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SIT DOWN AND SPEAK UP: STABILITY AND CHANGE IN GROUP PARTICIPATION

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Public forums such as the Australia Citizens' Parliament (ACP) have the potential to engender personal transformation, group learning, and social and political change, but that potential is realized only if participants actually deliberate. More precisely, deliberation does not work (and, in fact, is not really *group* deliberation) if only one or a few participants monopolize a discussion.¹

Like most large-scale deliberative events, the ACP used a mix of plenary sessions and small-group discussions. In the plenaries, all participants gathered together in the Members' Dining Room to hear a small number of individuals—such as policy experts, public officials, or selected ACP members—speak and answer questions. However, to counterbalance the relative passivity of those sessions, the bulk of the ACP consisted of group discussions convened at twenty-three small tables in the Old Parliament House dining room. A typical discussion table consisted of seven Citizen Parliamentarians (CPs) and a facilitator.

The issue addressed in this chapter is whether the ACP succeeded in its efforts to create truly deliberative discussions at these tables, at least in terms of relatively equal participation. Such equality cannot be taken for granted, as past research shows even carefully crafted deliberative events, such as the 1996 USA Deliberative Poll, become monopolized by just a few members, with others remaining silent.² And although equality of participation does not equate with the more fundamental question of equal speak-

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ing *opportunity*,³ it is necessary to begin setting a baseline for what kinds of talk distributions one can hope to achieve in a highly structured deliberative process.

Theorizing Participation in Small Groups

Research on small-group communication shows that discussion participation is anything but equal.⁴ When defined as taking a turn to speak during a discussion (i.e., a “speaking turn”), participation rates vary considerably among the members of a typical small group. In some cases, a few participants dominate from the beginning, and that dominance persists throughout a group’s discussion. In other cases, dominance develops gradually, becoming clearer by a discussion’s end.⁵ What’s more, there is evidence that pairs of participants hold the floor for the majority of discussion, in effect “locking out” those who might otherwise wish to contribute.⁶ In effect, the longer one waits to participate between speaking turns, the less likely one will continue contributing to a discussion.

What group characteristics are responsible for, or at least correlate with, variance in participation? Groups, such as those at the twenty-three tables at the ACP, often vary on many dimensions, but some of those differences are more dynamic than others. For example, group size is a fairly static characteristic, though it can change. In fact, it did change for some ACP groups, with individual members leaving during discussion—sometimes through the remainder of an entire session. The process of a group discussion also has dynamic qualities. An ACP discussion group’s excitement about the topic of Australian politics, for instance, waxes and wanes when it develops a novel civic-reform idea only to discover later that it won’t work.

Before searching for causal explanations of differences in participation equality, it is important to start with a richer description of the extent of those differences within and between the small groups at the ACP. In doing so, we hope to establish something of a baseline for looking at equality of speaking turns in deliberative events. With the level of concern that went into organizing the ACP, establishing discussion norms, and bringing in professional facilitators, the ACP provides a good starting point for seeing what level of equality is feasible in a public deliberation, at least in terms of the crude measure of speaking turns per person. (For more detail on these features of the ACP, see chapters 13 and 14.)