Research Brief

*Degree of Deliberativeness— The Case of the Energy Efficiency Choices Project*

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Alberta Climate Dialogue (ABCD) is a community-university research alliance funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada from 2010–2015. Our team is exploring how innovative forms of citizen involvement and deliberation can enhance responses and potentially shift the politics of climate change in Alberta.

By convening deliberations with partners and researching the process, we are able to test theories, better understand how to design citizen participation for maximum effect, and help create capacity-building tools for others.

We seek to empower citizens to take action within their communities and give them the opportunity to make recommendations to municipal and provincial governments on climate change policy.

For more information please visit us at AlbertaClimateDialogue.ca or follow us on Twitter @ABClimateDialog
Introduction

This research brief presents the findings from the Citizens’ Panel on Edmonton’s Energy and Climate Challenges. The findings show increases in participants’ self-assessed knowledge of climate change, energy issues, and policy options to address Edmonton’s energy and climate challenges. These increases are attributed to participation in this 42 hour deliberative exercise.

Relevant Literature

Deliberative democracy involves citizens meeting to discuss policy preferences. Ideally this discussion will involve an open communication process, with equal contributions from the various participants, who appeal to reason when explaining their decisions (Habermas, 1996). Unlike everyday conversation, deliberative exercises are expected to reveal differences in values that underpin disagreements among participants (Schudson, 1997; Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009). Some argue that the degree of deliberativeness can be measured by the presence of disagreement (Schudson, 1997; Stromer-Galley, 2007). Disagreement is important for signifying diverse viewpoints and for motivating people to develop more a sophisticated rationale for their opinions (Cappella, Price, & Nir, 2002; Stromer-Galley, 2007; Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009). As such, a variety of practitioners and scholars have examined how participants in deliberative exercises have managed disagreement and the extent to which disagreement encourages a change of opinions (Abelson et al., 2013; Frasera et al., 2006; Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009). On the other hand, the handling of disagreement can be challenging. Some studies suggest that the presence of disagreement may impede mutual learning and diminish overall satisfaction with the deliberative experience (Edwards et al., 2008; Pomatto, 2012; Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009).

Moving beyond the focus on disagreement, Gastil and Sawyer (2004) offer an alternative way to measure the degree of deliberation within a discussion setting. They examine participants’ responses about whether they listened to others’ ideas and respected others’ viewpoints. They label this sub-dimension of deliberation “listening.” They compared participants’ ratings of listening with trained observers’ ratings of the same deliberative event (Gastil & Sawyer, 2004). This listening dimension is important because it positively correlates with satisfaction with the decision made as part of the deliberation (Gastil & Sawyer, 2004).

Case Study

In the Energy Efficiency Choices project, approximately 400 Albertan citizens were randomly selected and invited to participate in a two-hour discussion about energy efficiency policies and programs. Prior to the discussion, participants were given a background document with a list of topics to be discussed. The sessions were hosted via WebEx Solutions software by Cisco. Participants interacted by voice and could enter the discussion by telephone or online. Upon entry, participants were welcomed and the purpose of the discussion was explained, followed by three rounds of discussion. Each round consisted of a short voice and slide...
presentation to all participants followed by questions and answers via voice and text. Then, all participants were randomly assigned into breakout groups and were asked to discuss a subset of questions in depth. Both plenary and breakout groups were moderated by trained facilitators. Approximately 164 people participated in one of six virtual discussions conducted in November 2013.

Research Question

To what degree was the two-hour, virtual discussion deliberative?

Methods

Approximately, 164 participants participated in one of six two-hour events. After each event, participants were asked to complete a five-minute web survey via email that solicited feedback about the deliberative process. Approximately 121 of the 164 participants completed this survey. We examined five survey questions about the deliberation. The sample sizes differ for each survey question because ‘don’t know’ and missing responses were excluded from the calculation. The results are reported as percentages.

Findings

In general, few people reported that they had trouble respecting different viewpoints (Figure 1). Instead, people perceived themselves as being generally respectful of differing views.

Survey Question 3c: I had difficulty respecting the points of view of participants that I disagree with. n=116

![Figure 1: I had difficulty respecting other viewpoints.](image)
Participants had mixed feelings about whether disagreement was common (Figure 2). Approximately 25% of participants thought there was disagreement in the discussion of different policy options.

**Figure 2: Disagreement was common**

Survey Question 3b: Disagreement was common. n=118

Further, when participants shared ideas, others carefully considered their contributions. More than 80% of the respondents replied that they agreed or strongly agreed that the contributions made were carefully considered by other participants (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Participants considered others' ideas**

Survey Question 2b: When participants shared an idea, others carefully considered their contributions. n=121
Almost all participants agreed or strongly agreed that they, personally, listened carefully to other participants’ points of view (Figure 4).

Survey Question 2c: When other participants shared their ideas, I listened carefully to their points of view. n=124

Lastly, participants generally felt that their points were acknowledged by other participants (Figure 5). Almost 74% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that another participant responded to a comment they had made.

Survey Question 3a: Whenever I made an important point, another participant would respond to my comment. n=115
Discussion

The results presented here suggest that participants in the Energy Efficiency Choices Project were generally open to hearing others’ ideas and felt that their ideas, too, were heard. According to Gastil and Saywer’s (2004) listening criterion, the discussion would be considered deliberative. However, those scholars who prioritize disagreement as a measure of deliberation would not be convinced that the exercise was deliberative, because only 25% of participants observed some level of disagreement during the virtual discussion. Several researchers connect the presence of disagreement with opinion change (Abelson et al., 2013; Frasera et al., 2006; Stromer-Galley & Muhlberger, 2009) and thus, would expect to see minimal opinion changes in an exercise where participants observe little disagreement. Further research could examine whether opinion changes relate to real or perceived disagreement within the deliberative session. In other words, are those who reported the presence of disagreement more likely to change their policy preferences?

Further research could also examine whether perceptions of disagreement affect participants’ willingness to participate in future deliberative projects. Stromer-Galley and Muhlberger (2009) suggest that the presence of disagreement does not affect willingness to participate in future deliberation exercises. Building on Gastil and Sawyer’s (2004) work, further research could examine whether listening to others was related to agreement with the recommendations from the deliberative process and willingness to participate in future deliberative projects.
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