Consensus Conferences and Better Citizens[*]

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Abstract: Students and proponents of deliberative democracy often contend that the practice, application and experience of deliberative decision making processes, including consensus conferences, have positive influences on those who participate, leading to "better" and more democratically ideal citizens. This study evaluates the long term effect of participation in citizen conferences on civic virtue by interviewing 11 participants in two Israeli Consensus conferences. We identify and refer to eight dimensions of positive influence associated with deliberation: knowledge, efficacy, political interest, political participation, public spiritedness, political trust, political empathy, tolerance, courtesy and respect. We then analyze the interviews in accordance with these dimensions, and suggest some further insights.

"For we set down the end of political science as the good; and this devotes its principle attention to form the character of the citizens, to make them good, and dispose them to honourable actions"

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, Ch. IX. (Trans. R.W. Browne)

"At least in the course of time, the effects of common deliberation seem bound to improve matters"

John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice,* 1971, p. 359

Preface

Theorists of deliberative democracy and some political scientists frequently argue that various practices of deliberation and deliberative decision making, consensus conferences included, make for better citizens. Whether it is argued that this is only a welcomed by-product of deliberation, or that this is one of the main goals of deliberation, it seems that there is a common agreement over the idea that deliberation is expected to produce a variety of positive democratic outcomes. While a growing body of literature is devoted to the empirical examination of this claim, there is still a lot to learn about the kinds of attributes, the way participants conceive them, and how time passed since the conference might affect their strength. This study evaluates the long term effect of participation in citizen conferences on civic virtue by interviewing 11 participants in the Israeli Consensus conferences. After sketching the theoretical aspects behind consensus conferences we identify 8 dimensions of positive influences associated with deliberation; we then present our impressions from interviewing participants while referring to these dimensions. We conclude with a discussion and some general insights.

Theoretical background

Deliberative democracy and consensus conferences

Deliberative Democracy is a major scholarly trend within general democratic theory, and particularly within theories of participatory democracy. At the heart of the theory, which emerged in the early 1990s, is the idea of the use of deliberation - free discourse between equals - as a major mechanism for decision making in democratic systems. Deliberation is a special kind of conversation between people. It is characterized by a process exchanging information, arguments and knowledge, including mutual listening and internalizing of other participants' views. Equally crucial to this theory is the idea that discussion can change the views and positions of participants. While

participatory theory revolves around the idea that citizens should have greater participation, deliberative theory focuses on the question: what is the mode of participation that should take place. Deliberative advocates' answer to this question is that participation should be through an ideal discussion between people who respect each other, listen to each other, and therefore are capable of reaching a resolution that best serves the common good (Gofer, 2008, p.12). For them, political choice must be the outcome of deliberation among free, equal and rational agents (Elster, 1998, p.5).

Morrell distinguishes between three types of deliberative processes: civic dialogue, deliberative discussion, and deliberative decision-making (Morrell, 2005, p.55). This essay will focus on a model of the third type: the consensus conference.[1] A consensus conference is a citizen participation technique, and is one of many deliberative practices (Gofer, 2003, p.193; Einsiedel and Eastlick, 2000). It was originally developed by the Danish Board of Technology in 1987 to give the lay public a voice in decisions about scientific and technological developments. Since then it has been held in numerous countries around the world (Powell and Kleinman, 2008, p.331). In Israel the technique has been tried four times by the *Zippori Center for Community Education*. Consensus conferences originally were not intended to have a direct and immediate impact on public policy. This is not to say, however, that participants do not expect or hope for such an impact (Guston, 1999, p. 474). Consensus conferences are multi-stage, involving diverse participants who are provided with background materials on a given issue prior to a specific number of meetings. These meetings, through the help of facilitators, allow the participants an opportunity to discuss and raise questions concerning the issue at hand, interact with experts as well as the general public, and finally, to discuss, deliberate, and come to a consensual decision. That decision is then codified in a summary report which may then be distributed among public figures and media (Powell and Kleinman, 2008, p.331).

Does deliberation make for "better citizens"?

"The only way to learn civility and reciprocity", says Dryzek "is through practice in deliberation itself" (Dryzek, 2000, p. 169). Whether it is argued

that this is only a welcomed by-product of deliberation (Fearon, 1998, p.60; Cooke, 2000, p.949) or that this is one of the main goals of deliberation (Guston, 1999, p.471), it seems that there is a common agreement over the idea that deliberation is expected to produce a variety of positive democratic outcomes (Anderson and Hansen, 2007; Barber, 1984; Benhabib, 1996; Burkhalter et al., 2002; Cohen, 1989; Cooke, 2000, p.948-949; Fishkin, 1997, p. 143; Fishkin, 2009; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996, pp. 40-44; Mansbridge, 1983, 1996; Warren, 1992; Sulkin and Simon, 2001; Guston, 1999, p.471; Powell and KleinmanIn's, 2008).[2]

The idea of deliberation as a means of producing "better" citizens has also had some influence on the field of civic education. Luskin, Fishkin, Malhotra and Siu (2007) found that deliberation about policy and politics in the classroom increases students' knowledge, efficacy, interest, and opinionation. They conclude that adding policy deliberation to civic education may be a long-sought way of boosting the public's level of civic engagement.

When claiming that deliberation makes for better citizens, what exactly is meant by "better"? When Fishkin says "better" he means more democratic (Luskin, Fishkin, Malhotra and Siu, 2007). According to Fishkin, participation in deliberative projects makes better informed and better engaged citizens in the sense that it enhances the participants' civic capacities - attributes that help citizens solve collective problems, including information, efficacy, public spiritedness, and political participation (Luskin, Fishkin, Malhotra and Siu, 2007). In fact, when theorists say "better", it seems that they always mean someone who is closer to the democratic ideal citizen. It is not always easy to break this ideal into separate and distinguished components, but nevertheless, in what follows we shall mention a few dimensions of positive influences associated with deliberation which have been suggested by writers and also received the support of some empirical research.

Information, Knowledge and Understanding: A very common argument on behalf of deliberation (some refer to it as a proposition that is now firmly established) is that in a deliberative meeting a dramatic change occurs in the level of information the participants possess before and after the event.

It is helpful to distinguish between three kinds of acquired knowledge. The first is *substantive knowledge*, meaning information regarding the debated issue. Some evidence for gains in this kind of knowledge is available (Fishkin, 2009, p. 140; Guston, 1999, p. 470; Gofer, 2003, p. 210; Anderson and Hansen, 2007, pp. 543-546).[3]

The second is *"procedural" knowledge*, or the participants' general political knowledge (Guston, 1999, p. 470). After deliberation, participants are more aware of competing arguments and crucial factual knowledge about politics and policy (Luskin and Fishkin, 2002, pp. 3, 7). They know more about the policy process and the role of citizens within it (Guston, 1999, p. 470), and more specifically, they become knowledgeable about consensus conferences and the role of citizens in public decision making (Guston, 1999, p. 470).[4]

Finally, it is sometimes argued that deliberation increases individual citizens' understanding of their own interests and preferences, and of what influences them, and so they are able to justify those preferences and interests with better arguments (Luskin and Fishkin, 2002, p. 1; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996, pp. 42-43; Guston, 1999, pp. 470-471). This can be called, as Guston (1999) suggests, *reflexive knowledge*, meaning knowledge the participants gain about themselves and their place in society.

Political Interest: It is argued that deliberation stokes two kinds of political interest: issue-specific and general. The idea that deliberation will increase a citizen's interest in the debated issue is intuitive: the more you know, think, and talk about something, the more interested in it you become (Luskin and Fishkin, 2002, 3; Luskin, Fishkin, Malhotra and Siu, 2007). It is not surprising, then, that all of the participants in consensus conferences Guston interviewed reported subsequently following the debated issue after their participation experience (Guston, 1999, 470). The idea that deliberation will increase general political interest is less plausible. Nevertheless, Fishkin asked participants before and after a Deliberative Poll about the extent to which they are generally interested in politics, and found an increase (Luskin and Fishkin, 2002, 7).[5]

Efficacy:[6] Scholars typically consider two dimensions of efficacy - internal and external. *Internal efficacy* refers to citizens' feelings of personal competence to "understand and to participate effectively in politics" (Craig et al., 1990, p. 290).[7] External efficacy describes the "citizen's perceptions of the responsiveness of political bodies and actors to their demands" (Morrell, 2005, p. 51). There is some empirical evidence that democratic deliberation leads to increases in citizens' feelings of political efficacy, external as well as internal (Fishkin, 2009, p. 141; Luskin and Fishkin, 2002, p. 8; Luskin, Fishkin, Malhotra and Siu, 2007, p. 7; Guston, 1999, p. 471; Smith, 1999, p. 54; Einsiedel and Eastlick, 2000).[8]

Political Trust: Deliberation is said to increase political trust, because grappling with the complexities most issues entail may increase citizens' appreciation of what government decision makers must deal with (Luskin and Fishkin, 2002, pp. 3,9).

Public spiritedness: A popular hypothesis is that post-deliberation preferences will be more "public spirited" (Fishkin, 2009; Luskin and Fishkin, 2002, p. 2). It is assumed that when people share their reasoning in a dialogue about public problems, everyone is sensitized to broader public concern; they come to understand the interests and values at stake from the perspective of other members of the community (Fishkin, 2009, p. 141).[9] In this sense, deliberative projects are "schools of public spirit" – John Stuart Mill's term for assemblies in America in which citizens discussed public problems together. Fishkin argues that deliberative projects do in fact function as Schools of Public Spirit, and provides some evidence for this (Fishkin, 2009, p. 142; Luskin and Fishkin, 2002, p. 9). Anderson and Hansen found similar evidence, although their results only concerned participants' increases in public spirited during the process of deliberation (Anderson and Hansen, 2007, p. 553).

Political participation: Information, interest, efficacy and public spiritedness are traditionally considered as factors that might contribute to political participation (Luskin, Fishkin, Malhotra and Siu, 2007; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Thus, it is plausible to think that deliberation

increases political participation (Fishkin, 2009, p. 142; Luskin and Fishkin, 2002, pp. 2-3; Burkhalter et al., 2002). A few findings tell us that participation in deliberation does result in *motivation* to participate in another conference and other kinds of political activities (Guston, 1999, p. 474; Fishkin, 2009, p. 142; Einsiedel and Eastlick, 2000), while other findings demonstrate a significant increase in *actual participation* in political activities in the months following participation in a deliberative poll (Luskin and Fishkin, 2002, p. 7).

Political Empathy, Tolerance, Courtesy and Respect: Several authors have argued that deliberation has an effect on some political attitudes and values. For instance, it has been argued that deliberation increases participants' levels of political respect, understood as the understanding that there are reasonable arguments to be made for most prominent positions, even if the arguments for some alternative outweigh them. This is closely connected to political empathy, which is the appreciation of the interests of others situated differently from oneself (Luskin and Fishkin, 2002, p. 3). Some claim that this should stem more from discussion than from isolated learning or cogitation due to the impact of seeing and hearing people from very different walks of life (Luskin and Fishkin, 2002, p. 3; Fearon, 1998, p. 59). These two phenomena are related to the idea of political tolerance, which is the acceptance of opposing points of view (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996, pp. 42, 79.). These three concepts could carry with them more of what Fearon Calls "political courtesy" (Fearon, 1998, p. 59).

 As compelling as these lines of arguments may seem, there is no available empirical evidence to support them, perhaps because of the ambiguous nature of these variables. However, something of exception can be found in the work of Anderson and Hansen, who found that participants had become more tolerant in the course of the process of a deliberative poll. But note that when polled about their level of political tolerance three months after the deliberative weekend, participants reverted towards their initial position (Andersen and Hansen, 2007, p. 543).

The Current Research

As the previous section demonstrates, some empirical research has been conducted which attempts to estimate if and to what degree deliberation actually increases these attributes. However, there is still a great deal of uncertainty and room for further study.[10] We will now briefly survey a few shortcomings of the existing research which we intend to address in this study.

One concern is the timing of the research. In most cases interviews and polls are conducted right after the deliberative event (Luskin and Fishkin, 2002), or a few months after (Guston, 1999; Anderson and Hansen, 2007; Luskin and Fishkin, 2002). We feel that there is room for a study that will be conducted after a long period of time has elapsed since the event, and thus will explore the long term effects of deliberation. Our research was conducted 6 and 8 years respectively after two consensus conferences took place, so hopefully it will contribute a new perspective to the existing body of literature.

A second issue is the lack of research exploring participants' own perceptions of the attributes generated by the conference (for an exception see Powell and Kleinman, 2008). For instance, while knowledge may be gained, whether or not the participant feels he acquired this knowledge during the conference is another question. The distinction between objective and perceived knowledge might be of some importance, for as Powell and Kleinman say, citizens' perceived knowledge may be more critical than external measures when trying to understand what motivates citizens to participate (Powell and Kleinman, 2008, p. 336). Our study focuses on this sense, as we specifically ask the participants to report their perceptions and feelings.

The third issue arises from the fact that it can be argued that any of the positive effects discussed in previous research are attributed to the mere fact that the citizens participated in some form of civic or political activity, and not specifically in deliberation. Having this argument in mind, Cooke asks: "what is it about deliberation – as opposed to participation – that produces beneficial educative effects on individuals?" (Cooke, 2000, p. 948). In this study, we shall try to isolate the effects of deliberation by asking the

participants specifically about the impact they think deliberation has had on them.

Methodology

This study evaluates the long term effect of participation in citizen conferences on civic virtue using a qualitative approach. Interviews were conducted with 11 participants in the third and fourth consensus conferences conducted in Israel.[11] We used a semi-structured interview style (see Appendix). We managed to contact 12 of 38 participants, and 11 of them agreed to be interviewed. Our interview questions were designed to explore the 8 dimensions presented at length above.[12] Before tackling these issues, we asked the participants to tell us about themselves, their personal experience with the conference, and express themselves freely. We did this again at the end of the interview, acknowledging that this manner of discussion might be productive as well. After conducting the interviews and transcribing them, we analyzed the transcripts together according to the main issues we set out to explore.

Interviewing participants only after the conference may raise concerns as to the degree to which the participants' reported perceptions resulted from taking part in the conference, and whether or not participants already held these perceptions prior to the conferences. The reason for interviewing them only after the conference is an absence of accessible data.[13] We tried to be as sensitive as possible to this problem. It should be remembered, however, that this study set out to explore what the participants think about their experience themselves. For this reason they were asked explicitly what they had gained or learned *in the* conference*,* and to say whether in their view, a certain perception or a feeling is the *result of* the conference. We believe that researchers have a lot to learn from citizens' own reflexive thoughts and reasoning, even if they are subjective. In this sense, the depth offered by the interview methodology might compensate for its weakness.

That said, it must be noted that our methodology does not allow for broadly applicable generalizations. As is the case for other consensus conferences, the participants were not randomly drawn from the population,[14] but rather were

selected for maximum diversity from the responses to an advertisement (Gofer, 2003, p. 201). It is only reasonable to assume that a process of self-selection occurred, and must have happened again to some extent when we contacted the participants in order to interview them. In addition, the specific point in time we conducted the interviews - 6 and 8 years after participation- which was presented as an advantage of the study, is also a methodological weakness, because as time passes, it is harder for the participants to isolate the different forms of impact the conference had had on them. Another problem rises directly from the interview methodology: once the participants were asked to contemplate the effects of the conference, they inevitably gave this experience more weight.[15] These limitations bring us to treat this study as an exploratory one: It is intended only to explore some key issues at a very specific point in time. To isolate the different attributes discussed here and measure their impact accurately will require more research, and preferably a quantitative approach.

Results and Discussion

Information, knowledge and understanding: All interviewees reported that they gained significant and profound knowledge about the debated issue ("Substantive" knowledge). Some reported that elements of the conference which they learned the most from were those in which they met professionals and politicians and were exposed to written material about the issue. This is opposed to the actual deliberation itself, in which they learned opinions, but not substantive knowledge. These findings are consistent with previous findings about gains in substantive knowledge (Fishkin, 2009, p. 140; Guston, 1999, p. 470; Gofer, 2003, p. 210; Anderson and Hansen, 2007, pp. 543-546).

As for general political knowledge, most participants reported that they gained new general political knowledge about methods of political participation, as well as accessibility to decision makers. They also gained knowledge about political players and their various competing interests. One participant said that the "issue of decision making among political players was very new to me. I now have a better understanding of the politics behind mass media (the

debated issue)". This result is in sync with previous findings (Luskin and Fishkin, 2002, pp. 3,7; Guston, 1999, p. 470). On the other hand, we did not observe an increase in participants' general understanding of the political landscape and positions of various political parties regarding the issues under debate. This is not consistent with Fishkin's claim, which anticipates such an increase (Fishkin, 2009, p. 140).[16]

Our impressions regarding Reflexive Knowledge are mixed. One participant said that she indeed now has a better understanding of her interests as a citizen and as mass communications consumer. Another said, "As a result of learning a great deal of material, I now think about the subjects more critically. When you know more, you become more critical". Aside from these two responses, however, none of the other participants addressed this issue. This does not support claims about increases in reflexive knowledge (Luskin and Fishkin, 2002, p. 1; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Guston, 1999, pp. 470-471).

It is apparent that our results are in line with previous findings about gains in knowledge among participants in deliberative conferences. However, gains are not equally distributed among all aspects of knowledge. While there was a gain in substantive and general political knowledge, we observed only partial and inconclusive feedback in relation to reflexive knowledge.

Efficacy: Generally, all the participants felt that the conference enhanced and empowered their ability to influence policy-making. One participant said that "Before the conference, I didn't know that you can address a Knesset member and now I know it is possible and acceptable, and if there will be a subject that is important for me to act on, I now know how to do so". Some of the participants even used the term "turning-point" to describe the importance of the conference in their feeling of political competence.

For some of the participants, it seems that the experience of visiting the Knesset, and meeting with and listening to Knesset members and decision-makers, is the aspect of the conference that had the greatest impact on them. Says one, "it was the first time I had sat in a Knesset committee, and because I experienced it in person, I deeply understood that in this room there was a

potential for serious public impact". Having said this, it seems that the participants are not naïve about the potential influence of the conference's final report. This testifies to the participants' sober grasp of political reality, but they nonetheless have a hopeful outlook about citizens' agency in the political system. They believe that citizens' actions are important regardless if they succeed in having an impact.

Clearly, the sense of internal as well as external efficacy among the participants was significantly heightened and they felt empowered as a result of taking part in the conference. This is consistent with findings from previous research in the field (Fishkin, 2009, p. 141; Luskin and Fishkin, 2002, p. 8; Luskin, Fishkin, Malhotra and Siu, 2007, p. 7; Guston, 1999, p. 471; Smith, 1999, p. 54; Einsiedel and Eastlick, 2000). However, participants' comments reveal a certain complexity; on the one hand, the fact the report was received by Knesset members contributed to the general feeling that government and politicians are attentive and responsive. On the flip side, this should not be taken to imply a naiveté on the part of the participants, who on the whole retain a pragmatic and realistic view of the actual impact of the conference.

Political Interest: As previous findings have demonstrated (i.e. Guston, 1999, p. 470), it seems that there was an increase in issue specific political interest after the conference. A majority of participants reported that immediately following the conference they experienced an increase in their interest in the issues debated. However, this interest decreased over time. One participant said, "After the conference, we were all interested to see if the final report will have an impact, and how it would be received by the public, the mass media, and officials. But as time went by, this became just another among many topics which interest me". In regard to general political interest, many said that they are very interested in politics today, but that this was also true before they participated in the conference. The fact that many of participants expressed a high degree of interest in politics   to begin with could be due to the self-selection nature of the consensus conference.

Political Trust: For a small number of participants, the conference led to a more cynical view towards politics. One participant reported that "I always felt

that you can't count on politicians, and it only confirmed this feeling". These exceptions aside, for most participants the conference had a positive impact on political trust. One said, "I think it was one of the first encounters I'd had with Knesset members and their work, and the mere experience made me feel that changes are possible". Additionally, most of the participants stressed that they now understand that decision making in a democracy is a complex and highly complicated matter. One reported that "I now understand that decision making is more complex than it first appears". These reports are in sync with previous findings (Luskin and Fishkin, 2002, p. 9).

However, it seems that other political events and life experiences which occurred during and after the conference had an equal or greater impact of these participants' political trust. For example, one mentioned her military service as a much more influential experience in terms of political perception and world view. For others, the political reality had an ongoing negative effect on their sense of political trust. Said one, "six years here are like a generation. [Referring here to the time elapsed since the conference and the concurrent changes in political atmosphere during that period] Things have changed- you see all the corruption and special interests. It seems that people [politicians] don't care about anything". These remarks offer a long term perspective on political trust, and reflect that the conference was only a single element in the political lives of the participants.

Political Participation: We clearly observed that for most participants, the conference had a positive impact on their motivation to participate. Even those participants who were highly engaged prior to the conference reported that they were energized to further participation, as one participant said that "It sharpened and enhanced my will to participate and to encourage others to see that they can also [participate]". The few participants who did not share this effect were originally atypical as compared to the majority in that they, prior to conference, did not engage in political participation. These findings are in line with previous research (Guston, 1999, p. 474; Fishkin, 2009, p. 142; Einsiedel and Eastlick, 2000).

In contrast with Fishkin's findings (Luskin and Fishkin, 2002, p. 7), the participants say that their *actual* participation remained the same as pre-conference levels. However, while the degree of participation remained constant, for some participants the modes of participation became more varied. For example, one individual became involved with a particular issue which she was first exposed to at the conference. Likewise, another participant became a school principle. She said, "After the conference, I felt that school management is the best way for me to make an impact". Both of these individuals had high levels of participation prior to the conference. We suggest that, given their prior high level of participation, these courses of action represent a variation in participation rather than an increase.

Political Empathy, Tolerance, Courtesy and Respect: Some of the participants stated that meeting individuals from different sectors of society, such as Arab, Druze, religious, and secular individuals, as well as different age groups, was a meaningful experience for them. They reported that although some of them meet people from various sectors in everyday life, the conference gave them the opportunity to discuss politics with them in a way that doesn't normally occur. This resulted from informal conversations not necessarily related to the conference topics.

Most of the participants said they were tolerant and pluralistic in their worldview prior to the conference, but nonetheless, they gained significant knowledge from meeting individuals from other societal backgrounds, and that had some influence on their tolerance level. One said, "Maybe I am more tolerant towards other opinions than mine [now]. At first, you do not accept them, but then you can see the logic behind it, and change your mind". Another, who was originally antagonistic to our question on tolerance, finally admitted that "perhaps I learned from the conference that it is more important to listen to opinions than to express them".

It seems that meeting individuals from different walks of life had a positive influence on the participants, who report being more open to opposing points of view and arguments, more willing to consider others' positions, and more interested in learning about life experiences different from their own. They

stressed that this was not a mere anthropological experience for them, but one that had a real impact on their tolerance and open-mindedness towards people and opinions different from their own. One said that "when I think of political issues now, I tend to consider the minority's point of view as well as mine [Bedouins, in this case]. This is something I haven't done before". As has been argued before (Luskin and Fishkin, 2002, p. 3; Fearon, 1998, p. 59), the observed positive developments are the result of discussion, sometimes informal, between participants more than they are resultant from other ways of learning included in conference, such as listening to a lecture or reading.

Although not asked about it directly, the concept of consensus decision making came to be viewed very positively by the participants. One of the participants said that "The conference reminded me that some decisions should be reached in a consensual way". Some participants said they realized it is harder to reach consensual decisions, but this does not imply that it is not important. Another participant said, "I can't say which decisions should be reached through consensus, but I know for certain that some of them should".

Public Spiritedness: Participant interviews indicated increased public spiritedness, in that they have come to understand the interests and values at stake from the perspective of other members of the community. One participant claimed that "I now understand that there are individuals and institutions and other elements that I haven't even heard of, and I am not familiar with their claims and intentions, but I am willing to hear them... if I need to form an opinion about something, it is now clear to me that other people have a stake in it, and that means that I am willing to hear them". A few exceptions reported that they think their decision making process was already public-spirited prior to the conference, and therefore there wasn't much room for improvement. Aside from these few exceptions, those instances where we did find improvements are in agreement with the findings of other researchers (Fishkin, 2009, p. 142; Luskin and Fishkin, 2002, p. 9).

General discussion

The above results support both the findings of previous researchers as well as their general philosophical intuition. It seems that the third and fourth consensus conferences in Israel did have a positive influence on participants, and that they did lead to some increases in democratic attributes.

In general, the responses we gathered from the interviews left a strong impression that the conferences' positive benefits diminished over time. This is in sync with Andersen and Hansen's findings regarding political tolerance (Anderson and Hansen, 2007, p. 543). Perhaps the reason for this is that these benefits, and their resultant behaviors and attitude, requires continuous maintenance. One experience, intensive as it may have been, is simply not sufficient. This leads us to theorize that an institutionalization of deliberative processes is required if we are interested in their positive effects in terms of citizen education. This is in accordance with Fishkin's suggestion: "To nudge the public as a whole toward greater engagement, we need to 'treat' many more people, to make the treatment more sustained" (Luskin and Fishkin, 2002, p. 3).

A key point we have drawn from our study lies in the emphasis placed by a high number of participants on the importance of the consensus aspect of decision making. We feel that it is plausible to say that this is a result of the unique format of consensus conferences.[17] Further research is required if we want to fully understand the connection between the type of deliberative process and the impact it may have on participants. Furthermore, we should ask whether a positive attitude towards consensus is in fact a desired civil virtue. To a great extent, the answer to this question depends on a theoretical question fundamental to the deliberative theory, which asks what should be the place of consensus in decision making.

Another insight brought up by the interviews regards the ways in which participants construct their memories of participating in the conference. Many of the participants talked about the experience as something they had been through as individuals, and not as a collective. The manner in which they

spoke about the experience reminded us of the manner in which people speak of other meaningful experiences in their personal lives, not necessarily political experiences, such as military service, the traditional Israeli post-army trip abroad, or going to university. It was evident that they didn't feel they were representing a certain sector of society, or even any political interests of any kind, but rather only themselves. We feel that this very specific manner of constructing their memories of the experience might have an influence- either positive or negative remains unclear - on the kinds of civic virtues mentioned earlier. This insight was possible thanks to the specific point in time at which we chose to interview the participants. We are not sure if it would have been raised had the interviews been conducted shortly after the conference.

Summary

The aim of this article was to examine the long-term influence of deliberative discussion on the attitudes and opinions of citizens. The assumptions regarding a positive influence is wide-spread in the academic literature, but the empirical evidence isn't as common. We decided that the best methodology at this point of time would be that of depth interviews of the last two consensus citizen conferences taking place in Israel, which were our case-study. We evaluated them according to eight categories of citizenship virtues that appeared previously in the literature.

Our results were not clear-cut. While some categories, such as political knowledge or political participation, were very obviously enhanced by participation in citizen conferences, others were unaffected or their effect wore off due to time and events occurring in between the conference and the interview (such as political trust). The overview of our results raises three main results: First, the conference is a one-time event, and as such its effects on the participant did not remain consistent over time, and did not resist the influence of other happenings and events in their lives, which subsequently changed certain perceptions among some interviewed participants. In order to overcome this, deliberative discussions may have to be a recurring part of our lives through some form of institutionalization. Second, the interviews and investigative process undertaken in this study led us to consider the important

role of *consensus* as a specific form of deliberation, and we believe urges us to further study in order to elucidate this point. Third and finally, we saw that the participants expressed an individualistic view of the experience, rather than having viewed their participation role as one of representatives of different sectors in society.

This study was restricted by space limitations as well as by methodological problems. Future research will need to overcome these problems, which present a serious obstacle to the credibility of the results. Furthermore, it is advisable to examine not only the consensus conferences but other forms of deliberative discussions, and see if different forms affect the participants differently. In addition, during the interviews we noticed a difference between the participants from the two different conferences. This might stem from the subject discussed or from the way the process has been carried out within the conference. The implications of this are that the extent to which a certain participant or a group of them is affected has to do with not only the general form of the discussion but with the facilitators and the way discussions were ran. If that is the case, it is important to take note of it in the research process.

Nonetheless, this study has shown that citizens are indeed affected by participation in deliberative discussions, at least in some ways, and that deliberation can help create a "better" citizen. This conclusion reinforces what is at once our very basic intuition and the ideal of a democratic system: a place where informed and active citizens come together in order to deliberate what is the best policy.

References

1. It should be noted that this work will not be sensitive to Morrell's distinction in the sense that it will draw on previous research that refers both to deliberative discussion (the most obvious examples of which are the deliberative public opinion polling done by James Fishkin) and to deliberative decision-making (consensus conferences belong to this type). The reason is that we do not see a good reason to think that different types of processes will have different consequences, and neither do other researchers: Fishkin notes, for instance, that "deliberation is a school for better citizens no matter what kind of deliberative project is conducted" (Fishkin, 2009, 143). Although this claim (that different procedures will result in different effects) might be interesting to investigate.

2. For a few reservations, see: Delli Carpini et al. 2004; Fearon, 1998, 66, note 20; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002, 191.

3. The gain in substantive information could be the result of acquiring information during, but also before the discussion. It seems plausible that if people expect to engage in public discussions about what to do, they will be encouraged to invest more time and energy preparing themselves by gathering information and thinking about the issue (Fearon, 1998, p. 59; Andersen & Hansen 2007).Guston Found as well that some participants continued to acquire knowledge about the issue after the conference, on their own (Guston, 1999, p. 470).

4. Fishkin even found that deliberative polls show a significant increase in the ability of participants to place political parties and themselves on a policy scale (Fishkin, 2009, p. 140).

5. See Guston, however, for some reservations which results from his evaluation of the American consensus conference (Guston, 1999, 471).

6. Efficacy receives much attention in part because of its alleged connection to political participation. Studies show that citizens who feel more efficacious or "empowered" are more likely to be motivated to participate in the political process (Pateman, 1970, p. 45; Burkhalter et al., 2002)

7. This sense of efficacy could also be understood as akin to the term "empowering" (Fishkin, 2009, p. 141).

8. See, however, for some reservations: Guston, 1999, p. 471; Morrell, 2005, pp. 61, 54.

9. Note that Public-spiritedness doesn't require putting the public interest consistently ahead of one's own. It only requires that the public interest be admitted to the calculus as something to consider in weighing the merits of given alternatives (Luskin and Fishkin, 2002, p. 2).

10. Mendelberg talks of "thin or non-existent empirical evidence for the benefits that deliberative theorists expect" (Mendelberg, 2002, p. 154).

11. The third's title was "Transparency, control, accessibility and creation of a civil society" and was conducted in 2002; the fourth dealt with mass communication, and was conducted in 2004.

12. The issues are: improvement or gain in (1) information, knowledge and understanding, (2)efficacy, (3)political interest,(4) political participation,(4) public spiritedness,(5) attitudes towards democracy and (6)political trust, political empathy, tolerance, courtesy and respect.

13. The Zippori Center, which was the initiator and host of the four conferences, was closed shortly after the fourth conference. We tried to obtain data about attitudes and perspectives of the participants before and during the conference which could be used as reference, but we were unsuccessful.

14. As is the case, however, in other types of deliberative processes such as Fishkin's Deliberative Polls.

15. We would like to say, however, that just because a perception is only reveled by contemplation, does not mean it is un-authentic.

16. This might be due to the nature of the conference's topics: For the most part, political parties in Israel do not take a decisive stand on the two topics discussed at the conferences.

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Appendix: Semi-Structured Citizen Interview Protocol

1. Did you gain new knowledge during the conference? Do you think that this knowledge influenced your decisions during the conference or the way you make decisions? If so, how?

2. Did participation in the conference improve your understanding of your interests and preferences, regarding the debated issues?

3. Did the conference change the way you view politics? Did it improve your understanding of the parties' or politicians' preferences regarding the issues?

4. Did the conference change your view regarding the ability of civil participation to affect policy-making? [Refer to these points: In what ways can such participation take place? Do citizens such as your self have the requisite knowledge to participate? Do you think citizens should be more involved in public activities? Do you think more citizens should take part in projects of this sort? If so, why is it important?]

5. Did the conference influence your view of the level of politicians' attentiveness to public needs and wants? Do you feel that there is willingness among politicians to heed and include the public in the policy-making process?

6. What is your view of citizens' ability to influence politics, following the conference?

7. Did the conference influence your understanding of the complexity of policy-making, and the difficulties politicians face when making decisions?

8. Did the conference influence your view regarding the proper way to make decisions in a country?

9. Did the conference influence the way you understand democratic government?

10. Are the issues of the conference still interesting to you? [Refer to these points: Do you read articles about these topics, discuss them with friends, etc? If not, did these issues interest you after the conference? For how long?]

11. Did the conference influence your general interest in politics?

12. Did the conference influence the way you form your view of political issues? Do you tend to think of more varied viewpoints or public interests than before?

13. Did participation in the conference influence the level of your involvement in the public-sphere? If so, how and where?

14. Did you stay in touch with members of the group after the conference?

15. Did you change your views about different sectors and cultural groups within society as a result of meeting with those groups during the conference?

16. Do you believe that participation in the conference made you more tolerant of different opinions?

17. Would you be willing to participate in similar projects in the future?

18. Do you think there are any ways in which the conference influenced you that we haven't mention?