

I7

PARTICIPANT ACCOUNTS OF POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION

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Political theorist Mark Warren once asked whether participation in democracy can make us “better” citizens. His “self-transformation thesis” pulled together writings by philosophers from John Stuart Mill and Jean-Jacques Rousseau to modern theorists such as Carole Pateman and Benjamin Barber. All of these writers pointed to the same basic idea—that democracy is a complex social process that requires civic attitudes and habits best developed through equally complex experiences.¹

We now know from a growing body of research that participation in public life can, under the right circumstances, inspire people to return to help tackle future problems in their community or nation. We also know that this does *not* always occur, and its effect depends on the quality of the experience someone has. Research on the jury system in the United States, for instance, shows that serving on a deliberative jury even just for a couple of days can inspire people to become more regular voters, get more active in public affairs, and come to view themselves and their society differently. That same study, however, shows that these civic transformations are less likely for those already active in public life, and the quality of the deliberation with fellow jurors can influence the degree of attitude and behavior change.²

This leads us to ask, did the participants in the Australian Citizens’ Parliament (ACP) and Online Parliament (OP) experience this kind of self-transformation? We cannot take for granted that they had such an impact, but there was good reason to expect one. After looking at the past research briefly, we will show how we helped participants assess the effect of the ACP

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and OP on their political and community lives. We will then show that when surveyed a year later, participants reported profound changes in how they viewed themselves, politics, and public life, as well as how they participated in the latter. The transformation appeared to stop, however, when it came to the most institutionalized kinds of politics. But we get ahead of ourselves.

Do Public Forums Really Change People?

One of the principal aims of deliberative democracy is to transform the deliberators themselves, making them more politically efficacious and public-spirited.³ And while a growing literature has begun to gauge the degree to which deliberative participation fulfills these goals,⁴ questions still linger about how different processes affect people differently as well as the long-term effects of participation. Moreover, the introduction of online deliberation raises further lines of inquiry about the difference between online and face-to-face deliberation and their effects on the political actions and attitudes of participants.

In part because participants must think deliberative processes work and have a purpose in order to gain the civic benefits associated with participation, carefully designed forums conducted in real-world settings are likely the best means to answer these questions.⁵ Scholars have paid particular attention to forums such as the Deliberative Poll and National Issues Forums (NIF) for just this reason, and their findings suggest that theoretical predictions about how deliberation could change citizens are often verified in practice. Moreover, a growing literature on online forums suggests that computer-mediated deliberation can have benefits similar to those stemming from face-to-face interaction. Below, we discuss a few of these forums and how they inform what effects we may expect for both ACP and OP participants.⁶

Deliberative Polls are particularly suited for comparison with the ACP because of the large-scale and highly structured design of the events. Like the ACP, Deliberative Polls gather hundreds of individuals together to learn about and deliberate on local, real-world issues in a face-to-face setting. Several of these events have been shown to increase participants' external efficacy, or their faith that governing officials are attentive to the will of the public, as well as their internal efficacy, or individuals' faith in their capability for governance. Further, participating in Deliberative Polls seems to lead to greater discursive and electoral engagement.⁷ Smaller-