment of many of us

involved, means that 'evidence that reduces the odds that mechanisms designed to improve democratic deliberation are successful in certain contexts will be ignored or downplayed and the project of democratic deepening will suffer' (Spada and Ryan 2017: 10). In other words, the plurality of perspectives along with vested interests in the project of deliberative democracy can mean that there is a tendency to say 'oh well that wasn't proper deliberative process' rather than 'that was a rubbish deliberative process'. It is thus paramount to try and get a handle on these divergent and possibly competing priorities for assessing integrity before trying to define and assess integrity.

This leads nicely to our third insight, which is the question of who is best placed to assess deliberative integrity and t█ ██████████ █ ███████████ local contexts (Ridde and Dagenais 2017). The electoral integrity project and open government work on integrity emphasise the importance of local experts familiar with knowledge and context as part of their expertise (Mann et al 2014; Norris 2014). Indeed, attention to local contexts must be central to any standards of deliberative integrity and is also an argument against the development of any 'global standard'. On the one hand, developing clear standards is needed to maintain the integrity and credibility of mini-publics (Curato et al 2021). On the other hand, there are valid concerns that imposing standards could also stymie flexibility and the ability to adapt to local contexts (Mann et al 2014: 20). One of the most impressive features of deliberative practice has indeed been its agility and willingness to reflect upon and improve process designs and delivery (Parry, Alver and Thompson 2019). Could developing standards of integrity stifle this? There are further concerns that attempting standardisation would constitute a neo-colonial move to impose a specific view of what is acceptable in deliberative practice:

> The issue of whether to standardize citizen panels is not solely a technical or functional question of how deliberation should be conducted in certain situations, but also a political question of constitution building and deciding to promote a certain vision or worldview. (Mann et al 2014: 21)

We should be alive to these considerations as we move forward, and one way we can do that is to ensure that we can engage with relevant actors working in diverse political and geographical contexts. This point is particular important because, as already discussed, there are no global norms and standards on which to rely for the concept of deliberative integrity, unlike electoral integrity. Yet it is worth remembering that both electoral integrity and open government have a number of higher-level principles or minimum standards, which are then assessed according to local contexts and by local experts.

Conclusion

This brief literature review sought to identify some of the pertinent considerations relevant to our project on deliberative integrity. I don't seek here to actually conceptualise deliberative integrity, although I have noted a number of possible indicators. Overall, this research note has demonstrated the plurality of possible understandings and priorities for deliberative integrity and the importance of understanding these perspectives moving forward.

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