

*This is the author's accepted version of a work accepted for publication*

**Citation:**

Dryzek, J. S., & Niemeyer, S. (2019). Deliberative democracy and climate governance. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 3, 411–413. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-019-0591-9>

**This file was downloaded from:**

<https://researchprofiles.canberra.edu.au/en/publications/deliberative-democracy-and-climate-governance>

**Copyright:**

©2019 Springer

**Version:**

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a work that was published by Taylor & Francis in **Nature Human Behaviour** which has been published at <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-019-0591-9>

Changes resulting from the publishing process may not be reflected in this document.

# Deliberative Democracy and Climate Governance

John S. Dryzek and Simon Niemeyer

Against those who advocate simplistic authoritarian solutions to the climate challenge<sup>1</sup>, we argue for democracy's revitalization through harnessing the latent wisdom of citizens and joining that wisdom more effectively to relevant expertise and political authority. Skeptics argue that weaknesses in mass political cognition warrant elite governance. In contrast, we argue that it is the way the political process is constructed that affects how citizens engage and behave on issues such as climate change, and that if constructed properly citizens reveal competence that enables them to play key roles in governance.

Effective response can be enhanced by deliberative democratic principles and practices. This includes institutions that promote genuine deliberation among citizens and leaders rather than posturing and strategic language, together with mechanisms to link deliberation with decision making. A concerted effort along these lines to re-imagine governance at different scales can better equip us to meet the challenges of climate change.

## The Challenge

The 2018 special report issued by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change on *Global Warming of 1.5°C* confirms the increasing urgency to act to mitigate the effects of climate change. That climate governance has fallen far short of what is needed reflects not just the immensity and complexity of the challenge, and the general difficulty in overcoming incentives for everyone to avoid contributing to the public good of mitigation, but also the role of powerful interests able to mobilise resources to undermine scientific knowledge, create public doubt, and delay action.

Democracy might seem ill-equipped to meet the challenge, especially given its own crisis of growing populism and declining levels of trust. Elections produce lurches between radically different agendas. Climate change exposes gaping deficiencies in all existing governance institutions – though the balance of evidence suggests democratic systems do better than their authoritarian alternatives on environmental problems in general, and that their degree of democracy is somewhat positively associated with both commitment to climate change policies and performance in reducing greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>2</sup>

## Why Deliberative Democracy Could Help

These correlations notwithstanding, democracy is on the face of it poorly equipped to deal with problems such as climate change. But most of the current scepticism toward democracy turns out on closer examination to be about *electoral* democracy, in which evidence suggests citizens vote not on the basis of issues or even self-interest, but largely in affirmation of the groups with which they identify (be it nation, race, religion, class, or party).<sup>3</sup> Populists have discovered that electoral success can be found in invoking identities – while treating government as a simple matter that has no time for complex problems such as climate change.

But democracy comes in several varieties. Deliberative democracy highlights an aspirational ideal with realizable benefits of inclusive and meaningful communication joining citizens, activists, and leaders.<sup>4</sup> Deliberation features civility and respect, mutual justification, listening, reflection, and openness to persuasion. Deliberation here goes beyond the mere fact of involvement in political discussion to account for the quality of exchange. Existing political systems fall far short of deliberative ideals, but could do better.

And if they do, the consequences for climate governance should be positive. The substantial literature on deliberative democracy and the environment suggests that deliberation ought to be highly beneficial for several reasons. First, deliberation is a way to integrate different perspectives on complex issues, including different kinds of expertise (as Norgaard demonstrates happened in the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment)<sup>5</sup>, as well as lay perspectives. Second, and relatedly, deliberation is a way of incorporating feedback on the condition of social-economic systems into governance. Third, deliberation induces concern with the common good over more partial material interests, as arguments couched in collective interest terms are more persuasive. Fourth, deliberation can call to mind the interests of those not present – such as future generations, and non-human nature.

## The Evidence

The degree to which realization of these effects requires wholesale reconfiguration of institutions is an open question, but that there are significant benefits as deliberation improves seems clear. Evidence of the effectiveness of deliberation is, thus far, strongest at smaller scale via observation of deliberative minipublics (such as citizens' juries) involving randomly selected citizens tasked with reflecting on and developing judgements about common good issues.

Studies in the UK and Australia suggest that simply confronting citizens with climate change scenarios induces anxiety that is not conducive to the effective operation of democratic decision making.<sup>6</sup> However, when the same cohort is involved in group deliberation, the very nature of conversation around climate change transforms in ways that have far-reaching implications for improving governance and the operation of democratic institutions.

Growing evidence from small-scale deliberation points to improved sophistication in reasoning by citizens in ways that inoculate against the kind of blandishment that can be used to forestall climate action. Such deliberation does not transform citizens, so much as facilitate more consistent translation of their existing values into preferences for policy action. This translation overcomes the way the political spectacle in electoral democracies operates to frame issues in unnecessarily divisive ways, for example in framing action on climate change as inevitably involving a zero-sum trade-off between economic and environmental performance, in the face of a good deal of evidence against the need for such a stark characterization.

Deliberation changes the political context away from one in which citizens are observers in a mass political system, riven by cleavages such as party identity that induce pathologies including motivated reasoning. Instead, citizens can deliberate together to solve problems across differences that often prove much smaller than they previously thought. In other words, the deliberative context induces qualitatively different citizen behavior, very different to the subservience to group identity found in research on electoral democracy.<sup>7</sup>

This deliberative reconstruction of politics invokes public-spirited issue dimensions that reflective citizens support in-principle, but which for practical purposes are crowded out in the discourse of everyday politics. Crucially, these dimensions include concern for the environment and future generations. Positive evidence here comes from direct observation of citizen deliberation in minipublics<sup>8</sup>.

## **The System: Improving Deliberative Capacity**

Research on minipublics also points to the potential for marginal adjustments in the operation of institutions to reap significant gains for environmental performance, including meeting the challenge of climate change. While evidence from minipublics is strong, empirical research on the effects of deliberative democracy at larger scale is still limited. At large scales (such as national decision making), deliberative democracy can be conceptualized not as a forum, but rather as a system that joins differentiated elements, such as publics and decision makers. Policy making can be interpreted and evaluated in deliberative system terms, though currently few studies compare across systems in terms of their deliberativeness and its consequences for environmental performance. But there are good reasons to suppose that the kinds of effects we see in minipublics should have equally salutary effects in macro-politics.

Evidence suggests that larger publics can take their cues from their peers participating in minipublic deliberation<sup>9</sup>, with Citizens' Initiative Reviews conducted prior to referendums in some states in the USA a good example. Such mechanisms can help remedy distrust not just in policy making, but also in what experts (such as climate scientists) say. Deliberating peers mediate between the larger citizenry and experts, who for their part can hone their deliberative skills through engaging minipublics.

## Global Deliberative Governance

Climate change is a global problem that needs a global response, and so deliberative governance needs to apply here too. Electoral democracy is unavailable at the global level, but deliberative democracy is highly applicable. The global governance of climate change can be interpreted as a potentially deliberative system joining the multilateral negotiations in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, scientific assessments, various networked government initiatives (such as the Clean Technologies Initiative – Private Finance Advisory Network), national governments, and civil society organizations and activists.<sup>10</sup> The sites and linkages in this system can be examined and evaluated, and their deliberative shortcomings and opportunities pinpointed. In this light, global governance would be improved by measures such as the insertion of transnational deliberative minipublics into the system (for example, in conjunction with scientific assessments, or to meet in parallel with international negotiations), multilateral negotiations that learn from the more deliberative experience of the Open Working Group that was key in the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals, more and better engagement across radical discourses and forums on the one hand and mainstream sustainability discourses and business-friendly forums on the other, and deliberative accountability mechanisms that link networked governance initiatives to the UNFCCC and then to civil society. The turn to ‘orchestration’ around the 2015 Paris Agreement introduces new deliberative possibilities into the system. Orchestration involves multilateral organizations enlisting civil society organizations and others to pressure states and corporations to meet their mitigation commitments. As a result, civil society is much better placed to demand a stronger role in global deliberations.

## What to do

The deliberative democratization of climate governance can involve the introduction of innovations such as minipublics to regulate and propagate arguments. More importantly, whole systems of governance, spanning formal institutions, informal networks, and civil society, ought to be rendered more deliberative. Reform here would involve not just institutional innovation and redesign, but also curbing the anti-deliberative role of money in politics and the cultivation of alternatives to both the traditional media and social media platforms that currently do such a poor job in processing complex public issues like climate change. Citizens are perfectly capable of showing the way in all of this, if only they are given the right deliberative chance.

## References

- 1 Shearman, D. J. C. & Smith, J. W. The climate change challenge and the failure of democracy. (Praeger Publishers,, 2007).
- 2 Hanusch, F. Democracy and Climate Change. (Routledge, 2018).

- 3 Achen, C. H. & Bartels, L. M. *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. (2016).
- 4 Bächtiger, A., Dryzek, J. S., Mansbridge, J. J. & Warren, M. E. *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*. (Oxford University Press, 2018).
- 5 Norgaard, R. B. Finding Hope in the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. *Conservation Biology* 22, 862-869, doi:doi:10.1111/j.1523-1739.2008.00922.x (2008).
- 6 Hobson, K. P. & Niemeyer, S. J. Public responses to climate change: The role of deliberation in building capacity for adaptive action. *Global Environmental Change* 21, 957–971, doi:10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2011.05.001 (2011).
- 7 Chambers, S. Human life is group life: Deliberative democracy for realists. *Critical Review* 30, 36-48, doi:10.1080/08913811.2018.1466852 (2018).
- 8 Niemeyer, S. J. & Jennstål, J. in *Institutions for Future Generations* (eds Axel Gosseries & Iñigo González Ricoy) Ch. 15, (Oxford University Press, 2016).
- 9 Warren, M. E. & Gastil, J. Can Deliberative Minipublics Address the Challenges of Democratic Citizenship. *Journal of Politics* 77, 562-574 (2018).
- 10 Stevenson, H. & Dryzek, J. S. *Democratizing global climate governance*. (Cambridge University Press, 2014).