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EVIDENCE OF PEER INFLUENCE IN THE CITIZENS' PARLIAMENT

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Deliberative democratic theory presumes that people influence one another through interaction. To move to the more nuanced questions addressed throughout this book, scholars generally take that presumption for granted. But the necessary assumptions underlying much of the work on deliberative democracy must, at some point, themselves be scrutinized, lest we build a tower of theory on a hollow foundation.

The Australian Citizens' Parliament (ACP) provides a special opportunity to examine this bedrock assumption of deliberative-democratic theory because of the richness of its data and the special properties of its design. Because the ACP organizers wanted the Citizen Parliamentarians (CPs) to get the benefit of hearing many different voices, each day CPs were assigned at random to one of the twenty-three different discussion tables. Though done to improve the quality of deliberation, that design choice also gave us the opportunity to look at the net influence of all those different pairings on CPs' attitudes.

Recall that the ACP asked its CPs to address a central question—namely, how best to reform the Australian political system. The CPs generated a number of proposals, even beyond the initial set drafted by the Online Parliament (see chapters 4 and 11). To winnow those down to a manageable number, the CPs came up with a set of judgment criteria, and on Day 3 they applied those to the proposals. They took a series of eleven votes (one for each criterion), and each time the CPs distributed one hundred weighting points across the different proposals, with a maximum weight of thirty for any single one. In essence, this chapter tests whether a given CP's weighting

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scores were influenced by his or her randomly assigned tablemates from the first three days of the ACP.

Theorizing Social Influence

When framed in broader terms, the assumption of influence occurring in small-group interaction has been challenged before. Communication theorist Dean Hewes has posited that group interaction may consist largely of solipsistic speech that follows interactional rules but constitutes little more than thinking out loud to oneself.¹ Hewes set up a strict standard for proving group influence, and although carefully designed studies have persuaded some scholars, others remain unconvinced.² The present study does not aim to resolve that debate, but we raise it simply to demonstrate that one cannot take for granted the existence of social influence.

In the particular case of public deliberation, few studies have had the ability to sort out the effects of group influence from other factors that might cause deliberators to change their minds. One of the exceptions is a study of a Deliberative Poll, which showed that the direction of individual attitude change had a slight but significant tendency to follow the shift in attitudes within the particular small group to which they were assigned.³ Likewise, a study using brief laboratory discussions found group composition influences: groups with a higher proportion of politically liberal members tended to cause political moderates to drift toward the left. That same study, however, found that conservative discussants tended to react against liberal group members by shifting further to the right.⁴ An earlier analysis of National Issues Forums also found a tendency for deliberation to yield more coherent and distinct liberal and conservative viewpoints, rather than a moderation of preexisting views.⁵ In sum, there exists some evidence of group-level effects in political deliberation, but the research to date on this question is quite limited.

For the purpose of the present study, we start with the assumption that no peer influence occurred. In this view, whom CPs happened to sit next to on the first three days of the ACP had no influence on what they ultimately came to believe about Australian politics when they did their Day 3 policy rankings. We will look for evidence of social influence against the “null hypothesis” that what CPs said during the first three days of the ACP had no effect on their peers. Note that in doing so, we say nothing about the