

**SPSR Manuscript No 2019-085****Scaling up Deliberation: Testing the Potential of Mini-Publics to Enhance the Deliberative Capacity of Citizens**

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Jane Suiter  
Lala Muradova  
John Gastil  
David M. Farrell

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**Abstract:**

This paper tests the possibility of embedding the benefits of minipublic deliberation within a wider voting public. We test whether a statement such as those derived from a Citizens' Initiative Review (CIR) can influence voters who did not participate in the pre-referendum minipublic deliberation. This experiment was implemented in advance of the 2018 Irish referendum on blasphemy, one of a series of social-moral referendums following the recommendations of a deliberative assembly. This is the first application of a CIR-style voting aid in a real world minipublic and referendum outside of the US and also the first application to what is principally a moral question. We found that survey respondents exposed to information about the minipublic and its findings significantly increased their policy knowledge. Further, exposing respondents to minipublic statements in favour and against the policy measure increased their empathy for the other side of the policy debate.

Referendums ask an electorate to make the kind of policy decisions otherwise reserved for professional legislators. Deliberative democratic reformers have proposed that voters would benefit from the use of a special kind of citizen body—the “deliberative minipublic.” When such a body communicates its findings to the full electorate, it could help voters make more informed and reflective choices on their ballots (Mackenzie and Warren 2012; Warren and Gastil 2015).

Minipublics consist of randomly chosen citizens who represent a wider population. Organizers ask these citizens to deliberate on important policy issues and offer impartial judgments based on good evidence and respectful deliberation across different viewpoints. Seminal cases include the Irish Constitutional Convention (Suiter et al. 2016a), Irish Citizens' Assembly (Farrell et al. 2018), Deliberative Polls (Fishkin 2009), and the Citizens' Initiative Review in Oregon (Gastil et al. 2018).

Much of the empirical research on minipublics examines micro-level processes and outcomes for participating citizens, but this leaves unanswered hard questions about their scalability and practical value for macro-level policymaking. Can deliberative minipublics influence the wider public, and if so, to what extent? Such questions are particularly important at a time when researchers are using the Citizens' Initiative Review model to conduct experiments in

new countries, such as Switzerland (Stojanović and Geisler 2019) and Finland (Setälä et al. 2019).

Prior research has studied how minipublics affect deliberating individuals' values and attitudes by boosting the coherence of their policy attitudes, democratic legitimacy beliefs, political efficacy, complexity of thinking, the quality of political knowledge and judgements (Fishkin 2009; Grönlund et al. 2010; Himmelroos and Christensen 2014; Jennstål 2019; Lindell et al. 2017; Luskin et al. 2002; Muradova 2020; Suiter et al. 2016b). More recently, attention has turned to whether such effects scale to the wider citizenry (Boulianne 2018; Felicetti et al. 2016; Ingham and Levin 2018; Knobloch et al. 2019).

We extend this growing line of research by asking whether reading a report from a deliberative minipublic can strengthen the *deliberative capacity* of an electorate. Deliberative capacity involves resources and skills that enable citizens to engage in interpersonal and intrapersonal deliberation before making political judgements (Burkhalter et al. 2002).

Although there is a scholarly debate on what specific capacities are the most important (Curato and Böker 2016), we focus on two: informational resources and emotional capacities. An abundance of the former provides necessary factual knowledge about politics and policy, whereas the latter affords one the empathy necessary for considering how collective decisions impact the full demos. Both are crucial components of the “enlightened understanding” that deliberation aims to create (Dahl 1989: 112; O’Flynn and Sood 2014).

More specifically, we examine whether reading about a minipublic and its recommendations can enhance citizens' factual knowledge and other-regarding empathic feelings toward the other side of a public policy debate. Our study investigates whether different ways of transmitting information about minipublics to the larger public yields different deliberative capacities. For example, does reading about the justification statement for minipublic recommendations (as opposed to mere recommendations, with no justification) have a differing effect on citizens? Does exposure to the counter-attitudinal arguments considered by the minipublic have a positive or a negative effect on knowledge gain and empathy?

To disentangle the effects of three different elements of informational exposure (recommendations, justifications, and pro-con arguments), we fielded a survey experiment ( $N = 776$ ) among Irish citizens in the run-up to 2018 referendum on blasphemy. The survey exposed citizens to statements on this issue from the Irish Constitutional Convention, which were adapted to resemble the voter guides produced by the Citizens' Initiative Review (Gastil and Knobloch 2020).

After providing a broader theoretical context for this study and laying out our research methods, we present the results of our experiment. At the cost of giving away the ending of this story, the main findings were as follows. First, reading information about the minipublic's key findings had the hypothesized positive effect on voter knowledge, though not in every case. Second, exposure to opposing viewpoints had a positive effect on empathy for the other side, but it dampened the knowledge gains. In our concluding section, we discuss the implications of these results, such as tension between providing factual information and foregrounding political disagreement in deliberation (Esterling et al. 2015; Guess and Coppock 2018; Mutz 2006; Nyhan and Reifler 2010) and offer new insights to political psychological theories of how different information cues about citizen forums may influence voters' decisions.

## The Effect of Minipublics on Public Attitudes

Deliberative minipublics are institutions consisting of a (near) random sample of citizens who engage in structured discussion and deliberation on policy issues and make policy recommendations (for a review, see Setälä and Smith 2018: 300). The examples of minipublics include deliberative polling (Fishkin 2009), citizens' assemblies (Suiter et al. 2016a), citizen juries (Smith and Wales 2000), and Citizens' Initiative Reviews (Gastil et al. 2018). They are designed to involve citizens in political decision-making processes by providing them with unbiased and diverse viewpoints, expert information, and a safe space to deliberate and reason together (Goodin and Dryzek 2006).

### *Theorizing Minipublics' Broader Impacts*

Research suggests that deliberation in minipublics leads to higher-quality political attitudes, increased political efficacy and political knowledge and higher civic engagement among participating citizens (Farrar et al. 2009; Grönlund et al. 2010; Knobloch and Gastil 2015; Luskin et al. 2002). Although having merit on their own, these attitudinal effects are restricted to the small number of people who participate in minipublics. In practice it is challenging for all or nearly all citizens to have the opportunity to get engaged in small group deliberations (Goodin 2003). Proponents of a systemic approach to deliberation, such as Parkinson (2018: 433), acknowledge that unlike the Ancient Athenian demos, "it is impossible for everyone — or representatives of everyone — to gather together in a single room to hear all of the proposals for action and inaction and reason together to reach a joint conclusion."

To be of practical benefit for polities, minipublics must have impacts on the wider citizenry (Knobloch et al. 2019: 2). In the absence of this impact, minipublics are faced with the challenges of scalability (Chambers 2009). Various means of minipublic influence on macro politics been suggested (Goodin and Dryzek 2006). According to one argument, deliberative minipublics have the potential to inform and shape public opinion on a range of complex policy issues. Learning that a group of randomly chosen lay citizens arrive at conclusions after a careful deliberation can serve as informational proxies for the public who are uninformed about the policies (Ingham and Levin 2018; Mackenzie and Warren 2012; Niemeyer 2011; Warren and Gastil 2015).

The so-called *blind deference* to the recommendations by minipublics, however, may not be the best solution. Cristina Lafont (2015) argues that the use of deliberative minipublics in shaping public policymaking directly decreases democratic legitimacy, because it circumvents deliberation in the larger public. From this participatory standpoint, deliberative minipublics should enhance (rather than hinder) deliberation in the broader public sphere (Lafont 2020; see also, Curato and Böker, 2016; Chambers 2009).

This leads to the question at the heart of this article: How can deliberative minipublics motivate the wider public to become better informed and more empathic when making political judgments? We argue that minipublics can contribute to mass deliberation by enhancing the *deliberative capacity* of citizens, defined here as the ability of citizens to engage in deliberative political decision making. Deliberative capacity encompasses a set of resources and abilities that can aid people to deliberate with others and/or in their heads before arriving at informed and reflective political decisions. *Informational resources* encompass factual information and knowledge which are necessary for interpreting and analysing political realities (Burkhalter et al. 2002). *Analytical capacities* include information

processing skills, reflective and logical thinking, whereas *communication skills* entail the capacity to articulate one's views, construct persuasive arguments, frame these arguments around a common good, and engage in a discussion with others (Burkhalter et al. 2002: 417).

We believe that this list should also include *emotional capacity*. This includes being sensitive to others' feelings, thoughts, and life experiences, which can be best captured by the concept of empathy (Rogers 1980; Morrell 2010). Empathy is the "capacity to feel like others might feel (affective empathy) or to understand their feelings and perspectives (cognitive empathy)" (Wessler 2018: 145). Michael Morrell (2010) argues that without empathy it is impossible for deliberative democracy to fulfil its promise of equal consideration that is central to giving collective decisions their legitimacy. It should reduce the distance between citizens from different walks of life by promoting inclusiveness and strengthening mutual respect and reciprocity (Goodin 2003; Krause 2008; Morrell 2010). As Sharon Krause posits, deliberation that lacks empathy "cannot provide a basis for legitimate, justified democratic decision making that truly takes all into consideration" (2008: 83). Recent empirical research has shown that consideration of different perspectives on the issue, in particular those of the opposing side, requires being empathetic toward others' perspectives and feelings (Muradova 2020).

In this paper, we focus on two aspects of deliberative capacity: informational resources and emotional capacities. We explore whether reading about a minipublic and its consensus recommendation enhances informational resources and other-regarding, empathic capacities of citizens in the wider public.

#### *The Citizens' Initiative Review Model*

Perhaps the best known of the consensus recommendation processes was established by the Oregon State Legislature in 2009, whereby a randomly selected group of citizens meet for four-to-five days as a Citizens' Initiative Review (CIR) panel to write a one-page Citizens' Statement that is inserted into the official Oregon *Voters' Pamphlet* mailed to every registered voter by the Secretary of State (Knobloch et al. 2013). This Citizens' Statement has five parts: a description of the CIR process; a Key Findings statement of relevant information that a majority of panellists consider accurate and important; and statements in favour of and opposed to the measure. The process for writing these pro and con arguments has varied over the years, from subsets of panellists on either side writing them independently in the first year (2010) to a more recent collaborative approach that involves the whole panel (Gastil and Knobloch 2020). Though variants exist, statewide CIRs in Oregon also show how many panellists ended up in favour or against the ballot measure.

The CIR is designed to create a distinctive communication process through which the wider electorate can discover how citizens understood an issue following a period of deliberation (Gastil et al. 2014). The mechanism through which this happens may be facilitative trust (Warren and Gastil 2015). Minipublics can act as facilitative trust agents when such bodies are high in competence but low in motivated reasoning. The wider citizenry might use these facilitative trustees to make judgments on their behalf when they offer a consensus recommendation (Fishkin 2009; Landemore 2013). Indeed, evidence from Irish minipublics finds that those who know more about the minipublic also have higher levels of subject knowledge and are more likely to vote in line with the minipublic recommendation (Elkink et al. 2017, 2020; Suiter and Reidy 2020).

This trustee model of the minipublic, however, raises objections from those who would prefer that a minipublic inspire—rather than replace—reflection and judgment in the wider public (Lafont 2015, 2020). The CIR model addresses this concern by foregrounding key information and arguments for the public to consider, rather than a recommendation to be followed. A review of survey experiments on the full set of CIRs held in the US since 2010 found that even when voters see a tally showing how the CIR minipublic itself voted, this alone did not predict changes in voters' judgments. As Gastil and Knobloch (2020: 130) conclude, "The bottom line is that how a CIR panel votes gives some indication of its likely effect on the electorate. What really matters, though, is the content of the panel's statement."

Building on this finding, we examine whether a CIR-type statement from a minipublic can enhance the deliberative capacity of citizens by increasing their knowledge gain on the issue and prompting other-regarding empathic feelings in them. We examine this in the context of a moral referendum on blasphemy in Ireland. Moral questions are associated with fixed attitudes; they are situated at a deeper level (Pearce and Littlejohn 1997: 51) and may "engage a distinctive mode of processing [...] [and] evoke certain negative emotions toward political disagreement, perhaps more powerfully than any other attitude characteristic" (Ryan 2014: 381). Acknowledging and gaining new and counter-attitudinal information on a moral issue may be more challenging for people. Therefore, a moral issue constitutes a hard test for our theoretical argument.

### Hypotheses and Research Questions

#### *Impact on Informational Resources*

Learning about a deliberative process, such as a minipublic and its recommendations on a policy issue may increase citizens' factual knowledge about the policy issue. This may happen via the following possible mechanisms. Non-participating citizens may perceive a minipublic as a trusted and legitimate source of information and seek to learn from it and subsequently update their knowledge about an issue (Fournier et al. 2011; Warren and Gastil 2015). Others argue minipublic participants can be perceived by citizens in the wider public as more knowledgeable on the policy issue, due to the internal workings of minipublics which involve learning from the experts and from each other (Boulianne 2018; Warren 2009). In other words, individuals may "defer to more enlightened peers" when acknowledging the correct factual information (Fournier et al. 2011: 127). Alternatively, the wider public—upon reading the information about the consensus nature of the decision making by the minipublic—could view the information as non-partisan and less biased (Már and Gastil 2019: 4).

Either of the preceding mechanisms justify the expectation that being exposed to information about the minipublic and its findings may lead to knowledge gain, which could potentially lead the wider citizenry to reconsider policy preferences (Goodin and Dryzek 2006). Both could be obtained, for example, with the help of extensive media coverage of these events (Elkink et al. 2017, 2020). In this paper, we examine whether reading about the minipublic and its key findings can lead to factual knowledge gain among non-participating citizens. Building on the above-mentioned literature, we hypothesize that being exposed to information about a minipublic would lead to factual knowledge gain among a wider public (H1).

### *Impact on Emotional Capacities*

Empathy is beneficial for making citizens “more enlightened about their own and others’ needs and experiences” (Mendelberg 2002: 153), thus aiding the discovery of the common good (Mansbridge 1983). Empathy is important for political decisions, where it is vital to maintain a mutual respect among people with conflicting value priorities. Empathy helps people appreciate the arguments on opposing sides of a legitimate debate (Barber 1999).

Participating in deliberation within a minipublic has been found to generate more empathetic feelings and understanding among participating citizens toward others (Morrell 2010; Grönlund et al. 2017; Muradova 2020). What is unknown is whether these effects extend to individuals who did not participate directly in a minipublic or similar deliberative process.

We know from research in social psychology that at the heart of the processes of empathy lies the perceived similarity between the target of the empathy (toward whom the empathizer feels empathy) and the empathizer (e.g. Davis 1994). Batson et al. (2005: 15) argue that individuals “feel for a stranger [...] to the degree that they perceive the stranger to be similar to themselves.” People may perceive the members of the minipublic as more similar to themselves – ordinary, laypeople with similar needs and interests. This perception of similarity can engender more empathic feelings in people toward other citizens whose lives may be different from theirs, particularly toward those in a disadvantaged position (Grönlund et al. 2017). Nevertheless, these processes may be limited to face-to-face interactions, wherein empathic emotions can be easier to elicit. The question that arises is whether informational exposure to minipublics can increase people’s other-regarding empathic responses to the other side in a referendum question (RQ1).

### *Exposure to Different Kinds of Information from Minipublics*

Next, we examine what amount of information about a minipublic is sufficient for the wider public to experience the aforementioned theorized beneficial effects. Surely different informational exposures about the same minipublic could have different impacts.

We look at varied combinations of three elements of the standard CIR-style information: (a) brief information about the minipublic and its policy stance; (b) its main findings (i.e. a paragraph justifying its policy stance); (c) in addition to a and b, a list of statements in favour of and against the policy measure, considered by the minipublic prior to arriving at a decision.

The little empirical research that looks at the effect of information about the minipublic on the wider public’s political attitudes mainly relies on the combination of a and b (e.g. Boulianne 2018). Meanwhile, the real-world Oregon process includes CIR statements as a part of its *Voters’ Pamphlet*, and studies looking at the impact of this information has not yet tried to unravel which elements of the statements account for observed effects.

To disentangle the different elements of statements emanating from minipublics, we return to deliberative theory itself. At the heart of a deliberative discourse lies the *justification* of claims and assertions. Justifications involve “offering reasons that are acceptable to citizens” (Chambers 2010: 894) and constitute crucial elements which “stimulate[e] the deliberative process” (Steenberger et al. 2003: 25). As Burkhalter et al. (2002: 411) argue, “In the end, deliberation requires not just a final decision but also a justification of that choice”. The Key Findings of the CIR informational exposure were designed to convey the justification claims

for the main recommendation of the constitutional convention. Relying on this, we test whether being exposed to information about a minipublic together with its key findings (i.e. justification) will have a greater effect on deliberation in the wider public than an information exposure that lacks such a justification (H2).

Further, we examine whether statements juxtaposing arguments in favour of and against a policy measure (hereafter called “Pro-Con statements”) have distinct effects. Democratic theorists argue that being exposed to opposing viewpoints in everyday political talk engenders more reflective and considered political judgments, and more positive evaluation of the other side (Arendt 1982; Gutmann and Thompson 2009). First, being exposed to opposing views can expand one’s understanding of different others’ perspectives (Price et al. 2002) and can encourage a greater awareness of rationales for counter-attitudinal views (Mutz 2006). Second, exposure to heterogeneous political views can evoke more positive, and empathetic evaluation of people who hold viewpoints different from one’s own. This may be particularly relevant for minipublic context, the members of which are chosen randomly to represent a diverse group of people with different backgrounds. Consistent with this thinking, reading about oppositional statements generated by members of the minipublic would have a positive effect on citizens’ knowledge gain (H3a) and other-regarding attitudes (H3b).

Others contend that exposure to political disagreement can backfire (Esterling et al. 2015; Guess and Coppock 2018; Mutz 2006; Nyhan and Reifler 2010). Humans have a range of cognitive biases which affect their reasoning systematically (Taber and Lodge 2006). Exposure to disagreement in the form of opposing statements would produce a cognitive dissonance and subsequent discomfort and confusion in individuals. In the face of such disagreement, citizens tend to act as motivated reasoners, as psychologists argue (Kunda 1990; Lodge and Taber 2013). They tend to search for more arguments and justifications for their existing views and end up with more (not less) polarized policy attitudes. Nyhan and Reifler (2010) find that factual information does little to decrease misperceptions about political issues. Quite the contrary, in some cases, hearing factual corrections can boost misperceptions.

Consistent with this way of thinking, we expect that reading about factual knowledge emanating from a minipublic could have a negative effect on citizens’ knowledge gain (H4a). Furthermore, recent research has found that people who are politically polarized also happen to score high on trait empathic concern toward others (Simas et al. 2020). In this case, we may predict negative relationship between exposure to counter-attitudinal viewpoints and other-regarding attitudes (H4b). An alternative hypothesis holds that pro-con statements may have heterogeneous effects on individuals’ reasoning processes and thus effects emanating from two mechanisms may offset each other (H4c). Our study will try to adjudicate between these mutually exclusive expectations.

## Research Methods

### *Study Context: The Irish Constitutional Convention*

The Irish Constitutional Convention (ICC) of 2012-14 ([www.constitutionalconvention.ie](http://www.constitutionalconvention.ie)) was a mixed-member deliberative forum, including lay citizens and members of parliament as members. The citizen members were selected at random by an independent market research company, which had a brief of ensuring that the membership was a reasonable reflection of the population in terms of sex, age, region, and socio-economic status (Arnold et

al. 2019; Farrell et al. 2019). The ICC was given a brief to report within 12 months on eight matters: review of the Dáil (parliament) electoral system; reducing the presidential term to five years (from its current seven); provision for marriage equality; amending the clause on women in the home; measures to encourage greater participation of women in politics and public life; removing blasphemy from the Constitution; reduction of the voting age; and votes for emigrants (and Northern Ireland residents) in presidential elections.

Space was given for the ICC to consider other possible areas of amendment, once their work on these items was complete: in the event the ICC members considered two other areas: parliamentary reform, and whether to insert a clause into the Constitution recognizing economic, social and cultural rights (See Suiter et al. 2016a for a full description). The government proposed that the recommendations of the Convention would be debated in the lower house of the Irish parliament (a portion of whose members were themselves Convention members), with the possibility of constitutional referendums to follow (dependent ultimately on the government's reaction to the proposals).

The focus of this article is on the Convention's report on blasphemy, which addressed the question of whether to remove an existing ban on blasphemy from the Irish Constitution. Blasphemy was one of a number of moral issues which had found their way into the 1937 Irish Constitution reflecting the country's traditional religious traits (O'Brien 2002). As far back as 1991 the Irish Law Reform Commission recommended that the constitutional prohibition be removed, yet the Defamation Act 2009 made blasphemy a crime punishable by a €25,000 fine. The law came to prominence in 2017 when a Garda (police) inquiry began after a complaint was made over British actor Stephan Fry making critical comments about God during an interview on state broadcaster RT. No prosecution was brought in the case (McMahon 2017).

When the Convention examined the issue in 2013, it heard from proponents and opponents of the measure. Sixty-one of the 100 convention members voted to remove the provision from the Constitution. It recommended that the current constitutional ban should be replaced with a new general provision which would make incitement to religious hatred an offence to be defined by law. The ICC presented its report on the matter to the Irish parliament in January 2014. The referendum that is the focus of this paper was held on October 26, 2018: it passed with 69 percent of the vote, thus removing the offence of publishing or uttering blasphemous material from the Constitution.

The ICC is not an exact replica of the CIR: the current authors summarized the Convention's 39-page report onto one-page presenting the Key Findings and the pro/con arguments – replicating the type of material produced in an Oregon-style CIR. This was shown to a core group of ICC citizen-members who agreed it was a fair reflection of their report. This core group was made up of the 15 members of the ICC members who had agreed to follow up email correspondence. Some 13 members replied and all agreed this summary version of their final report.

### *Experimental Survey Design*

We conducted our survey from October 12-25, 2018 and received 776 surveys from volunteers recruited by the online survey firm Qualtrics. A plurality of respondents (48%) completed the survey on a smart phone, with the rest using laptops (23%), desktop computers (17%), or tablets (13%). The majority of respondents (35%) required 11-20 minutes to finish the survey, with all but 6% of the sample requiring more time to finish. Age of respondents



ranged from 18 to 87, with the mean age of 45 years old. 47% of the sample self-identified as female, with 12% of them having at least a bachelor's degree (see appendix for more descriptive statistics).

Every respondent saw the following description of the blasphemy referendum:

This October's ballot referendum (the 37th Amendment) proposes to amend the Irish Constitution to remove the word "blasphemous" from Article 40.6.1(i). That Article currently reads:

The publication or utterance of blasphemous, seditious, or indecent matter is an offence which shall be punishable in accordance with law. The proposal is to remove the word "blasphemous." All other words in this Article would remain.

Afterwards, random assignment broke our larger sample into experimental treatment groups. A control group consisted of 184 respondents, who saw no information about the CIR-style statement. The rest of the sample saw a statement describing the ICC minipublic:

Now that you have read the official summary of this year's referendum, we would like you to consider a Statement from the Convention on the Constitution. Please read the description of this statement carefully.

As part of a year-long Convention on the Constitution, sixty-six randomly selected registered Irish voters and thirty-three members from the Dáil, the Seanad and the Northern Ireland Assembly gathered to discuss and make recommendations on key constitutional provisions. Over the weekend of November 2, 2013, the Convention heard evidence from experts in the field, legal representatives, advocacy groups, and laypeople to make recommendations on the removal of the offence of blasphemy from Article 40.6.1(i) of Bunreacht na hÉireann. This statement is a product of those deliberations and recommendations.

These respondents were then randomly assigned to one of three conditions: exposure to Key Findings only ( $n = 200$ ), pro and con statements only ( $n = 188$ ), and Key Findings followed by pro and con statements ( $n = 204$ ). Those seeing the Key Findings saw this text:

The Convention produced these KEY FINDINGS regarding the removal of the offence of blasphemy from the constitution.

- The European Court of Human Rights grants member states a certain level of autonomy to determine their own religious and moral standards and laws.
- Blasphemy laws, or similar 'hate crime' laws, exist in many Western democracies; however, it is unusual to find such matters included in constitutions.
- Ireland's Constitution proclaims that speech and publication of blasphemous materials are criminal acts.
- The Supreme Court ruled in *Corway v Independent Newspapers* (1999) that the wording in the Constitution regarding blasphemy was too vague.
- Blasphemy will remain a crime in Ireland even if the constitutional provision is removed. The Defamation Act of 2009 provides legislative guidance on criminal prosecutions for blasphemy.

These findings were supported by members of the Convention.

For those seeing pro and con arguments, a tailored transition statement read, “The Convention summarized what its members considered the strongest ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST the referendum”). The arguments in favour were presented as follows:

#### Arguments IN SUPPORT of REMOVING the Offence of Blasphemy from the Constitution

- Religion has no place in the constitution of a modern state like Ireland.
- Previous court cases show that the wording of the offence is too vague and unworkable for criminal prosecution.
- Ireland’s blasphemy law is used by repressive regimes in the middle-east to support more repressive measures there.
- The rights of both religious and non-religious groups can be protected by legislation, without the need for a Constitutional provision. The Defamation Act of 2009 currently provides more protections for religion than the constitutional provision against blasphemy.

This position was supported by 61 per cent of Convention voters.

And the arguments opposing the referendum were these:

#### Arguments OPPOSED TO REMOVING the Offence of Blasphemy from the Constitution

- Removing the offence of blasphemy would be yet another step in the downgrading of religion in Irish society; it could be seen as an attack on religious beliefs.
- Religion is a sacred and personal aspect of our society – it needs constitutional protection.
- Retaining this clause in the constitution will make people think before they act or speak.
- Blasphemy laws protect offence against all religions; they deter people from disrespecting any religion, which is important in Ireland’s multi-faith society.

This position was supported by 38 per cent of Convention voters.

#### *Outcome Variable Measurement*

*Objective knowledge* of respondents was measured on the basis of responses to a series of statements. Respondents were instructed to indicate whether each of the given statements was definitely true, probably true, probably false, or definitely false. They also had an option of choosing the “don’t know” response. The statements were as follows:

1. The European Court of Human Rights grants member states considerable freedom to set their own laws regarding religion”.
2. The Irish Constitution prohibits speaking or publishing blasphemy.
3. The Defamation Act of 2009 provides more protections for religion than the constitutional provision against blasphemy.

4. Blasphemy laws can be found in the constitutions of many western democracies.
5. The Irish Supreme Court has ruled that the wording in the Constitution regarding blasphemy is too vague to be enforceable.
6. Irish blasphemy laws protect all religions from offence.

A dichotomous variable for each item was created with values of false (0) or true (1). We did not create a summative measure of objective knowledge because the internal consistency of a six-item knowledge index would have been low ( $\alpha = 0.57$ ).

To capture respondents' *other-regarding attitudes*, we measured individuals' empathic reactions of *compassion* and *sympathy* for other people. We captured the affective (rather than cognitive) dimension of empathy (Davis 1983), as it comes the closest to the popular understanding of the term. It also has been found to be the strongest predictor of prosocial and other-oriented attitudes and behaviours (for a review, see Simas et al. 2020). We asked the following question: "Sometimes people feel emotions when thinking about a referendum, and other times they do not. Please tell us if you felt any of the following emotions when considering how blasphemy might affect people whose lives are very different from your own". Among other listed emotions there were also compassionate and sympathetic. Respondents indicated their response on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 ("did not feel this emotion") to 5 ("felt this very strongly"). Using these items, we created a two-item summative index for empathy ( $M = 5.3$ ,  $SD = 2.4$ ) that had scores ranging from 2-10 ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ).

## Results

We estimated the effect of our treatments on outcomes of interest by running a series of regression analyses. The effects are visualized with the help of coefficient plots.

### *Knowledge Effects*

Figure 1 visualizes coefficient plots showing the effect of exposure to separate or combined sections of a CIR-style statement on the six factual knowledge questions. The baseline is the control condition, where respondents are not exposed to information about the Irish minipublic. Knowledge1, Knowledge2, and so on refer to the numbers in the Methods section for corresponding knowledge items. The point estimates are depicted with 95% confidence intervals (CIs). Point estimates to the right of the baseline indicate a positive effect, whereas those to the left show a negative effect. Those that touch the vertical line indicate non-significant effects. For three out of six factual knowledge statements, reading information about the minipublic together with key findings had a positive and significant effect on knowledge acquisition.

Figure 1 about here

Figure title: *Figure 1. Factual Knowledge Effects from Exposure to Separate or Combined Sections of a CIR Statement. Baseline: Control Group (No information on CIR)*

Next, we tested the effect of exposing respondents to Pro-Con statements by comparing the knowledge acquisition across three experimental conditions: Key Findings, Pro-Con, and the combination of two (KeyFindings + Pro-Con). Figure 2 depicts the effects with 95% CIs. The baseline in these regression models is the KeyFinding condition. In four out of six knowledge questions, exposure to Pro-Con statements (either separately or in combination with

Key Findings) had a negative and significant effect on factual knowledge acquisition. In other words, those who were assigned to read about Pro-Con acquired less factual knowledge.

Figure 2 about here

Title: Figure 2 *Factual Knowledge Effects from Exposure to Separate or Combined Pro-Con Statements. Baseline: Key Findings*

### *Other-Regarding Attitudes*

A regression analysis, summarized in Figure 3, found that exposing citizens to more comprehensive information about the constitutional convention – i.e. Key Findings and pro and con arguments – exerted a positive and significant effect on the levels of empathy respondents felt towards “people whose lives are very different from” their own. Information about key findings of the minipublic on its own, or Pro-Con statements separately, however, had no effect. This suggests that being exposed to views inconsistent with one’s own in combination with Key Findings can be beneficial for inducing more empathic feelings towards the other side.

(Figure 3 *The Effect of Informational Exposure on Other Regarding Attitudes* about here)

## Discussion

Is it possible to scale up the deliberative effects of a minipublic? To answer that question, we empirically examined whether minipublics can reinforce deliberative practices by strengthening the deliberative capacity of citizens in a wider society. We tested these predictions by designing and conducting a survey experiment with the Irish public in the run-up to 2018 referendum on blasphemy in Ireland. We used a CIR-style statements on the issue of blasphemy taken from a real-world minipublic, the 2012-2014 Irish Constitutional Convention. We sought to test two key propositions—whether minipublics connected to macro-level decision making can foster increased objective levels of knowledge and other regarding attitudes. Further, we tested the impact of varying transmission mechanisms including being exposed to key findings and/or diverse viewpoints.

### *Summary of Results*

First, we tested whether information about the minipublic allow the wider public to vote in a more informed fashion, thereby increasing the likelihood of correct voting (Lau and Redlawsk 1997) or voting in line with values (Hobolt 2007) and a possible reconsideration of policy preferences (Goodin and Dryzek 2006). We found that there were significant knowledge increases among voters who read the information about the minipublic’s findings, although this increase was not consistent along all knowledge items.

Second, we tested whether being exposed to information about a minipublic will lead to stronger other-regarding attitudes among the wider public. Here we also found that being exposed to mere information about the minipublic and its findings did not *per se* lead to an increase in empathy among the wider public. However, being exposed to balanced information from both sides of the issue (Pro-Con statements) exerted a positive and significant effect on people’s empathy among the wider public. It is possible that learning

about balanced and diverse perspectives that a minipublic considered before arriving at a decision is particularly important for a moral and values-driven decision, such as blasphemy, where it is crucial to consider arguments on the other side. But even on issues with a less prominent moral framing, it is unclear whether deliberation is even possible without a modicum of empathy (Mansbridge 1983; Mendelberg 2002; Morrell 2010).

Third, we examined whether being exposed to those diverse viewpoints has an impact on people's deliberative capacities. From a deliberative democratic perspective, being exposed to opposing viewpoints should engender more reflective and considered political judgments. We found, however, that including diverse viewpoints in a minipublic statement (i.e., representing both sides of the issue) dampened the minipublic statement's impact on voters' factual knowledge. One explanation could be potential backfire effects of being exposed to opposing views. Some scholars assert that upon being exposed to political disagreement people cling onto their prior thoughts even more strongly, and thus this exposure reinforces their initial beliefs and attitudes (Mercier and Landmore 2012). Interestingly, however, exposure to opposing perspectives increased individuals' empathic feelings towards those on the other side of this debate.

### *Theoretical and Empirical Contributions*

This paper makes three contributions to the growing literature on how deliberative minipublics impact the wider public. First, being exposed to information about a minipublic and its findings lead to an increased knowledge gain among people. The sizes of these effects are modest, but they are in line with other research into the effects of small-scale deliberative processes on attitudes of wider publics in the US (e.g. Boulianne 2018; Knobloch et al. 2019). This is important as these information statements are a relatively cheap and easy way to convey information about a minipublic to the wider public and hence provide a potential for the perennial problem of scaling up deliberation.

Second, our research design allowed us to disentangle different elements of informational exposure. Reading about key findings of the minipublic, which lists the justification for the minipublic's policy recommendation together with a brief information about the minipublic, is beneficial for individuals' knowledge gains. This is consistent with the expectations of deliberative democrats about the value of expressing reasons and justifications for a held political position. The CIR Citizens' Statement in Oregon also provides pro-con arguments. We included them in this experiment to see whether such an innovation would boost—or hinder—transmission effects. We found that reading the pro and con statements on the policy issue appears to potentially confuse voters and largely dampens the positive effect of the exposure to information about the CIR and its key findings. This finding speaks to the literature arguing about the potential negative effects of exposure to counter-attitudinal viewpoints (Nyhan and Reifler 2010) by showing that the Pro-Con statements have a dampening effect on their factual knowledge gain, the implications of which we discuss in the concluding section of the paper.

This study's third contribution is the finding that being exposed to opposing statements has a positive effect on people's other-regarding attitudes. It increases empathy for the other side on the referendum question. This is consistent with previous literature which suggests that a greater awareness of viewpoints of the opposing side may have a positive effect on the levels of political tolerance respondents feel toward the other side (Mutz 2002). Although the concept of political tolerance is different from the concept of empathy, the latter may constitute one of the affective mechanisms underlying the relationship between exposure to

counter-attitudinal views and improved intergroup positivity, such as political tolerance (Todd and Galinsky 2014). This study also speaks to the findings of the contact theory, which posits that interpersonal contact across lines of nationality, race and social class results in more empathetic, and less prejudicial attitudes and heightened ability for perspective taking – seeing the world from someone’s else vantage point (Pettigrew and Tropp 2011; Reich and Pubhoo 1975). In a similar vein, the latest research finds that one of the crucial features of interpersonal deliberation eliciting and facilitating the processes of empathetic imaginings during deliberations is the presence of diverse and opposing viewpoints (Muradova, 2020). The present study expands on these findings with an evidence that mere exposure to counter-attitudinal attitudes that a minipublic considered during deliberations can evoke empathic feelings toward the other side, also among non-participants.

Finally, our study expanded the range of CIR-type minipublics that have been studied. Our case was distinctive because it occurred outside the US, and it focused on a policy issue that foregrounded values over technical knowledge. Our findings support the generalizability of previous results produced in Oregon on CIRs principally analyzing more complex public policy issues (e.g. Gastil et al. 2014; Knobloch et al. 2019; Már and Gastil 2020). That said, there is no simple way to replicate the CIR model because even in Oregon, the official CIR Commission has authorized significant changes in the process, such as reducing its length, altering the structure of its agenda, and even--most recently--removing from the CIR Statement template the official tally of how the panellists intend to vote on the issue they studied (Gastil and Knobloch 2020).<sup>1</sup>

### *Study Limitations*

Our study, however, had its limitations. In the first instance, it was based on a single process on a single referendum in one country. Ireland shares many characteristics with other western democracies; however, it differs from most of them in its experience with referendums and deliberative forums. Over the past six years, Ireland has experimented with two deliberative forums, the Irish Constitutional Convention and Irish Citizens’ Assembly, with a third such process currently underway. The earlier forums were influential in shaping the public opinion on important moral issues, most notably marriage equality and abortion. The Irish public may thus be more acquainted with deliberative processes than their other European counterparts. In other words, a country-context may moderate the relationship between informational exposure to a minipublic and citizens’ perceptions about the process, and their knowledge acquisition. It would be helpful if future research could attempt to replicate our findings in other countries.

Second, although this study had a high ecological validity by studying a real-world referendum issue using recommendations generated by an actual minipublic, the minipublic itself did not produce the CIR-style statement used in our research. Rather, the authors adapted documents produced by the Irish minipublic, though our study materials were reviewed and approved by a sub-group of the minipublic members themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Current details on the Commission and its rulemaking regarding the Oregon CIR can be found online at <https://secure.sos.state.or.us/oard>.

### *Concluding Remarks*

In spite of these shortcomings, these findings show that minipublics can boost the deliberative capacities of citizens beyond the small number of participants serving on the minipublic itself. We also showed that exposure to opposing viewpoints can have both positive and negative effects. Whereas reading about counter-attitudinal arguments dampens the positive effect of CIR statement on factual knowledge, it increases people's empathy towards the other side. Future research should study this question more systematically and in relation to other deliberative capacities, such as future motivation to deliberate, and political efficacy.

At this juncture, the practical takeaway is clear: the content of a minipublic's report can have real impact on a wider public, but thought must be given to the purpose of such a statement. Readers may process neutral information on an issue quite differently from pro and con arguments, and pairing the two together can yield mixed results. With solid evidence of overall impact for such statements, future research could examine how crafting them can best achieve the deliberative goals that motivate such processes.

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Replication Data for: Scaling up Deliberation: Testing the Potential of Mini- Publics to Enhance the Deliberative Capacity of Citizens (view at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/FAZUZ0>) was published in Harvard Dataverse (view at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/harvard>).

## Biographies

Jane Suiter is an Associate Professor, School of Communications Dublin City University. Research interests include deliberative and direct democracy, citizens' assemblies and

participation. Project co-lead of the Irish Citizens' Assembly project ([www.citizenassembly.ie](http://www.citizenassembly.ie)). Email: [Jane.Suiter@dcu.ie](mailto:Jane.Suiter@dcu.ie)

Lala Muradova is a PhD Candidate at the Centre for Political Science Research, University of Leuven (Belgium) and Associate at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance, University of Canberra. Research interests include experimental methods, participation and deliberation. Email: [Lala.muradova@kuleuven.be](mailto:Lala.muradova@kuleuven.be)

John Gastil is Distinguished Professor in the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences and Political Science at the Pennsylvania State University, where he is Senior Scholar at the McCourtney Institute for Democracy. His most recent books include *Hope for Democracy*, *Legislature by Lot*, and the novel *Gray Matters*. Email: [jgastil@psu.edu](mailto:jgastil@psu.edu)

Professor David Farrell, MRIA, Head of the School of Politics and International Relations, University College Dublin. Research interests include: political parties, elections, electoral systems, deliberative mini-publics. Project co-lead of the Irish Citizens' Assembly project ([www.citizenassembly.ie](http://www.citizenassembly.ie)). Email: [david.farrell@ucd.ie](mailto:david.farrell@ucd.ie)

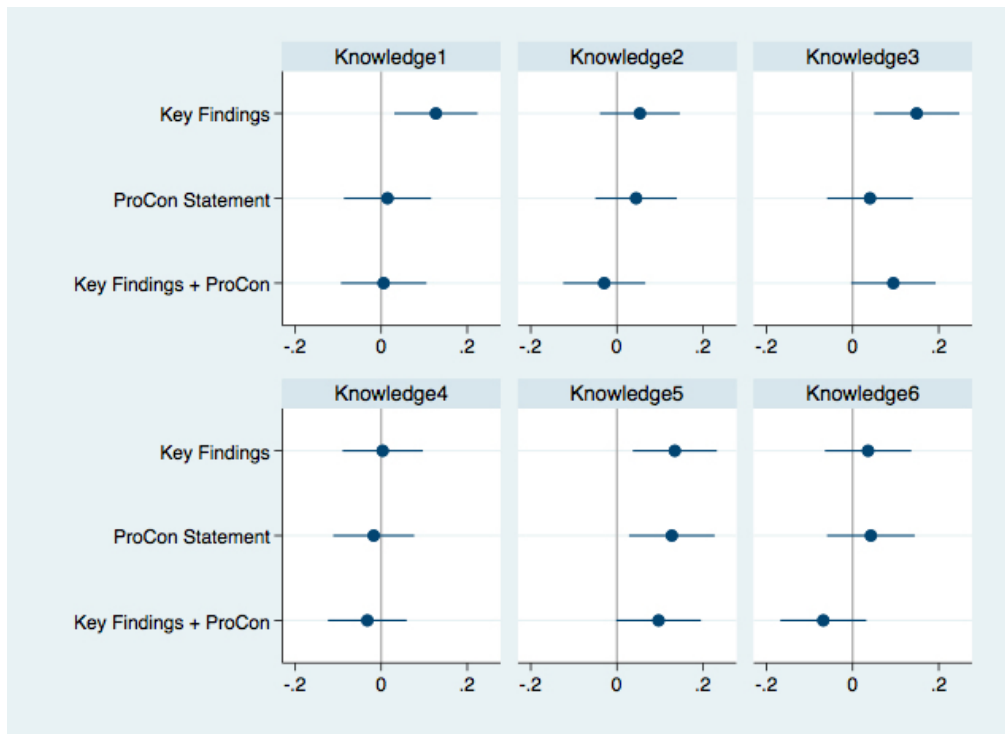


Figure 1. Factual Knowledge Effects from Exposure to Separate or Combined Sections of a CIR Statement. Baseline: Control Group (No information on CIR)

222x161mm (72 x 72 DPI)

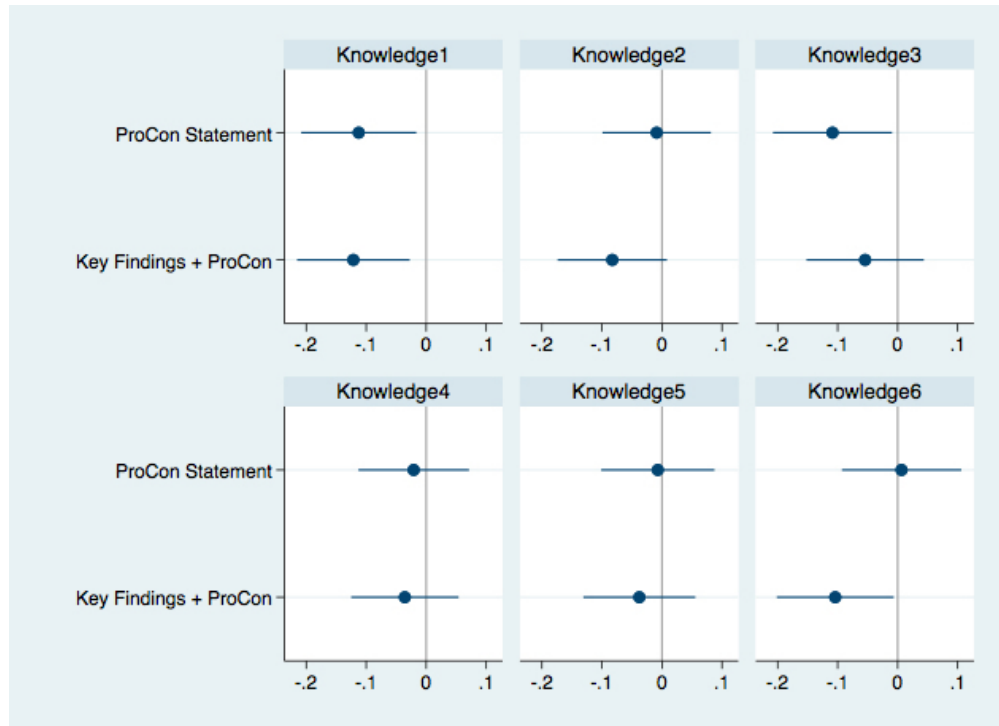


Figure 2. Factual Knowledge Effects from Exposure to Separate or Combined Pro-Con Statements. Baseline: Key Findings

222x161mm (72 x 72 DPI)

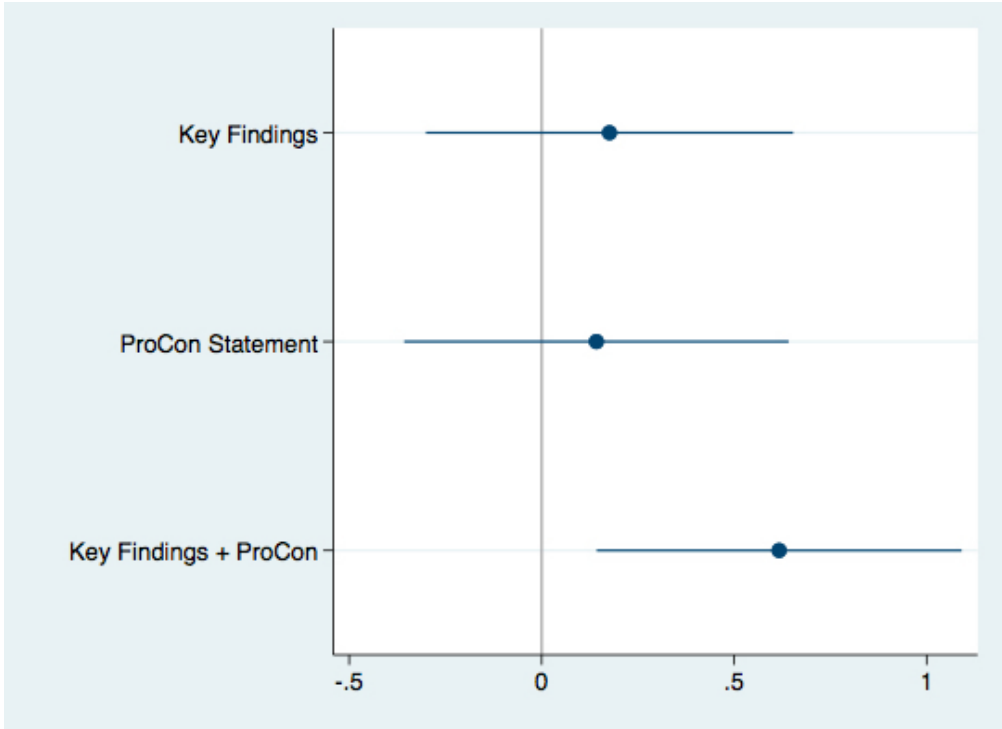


Figure 3. The Effect of Informational Exposure on Other Regarding Attitudes  
190x138mm (72 x 72 DPI)