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Deliberative Democracy and Electoral Reform in South Africa: A Campus Experiment

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ABSTRACT
In the transition to an inclusive democracy, South Africa changed its electoral system for the national parliament to proportional representation. Ever since, there have been suggestions of electoral reform. So far, the debate has rarely involved ordinary citizens. This article presents the results of a Deliberation Day on Electoral Reform in South Africa at the University of Cape Town. This campus experiment in deliberative democracy was part of a project-based course for MA students in Political Studies. The outcomes are as predicted in the literature: the knowledge of the 47 student participants increased and their opinions became more coherent. The student participants were highly critical about South Africa’s political system and demanded more accountability through the electoral system. The most striking, and encouraging, outcome was the unanimous support for more deliberation on campus. The findings presented here suggest the potential of deliberative democracy for organising the national debate on electoral reform as well as for communication inside South Africa’s universities.

Introduction
In May 2014, South Africa held its fifth general election since the inauguration of inclusive democracy in 1994. As was the case in previous years, the elections were generally regarded as free and fair and resulted in another overwhelming parliamentary majority for the incumbent African National Congress (ANC). Despite the apparent satisfaction with the current electoral system, there have been repeated calls for reform. So far, the debate about electoral reform has taken place largely in the media and in academic circles, fuelled by regular reports commissioned by (international) non-governmental organisations (see Mottiar 2005; Chiroro 2008; Matshiqi 2009; Tucker and Walther 2014). The only public opinion poll on the electoral system dates from 2002 (Mattes and Southall 2004).

Moreover, opinion polls tell only part of the story. Suspecting that the policy preferences measured in mass surveys often do not reflect what people really think or want, Fishkin (2009) decided to ask the same people twice: before and after a deliberative event. In-between, he brings respondents together for a workshop, providing them with relevant information, inviting experts, and allowing for ample deliberation facilitated by qualified moderators. Fishkin and his collaborators then measure how preferences have changed and knowledge has increased, claiming this as the impact of the process of deliberation. The aim of such deliberative polls is to arrive at informed citizen opinions.¹ By now,
many deliberative polls have been organised around the world at the local, national, and even supra-national level.\footnote{2}

Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh has sought to implement Fishkin’s ideas. Their ‘Campus Conversations’ constitute the most extensive and best documented, experience with deliberative democracy at university level.\footnote{3} It provided the background for the project-based course on Deliberative Democracy and Electoral Reform in South Africa that I taught at the University of Cape Town (UCT).\footnote{4} The course concluded with the first deliberative event on a South African university campus. The 49 UCT undergraduate student participants spent the best part of the day deliberating about electoral reform in South Africa: welcome (9–9.30 am), deliberation in small groups, session I (9.30–11 am), Questions and Answers (Q&A) with experts (11:00 am–12.30 pm), common lunch (12.30–13.30 pm), deliberation in small groups, session II (13.30–15:00 pm), completion of exit survey, payment, and farewell (15:00–15.30 pm).

The outcomes conform to expectations and follow those of an earlier campus experiment that I conducted at a German university (Bogaards and Deutsch 2015): knowledge increased and opinions changed. There are two substantive findings that are especially important for a South African audience. First, the participants were highly sceptical of the performance of South Africa’s electoral system and consistently favoured more accountability. Second, students were very satisfied with the experience of deliberation and unanimously asked for more deliberative events at UCT. In light of the student protests that have rocked South African universities since 2015, this finding points at the potential of deliberative democracy for curriculum reform and campus governance.

The article is organised as follows. The first section reviews the debate on electoral reform in South Africa. The next sections provide information about the deliberation day on electoral reform at UCT and its main outcomes in terms of knowledge gain, opinion change, and the internal and external efficacy of participants. The third section looks into more detail in the process of deliberation and its quality. The conclusion highlights the main substantive findings as well as the potential of deliberative democracy for South Africa.

**Electoral reform in South Africa**

Since the Union of South Africa in 1910, members of the national parliament had been elected in single-member districts using plurality. The 1994 elections were different in two key respects: all South Africans had the right to vote and the electoral system was changed to proportional representation (PR). Electoral system choice was the result of negotiations between the National Party government of president De Klerk, the ANC, and other stakeholders (see Sisk 1993; Asmal and de Ville 1994). There was broad agreement on the need to have a parliament that was representative of all the interests, identities, and voices in society. The constitution does not prescribe a particular electoral system but rather an outcome, stipulating in article 46 (d) that the electoral system for the National Assembly ‘results, in general, in proportional representation’.\footnote{5}

South Africa’s electoral system is the most inclusive and proportional electoral system in the world (Lijphart 1995). The 400 seats of the National Assembly are allocated on the basis of the so-called largest remainder method. This allocation formula determines the number of seats each party is entitled to on the basis of its share of the national vote. Half the seats
are then filled from national lists and half from lists that correspond to the country’s nine provinces. Seven parties won representation in the first democratically elected parliament and, following the Interim Constitution, a Government of National Unity was formed with the three main parties (Gouws and Mitchell 2005; Bogaards 2014). The current parliament contains 13 parties, most of them very small.

With the 2004 elections approaching and without a permanent electoral system, the Cabinet established a commission in March 2002 to draft the new electoral legislation required by the Constitution. This Electoral Task Team (ETT) was chaired by Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert, a former leader of the liberal opposition in parliament. The ETT did consultations with all South African political parties and solicited the input of a broad range of experts. Its report was published in January 2003 (Republic of South Africa 2003).

Everybody in the ETT agreed that proportional representation was the right electoral system for South Africa and that the electoral system adopted in 1993 had performed very well in terms of inclusiveness, fairness, and simplicity – three core values that go back to the Constitution. Disagreement focused on the fourth value, accountability. Because officials are accountable to the parties they represent, rather than to the voters, accountability is weakened. The closed list system means that deputies depend for (re)election on the party leadership. Seats in parliament belong to a party, not to deputies. There is no direct relationship between members of parliament and voters.

The majority of the ETT thought that accountability of members of parliament to voters could be strengthened through electoral reform. The minority of the ETT was doubtful about the possible gains and followed a ‘don’t fix it if it ain’t broke’ logic. The opinions found within the ETT mirror those in society. In the only survey on electoral reform, from 2002, the majority of South Africans indicated they were satisfied with the performance of the electoral system. However, only 60% of respondents felt that the system allowed for individual representatives of government to be held accountable (Mattes and Southall 2004, 53). The government has implicitly recognised the need for some kind of constituency service, funding constituency work of parties in parliament. There are about 350 ‘Constituency Offices’ around the country where members of the public can approach elected representatives and ask for help.

Since the recommendations by the ETT, several other proposals for electoral reform have been launched (for helpful overviews, see Mottiar 2005; Chiroro 2008; Matshiqi 2009; Tucker and Walther 2014). Some come from opposition parties such as the Congress of the People, the Democratic Alliance (DA), and Agang. Others come from academics, non-governmental organisations such as My Vote Counts (Solik 2014), and the former chair of the Independent Electoral Commission (Bam 2015). These proposals have two things in common: (1) they embrace the four core values that any electoral system in South Africa should have: inclusiveness, fairness, simplicity, and accountability and (2) they aim to strengthen accountability. The proposals differ in the balance that they seek between the four core values and in the details of the favoured electoral system. The three main alternatives are what are called here two-tier PR with fixed district size, two-tier PR with variable district size, and mixed-member proportionality (for more alternatives, see Krennerich and de Ville 1997). All reform proposals are variations on the theme of proportionality.
The ETT majority recommendation envisioned an electoral system using proportional representation in districts of different size. Three hundred members of the National Assembly would be elected using proportional representation in 69 multi-member districts, following the boundaries of district councils. The small multi-member districts would elect between three and seven members of parliament, strengthening the link between voters and representatives. Another 100 members of the National Assembly would be allocated from a closed national list also based on proportional representation. This amounts to two-tier PR with flexible district size. The overall result was expected to be highly proportional and the system could work equally well with one vote or two votes. For the long term, the ETT majority recommended that open lists should be used allowing voters to vote not just for parties but for candidates. Open lists are regarded as another means to improve accountability and encourage more citizens to vote because they have more choice.

In 2013, Democrat Alliance Member of Parliament (MP) James Selfe introduced a Private Member Bill. He proposed 100 constituencies that would each elect three MPs using proportional representation. These 300 MPs would be joined in the National Assembly by another 100 MPs elected from a national list, again using proportional representation. For want of a better term, we could call this two-tier PR with fixed district size. The main motivation for the proposed reform was to increase accountability, because the new electoral system would encourage individual candidates to base their campaigns on their own merits instead of hiding behind a party label. Voters would still vote for party lists, but because of the small size of the electoral district would have a better idea of who the candidates are. In return, parties would select candidates who are well known and highly regarded in their community. In comparison with the ETT majority proposal, the demarcation of constituencies will be more complicated and potentially contentious and overall proportionality more difficult to achieve, because proportionality is inversely related to the size of a constituency.

Another popular alternative, a mixed-member proportional (MMP) system, has two sources of inspiration: (1) the German electoral system for federal parliament and (2) the South African electoral system for elections to most local councils. The basic idea is the same: half of the members of the assembly are directly elected in single-member districts using plurality; the other half is elected from party lists using proportional representation. Germany shows that it is possible to secure overall proportionality if the two parts of the electoral system interact. MMP electoral systems have become increasingly popular around the world, because they seem to combine the best of both worlds: the constituency representation associated with plurality elections in single-member districts and the inclusiveness of an overall proportional result. Italy, Lesotho, Mexico, New Zealand, and Venezuela all changed to MMP or a similar system, though Italy has in the meantime changed its electoral system again.

Clearly, there are many other aspects that are important, for example, floor-crossing legislation, recall of elected representatives, party primaries, or party finance reform (see, e.g. Ben-Zeev 2012). Also, electoral reform is not the only and perhaps not even the main means for increasing accountability within South Africa’s political system. Some commentators have called for a strengthening of civil society and a change in political culture (Friedman 2015).
Still, President Nelson Mandela already pointed to electoral form, arguing in 1999 that ‘we do need to ask whether we need to re-examine our electoral system, so as to improve the nature of our relationship, as public representatives, with voters’ (quoted in Louw 2014, 21–22).

Representativeness of the participants

To recruit participants for Deliberation Day, the Department of Student Affairs sent out an e-mail to all UCT students with an invitation. The message informed prospective participants about the project and its aims, emphasised that participation was voluntary, and included a link to the pre-deliberation survey. The main incentives for students to participate were ZAR 200 and a free lunch. A total of 68 respondents completed the pre-deliberation survey. Deliberation is most powerful when it concerns a topic that affects those involved. Therefore, we only invited second- and third-year undergraduate students with South African citizenship, as they would have had the right to vote in the last national elections in 2014. Of the 68 students, 47 participated in Deliberation Day. This turnout is very high and compares favourably with other deliberative events (see Bogaards and Deutsch 2015), even more so when one considers it was the middle of exam time.

Table 1. Descriptive characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>UCT population/national population (%)</th>
<th>Participants (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year of study</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>31&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>87&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coloured</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>13&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering &amp; Built Environment</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Health)Science</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>72&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>70&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close to party (member)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>26&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>53 (83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, ANC</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>15 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, EFF</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, DA</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, PAC</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, others</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| <sup>a</sup>Data for 2014, retrieved from: http://www.uct.ac.za/about/intro/statistics.<sup>b</sup>Percentages do not add up to 100 per cent because of missing answer(s).<sup>c</sup>Includes combined major Law and Humanities.<sup>d</sup>Turnout as percentage of registered voters at the 2014 national elections.<sup>e</sup>Data from the 6th round of the Afrobarometer (2014/2015) in South Africa, available at http://www.afrobarometer.org.
As one can see in Table 1, there was a gender balance among the participants to Deliberation Day. Academically, there was variation in year of study and discipline. Compared to the overall population, the participants were equally likely to have voted in the last national elections, though they were less likely to identify with a political party.\textsuperscript{17} The race distribution, however, is highly skewed towards Black Africans.\textsuperscript{18} All other race groups are severely underrepresented, especially when compared with the overall enrolment by population group. Three remarks are in order. First, self-selection and problems with generalisability are common.\textsuperscript{19} Second, racial imbalance is the result of self-selection. To the extent that participants come from groups that traditionally participate less, their overrepresentation may even be a good thing (Neblo et al. 2010, 574). Third, we know that overall Black South Africans are more satisfied with the electoral system and its performance than Whites, Coloureds, and Indians (Mattes and Southall 2004, 55). If anything, the overrepresentation of Black South Africans among the participants to Deliberation Day should make the group less critical and less favourable towards electoral reform. However, that is not what we find.\textsuperscript{20}

The following three sections present the substantive findings on knowledge gain, opinion change, and internal and external efficacy. The main interest is in assessing the impact of deliberation through a comparison of pre- and post-deliberation answers to the same questions. The answer categories are organised as a Likert scale, typically ranging from strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), agree (3), to strongly agree (4).

**Results: knowledge gain**

Political competence is a multi-faceted concept and factual knowledge is one of the elements (Kuklinski and Quirk 2001). Participants were asked five knowledge questions. As is to be expected, knowledge gain was lowest for those questions where participants did very well from the start: the number of seats in parliament and the year in which the current electoral system was introduced. Knowledge gain was most pronounced for the two questions where participants struggled most. Before deliberation, only 28% knew that South Africa’s president is elected by the National Assembly. After deliberation, this had improved to 64%. Almost 3 out of 10 participants still thought, though, that the president is appointed by the ANC. Before deliberation, half the participants knew the name of the ETT chairman. Afterwards, it was 91%. Disappointingly, even after deliberation, one-third of the participants misclassified the type of electoral system in use in South Africa. Positively, the number of participants who thought South Africa’s electoral system was plurality or majoritarian, which is clearly wrong, was halved (from 12 to 6).

**Results: opinion change**

Table 2 shows the participants to Deliberation Day to be critical citizens and voters. Satisfaction with the state of democracy in South Africa is low and so is satisfaction with the electoral system. Deliberation did not improve this overall verdict. Only 60% of the participants agreed that ‘democracy is preferable to any other kind of government’, a figure that did not change.\textsuperscript{21} This may seem low, but the level is very similar to the South African average of 62%.\textsuperscript{22} In fact, the student participants were more democratic than the born-free generation who came to age after the end of apartheid. Only 35% of the
‘born frees’ support democracy and reject three authoritarian alternatives (Mattes 2012, 143) versus 50% of the student participants (55% after deliberation).

Deliberation did improve the appreciation of the inclusiveness, fairness, and, especially, equality, of the electoral system. Apparently, deliberation helped to bring out the virtues of South Africa’s electoral system. At the same time, it also increased awareness of its flaws, as the scores for accountability (parties) and accountability (individual representatives) show. Deliberation had a significant negative impact on the already highly critical attitude of participants towards accountability of the electoral system. If one keeps in mind that the lowest possible score is 1, the 1.34 for individual accountability gives the strongest possible signal that participants were profoundly unhappy with the performance of the electoral system on this criterion. The participants to Deliberation Day were much more critical than the respondents in the 2002 national survey (Mattes and Southall 2004), though also there citizens saw accountability as the weakest point.

The participants were asked directly for their favourite electoral system, having a choice between the current electoral system, proportional representation combining small electoral districts with one national district, a German-style MMP system, and the electoral system currently in use for most local elections in South Africa. Importantly, we did not use these labels but instead described the properties of the electoral systems. For example, we asked participants whether they preferred ‘proportional representation with party lists that correspond to the provinces and the country as a whole’, without making explicit that this is the current electoral system for national elections. The distribution of preferences proved stable, with proportional representation of the type advocated by the ETT and DA the most popular choice (around 45%) followed by the current system (around 30%). The only notable change was the decline in popularity of the mixed electoral system used for local elections, which might be explained by the critical discussion of its functioning during the Q&A.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Mean before deliberation</th>
<th>Mean after deliberation</th>
<th>Net change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in South Africa? (1 = Very dissatisfied to 4 = Very satisfied)</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>+0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you satisfied with the way we elect the government in South Africa? (1 = Very dissatisfied to 4 = Very satisfied)</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>−0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the electoral system fair to all parties? (1 = Strongly disagree, 4 = Strongly agree)</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>+0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the electoral system ensure that we include many voices in parliament? (1 = Strongly disagree, 4 = Strongly agree)</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>+0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were all parties treated equally in the last national elections? (1 = Strongly disagree, 4 = Strongly agree)</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>+0.33**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the electoral system help voters to hold political parties accountable? (1 = Strongly disagree, 4 = Strongly agree)</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>−0.51**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the electoral system help voters to hold individual representatives of the government accountable? (1 = Strongly disagree, 4 = Strongly agree)</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>−0.38**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you favour an electoral threshold? (1 = No, strongly against, 4 = Yes, very much in favour)</td>
<td>1.77</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>+0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the next elections, would you like to see independent candidates? (1 = No, absolutely not, 4 = Yes, very much)</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>−0.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Statistical significance tested with a paired sample t-test. *N* varies due to ‘don’t know’ answers. **p ≤ .05.
We also asked participants to rank the four values that have dominated the discussion about electoral system reform in South Africa: inclusiveness, fairness, accountability, and simplicity. From the start accountability was the main priority and deliberation strengthened this position. Simplicity was consistently the lowest priority.

As can be seen in Table 2, Fakir’s (2014) proposal for an electoral threshold was not popular with the students. They did favour the possibility of voting for independent candidates. We also asked whether participants preferred to cast their ballot for a party, for a candidate, for both with one vote, or for both with separate votes. The last option was the most popular by far, even reaching a majority (57%) after deliberation. This kind of ballot structure is compatible with all three alternatives described above, but not with the current electoral system. A final question pertaining to accountability was: ‘National elections take place every five years. Who do you think should hold government accountable in between elections?’ An overwhelming majority of participants thought that voters had an important role in holding the government accountable.

The picture that emerges from the answers to the questions about democracy and elections in South Africa is clear: the students are dissatisfied with the political system in general, even to the point that a sizeable minority lacks a strong commitment to democracy, and with elections in particular. After deliberation, more participants came to see the positive side of South Africa’s extreme version of proportional representation, but they also became even more critical towards its lack of accountability. Their opinions are coherent: they see accountability as the most important value of the electoral system; observe a lack of accountability from parties and even more so individual representatives; would like to be able to vote for independent candidates and to have two separate ballots, one for candidates, another one for parties; and a majority prefers a type of electoral system that has these features or at least is compatible with them. In other words, the participants want an electoral system that promotes accountability because they value it, find it wanting, and are eager to hold the government accountable.

**Internal and external efficacy**

Deliberation is expected to increase internal efficacy, or citizens’ feelings of personal competence, and external efficacy, or citizens’ perceptions of the responsiveness of the political system (Morrell 2005, 51). As one can see in Table 3, after deliberation participants felt

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Mean before deliberation</th>
<th>Mean after deliberation</th>
<th>Net change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am able to understand most political issues easily (1 = Strongly disagree, 4 = Strongly agree)</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>+0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am good at explaining a political issue to someone (1 = Strongly disagree, 4 = Strongly agree)</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>−0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel you have enough knowledge to say how South Africans should elect their members of parliament? (1 = No, not at all, 4 = Yes, absolutely)</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>+0.25*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members of parliament are interested in the opinions of people like me (1 = Strongly disagree, 4 = Strongly agree)</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>−0.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

more knowledgeable. However, it seems that internal and external efficacy diverged. Participants felt less confident about their abilities to explain political issues to others after deliberation. Looking at the individual level, seven participants increased their confidence, but 14 felt less sure afterwards. This suggests that deliberation had a paradoxical effect: participants felt significantly more knowledgeable, but less confident about explaining politics to others. One interpretation is that deliberation is a skill that needs to be learned and practiced. Finally, before and after deliberation, participants felt largely ignored by members of parliament. This is no surprise: because politicians were not involved in Deliberation Day, they had no chance to prove their interest in the opinions of ordinary South Africans.

Nine questions about the perceived performance of the electoral system and the desired qualities of electoral systems allowed the respondents to avoid an answer. The reasons were twofold. First, to avoid forcing respondents into an opinion where they did not have one. Second, to check whether deliberation lowers the number of non-responses. Attitudinal certainty is one element of political sophistication (Gastil and Dillard 1999, 4). In this sense, deliberation increased political sophistication. The average for ‘cannot really say’ or ‘haven’t had a chance to find out about this’ declined from 6.44% to 2.44%. This suggests that deliberation helped the participants to form an opinion where they did not have one before.

Deliberation is expected to extend the argument repertoire of the participants. Cappella, Price, and Nir (2002, 77) define the concept as follows: ‘For any given stated opinion on an issue, argument repertoire includes the number of relevant reasons for the stated opinion and the number of relevant reasons for the opposite opinion.’ To measure the respondents’ argument repertoire, they were asked two open-ended questions following the question about their preferred type of electoral system. The first question simply asked: ‘Why do you think so? Please list all the reasons that come to mind’. The second question read: ‘What reasons do you think other people might have for preferring a different kind of electoral system than you do? Please list all the reasons that come to mind’. An analysis of the answers reveals three things. First, the percentage of participants who provided no reasons for their preference declined from one-third to less than one-tenth. Second, the percentage of participants who cannot think of counter arguments remains relatively high (decreasing slightly from 23% to 17%). Third, frequently such counter arguments amount to insults (‘poor understanding of electoral systems’) and accusations (‘to enforce totalitarian rule’). Such answers, even after deliberation, suggest that the experience of deliberation cannot be fully insulated from the polarised debates that one finds in South African society and politics.

**Quality of deliberation**

In the week before Deliberation Day, all participants received a 10-page brochure with background information on South Africa’s electoral system and the main alternatives. Additional copies of the brochure were distributed at the beginning of Deliberation Day. The content of the brochure was verified by an expert on electoral systems, a former member of the ETT. As can be seen in Table 4, the participants were satisfied with the objectivity and comprehensiveness of the information provided in the reading.23 Had we also pretested the accessibility of the background information on the
prospective audience, as recommended by the Handbook for College-Level Deliberative Polling, we might have discovered that the brochure was not as easy to understand as we thought.\textsuperscript{24} As a consequence, the moderators had to spend part of the morning session answering technical questions about electoral systems.\textsuperscript{25}

The panel consisted of the Italian Consul in Cape Town, on account of Italy’s experience with electoral reform; the International Politics Program Manager at the Heinrich Böll Stiftung, as somebody who knows the German electoral system; the director of the Centre for Constitutional Rights in Cape Town, to bring in a legal perspective; and finally a professor and a senior lecturer from the Department of Political Studies at UCT, the first an expert on the ANC and party finance, the second an expert on local governance. Their role was to answer the questions from the participants, not to act as partisans or advocates. There was a lively disagreement among the experts about the subject at hand. From the responses in Table 4, it is clear that the participants were very satisfied with the competence of the panelists and that the Question and Answer session served its purpose of clarifying facts and choices. The moderator reports from two of the three groups notice that participants were more confident and knowledgeable in the afternoon session.

\begin{table}
\centering
\caption{The quality of deliberation.}
\begin{tabular}{lcccc}
\hline
 & Strongly disagree (%) & Disagree (%) & Agree (%) & Strongly agree (%) \\
\hline
\textit{Balanced information} & & & & \\
The brochure provided balanced and fair information & 7 & 9 & 61 & 23 \\
The expert session helped me to better understand the facts and choices & 2 & 6 & 49 & 42 \\
The experts answered all our questions in a competent manner & 4 & 0 & 53 & 42 \\
\hline
\textit{Role of group moderators} & & & & \\
The moderators made sure that everyone had the opportunity to participate in the discussion & 4 & 0 & 23 & 72 \\
The moderators sometimes tried to influence the group with their opinions & 42 & 40 & 13 & 4 \\
\hline
\textit{Small-group discussions} & & & & \\
From the beginning there was consensus in my group & 8 & 60 & 30 & 2 \\
Towards the end there was consensus in my group & 2 & 36 & 51 & 11 \\
All of us contributed equally to the discussion & 15 & 48 & 33 & 4 \\
Some members dominated the discussion in my group & 4 & 4 & 59 & 32 \\
The members of my small group respected each other’s views & 4 & 15 & 49 & 32 \\
There were views or opinions that were ignored or not taken seriously & 6 & 60 & 26 & 8 \\
There was enough time to deliberate & 9 & 13 & 63 & 15 \\
The discussions were superficial & 19 & 47 & 30 & 4 \\
The discussion got heated, making me feel uncomfortable & 11 & 51 & 30 & 8 \\
I am more determined to vote after deliberating about electoral reform & 6 & 24 & 33 & 37 \\
Overall, I am satisfied with my experience in Deliberation Day & 2 & 2 & 34 & 62 \\
Should UCT organise more deliberative events, also on topics close to university students? & 0 & 0 & 17 & 83 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\begin{flushleft}
Notes: N = 46–47. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding errors. The evaluation questions used two types of formulations: ‘How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement: …’ and ‘Would you say that …?’ For ease of interpretation, the answer categories for the latter type of question have been transformed into ‘strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree’. The question wording as reported in the table has been adjusted accordingly.
\end{flushleft}
\end{table}
Moderate disagreement in political conversations helps to clarify issues and increase understanding (Schmitt-Beck and Lup 2013, 527). As can be seen in Table 4, participants reported limited substantive consensus at the start of deliberation. By the end of the day, however, that picture had changed. Although some deliberative theorists think that deliberation should result in a consensus, this result was not intended.26 In the introduction to Deliberation Day, participants were explicitly told that there was no need for them to arrive at a vote, recommendation, or consensus and that the deliberations were open-ended.

Fishkin and Luskin (2005, 40) define deliberation as ‘a weighing of competing considerations through discussion’, whereby discussion should be informed, balanced, conscientious, substantive, and comprehensive. Moreover, deliberation should be based on political equality. This objective was achieved in the sense that all second- and third-year undergraduate students at UCT with South African citizenship had the chance to participate. However, as is clear from Table 4, actual participation suffered from small-group deliberation being dominated by one or more individuals. They did not blame the moderators for this outcome, as they were seen to give equal opportunities for participation. The moderator reports complement the picture in two ways. First, in two of the three groups all participants participated in the discussion. Participation may not have been equal, but everybody participated. Second, lack of participation was a problem in one group, which also happened to be the largest one.

Moreover, the problems with equal participation and domination apparently did not go together with a lack of respect or a narrowing of the discussion. Eighty-three per cent of the participants said that group members respected each other’s opinions and only 26% mentioned that opinions were ignored or not taken seriously. More worrying, but not surprising, is that almost 4 out of 10 participants reported that there were times that deliberations became heated.

Very few participants thought that the moderators tried to bias the deliberation by pushing their own opinions. To get a sense of how the participants themselves viewed the level of the deliberations, we asked whether they thought the exchanges were superficial. Two-thirds of the respondents said no. The reports from the moderators give a hint as to why a minority of participants might regard the discussions as lacking depth. In each group there were attempts to address broader issues, such as democracy itself, socio-political issues, presidentialism, and even university fees – the topic at the centre of the wave of student protests that was still gripping the country at the time of deliberation. When the moderators tried to get the discussion back on track, some participants evidently felt cut-off.

The small groups deliberated for 90 minutes in the morning and again in the afternoon. This seems to have been enough. Only 22% of the participants would have liked more time for their deliberations. In line with previous findings that deliberation empowers citizens and strengthens their resolve to get involved (but see Grönlund, Setälä, and Herne 2010), two-thirds of the participants said the experience made them more determined to vote.

The proceedings were not recorded as we felt this might be controversial. Therefore, no content analysis is possible and the quality of the deliberation can only be assessed indirectly through the survey responses and the moderator reports. This is a deficiency, as current empirical research on deliberative democracy is seeking to open the black box of deliberation (Farrar et al. 2010; De Vries et al. 2011; Knobloch et al. 2013; Myers...
One example is Jaramillo and Steiner’s (2014) work on ‘deliberative transformative moments’. Analysing the flow of the deliberation, Jaramillo and Steiner search for moments at which the quality of deliberation increases or decreases because of the contribution of an individual participant. One of the moderators at Deliberation Day provides anecdotal evidence for such a deliberative transformative moment, when she writes how the discussion, which until then had been dominated by a few individuals, was transformed when a participant proposed to limit voting rights in South Africa to literate, educated citizens. At that point, everybody wanted to get involved and even though the comment was slightly off topic and the exchange became heated, deliberation widened to include the whole group.

Conclusion

The Citizens’ Assembly in British Columbia, Canada, has demonstrated to the whole world that citizens are eminently capable of designing a new electoral system (Warren and Pearse 2008). However, its participants had one year and the assistance of a broad range of experts and ample resources. The student participants in the Deliberation Day on Electoral Reform in South Africa at UCT met for only one day in an event prepared as part of a project-based MA course. Still, the outcomes are in line with the expectations from the literature: knowledge increased and opinions became more sophisticated. As research has shown, deliberative events of this kind do not promote any particular type of ideology (Gastil, Bacci, and Dollinger 2010). The organisers had no stake in electoral reform and did not favour any particular type of electoral system. The participants did, though. They were adamant in their demand for accountability, which they demonstrated across a variety of issues.

A shortcoming of this study is that participants are not randomly selected and that the students who participated in the campus experiment differ demographically from students who did not participate. Therefore, the results of the Deliberation Day on Electoral Reform in South Africa cannot be generalised to the UCT student population, let alone beyond. This does not make the picture less striking. Thirteen years after South Africans were last asked about their electoral system, student participants show profound dissatisfaction with the way parliament is elected. The alternatives are clear and popular.

Dissatisfaction with democracy in South Africa should not be mistaken for alienation. The student participants were as committed to democracy as the general population and much more so than many of the born frees. They were as likely as any South African of voting age to have cast their ballot in the last national elections. The student participants were as likely to have contacted a local councillor as the average South African (30%), but almost four times more likely to have contacted a member of the national parliament (15%). In sum, in their attitudes and actions, the participants in Deliberation Day were at least as democratic as the average South African. They are critical citizens and critical democrats.

The former head of South Africa’s Independent Electoral Commission, Brigalia Bam, has launched the proposal for an Electoral Systems Convention to study electoral reform. In her view, the members of this convention should be two ‘eminent citizens’ from each of South Africa’s nine provinces (Bam 2015, 210). The experience of citizen assemblies on electoral reform in Canada and the Netherlands (Fournier et al. 2011) as well as the
deliberation day on electoral reform on the UCT campus suggest an alternative model: a South African Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform. Its participants should be ordinary South Africans, randomly selected from the population so that the mini-public is representative of South African society.

When asked how they experienced Deliberation Day, all but two participants were satisfied, most of them very satisfied. When asked whether UCT should organise more deliberative events in the future, also on topics directly affecting university students, everybody agreed. Thirty-nine of the 47 participants even wrote ‘yes, absolutely, great idea’. These two questions about deliberation, the experience and its prospects, solicited by far the strongest and clearest response in the survey. This shows the promise of deliberative democracy for university governance and reinforces the recommendations that have been made in the scholarly literature. For Shaffer (2014, 3) ‘deliberation has the ability to alter how higher education functions’. Mabovula (2009) advocates deliberative democracy for South Africa’s school governance and Ani (2013) eloquently argues the merits of deliberative democracy for African politics more broadly. In the South African context, Waghid (2009, 75) hopes that ‘through democratic deliberation university staff and students together establish opportunities which take into account people’s linguistic, cultural, ethnic and religious commonalities and diversity’. Research on university deliberation shows that it possible to overcome status differences and create a level playing field (Pierce et al. 2008). This effect should be even stronger when deliberation is not only for and with students, but also organised by them, following the example of this project-based course (see also Bogaards and Deutsch 2015). In other words, deliberation on campus ideally is accompanied by deliberation in the curriculum (O’Connell 1997; McMillan and Harriger 2002).

The Deliberation Day on Electoral Reform in South Africa took place soon after the UCT campus had been closed for several weeks because of students protesting tuition fees and outsourcing. Could deliberative democracy help in bringing the different stakeholders on campus together, providing a mechanism for meaningful exchange in an environment of mutual respect? The student participants in the first-ever campus experiment in deliberative democracy in South Africa think so.

Notes

1. “Deliberative poll” is a registered trademark of prof. Fishkin at Stanford University.
4. At the time, I was the Van Zyl Slabbert Visiting Professor in the Department of Political Studies at the UCT. I would not have been able to teach the course and do the project without the crucial support of key people, first of all prof. Anthony Butler, the head of the Department of Political Studies, and prof. Robert Mattes, the director of the Centre for Social Science Research. Mrs Gajjar and Mrs Polzin provided invaluable administrative support. Matthias Krönke assisted with data entry. The MA students in my course helped prepare and organise Deliberation Day from beginning to end and were instrumental to its success as moderators of the small-group sessions: Darkowa Awinador-Kanyirige, Christopher Edyegu, Kristýna Greplová, Richard Griffin, Zahira Grimwood, Leonard Mbulle Nziege, and Davide Rasconi. Previous versions of this article were presented in the Africa Research Group at the Central European University and the 2016 General Conference of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) in Prague. I thank the participants, as well as André Bächtiger, for helpful comments.
5. This requirement, which fits with the general preference for proportional representation after violent conflict (Bogaards 2013), has limited the options for electoral reform (cf. Bogaards 2007). Non-proportional electoral systems are ruled out from the start and among proportional electoral systems, those that rely on preferential voting are considered too complicated.

6. There are many more criteria for electoral system design. For an overview, see Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis (2005).

7. More than 4 out of 10 participants in Deliberation Day admitted not to know the name of their constituency representative. The same number provided guesses that were obviously incorrect.

8. Technically, even now, South Africa’s electoral system is two-tier PR (Elklit and Roberts 1996).

9. Already before the first inclusive elections, Reynolds (1993) advocated a similar system, with slightly larger districts (5–12 members).

10. See the Minutes of the Discussion of the Electoral Amendment Bill in the Home Affairs Committee of the Parliament of South Africa. Available at: https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/16044.


12. For example, Hamilton (2014) favours a German-style electoral system for South Africa. His mention of Ireland might be mistaken for a recommendation of the single-transferable vote practiced in both parts of the island, but from the description, it is clear that this is based on a misunderstanding and that Hamilton endorses a German-style combination of PR and elections in individual constituencies.

13. Likewise, Cooper-Knock (2016) sees institutional reform as only part of the solution to South Africa’s many problems and Zuern (2015) expects the most from social contention.

14. Following UCT protocol, the Department of Student Affairs approved this study, after a positive review of the Ethics Committee of the Department of Political Studies. UCT policies regarding access to student records did not allow for the random sampling that is normally recommended (Fishkin 2009).

15. Of the 21 students who completed the pre-deliberation survey but did not attend Deliberation Day, 19 gave permission to use their responses. A comparison of participants and non-participants shows that although they are similar in background features, they differ in many other respects. Non-participants are more negative about the state of democracy in South Africa and the working of the electoral system. They are also less committed to the ideal of democracy. They score worse on knowledge questions and also report feeling less politically competent. Remarkably, 60% are not sure what kind of electoral system they prefer, against 15% among the participants to Deliberation Day. On the other hand, they have no problem answering more specific questions about the electoral system and they show the same preferences as participants (e.g. against an electoral threshold, in favour of independent candidates). In sum, the students who completed the pre-deliberation survey but did not attend Deliberation Day are overall more critical and insecure than the participants. Arguably, it is precisely these students that could have benefitted most from the deliberative experience.

16. 49 students participated in Deliberation Day and completed the post-deliberation survey. For two of the participants we could not identify a matching pre-deliberation survey and they are excluded from the analysis.

17. The exception is identification with the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), which is in any case more popular with young people. According to the sixth round of the Afrobarometer, with data for 2014/2015, 12% of respondents aged 15–29 felt close to the EFF. Available at http://www.afrobarometer.org.

18. For an empirical analysis of the impact on small-group deliberation of race and gender composition, see, respectively, Sommers (2006) and Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and Shaker (2012).

19. For problems with self-selection, see the documentation of the various Campus Conversations conducted at Carnegie Mellon University. Melville, Willingham, and Dedrick (2005, 53) admit that the National Issues Forums in the USA ‘often do not represent a true cross section of the
community’. At the University of Limpopo, Oyedemi and Mahlatji (2016) conducted a qualitative study on voter turnout among born frees with a focus group of 18 self-selected students. The preliminary results of the Deliberation Day on Electoral Reform in South Africa were presented at a roundtable in mid-December 2015 with academics, including two former consultants of the ETT; a leading activist in the non-governmental organisation My Vote Counts; and the convener of the UCT Global Citizenship Program. To enhance transparency, all student participants and experts were invited to this event.

21. Overall, young people are more likely to change their mind, demonstrating the kind of open-mindedness that deliberation requires (Suiter, Farrell, and O’Malley 2014).


23. In the expectation that not all participants might have had a chance to read the brochure, we included a ‘cannot really say’ answer. Three out of the 47 participants chose this option.


25. The six moderators, two for each of the three deliberating groups, were all students in my course. They were prepared for their task by a professional from the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation in Cape Town who also chaired the Q&A session during Deliberation Day.


27. Deliberative experiments of this kind take place in a highly controlled environment and one might wonder whether this control could not be used for political ends. For example, moderators ‘can be seen as potentially having the power to control the process and to guide the deliberation in a specific direction’ (Elstub 2014, 176). However, there is no indication that the participants felt manipulated to arrive at a particular outcome. Several survey questions on the quality of deliberation directly asked about the fairness of the background information, the impartiality of the moderators, and the helpfulness of the experts. No problems were flagged.


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