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Thinking systemically about deliberative democracy and climate change

Report

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Summary

This report suggests that deliberative democracy is a collaborative and effective way to develop the concerted, ambitious and creative action needed to respond to climate change. Drawing on the work of Alberta Climate Dialogue (ABCD) in organizing mini-publics, it argues, however, that in order to achieve these aims, deliberative approaches need to adopt the tools of system design and thinking to enable people to better understand complex problems and implement action through experimentation and learning.

Introduction

Climate change is a global challenge, shot through with power and politics, approached through a wide diversity of frames, and touching just about every area of human activity. There are promising currents and developments: continued innovation and rapidly decreasing costs for renewable energy technologies, as well as shifts toward climate responsibility by governments. Living in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, I have seen such shifts in the last year at all political levels: local, provincial and national. There have also been recent positive signals from the 2015 Paris COP negotiations; and growing civil society mobilization for strong and just climate responses.

But there are plentiful reasons for pessimism, including the continued prominence of climate denial in US politics, the political power of corporate forces resisting rapid change in energy systems, and the inadequacies of current mitigation efforts given scientific evidence about the pace of change required. All told, there is massively insufficient public and political will and imagination to motivate the deep political, economic, social, and cultural transformations needed to mitigate catastrophic climate disruption and deal with increasingly catastrophic impacts. What kinds of collaborative and

democratic mechanisms and institutions might help to cultivate concerted, ambitious, creative action?

Deliberative democracy offers a potential answer. Deliberative democrats suggest that engaging diverse citizens directly in problem-solving and policy development can improve the responsiveness, accountability, and effectiveness of representative institutions, and build support for government action that aligns with public values.

This report asks to what extent can deliberation, in the form of 'mini-publics', support responses adequate to the scale and intractability of climate change? I explore this question through the example of the Citizens' Panel on Edmonton's Energy and Climate Challenges.[1] Setting out the strengths and political impacts of such mini-publics, I suggest that they are most likely to support strong and wise climate responses if based on careful systemic analysis, using tools drawn from systems and design thinking. Theories and practices of deliberative democracy must change if they are to be adequate to the climate challenge.

What is deliberative democracy?

'Deliberative democracy' describes a political theory and also an extensive field of practice encompassing organized grassroots dialogue and action, sustained dialogue on polarized political questions, and, the focus of this article, 'mini-publics' – carefully convened, limited-term gatherings of diverse citizens that make recommendations to government.

Deliberative democracy can be distinguished from other discourses and practices of public engagement, involvement, participation, and consultation in at least four ways. These draw on democratic ideals as well as understandings of how to bridge diverse perspectives to reach decisions that reflect a sound interpretation of complex problems. First, deliberative democracy emphasizes the need to represent the diversity of affected communities in political discussion and problem-solving. Second, it stresses deliberation, which not only elicits the views of participants but helps them learn about an issue from diverse perspectives, engage across this diversity, consider solutions, and locate common ground without ignoring trade-offs. Third, deliberative democracy seeks formal political influence for participants' recommendations, which both motivates and focuses their work together. Fourth, deliberation grounds discussion and decisions in participants' convictions and values.

Mini-publics are attracting theoretical interest and stimulating practical experimentation. They often are convened in formal partnership with government and civil society actors, with explicit commitment from political decision-makers to take citizen recommendations seriously and respond publicly. Mini-publics appear under different names and forms, including citizen assemblies, citizen panels, citizen juries and consensus conferences. They can provide decision makers with a sense of where citizens stand after careful reflection; identify unanticipated coalescences of public will and new ways forward; build public legitimacy for action on contentious issues; and increase the willingness and ability of communities and civil society organizations to act in concert with government.

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[1] http://www.edmonton.ca/city_government/environmental_stewardship/citizens-panel-energy-climate.aspx

Mini-publics have been convened around a range of complex, polarized issues – for example GMOs, the just distribution of health care, neighbourhood policing, and (in at least a few high profile cases) climate change. While many of the most prominent examples involve face-to-face deliberation, conveners increasingly blend face-to-face with electronic participation; build complex programs of involvement where some participants deliberate at length, while others participate more lightly; and host deliberation entirely online.[2]

Mini-publics and climate change: the case of the Edmonton Citizens' Panel

From 2010 to 2016 I led Alberta Climate Dialogue (ABCD), a community-university research project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. A collaboration of over 50 governments, NGOs, dialogue convening organizations, and university-based researchers, ABCD convened deliberations with a municipal government (City of Edmonton), a non-government organization (the Alberta Energy Efficiency Alliance), and a para-governmental organization (the Oldman Watershed Council).[3] The municipal partnership, which gave rise to the Citizens' Panel on Edmonton's Energy and Climate Challenges, helps illustrate both the strengths of mini-publics and some of the challenges they face in addressing systemic dimensions of climate change.

Alberta was a challenging place to build mini-publics on climate change. In the period of our project, Alberta was an engine of the Canadian economy based on fossil fuels, including the Athabasca oil or tar sands (politically contested labels), the third-largest crude oil reserve in the world, expensive and energy-intensive to extract. ABCD's efforts to convene deliberations with the conservative provincial government were unsuccessful. The provincial capital of Edmonton, though, was a different story. Edmonton is a politically progressive city of under a million people, and in the period of our work was bolder and more innovative than higher level jurisdictions in addressing climate change. The City's Office of Environment partnered with ABCD and the Centre for Public Involvement to build a citizen engagement process that they hoped would help them align ambitious energy and climate policy, which was already fairly advanced in development, with the perspectives of citizens, and demonstrate this alignment in order to secure political support for an energy transition strategy.

A randomly recruited Citizens' Panel appealed to our City partners: they wanted to show City Council that the citizens involved were not 'the usual suspects' but reflected Edmonton's ideological and demographic diversity. Given the complex issues and policy choices, we needed to involve

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[2] For a sense of the diversity of approaches and exercises, see http://ncdd.org and http://www.participedia.net/
[3] www.albertaclimatedialogue.ca

participants over a number of days, which is doable with mini-publics. And a process that converged on recommendations to decision makers was perceived to be key to political influence.

It took a year-and-a-half of negotiation and planning with ABCD for the City to feel confident moving forward with a deliberative democratic process quite different from consultation methods they were used to. We used a professional polling firm to recruit sixty-six demographically representative residents who agreed to participate in six days of deliberation. The recruitment process surveyed belief in anthropogenic climate change and targeted a threshold number of sceptics; it also enlisted a threshold number of people whose jobs or those of family members were dependent on the energy sector. Panellists met for six days from October to December 2012. They deliberated on energy transition policy for Edmonton, deciding between business as usual, 'reduced carbon', and 'low carbon' pathways. Substantial time was spent on how the City should achieve carbon reductions, for example, lobbying to green the provincial grid, increasing the energy efficiency of new and old buildings, supporting district and renewable energy systems, influencing vehicle use, and moving toward a more compact urban form and transit-centred development.

Given the diversity of participants, we were surprised by their degree of convergence on recommendations: 92% agreed that the City should take the measures needed to become a low carbon city by 2050 and panellists supported a range of specific measures to achieve this. These recommendations were presented to Council in 2013, and the Office of Environment was instructed to develop an Energy Transition Strategy. The strategy—ambitious by Alberta standards, and highly detailed—came back to Council in 2015. Council debate stretched over two days, with significant discussion of the Citizens' Panel process and recommendations. The Strategy passed unanimously.

This Citizens' Panel process shows how mini-publics can identify ambitious paths forward on complex and controversial issues like climate change and energy transition. City Council's response to the Panel suggests that the exercise had real influence on a key policy decision. And yet given the scale of the climate challenge and its systemic complexity, there is room for qualms about the impact of mini-publics.

One concern points to the vast scale of the climate challenge, and the drop-in-the-bucket quality of many responses. This qualm was present in spades after the Paris COP negotiations (2015): the agreement spoke of keeping global temperature rise to 2 degrees, and aiming for closer to 1.5 degrees; yet the national commitments brought to Paris fell far, far short of the ambition needed to achieve either goal. A similar qualm about the gap between the scale of the problem and the scale of action was expressed by some Edmonton Citizens' Panellists.

Another concern is yet more piercing: it is not just that we are not going far enough fast enough; in fact, our piecemeal solutions may stand in the way of recognizing the systemic causes of climate change. We may be treating the symptoms while failing to see the cause. Worse yet, our ignorance of systemic dynamics may lead us to push levers in the wrong direction (Easterbrook, 2011). Naomi Klein (2014) is one of the most prominent proponents of this critique, associated with the slogan "system change, not climate change".[4]

Both sets of concern suggest that we are not taking a broad and systemic enough view in developing responses to climate change; both resonate with me. I want to ask here, though, whether mini-publics are consigned to head-in-the-sand irrelevance (I say 'no'), and if not, what it

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[4] See http://systemchangenotclimatechange.org/

would take to design mini-publics to be adequate to the complexity and gravity of climate change. But I want first to distinguish worries about constrained political ambition (action on too small a scale) from worries about misunderstanding complex systems (pushing in the wrong direction).

Thinking systemically about mini-publics and climate change

Whether at the Paris COP or the City of Edmonton, deciding on the right level of ambition for energy transition is politics as the art of the possible. Yes, the science of climate change screams at us to change fast; but the constraints on action are massive. Leaders need to wrestle with how ambitious they dare to be in the short term, and how near-term action can sow seeds for more ambitious action to follow. In City of Edmonton, this involved complex assessments of how near-term changes to City metrics, subsidies, incentives, regulations, and public education around energy transition might make space for ambitious policy down the road, and leverage significant market transitions. In Paris, the hope was that voluntary agreements, plus transparency, plus increased investment in technologies of transition, plus changing market conditions, plus transfers to countries on the front lines of climate impacts, set the stage for ratcheting up ambition in subsequent years. These may be good or bad bets; but it is not a knock-down refutation to say that near-term action falls short of the scale of action called for by the science.

Debates about political ambition, though, may nest within worries about system complexity. Stories about how small and feasible progress now sows seeds for rapid progress later presuppose analyses of the system in which we're intervening (Petrocultures, 2016). If climate change is an artefact of irreducibly rapacious capitalist markets, for example, then our efforts to nudge these markets toward climate responsibility over time are misconceived. If our representative democratic institutions are hostage to global corporations and elites, small victories now may be alibis for inaction rather than steps toward the right scale of ambition.

What tools do we have for reckoning with the systemic and structural dynamics that drive climate change and predict the success of different climate responses? And how can these tools inform how mini-publics are used on climate issues?

I take seriously the message of systems theorists – and also many traditional and indigenous approaches to knowing (Tully, 2014) – that we need to understand complex problems in ecosystemic rather than linear, mechanistic terms. I'll admit that as we designed the Edmonton Citizens' Panel, we tended to tell a linear story: citizens will deliberate in the mini-public, generate a report, the report will go to City Council, Council will make a decision, and this policy will change states of affairs in the world. Of course we realized that public perception, civil society mobilization, industry resistance, and other factors would play roles, and we strategized about these. But our thinking could be quite mechanical, like we were solving a tough equation or plotting the interaction of discrete forces.

Systems thinkers urge that we approach things in more ecological terms. Changes in ecosystems do not happen in straight lines but through negative feedback loops (where a perturbation feeds into systems that bring things back into balance, as when a healthy body deals with fluctuations in body

temperature) and positive feedback loops (where a stimulus causes changes that increase its power, as with global warming melting permafrost and releasing methane that increases warming). These feedback loops have different time lags, which – combined with how any given systems nest within other systems – makes the change caused by any particular intervention intricately complex.

From this systems point of view, much about our ways of life, forms of social understanding, and methods of politics are premised on a fundamental (and peculiarly modern) alienation from webs of both social relationship and relationship with the living earth (Tully, 2014). We imagine ourselves to be independent beings, deciding how to relate to a calculable and commodified natural and social world (Polanyi, 1944). But in fact our interventions in the world are mediated through complex structures and systems that we understand poorly; we don't see how the behaviour of parts (including ourselves) interacts with and is conditioned by the ecology of the whole.

Deliberative democracy and theories of change

I worry that deliberative democratic theory, as well as practical interventions like mini-publics, tend to address parts of the system, or isolated dynamics, without a sufficient grasp of the broader whole. When I attend gatherings of deliberative democrats and experts on public engagement (the International Association for Public Participation; the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation; the Deliberative Democracy Consortium), the stories I hear about how mini-publics and other deliberative exercises make a difference fall into a common genre:

- They tend to be reformist stories: citizen deliberation affects the world by influencing established decision making structures, while also educating and empowering citizens.
- They tend to be aggregative stories: to fix liberal representative democracy we need more and more deliberation involving more and more people in more and more places, thus building capacities, linkages, and infrastructures over time.
- They tend to be 'liberal' stories, focused on how mini-publics and other deliberative exercises can change minds and decisions. Contrast this with a 'radical' analysis that focuses on how social stasis and change are explained by the unintended, systemically mediated effects of individual actions—that is, by structures and mechanisms of power that underlie and constrain our individual and collective reasoning and decisions.

If this ameliorative story is the only one that deliberative democrats have to tell, then I think that the broad approach, and particular interventions like mini-publics, will be limited when it comes to dealing with complex issues like climate change. I do, however, see an antidote.

Getting systemic about deliberative democracy

Tools of systems and design thinking, combined as 'systemic design', offer a way for mini-publics to be crafted and run so that they are more attentive to systemic dynamics. Systemic design has a

large toolkit of methods, including the following, which would be used differently for different contexts and situations (Ryan, 2014):

1. **Inquiring**: moving beyond the knowledge held by the group by using stakeholder ethnography, literature reviews, engagement with experts, and learning journeys that take the group to parts of the system they may not have experienced before.
2. **Framing**: bringing into view how issues and solutions are implicitly being framed or bounded, considering alternative frames, and developing a shared frame.
3. **Formulating**: having the group articulate the diverse values that are motivating their work on an issue, and creating tangible artefacts (diagrams, extensive maps, physical models) that support a common understanding of values, frames, and understandings of the system.
4. **Generating**: taking these artefacts out into the world to see how others respond, and perhaps as actual prototypes of interventions in the system. These artefacts should be quickly and cheaply produced, so that multiple understandings and interventions can be tested and build learning, including through failure.
5. **Facilitating**: establishing and supporting norms for working together, and planning and creating settings and dialogues where the group can invite others into the work.
6. **Reflecting**: assessing the effects of the group's actions in the world, and moving from diverse observations about these to shared understandings that support further cycles of analysis and action.

This is the quickest of sketches of the methodologies and methods of systemic design;[5] it points to forms of inquiry and action that, harnessed to the democratic ideals and practices of the mini-public, might build a more adequate understanding of complex problems like climate change. I think about the work that Alberta Climate Dialogue did to design the Edmonton Citizens' Panel, where we sought to understand a complex political terrain and tailor our interventions to reckon with the forces in play. This work would have been enhanced by more methodically mapping broader systems relevant to our work—the political, social, cultural, and economic dynamics that produced provincial and municipal climate outcomes in Alberta. The work would have been assisted by reflecting systematically on the facts and norms structuring our interpretation of the problem and potential solutions (Ulrich, 2005), as well as how we used deliberation. And it would have benefitted from cycles of divergence and convergence, of experimentation and learning, inherent in systemic design. Such work might have led us to consider mini-publics differently, taking into account their relationship with social movements and political opportunities (Kahane & MacKinnon, 2015; Kenrick, 2013), or steering us to strategies for systemic influence other than or in addition to mini-publics.

Systemic design methodologies and methods would not only have helped those building the Edmonton Citizens' Panel to do so in light of a broad systemic analysis, but would have been useful within the mini-public itself. At both levels, there were risks of premature closure, accepting dominant ways of thinking about climate change and climate action, and being satisfied with linear and ameliorative climate responses rather than grappling with deeper systemic and structural causes. At both levels, the tools of systemic design might have cultivated a broader view.

This incorporation of tools drawn from systems and design thinking into mechanisms like mini-publics is true to both the ideals and the epistemic convictions of deliberative democracy.

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[5] Systemic design is a new field, with no shared repository of tools. For a sense of the approach, see www.systemsorienteddesign.net and www.ideo.com.

At the level of ideals, the tools I've described offer deliberative democrats new ways to incorporate diverse voices and perspectives and to deliberate broadly and in light of understandings of systemic and structural dynamics that might otherwise be elusive. They suggest ways of achieving influence given a more adequate understanding of leverage points for systemic change; and arriving at new articulations of values that reflect systemic learning.

At the level of knowing what we need to know to influence complex systems like climate mitigation and adaptation, the tools of systemic design lead to a more adequate grasp of the complex causalities, feedback loops, temporalities, and nested systems in play. According to deliberative democrats, the value of mini-publics is that they not only express ideals of democratic justice, but lead to action in the world that more adequately satisfies the interests and values of diverse participants. To do this, though, actions need to be based on an adequate grasp of the problem at hand, and deployed in ways that lead to real learning about novel situations.

I believe that deliberative democratic forums like mini-publics are an important part of generating just, effective, sustainable climate solutions, but only when deliberative democrats address the complexity of social, economic, cultural, and ecological systems. Then the responses developed will be sufficiently bold, and tested against the emergent dynamics of the problems we seek to address.

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