



Democracy: A Citizen Perspective

Application for continued status as Center of Excellence at Åbo Akademi University 2010-2014

1. Introduction

This application concerns an ÅA Center of Excellence that has been in operation since January 1, 2006: “Democracy: A Citizen Perspective” (D:CE). The research conducted by D:CE scholars deals with the state of contemporary Western democracy and with the promises and pitfalls of developing democratic governance in a more participatory direction. Along with the present application, an updated version of our 2008 mid-term report is submitted. That report accounts for the work done until today. Moreover, for a detailed description of D:CE objectives, methods, organization, operations and external collaboration, the original research plan¹ may be consulted. This application therefore contents itself with brief summaries on these points. Priority is given to our plans for the years ahead; the prospects of *developing*, *expanding* and *refining* our work further will be at the center of attention.

2. Basic information

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Other senior and post doctoral researchers include Tom Carlson, Thomas Denk, Ann-Sofie Hermanson, Kaisa Herne, Guy-Erik Isaksson, Krister Lundell, Maija Setälä, Kim Strandberg and Peter Söderlund.

When additional scholars participating in D:CE operations (junior researchers, doctoral students, International Advisory Board members, scholars from partner institutions and networks) are included, the total number of researchers in the D:CE community is around forty. D:CE research thus far has been reported in 43 articles in refereed scientific journals, 28

¹The plan can be accessed via our homepage <http://www.dce.abo.fi/>

articles in other refereed publications, 17 scientific monographs and 24 other publications. Eight doctoral dissertations, seven licentiate theses and some seventy master's theses have been completed within the program.

3. Objectives

D:CE research examines the development of modern democracy from the point of view of the citizen. It probes the notion that modern democracy has, as a result of fundamental economic, social and cognitive transformations, left its earlier collective nature marked by class- and party-based organization and developed into an Audience Democracy. If this is the case, citizens no longer have a predominant collectively defined identity but a set of identities suggesting varying loyalties. Throughout the Western world, for instance, the importance of social class for party choice has declined during the past two-three decades. Voluntary organization and political representation increasingly center on single issues dependent on media coverage rather than stable class-based interests and platforms. The fate of political leaders and party campaigns is decided by their capacity to cultivate leader images that are feasible given the conditions determined by media. State and local government operates in an environment where a strict definition of public authority has been replaced by governance based on a mix of public, semi-private and private actors. New information and communication channels offer, unlike traditional vertical processes, an opportunity to communicate and acquire information on a horizontal basis.

D:CE work takes an open-ended view of the extent of change in the various areas of democratic society. It contributes to international research by introducing an interdisciplinary perspective on these questions. Much of research hitherto has dealt with changes in social structure, institutions and organizations, the public sector, civil society, media, and communications technology separately. D:CE brings together social and political scientists, researchers in public administration, media experts as well as social psychologists to provide a multidimensional approach to vital questions about citizen influence.

The objectives of the project can be summarized in the form of two broad research questions:

1. To what extent has a transition to Audience Democracy taken place?
2. What are its consequences from the point of view of the citizen, and what action do they call for?

In its work thus far, the D:CE community has made considerable headway concerning both of these queries. As for the first question, several findings support the notion that a move toward Audience Democracy has indeed occurred during recent decades. Our research on forms of participation, political attitudes and behavior clearly points to changes that are in line with the expectations presented in the theoretical literature. Electoral volatility has increased. Young generations see voting less as a civic duty than their parents. Political participation is based on engagement in specific issues rather than on collective solidarity. Concomitant institutional changes reinforce these behavioral patterns. On the other hand, for instance, the personalization of politics has not been found to be a pervasive and linear development of the kind that has frequently been assumed in the theoretical literature. All in all, the research produced thus far goes a long way towards answering the first question and specifying the areas where this development has occurred. At the same time, the results presented point to several new tasks for empirical research in the years ahead. As for the second question, unique experimental work by D:CE scholars indicates that several forms of participatory democracy may, if properly designed, become feasible complements to representative democracy.

The objectives for further D:CE research can be characterized with three keywords:

- We need to *expand* the analytical foundations of our work by a) introducing tasks that were not wholly envisaged in the original plan but to which our findings clearly point at this stage, and b) by putting the methods and tools developed in the program into even more extensive use;
- We need to *refine* some of our main conclusions by introducing broader empirical and experimental data to substantiate and specify our findings;
- We need to *finalize* the work on broad syntheses of our main analytical fields in the form of monographs for international publication.

4. Foundations and methodologies

The theoretical and normative foundations of representative democracy have been in crossfire during recent decades. Citizens have become more critical of the actors and institutions that form the basis of the representative democratic process, and traditional political participation has been in decline. The most common way of participating, voting at elections has fallen in most democracies since the 1970s, and the share of citizens belonging to political parties has waned. The decline has been particularly marked in established democracies. By contrast, fundamental democratic support has remained high. Political interest has either remained stable or even increased, and conventional participation has partly been replaced by new forms of political action.

Simultaneously, in democratic theory, and increasingly in political practice, a “deliberative turn” has taken place. According to the theory of deliberative democracy, democratic decisions should be based on public discussion where different political views are mutually justified and judged by their merits. Both scholars and policy-makers have pursued an array of projects that engage citizens in deliberative participation. Some want to introduce deliberative practices in representative institutions, while others call for new forms of citizen participation. However, the true potential and impact of participatory and deliberative forms of democracy is still contested; more systematic analysis is needed. Reconciling normative expectations with empirical deliverables, as well as cross-national networking and coordination form particularly central tasks for future D:CE research.

D:CE has brought together scholars from areas that normally do not interact very much. More precisely, the Center unites researchers from the fields of normative theory as well as empirical and experimental research on political participation. Together, they have an in-depth knowledge of normative theory, political behavior and comparative politics. The team is especially skilled within the fields of deliberative democracy and applied research methodology. A strong asset is the commitment to jointly agreed tasks, especially demonstrated by multiple experiments that test theories of deliberative and participatory democracy.

So far, we have been able to increase the scientific knowledge of the transformations that have taken place in contemporary democracies (the shift towards “Audience Democracy”). Moreover, the novel approaches of experimental research, both face-to-face and online, have guided our research towards a synthesis concerning the potential and limits of participatory forms of democracy. The ten most important publications so far are the following:

Lauri Karvonen: *The Personalization of Politics. A Study of Parliamentary Democracies*. Colchester: The ECPR Press (Manuscript 150 pp., accepted for publication in 2009).

Krister Lundell: *The Origin of Electoral Systems in the Postwar Era: A Worldwide Study*. London: Routledge. (Accepted for publication in 2009, 160 pp.).

Maija Setälä, Kimmo Grönlund and Kaisa Herne: “Citizen Deliberation on Nuclear Power: A Comparison of Two Decision Making Methods”, *Political Studies* (Accepted for publication in 2009).

Åsa Bengtsson and Mikko Mattila: “Direct Democracy and its Critics: Support for Direct Democracy and ‘Stealth’ Democracy in Finland”, *West European Politics* (Accepted for publication in 2009).

Carsten Anckar: “On the Applicability of the Most Similar Systems Design and the Most Different Systems Design in Comparative Research”. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 11 (2008): 389-401.

Kim Strandberg: “Online Electoral Campaigning in Different Settings”, *Party Politics*, Volume 14, 2008, Number 2, 223-244.

Kimmo Grönlund and Maija Setälä: “Political Trust, Satisfaction and Voter Turnout”, *Comparative European Politics*, 5 (2007), 400-422.

Tom Carlson: “‘It’s a Man’s World?’ Male and Female Election Campaigning on the Internet”, *Journal of Political Marketing* Vol. 6 (1) 2007, 41-67.

Lauri Karvonen: Legislation on Political Parties: a Global Comparison, *Party Politics*, Volume 13, 2007, Number 4, 437-455.

Maija Setälä: “On the Problems of Responsibility and Accountability in Referendums”, *European Journal of Political Research*, 45, 5, 2006, 701-723.

5. Organization

The responsible leader Lauri Karvonen and his deputy Kimmo Grönlund continue to be in charge of the management of the Center. Together with the Steering Group they bear overall responsibility and make policy decisions, including recruitment and administration of staff. They are also in charge of the development of research infrastructure. On important research-related issues, the members of the International Advisory Board will be heard. The IAB will also meet for conferences and feedback.

We are pleased with the fact that ÅA has acknowledged our long-term research collaboration. A new institutional structure will be enacted as of 2010 at the university, and the disciplines and institutes that form D:CE will join forces under a common umbrella. The newly established Department of Politics and Government, together with the integrated Social Science Research Institute (Samforsk) will strengthen our endeavors, not only in research and teaching, but also in the management of large research projects, such as D:CE. The new department will continue its operations in Åbo and Vasa. There will also be a dedicated Research Director and administrative staff at Samforsk. In this capacity, Kimmo Grönlund will be in charge of many daily routines of the Center. Moreover, Virtual Polity will be administrated by Samforsk under supervision of research fellow Kim Strandberg. The new institutional organization will ensure a more professional D:CE management. It will also support our future applications for national, Nordic, and international research funding.

6. Research collaboration

D:CE is well networked at the Nordic, European and International level. While individual scholars share a long tradition of collaboration both in Finland and abroad, the Center has taken an active position in strengthening this tradition. As a result, two institutional arrangements have been made with partner institutions abroad. Bern Center for Interdisciplinary Deliberation Studies at the University Bern in Switzerland as well as the Democracy, Citizens and Elections Research Network (DCERN) at University of Manchester form a basis for a network of researchers. More recently a new collaboration has been

launched between D:CE and the Technical University of Darmstadt in Germany. This is a result of Professor Brigitte Geissel's stay at the D:CE as Marie Curie fellow in 2008. The network has organized workshops in Bern and Åbo.

In September 2009, the network related to D:CE will organize a section with seven panels at the general conference of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) in Potsdam. The section is titled "Democratic Innovations – Innovative Democracies". Brigitte Geissel, André Bächtiger (Bern), Maija Setälä and Kimmo Grönlund are currently drafting European applications in order to attract network and research funding for this group of researchers. The network is truly global as it includes members from Australia (John Dryzek, Simon Niemeyer from the ANU) and the USA (Dennis Thompson, Harvard; Robert C. Luskin, Stanford). There is a strong D:CE presence in Scandinavia. Lauri Karvonen is President of the Nordic Political Science Association. He also chairs the Nordic Election Research Network (NED); Åsa Bengtsson heads its first book project.

7. Expected outcome and potential for development

In the years ahead, D:CE research will endeavor to broaden the empirical and experimental foundations of the work accomplished hitherto. While some effort is still required to make the research on the first main question (see section 3) complete, emphasis in coming research will clearly shift towards the second question. Consequently, the thrust of our efforts will be devoted to portraying the consequences of a move towards Audience Democracy from the point of view of the citizen and, in fact, from the point of view of democracy at large. Methodologically, two tasks will be given priority in our future work.

- A. *The experimental basis* of our research will be expanded and developed in the direction of a wider variety of experimental designs. The two large experiments carried out so far have produced a wealth of valuable evidence and a great deal of first-hand experience of the possibilities and pitfalls of experimental research on democratic deliberation and decision-making. In the future, a special emphasis will be laid on the virtual environment, Virtual Polity (VP), which has been created within the Center. VP will be used as a platform for our experimental research, allowing for a variety of research settings, including questions relating to anonymity and social trust.
- B. *The comparative element* of our work will also be strengthened further. As envisaged in the original D:CE research plan, our research endeavors to use comparative data to the largest extent possible. Consequently, a considerable part of the research already published has applied comparative designs. In the course of the research, nevertheless, the possibilities of acquiring more extensive comparative data have improved markedly. A growing number of international databases have become available. Meanwhile, our own efforts at establishing global databases have been successful. It is now possible to place both the macro-level institutional work and important parts of the individual-level research in a much wider comparative framework than we could envisage at the outset of D:CE operations. This effort will be greatly enhanced by the fact that Carsten Anckar, Professor of Comparative Politics has agreed to shoulder a central role in the D:CE Steering Group. A markedly comparative orientation increases generalizability of our findings.

Updated and new research questions

There are several questions that form the core for our research agenda in the coming years. In the following these questions are explained in more detail. They are partially updated and partially new, having emerged during the first years of operation.

1. *Are more inclusive participatory models of democracy feasible?* The empirical and experimental evidence is by no means conclusive as to the potential of democracy based on a large popular participation. Some evidence suggests that a full democratic inclusion is not particularly desirable as many lay citizens tend to avoid political conflicts and are happy to leave politics to politicians. Several scholars have held that academic research tends to have exaggerated expectations concerning the capacity and willingness of citizens to become personally involved. This debate is absolutely central from the point of view of democratic theory, but our factual knowledge is still limited. Therefore, *citizens' own expectations* about the current form of representative democracy as well as their capacity and willingness concerning direct democratic participation will be studied further. D:CE research will devote considerable energies to analyzing citizen expectations and propensities concerning the democratic process. This will be done both in the form of focus groups, representative surveys as well as in experimental lab settings.
2. *How can the scale problem (face-to-face requirement vs. large societies) be solved?* A communicative form of politics requires something of a “face-to-face society”, i.e. groups of a manageable size where talking and reasoning is possible. In order to reconcile the requirements of face-to-face reasoning and mass politics, many scholars have put their hope in mini-publics. Typically, a random sample of people are gathered together in order to achieve a “microcosm” of the whole population. Also other measures can be taken in order to guarantee that different views are represented. The idea is that deliberation in mini-publics can be taken as a substitute for deliberation among the whole demos. The follow-up question is *whether ICT-based participatory forms of democracy provide a realistic solution to the scale problem*. The political potential of ICT has been acknowledged for decades. A major strength of on-line discussion boards is that they essentially erode physical obstacles and allow people to engage in political conversations regardless of time and space. Our experiments so far show that it is possible to achieve a rationally motivated and respectful dialogue in an online environment, if the process is carefully pre-designed to meet these needs. Online deliberation seems to have real potential and is certainly worth further exploration. Therefore, we will continue exploiting Virtual Polity in our future experiments on citizen deliberation. More concretely, a doctoral project (Marina Lindell) has been launched to test the promise of deliberative democracy at the local level. This project will use VP for experiments.
3. *Can discursive quality be measured objectively?* Deliberative theory rests on the assumption that citizens, given the right practical arrangements, will engage in a dialogue that is more enlightened than the discourse in regular representative democracy. While studies of the processes and effects of deliberative talks have started to appear, few researchers have focused on the content of deliberation. Do deliberative discourses live up to the standards posited by the theory? Are they characterized by inclusiveness, interactivity and reflexivity? In his doctoral thesis, Staffan Himmelroos takes on the task of evaluating the discursive quality of deliberative talks, using instruments such as the Discourse Quality Index and Initiative-Response Analysis. This work breaks new ground in the field and will be followed by several additional content analyses within D:CE.
4. *How can the “deliberative capacity” of societies and individuals be measured, and what are its determinants?* There is a large theoretically oriented literature on the characteristics of deliberative democracy. Adjectives such as “egalitarian”, “reciprocal”, “reasonable” and “open-minded” are often associated with deliberation. Deliberative capacity resembles another topical concept, i.e. social capital in the sense that they both are positively linked with democratic discussion and citizen cooperation intended to solve collective action problems. The empirical knowledge about the deliberative capacity of nations on the one hand and different kinds of people on the other hand is still limited. We

need more comparatively oriented research on societies and political systems as well as an experimental design that acknowledges the possible differences among individuals as to their propensity to engage in political discussions and their ability to do so in a deliberative manner. D:CE puts effort into a) refining comparable characteristics of deliberative capacity at a system and an individual level as well as into b) conducting comparative research based on cross-national survey data and replications of experiments in new national settings.

5. *What are implications of deliberative democracy in terms of institutional design?* The institutional design aspects of deliberative democracy have not yet been fully thought over. For example, the ways in which deliberative mini-publics could be used to supplement representative decision-making have not been explored sufficiently. So far, the role of mini-publics has normally been advisory. This raises the question whether their empowerment might change their character and thus decrease the quality of deliberation. Problems of accountability might also arise if deliberative mini-publics were to have a binding role in policy-making, as their participants are typically selected by random sampling. To some extent, deliberative mini-publics can be compared with direct democratic institutions that also allow citizen participation on single issues. However, referendums, as majoritarian procedures, enjoy much more legitimacy among citizens and policy-makers than the new deliberative designs.
6. *The anonymization of politics* is, finally, a theme that has scarcely been addressed in international research but which we have repeatedly come across in the course of our work. One of the foundations of contemporary democracy is that representatives, actors and viewpoints are recognizable; this is a precondition of the open exchange of ideas as well as of political accountability. However, an upsurge of anonymous political debate has appeared especially on the internet. Traditional media have followed suit, allowing a stronger element of anonymity in letters to the editor and in newly established text message sections. More attention is paid to various internet polls while the forces behind them remain anonymous and no control is made of the representativeness of these views. We will approach this new area from two angles. First, a comprehensive *empirical study* will chart the extent of this development. To what extent has anonymization affected traditional arenas of politics? What is the significance of anonymous political discourse on the Internet? How much attention is paid to opinions and viewpoints that remain anonymous as to their initiators? Second, drawing on our previous experimental research, future *experimental studies* are intended to be carried out using the Virtual Polity platform. A preliminary design presented below combines two dimensions, anonymity and information. The experiment will provide knowledge on aspects important both concerning deliberative democracy – the role of information and deliberation – as well as about the effects of anonymity per se. The role of information vs. discussion is contested in deliberative theory. The design acknowledges this and compares small-n groups that receive information on the issue at hand with groups that discuss on the same issue without a commonly prepared information pool.

	Anonymous participants	Known participants
Information	A	B
No information	C	D

Our experiments concerning anonymity serve as a test of the “force of the better argument” assumption often made by deliberative theorists. If the assumption is correct, the personality

of the speaker (gender, age, education, status) should not be of importance in a discussion. This notion competes with findings that stress the importance of social trust in collective action. The experiments therefore also aim at testing how anonymity affects the emergence of social trust in small group deliberation.

The ultimate outcome of D:CE work will be visible in a number of areas:

- * We will be able to provide *permanent infrastructure* for research in the form of experimental designs, including an online platform for various types of research, as well as large comparative databases for empirical analysis.

- * We will present a number of *internationally published monographs synthesizing our research*. As to the alleged personalization of politics (Karvonen) and the design of electoral institutions (Lundell) this work has been completed and the texts are submitted along with this application. In a central area of civil society – the relationship between religion and democracy – a monograph accepted by Routledge will be published next year (Anckar). A volume on deliberative experiments and democratic theory is well under way (Grönlund and Setälä). Citizens' democratic expectations (Bengtsson) and the dynamics of electoral volatility (Söderlund) will result in additional monographs. These syntheses will be supported by a large number of articles in refereed journals.

- * We will maintain and develop a *permanent international network* for research cooperation in our field, with the D:CE community as hub.

- * We will maintain a *community of postdoctoral scholars* that is of a sufficient size to permit ambitious research undertakings in the future.

- * We will offer an ideal *environment for doctoral students* pursuing their dissertation work. They will be part of a large community of scholars on a daily basis. They will continue to have access to a local research school as well as to the North European network for research training (NEPOS) of which D:CE is a part. So far, eight doctoral theses have been completed (Strandberg, Söderlund, Lundell, Hermanson, Olausson, Jääsaari, Pikkala, Ackrén). Given continued operations until 2014, another dozen dissertations (including Sandberg, Bäck, Groop, Miklikowska, Christensen, Himmelroos, Nykvist, Henriksson, Grönholm and Lindell) will be presented.

8. Timetable

As D:CE is an established and ongoing research undertaking, it will produce finalized research throughout the period 2010-2014. This means that articles, books and dissertations will be presented and conferences will be organized each year. However, there will be certain characteristic phases during the five-year period. The first two years will place a strong emphasis on the completion of ongoing dissertation projects and on additional major experiments. The mid-period is marked by the work of senior and post-doctoral researchers on major syntheses and monographs. The final year will witness the publication of the main oeuvres of this collective effort. A concluding conference will bring together the entire D:CE community including the International Advisory Board, representatives of international partner institutions as well as other prominent scholars in the field.