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## Partisanship and citizen deliberation

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# Political partisanship and citizen deliberation

## **Introduction – deliberative democracy in empirical research**

Deliberative democracy is an influential contemporary normative theory. It emphasizes “the ideal speech situation” where rational discourse, reason-giving, mutual respect and reflection are important (Habermas 1996, Gastil 2007). According to the theory, deliberation produces outcomes that value the common good rather than prize particular interests. Even though normative in nature, deliberative theory has inspired a lot empirical research, and a large part of it has consisted of experiments and quasi-experiments in citizen deliberation.

A central goal of deliberation is the “laundering” of preferences (Goodin 2000). In an ideal speech situation, preferences based on prejudice or cognitive misbeliefs are expected to change, if the person holding them listens to other people’s arguments, has to give reason to her own opinions, and when she reflects on the issue. The most common way of conducting research on the dynamics and effects of citizen deliberation are through various deliberative mini-publics (Grönlund et al. 2014). Following the original idea of Robert Dahl’s (1989) mini-demos or mini-populus as he first labeled it, the goal of deliberative mini-publics is to gather a representative sample of the population, give the participants information on the issue at hand, and then deliberate in small groups. In most cases, the participants’ opinions are measured before and after deliberation, in order to trace changes. The idea behind deliberative mini-publics is to find out what an informed public opinion would look like, if the people had the necessary information and time to deliberate and reflect upon on issue (Fishkin 2018). The overall experiences from deliberative mini-publics are encouraging. Participants change their opinions as a result of deliberation and there are clear learning curves learn on the issue at hand. Mini-public participants also tend to like being part of deliberation very much (i.e. Fishkin et al 2014; Grönlund et al. 2010; Setälä et al. 2010; Luskin et al. 2002).

The best-known family of mini-publics is Deliberative Polling®, developed and standardized by James Fishkin in the early 1990s (Fishkin 2009). He designed it to address the problems of measuring public opinion through ‘raw’ opinion polls. The aim of deliberative polling is to provide a method of measuring enlightened and reflected public opinion, by allowing people

to gain information and deliberate on a political issue in small-n groups. Deliberative Polls (DP) have become a 'gold standard' in organising deliberative mini-publics (Mansbridge 2010). The DP is a quasi-controlled experiment in the sense that the participants are randomly selected from a population, and they are randomly allocated into small groups at tables at the venue for deliberation, after which they deliberate. In a strict sense the DP, on the other hand, cannot be considered an experiment since it does not provide different treatments or a treatment and a control condition (some DPs include a control group, which qualifies them as experiments). Thus far, DPs have been conducted over 100 times in 28 countries all over the world, including non-democracies (Fishkin 2018).

Even though the DP is not a strictly controlled experiment, the design clearly allows for interpretations regarding the impact of information, deliberation and reflection. From an experimental perspective, the fact that DP is a registered trademark and a standardized tool, involves both strengths and weaknesses. Its main strength is the testing of identical mechanisms in different political systems. If the DP works in a similar manner in democracies and non-democracies, in presidential and parliamentary systems, rich and poor countries, countries with high levels trust and countries where trust is low, or even in countries with high levels of corruption(!), we can conclude that public deliberation works, universally speaking. This increases the external validity of the findings related to DP. The weakness, on the other hand, is the fact that the DP lacks different treatments. The setting is more or less constant at each Deliberative Poll; it is difficult to test new independent variables.

Most experiments with mini-publics fall in the category of lab-in-the-field experiments. This means that the participants participate with their existing preferences, but the researchers manipulate the setting in some way, i.e. give treatments, and possibly placebo. Controlled lab-in-the-field experiments follow the logic of randomized trials (Grönlund & Herne forthcoming). In these experiments, the analyses are carried out by treatments. Thus, most analyses consider aggregated opinion changes at the treatment level.

The present chapter takes interest in the role of *political partisanship among participants of controlled citizen deliberation*. It proposes the overall question whether partisanship affects participants in deliberation. Political partisanship is operationalized in the following way. It is a trichotomy, trying to estimate the strength of partisanship by dividing respondents into three categories, people with no party identification, people who say that they are closer to a particular party, and finally people who are members of a political party, and who are

therefore expected to have the highest level of partisanship. The chapter poses three main research questions.

1. Does partisanship, i.e. attachment to a political party affect participants' inclination to change opinions in deliberation?
2. Does partisanship have an impact on knowledge gains in deliberation?
3. Does partisanship have an impact on how actively participants deliberate?

I will study the research questions with the help of controlled lab-in-the-field deliberative experiment from Finland. Based on the three research questions, I formulate the following hypotheses:

H<sub>1</sub> Compared to other participants in a deliberative mini-public, party members are least likely to change opinions in deliberation.

H<sub>2</sub> Knowledge gains are largest among non-partisan participants.

H<sub>3</sub> Members of a political party are most active in deliberation, whereas participants with no party identification are least active.

### **Data, a controlled deliberative mini-public experiment on immigration**

For the purposes of this handbook on partisanship, I exploit data from one the experiments in citizen deliberation, which my team have conducted. So far, we have organized five controlled experiments with deliberative mini-publics. They have all been population-based, i.e. the participants have been recruited among the general public. Our goal has been to increase the external validity of the experiments by involving “lay” citizens in deliberations, instead of using convenience samples, such as students. This way we hope to be able to draw conclusions on how mini-publics would work in democratic decision-making in the real world.

The participants of each mini-public have been recruited through forming a simple random sample from the population registry, but participation has naturally been voluntary. We have used two modes for deliberation. Three mini-publics have deliberated face-to-face, whereas two have been online replications of a face-to-face mini-public. There have been three themes: mini publics #1 (face-to-face) in the fall of 2006 and #2 (online) in the spring of 2008 deliberated on energy policy with a specific focus on nuclear power. Mini public #3 (face-to-face, spring 2012) dealt with immigration, whereas the newest mini-publics #4 (face-to-face)

and 5# (online) both in the autumn of 2014 concerned the status of the Swedish language in Finland (Grönlund 2016).

Our overall impression based on these mini-public experiments is that lay citizens indeed want to and have the necessary capabilities to act as responsible and reflective representatives of the citizenry. Our experiments confirm that people who take part in deliberative mini-publics and receive the “deliberative package”, as Mutz (2006: 61) labels it – i.e. are first informed about the subject and then deliberate in small groups of 8 to 12 participants – reflect on the issue and change their opinions as a result (Grönlund et al. 2009, Setälä et al. 2010, Grönlund et al. 2014, see also Luskin et al. 2002, Suiter et al. 2016). Moreover, we have traced clear positive side-effects, especially in terms of learning but also when it comes to an increased trust in politicians and democratic institutions as well as an increased satisfaction with democracy (Grönlund et al. 2010).

In this book, I use our third experiment, where we extended our research agenda partly to a new territory. In designing it, we were inspired by the concern regarding information cascades, most notably expressed by Cass Sunstein (2002, 2007, 2009), on the future of democracy if people only engage in political discussions in like-minded groups. This “enclave deliberation” may lead to group thinking with extreme views as a result. The phenomenon where views become extreme is called *group polarization* and occurs when a group of like-minded people discuss politics and reinforce the attitudes and opinions prevailing in the group to begin with. Sunstein (2009, 3) defines group polarization as follows: “[...] members of a deliberating group usually end up at a more extreme position in the same general direction as their inclinations before deliberation began”. Like-minded discussion may also lead to an *amplification of cognitive errors* (Sunstein 2007, 80–95, 140–143), which means that people’s false factual beliefs are strengthened. One of the key features of deliberation is that different views are present in the process of exchanging arguments. Indeed, some level of disagreement is often regarded as a necessary condition for deliberation (Thompson 2008: 502). Since Sunstein uses the term “enclave deliberation” for any kind of discussions in like-minded groups, our interest in designing this experiment was to test what happens if a like-minded group receives “deliberative treatment”, i.e. information, discussion rules and facilitation (Grönlund et al. 2015).

The topic, immigration policy, was chosen among contested contemporary issues in 2012. The participants’ opinions on immigration were measured before and after deliberation. Since we wanted to test like-mindedness at group level, we needed to form distinct opinion enclaves

in relation to immigration. At the first survey, respondents with negative attitudes to immigration were placed into a *con* enclave, whereas respondents with a positive view on immigration formed a *pro* enclave. Experimentally, we *manipulated the group composition* in order to compare deliberation in two types of groups: 1) groups of like-minded people on immigration, and 2) groups of people with different opinions on immigration. Thus, the participants were randomly assigned to like-minded groups, mixed groups, and a control group. The treatment groups deliberated, whereas the (pseudo) control group only filled in surveys at home.

A short survey was first mailed out to a simple random sample of 12,000 adults in the region of Turku (Åbo). Every fourth person in the addressed sample responded to the first survey consisting of 14 items measuring the respondents' attitudes on immigration.<sup>1</sup> Since the design of the experiment required people with clear views on the immigration issue, we excluded moderates (n=631), i.e. those respondents whose opinions on immigration were close to the median value of the frequency distribution (see Grönlund et al. 2015 for a detailed description of the whole research process). The second survey (T2), which also included an invitation to take part in the deliberation event, was then sent out to 2,601 people. Half of the invited sample consisted of *pro*- and the other half of anti-immigrants (*con*). At this stage it was clarified that only a part of those who volunteered could be included in the deliberation event and that the choice would be made by lot. Each participant who completed all the stages received 90 Euros, whereas the control group received 15 Euros.

Eventually, 805 people volunteered, and 366 were invited to take part in the deliberation event. The target sample was 256 participants, i.e. 32 small groups of eight participants each. This was not achieved, and only 207 people showed up. Especially people in the *con* enclave tended to abstain at this final stage, even though there were no indications of this kind of a bias at the earlier stages of the recruitment process. At the deliberation event, random assignment was used within the *con* and *pro* enclaves. Eventually, we could form 10 *pro* like-minded groups, five *con* like-minded groups and 11 mixed groups. Because of the need for balance between the enclaves, each mixed group consisted of exactly eight participants, four from both enclaves, whereas the group size was allowed to vary between 7 and 9 in the like-minded treatment. This was due to attrition at the last stage. The (pseudo) control group consisted of 369 people. The deliberation event took place during one weekend in the spring of 2012. Each participant took part during one day, either on a Saturday or a Sunday. The setup was identical. The day started with a 15-item knowledge quiz, after which the

participants were briefed about some basic facts related to immigration in Finland. The briefing was designed to be balanced and focused on basic facts. It was also handed out to the participants.

People deliberated in their small group for four hours, but this included a 45-minute lunch break. Thus, the effective time for deliberation for roughly three hours. In each group, a trained moderator facilitated the discussion and made sure that specific rules were followed. The rules emphasized respect for other people's opinions, the importance of justifying one's opinions and openness to others' points of view. In the beginning, every participant suggested a theme related to the immigration issue, which she wished the group to discuss. The discussion was free and the moderators interfered only if any of the group members dominated or completely withdrew from the discussion. After deliberation, each participant filled in a post-test survey.

The main result of the experiment was that all participants in the anti-immigration enclave became more liberal. This was especially true in the mixed treatment where the small groups consisted of four anti- and pro-immigrants each, but also in the groups consisting of only participants with initially negative view of immigration. Within the pro-immigration enclave, participants in the mixed treatment did not change their preferences, whereas a slight polarization into a liberal direction could be traced in the pro like-minded groups. Especially those pro-immigration participants in like-minded groups who did not learn in the course of deliberation became polarized, i.e. even more liberal in the post-deliberation measurement (Grönlund et al. 2015). We were able to show that, contrary to previous studies of discussion in like-minded groups, deliberative norms and practices can alleviate the negative consequences of filter bubbles or enclaves. In a later experiment, this result was replicated (Strandberg et al. 2019).

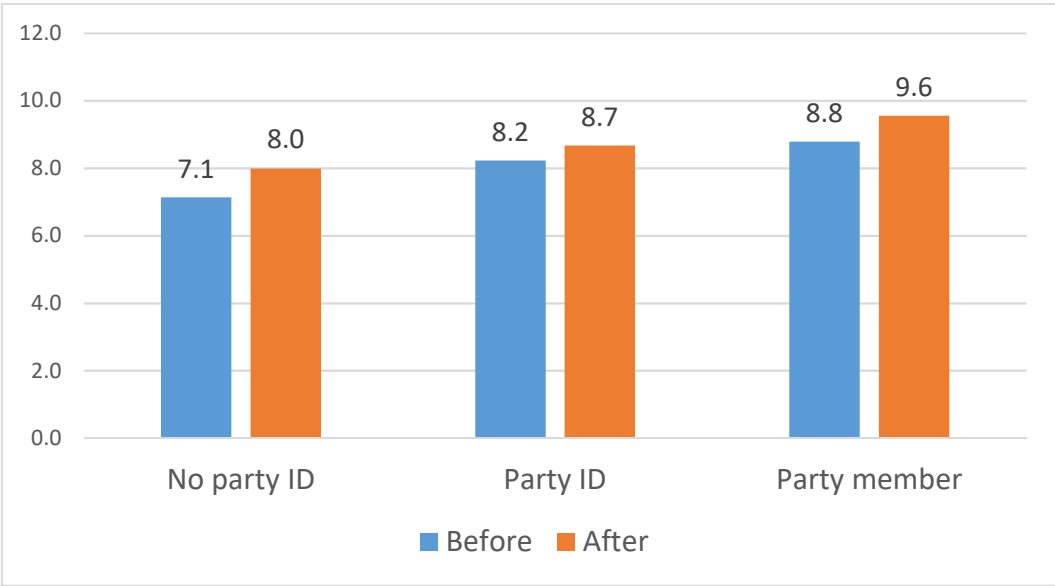
The results support a central theoretical assumption in deliberative democracy, claiming that all arguments should not have an equal weight in the process of public reasoning. Reasonable arguments appealing to generalizable moral principles are expected to be powerful, whereas arguments based on attitudes such as prejudice should be 'laundered' in the course of deliberation (Goodin 1986). Thus, our interpretation of the outcome of the experiment is that deliberation is different from other kinds of talk. The deliberative package with information material and discussion rules emphasising respect, equality and reflection, can be particularly useful in hindering group polarization in like-minded contexts (Grönlund et al. 2015).

**Analyses – partisanship and citizen deliberation**

What about partisanship? To my knowledge, systematic tests of how partisanship might affect the participants of deliberative mini-publics have not been carried out. Above, I have explained about the overall results of the experiment on immigration attitudes. The next step of this chapter is to seek answers to the three research questions and test the three hypotheses that I presented earlier. Partisanship was measured through two survey questions before deliberation:

- 1. “Is there a particular political party you feel close to? Which party?”
- 2. “The following is a list of various ways to participate in the society. During the last 4 years, have you done any of the following? Participated in the activities of a political party.

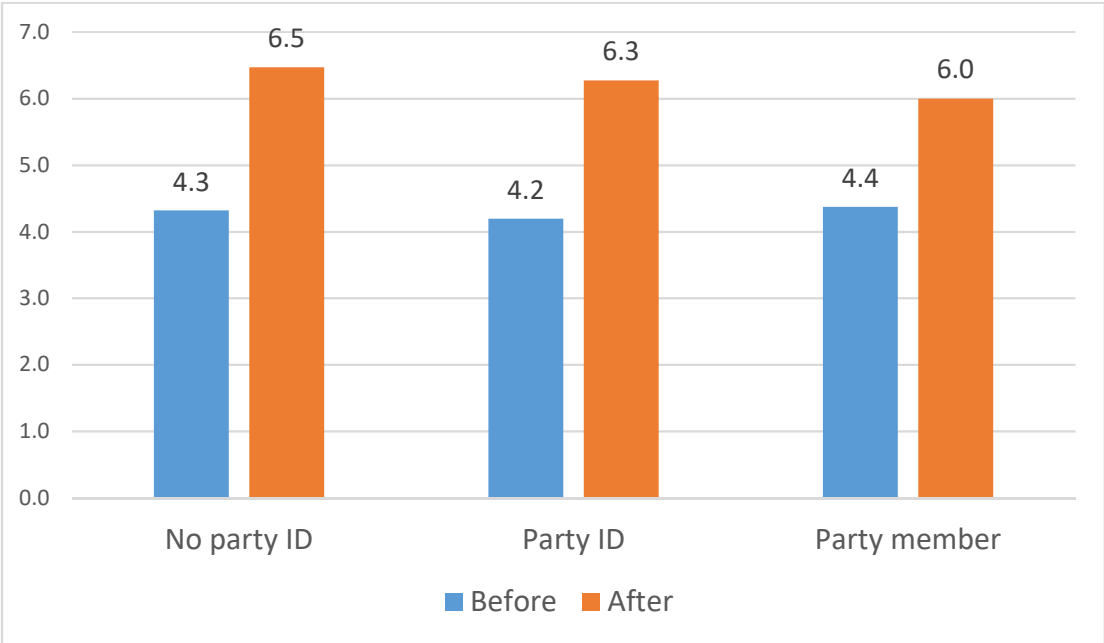
Of the 207 participants, 66 persons were not close to any political party, 117 were, and 24 persons had taken part in the activities of a political party. Our survey did not include a specific question of party membership, but the second question serves as a proxy of being partisan within a political party. From now on, whenever I refer to party members, these are persons, who during the preceding four years of the experiment had participated in the activities of a political party. The analyses will be carried out in the following manner. First, a simple comparison between partisans and non-partisans is presented for the three hypotheses, opinion change, knowledge gain and discussion activity. Second, similar comparisons will be made within treatments: like-minded groups versus mixed groups.





**Figure 1.** Opinions on immigration before and after deliberation according among non-partisans and partisans.

Figure 1 shows the mean opinions on immigration among non-partisans and partisans before and after deliberation. In all three groups, among non-partisans, participants with a party identification and party members, the opinions became more liberal regarding immigration. This reflects the overall results of the experiment, as described above. Moreover, we can see that the party members were, on average, most pro-immigration in their baseline attitudes, followed by participants with a party identification. The participants with no party identification, scored on average at 7.1 on the scale from zero to 14. On the other hand, the liberal shift among the non-partisans was the highest, 0.9 points. B The opinion changes among all three groups are statistically significant. This was tested by means of paired samples t-tests, with the highest t-value (5.16, p=.000) for the non-partisans, then participants with a party ID (t=3.28, p=.001), and party members (t=3.26, p=.003). Thus, the assumption of H<sub>1</sub> that party members would be less inclined to change opinions, is not gaining any convincing support, at least when we look at the whole experiment.

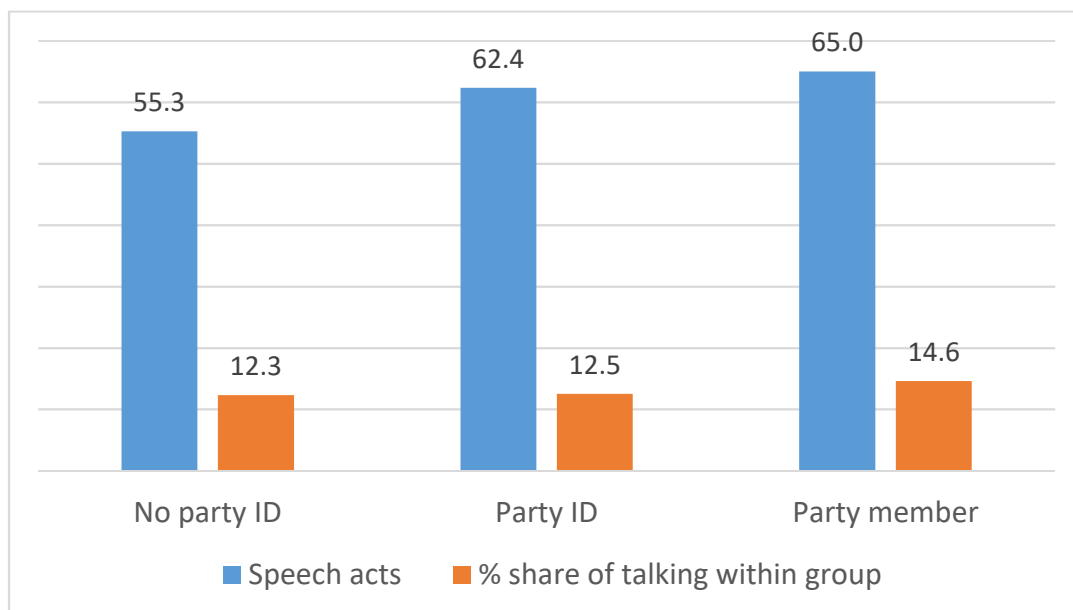


**Figure 2.** Knowledge on immigration-related issues before and after deliberation among non-partisans and partisans.

Figure 2 compares the learning curves among the participants in a similar manner. Knowledge was measured through 15 quiz-type items<sup>ii</sup>. Five of the items measured general political knowledge, which did not increase during deliberation. Ten questions pertained to knowledge on immigration-related issues. Of these, six questions could be answered through reading the

information material. In figure 2, the knowledge on the ten items related to immigration is shown as a mean of correct answers before and after deliberation among the three groups of participants. In all three groups, the learning curve is clear and it seems to be steepest among the non-partisans. Before deliberation, they had on average 4.3 correct answers out of 10. After deliberation, the mean of correct answers was 6.5, the average increase being 2.2 correct answers. In fact, the immigration knowledge after deliberation is the highest among non-partisans, the participants with a party identification had 6.3 and party members 6.0. According to within samples t-tests, all three increases are statistically significant ( $p=.000$ ) with t-value 11.06 for non-partisans,  $t=15.67$  for party identifiers and  $t=6.07$  for party members. Even though the increase was more modest among party members, and in that way indicating support for H2, the differences of increase between are not statistically significant, not even between non-partisans and party members.

We will now turn to the third research question. Were party members more active than other participants in the small group deliberations? All the deliberations were audio recorded and transcribed. For this analysis, I exploit the transcriptions of the deliberation in each group.



**Figure 3.** Speech activity in small group deliberation among non-partisans and partisans.

Figure 3 displays the activity of the participants in their small group deliberations in two ways. The first bar shows the number of speech acts, i.e. how many times a person has spoken on average within his or her group. We see that in accordance with H<sub>3</sub>, the participants with no party identification have spoken the least, on average 55.3 times during the deliberation, whereas the party members have spoken most often, 65 times. The participants with a party

identification fall in between with 62.4 speech acts on average. These differences are not, however statistically significant. The second bare displays a relative measure of talk activity. This is the mean share per individual of the whole talk within each group, with the moderator's talk activity excluded. In these relative shares, the differences between the three groups are less evident. Non-party identifiers talked on average 12.3 per cent of the whole group's talk, party identifiers 12.5 per cent and party members 14.6 per cent. Once again, the party members show more activity, but these differences are not statistically significant. Thus, H<sub>3</sub> does not gain support.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter has been to shed light on how politically partisan individuals behave in a deliberative mini-public. I proposed three research questions, which pertained to 1) opinion change, 2) knowledge gains and 3) speech activity. The hypotheses assumed that political partisanship would have an impact on how participants behave in a controlled deliberative experiment. I assumed that party members would change their opinions less than other participants, and further that participants with no party identification, i.e. non-partisans would change their opinions more than other participants (H<sub>1</sub>). This hypothesis was based on the idea that partisans are more bound by political ideologies and party cues, whereas non-partisans would have a more open view to information and arguments from others. The hypothesis could not be verified, which shows that the deliberative mini-public setting, encouraging reason-giving, listening and reflection, works in a similar way on participants regardless of their level of political partisanship.

Following the logic of the first hypothesis, H<sub>2</sub> assumed that partisans would learn less than non-partisans would as a result of information and deliberation. The results show that the learning curves were similar for all groups of participants, not supporting H<sub>2</sub>. Finally, H<sub>3</sub> assumed that partisan participants would be more active than non-partisans, and that party members thanks to their political background would be the most active in small group deliberation. Once again, even though party members were slightly more active than other participants were, the hypothesis could not gain statistical support. Thus, none of the hypotheses gained support.

Sometimes it is frustrating to find no support for research hypotheses. When it comes to the results in this chapter, we should probably take a more positive stand. At least for deliberative democrats, the finding where one of the central assumptions of deliberative democracy – “the

unforced force of the better argument” (Habermas 1996: 306), which emphasizes the fact that for an argument to win support it is important *what* is being said, not by whom – gains indirectly support through the results. Political partisans, perhaps being more ideological and at least being more open to cues from party leaders, behave in a similar manner as non-partisans in an ideal speech situation, i.e. a deliberative mini-public. In another study, we found comparable results when we analysed the impact of such variables as gender, age and education, and previous political activity, which usually are powerful predictors of political activity and impact. Deliberative mini-publics are able to diminish the impact of high socio-economic status (Himmelroos et al. 2017). In conclusion. Deliberative democracy, at least when it is facilitated in a controlled manner, is a powerful channel for *equal* political discussion – and the typical status effects both for political partisans and non-partisans.

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<sup>i</sup> The items through which opinions on immigration were measured were the following. All questions 3–14 were presented as a standard Likert scale with four values

1. Finland should take more immigrants. Do you think this is a bad or a good suggestion?
2. Migration of foreigners into Finland should be restricted as long as there is unemployment in Finland. [r]
3. Do you think Finland will change into a better or a worse place to live when people from other countries move to Finland? (Questions 1–3 were presented on a scale from 0 to 10)
4. It is good for the Finnish economy that people from other countries move to Finland
5. Immigrants take away jobs from native Finns. [r]
6. Immigrants should have the same right to social security as Finns even if they are not Finnish citizens
7. The state and the municipalities use too much money to aid immigrants. [r]
8. Immigration poses a serious threat to our national originality
9. Everyone who wants to come to Finland to live and work should be allowed to do so
10. Immigration policy should primarily favor Christians instead of other religions. [r]
11. Generally speaking, immigrants adapt well into the Finnish society
12. I would be happy to have an immigrant as a co-worker
13. I would accept an immigrant as a family member
14. I would accept immigrants in my neighborhood.

[r] = Reversed coding in the sum variable

<sup>ii</sup> 1. Who decides on residence permits? 2. The share of foreigners in Finland. 3. From which continent do most immigrants come to Finland? 4. Who decides the size of the refugee quota? 5. The size of the Finnish refugee quota. 6. The most common reason to apply for a residence permit. 7. The number of residents of foreign origin in (city to be inserted). 8. Foreigners' share of sentenced crime. 9. Unemployment among immigrants. 10. The amount of integration allowance in EUR. Questions 1–6 could be answered with the help of the info package (this was not the order in the questionnaire)