

# article

## When the people speak – and decide: deliberation and direct democracy in the citizen assembly of Glarus, Switzerland

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This article analyses deliberative direct democracy. It asks whether ordinary citizens are willing and able to deliberate and whether their participation in policy-making has the intended effect. We apply Bayesian logistic analyses to 500 speeches held between 2000 and 2012 at the Glarus citizen assembly. We find that every second government proposal is challenged through deliberation, with success to be higher if well argued for. However, politicians are both better at deliberating and more successful than ordinary citizens. Thus, citizens still need the political elite to do their bidding – or at least not to argue well when opposing them.

**key words** deliberation • direct democracy • policy-making • Switzerland

To cite this article: Gerber, M. and Mueller, S. (2018) When the people speak – and decide: deliberation and direct democracy in the citizen assembly of Glarus, Switzerland, *Policy & Politics*, vol 46, no 3, 371–90, DOI: 10.1332/030557317X14976099453327

At a time when the standard model of liberal democracy is increasingly criticised and the rift between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ is said to have widened, democratic theory presents two remedies. First, according to the *participatory* idea of democracy, citizen involvement should be extended from elections to actual decision-making (for example, Barber, 1984; Pateman, 1970; Dean, 2017, 219). Letting citizens decide on more than just their representatives ensures that policy decisions better approximate their preferences, lessening protest voting and the attractiveness of populist simplification (Albertazzi and Mueller, 2013; Della Porta, 2013, 40) while fostering their self-development (Warren, 1992). Second, according to the *deliberative* idea of democracy, decisions should be ‘appropriately informed by facts and logic and [be] the outcome of substantive and meaningful consideration of relevant reasons’ (Mansbridge et al, 2012, 11). Hence, creating public spaces where actors form their opinions based on a free exchange of reasons in favour and against a certain proposal increases the legitimacy of both the decision-making process and its outcomes (Parkinson, 2006a, 19ff).

Whether and to what extent these two ideals work when combined in a single setting remains an open question, however. In this article, we turn to a real-world case in which citizens not only have the right to participate and decide, but also

to deliberate. The main question addressed is whether citizen participation and deliberation have the normatively desired effect, that is, whether ordinary voters can influence collective decision-making via the provision of well-justified arguments.

Empirically, we focus on the *Landsgemeinde* of the Swiss canton of Glarus, the annual citizen assembly of that region's electorate with final and binding decision-making power over all policy areas in that region's competence. Comparable to New England town meetings (Bryan, 1999; 2004; Mansbridge, 1983; Zimmermann, 1999), every Swiss citizen residing in the canton of Glarus is allowed to speak and express demands on any policy matter tabled that day. Directly after all speeches on a topic are held, the electorate decides through a majority vote.

There are two reasons why the *Landsgemeinde* presents a useful case for our purpose. First, it exposes *all* voters to arguments in favour and against a certain proposal (Schaub, 2012). Elements of deliberation and direct democracy are thus combined. Yet while the effect of deliberation has largely been studied in small-scale settings (Ackerman and Fishkin, 2002; van Stokkom, 2005; Andersen and Hansen, 2007; Fishkin, 2009; Grönlund et al, 2010; Fuji Johnson et al, 2016), there is an ongoing discussion on deliberative up-scaling to the public at large (Fishkin and Luskin, 2006; Parkinson, 2006b; Chambers, 2009; Ercan et al, 2017). Our case thus allows us to more confidently assess the impact of deliberation on voting behaviour, since listeners and decision-makers are identical.

Second, the *Landsgemeinde* presents an excellent opportunity to compare the deliberative success of ordinary citizens and elected officials, since anybody with the right to vote is allowed to speak. If in this way the political elite had more possibilities to influence voters, this would seriously limit the potential for the people's self-government, a core aspect of participatory democracy (Teorell, 2006; Minozzi et al, 2015). On the other hand, ordinary citizens might very well be able to compete with politicians not only in terms of deliberative potential, but also as regards actual success in policy-making (for example, Fournier et al, 2011; Nabatchi et al, 2012). A claim, however, which has been challenged by many (for example, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002; Posner, 2004; Rosenberg, 2007; Schumpeter, 1942; see also Ryfe, 2005; Mutz, 2008). We are thus able to compare the deliberative behaviour of citizens and politicians – at least of those daring to speak – and its impact in actual political practice and contribute new evidence to this debate.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. We first organise our theoretical discussion along citizens' willingness to participate (*input*), the ability to rationally articulate political demands (*throughput*), and actual influence on political decisions (*output*). We then briefly describe the case and data. After presenting our method and findings, we discuss and conclude.

## Theory

Schumpeter (1942) famously argued against the inclusion of citizens into political decision-making beyond mere voting for three reasons. First, ordinary citizens are neither *interested* in nor able to *understand* complex problems, hence the need for a political elite. Second, even if citizens understood complex problems, they would still be incapable of *articulating* their views rationally, hence there is elite competition for votes but not opinions. Third, even if citizens were able to both think and speak

rationally, they would still *act* upon the indications of their leaders and/or yield to peer pressure, rather than follow arguments.

Since then, many scholars have argued against or refined some of these premises (for example, Papadopoulos and Warin, 2007). In the following, we structure these opposing stances in terms of citizens' willingness to participate (*input*), the ability to rationally articulate political demands (*throughput*), and actual influence on policy decisions (*output*).

### ***Input: citizen participation***

Some scholars in favour of citizen participation argue rather normatively, feeling uneasy 'about delegating complete authority to representatives' (Coppedge et al, 2011, 253). For them, participation constitutes the very core of democracy in that 'common concerns and common participation in the search for common solutions to common conflicts' (Barber, 1984, 219) are the ties that bind. Others argue instrumentally, for example, that through participation citizens are 'educated...with respect to how to think in public' (Della Porta, 2013, 41). Esterling et al (2011) also find a capacity for motivated learning among ordinary citizens when engaging with their members of Congress. Recent research further demonstrated that particularly the not-so-well represented exhibit a higher willingness to deliberate if given the chance (Neblo et al, 2010).

Despite, however, the rise in alternative forms of political decision-making (compare Papadopoulos and Warin, 2007; Smith, 2009), letting citizens directly participate in the political process has remained disputed. Like Schumpeter, so-called 'extenuationists' (Fishkin and Luskin, 2005, 290; compare also Luskin, 2002) depart from the premise that ordinary people lack either the necessary motivation (for example, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002) or skills (Campbell et al, 1960; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996) to engage in politics.

Advocates of participatory democracy also face a problem if providing input opportunities simply means offering 'different playgrounds for the same participants [of] representative democracy' (Lutz and Gilland, 2004, 7; see also Mansbridge, 1983, 60–71; Sanders, 1997; Young, 2002). In other words, venues for more direct popular participation might be usurped by members of the political elite, for example to challenge a government from which they are excluded (Pateman, 1970, 14; compare also Papadopoulos and Warin, 2007, 459; Dean, 2017) or to mobilise their followers.

### ***Throughput: deliberation***

A further challenge lies in the process of deliberation itself. Contrary to voting, deliberation is much more difficult to achieve (Hooghe, 1999). At its core lies the premise of justification via public reasoning among free and equal subjects (Elster, 1998; Gutmann and Thompson, 2004; Mansbridge et al, 2012). However, the main argument 'defeatists' (Fishkin and Luskin, 2005, 290) use to portray the ideal of citizen deliberation as illusory is the lack of requisite skills among most citizens. While Schumpeter (1942, 262) is the most outspoken critic in this regard, social and cognitive psychologists equally doubt the existence of the ideal citizen deliberator (Mendelberg, 2002; Mutz, 2008; Rosenberg, 2007; 2014). Rosenberg (2014), for example, concludes that the average citizen is biased in his perceptions, has trouble

utilising more abstract forms of evidence, engages in prejudicial thinking, and relies on cognitive shortcuts leading to flawed conclusions.

Nevertheless, against the claim that professional politicians are better at deliberating, Fishkin and Luskin (2005) state that in fact the *mass public* produces better deliberation, for neither are citizens bound by constituency or party ties, nor do they need to engage in strategic behaviour to get re-elected. These constraints might influence politicians in whether and what they say or in how they argue. Citizens, by contrast, are free to deliberate. Moreover, even if developmental psychologists admit that reasoning skills are not an inborn characteristic, they can still be learned and developed (Rosenberg, 2014). So while properly designed institutions educate citizens and improve their 'competence to make reasonable political judgments' (Setälä, 2006, 702; Knobloch and Gastil, 2015), repeated interaction may be key in helping to do so, as demonstrated also in the framework of the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly (Fournier et al, 2011; Warren and Pearse, 2008).

### ***Output: policy-making***

The final question is whether citizen deliberation matters for actual policy making. If it does, post-deliberative direct-democratic decisions need to be the outcome of a 'substantive and meaningful consideration of relevant reasons' (Mansbridge et al, 2012, 11; see also Barabas, 2004; Hendriks et al, 2007; Neblo, 2007b) *regardless* of whether these have been aired by ordinary citizens or politicians. Neither participation itself nor its impact must be determined by one's political status (Mendelberg, 2002, 159) and only 'rational, that is, argumentative, convincing is allowed to take place' (Chambers, 1996, 99; see also Landemore and Mercier, 2012). So for justification rationality to raise 'the chances of persuading others on the basis of logical coherence', arguments must trump everything else including the number and status of proponents, adherents, or the ratio between the two (Gerber et al, 2014, 414; see also Chambers, 1996, 99–100; Isernia and Smets, 2014).

Thus far, empirical evidence on 'deliberative persuasion' is rather scarce and mixed (Siu, 2009; Sanders, 2012; Gerber et al, 2014; Minozzi et al, 2015), although findings from deliberative mini-publics give rise to optimism with regard to undue influence of the advantaged (Fishkin et al, 2014). However, 'alarmists' warn that avenues for citizen deliberation might in fact make things worse (see Fishkin and Luskin, 2005). First, dominant groups may, consciously or not, overpower weaker ones (Mendelberg and Oleske, 2000; Sanders, 1997; Thompson and Hoggett, 2001, 356; Young, 2002). Thus, the reasoned opinions of citizens might fall prey to soundbites put forth by an elite – on whatever basis – simply because of the latter's *status* (but see Van Stokkom, 2005, 404, demonstrating that the 'interplay of power and emotion dynamics' can also advance deliberation). As many voters rely on low-information rationality, party cues and shortcuts presented to them by officials may count more than logical inferences drawn out of sophisticated argumentations by ordinary citizens (Luskin, 2002; see also Bowler and Donovan, 1998; Hendriks et al, 2007; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998). *Social conformity pressure* too may drive opinions, resulting in what Sunstein (2002) calls the 'law of group polarization': whichever position has most adherents will win, again regardless of the quality of its argumentation (Mutz, 2008, 533; Rosenberg, 2014, 111).

In sum, even if citizens participate extensively (*input*) using highly rational arguments (*throughout*), the actual decision (*output*) might still depend more on elite support and/or sheer numbers, thus making the citizen assembly a merely symbolic appendix to elite bargaining (Barber, 1984, 150; see also Hug and Tsebelis, 2002). After presenting our data and method, we examine these various positions empirically.

## Data and method

### *The case*

In order to evaluate the impact of citizen vs elite deliberation, we focus on the *Landsgemeinde* of Glarus, an open-air assembly with full decision-making power. Next to Glarus, there is only one other Swiss canton holding a *Landsgemeinde*: Appenzell Inner-Rhodes. In the latter, however, deliberation mainly takes place beforehand and the assembly primarily serves to vote (Blum and Köhler, 2006; Reinisch and Parkinson, 2007). This is why we focus solely on Glarus.

In the perception of its citizens, the *Landsgemeinde* of the Swiss canton of Glarus is upheld as an important venue for public debate and exercise of popular sovereignty (Blum and Köhler, 2006; Gerber et al, 2016b). As an annual open-air assembly in existence since 1387, it stands out for its multiple political rights: citizens can not only accept or reject a parliamentary proposal but also modify it, send it back for reconsideration, or postpone a final decision to a later year. Furthermore, a single citizen can also herself initiate policy change any time of the year, using the instrument of the *Memorialsantrag* (MA). Every MA supported by at least ten cantonal MPs is tabled at the subsequent *Landsgemeinde*, with parliament either demanding the MA to be rejected or accepted. Even MAs lacking such support are submitted to the *Landsgemeinde*, but the people then only decide whether they want parliament to debate the MA again or not.

In terms of eligibility, every Swiss citizen residing in Glarus who is at least 16 years old is allowed to speak and issue demands at the *Landsgemeinde*. There is no need for prior announcements, nor is there a minimum or maximum number of speakers. The only restriction is that speeches and demands are confined to business items tabled that year. But while the elected regional parliament (*Landrat*) acts as the preparatory committee, final decision-making exclusively belongs to the *Landsgemeinde*.

With an electorate of about 26,000, usually around 25 per cent of Glarus' voting population turn out to vote, but participation occasionally rises to 35 per cent (2006) or even 55 per cent (November 2007) (Schaub, 2012). Compared to US town meetings of a similar size, the participation rate is thus far higher than what Bryan (1999, 209; 2004, 79) and Zimmerman (1999, 165) report on New England. The *Landsgemeinde* is also bigger in absolute numbers (14,000 people attending at its best so far) than most town meetings, while still deciding on similar matters (Mansbridge, 1983, 44–6) and more.

An ordinary *Landsgemeinde* takes place once a year and lasts between three and five hours. Approximately three weeks before, all households with at least one eligible voter receive a government booklet of around 100 pages with descriptions of all policy proposals as well as summaries of the parliamentary debate. At the *Landsgemeinde* itself, the president of the government (*Landammann*) first summarises a policy proposal, then opens the floor for debate, and oversees the voting before moving to the next

item. Alongside ordinary citizens, elected local or cantonal politicians (technically merely a sub-group of the citizenry) are equally allowed to speak and issue demands.

If no one speaks against the parliamentary proposal, it is automatically accepted (*quid tacet, placet*). In case of opposing voices, that is, those demanding modifications or even the outright rejection of a project, both adherents and opponents can take to the floor. At the end of the deliberations, a regional government member usually has the last word. The assembly then decides by majority vote through the show of hands; the result is final and collectively binding. In that manner, the citizens of Glarus deliberate *and* decide on a wide range of areas including health and social services, education, law and order, public transport, infrastructure, taxation, the economy and cantonal state structure.

From 2000 to 2012, a total of 189 policy proposals (that is, excluding elections) were tabled at the 14 *Landsgemeinden* of Glarus between 2000 and 2012 (exceptionally, two were held in 2007). Out of these, 81 (43 per cent) were challenged through at least one demand. Thus, 57 per cent were accepted without discussion and without even voting on them. In the framework of our study, we coded all 492 speeches (by a total of 220 different persons) held on all 81 agenda items that were actually discussed. Besides speech-level data, we also gathered information on speakers, policy proposals, type of demands and the electoral cycle, as we explain next.

### *Predictors and operationalisation*

We first classified all speakers as either members of the political elite (office-holders) or ordinary citizens (non office-holders), using public records. We defined politicians as local, cantonal or national elected office holders (government, parliament, judiciary) at the time they spoke. Citizens speaking on behalf of a political party but without holding elected office were coded extra (see below).

### *Analysing input*

To analyse input, we classified all speeches as either *supporting* a parliamentary proposal or *challenging* it. Demands challenging parliament are those asking for: rejecting the parliamentary proposal ('reject'), a modification of the parliamentary proposal ('change'), sending the proposal back to parliament for reconsideration ('send back'), postponing a decision to a following year ('postpone'), and approving a single initiative/*Memorialsantrag* ('MA approve'). Demands *supporting* parliament are those asking for the approval of the proposal as introduced ('approve') and rejection of a single initiative ('MA reject'). If a speaker issued several demands, we split her speech accordingly and coded each part separately.

### *Analysing throughput*

To assess deliberation, we measured the justification rationality of each of the 492 speeches. While there is no universally accepted definition of the former, justification rationality as the presentation of arguments in a logically coherent and comprehensive way is regarded as the core of a Habermasian understanding of deliberation (Bächtiger et al, 2010a). Justification rationality not only makes a speech accessible to rational critique, but also increases the chances of persuading others on the basis

of logic (Landemore and Mercier, 2012). Some have criticised this overemphasis on rationality, highlighting the importance of alternative forms of communications such as storytelling (for example, Sanders, 1997; Young, 2002; see Fuji Johnson et al, 2016). However, stories only function deliberatively if they provide additional information or arguments, offer new perspectives, or advance ‘trust, inclusion, respect or in other ways help to meet the preconditions of effective deliberative participation’ (Neblo, 2007a, 533; see also Fuji Johnson et al, 2016). Furthermore, previous research has demonstrated that justification rationality is an important part of a latent construct of deliberative quality (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2014) to which storytelling also belongs (Gerber et al, 2016). This overlap is confirmed by our own data (for example, in terms of respect for others; results available on request). Finally, using justification rationality to assess deliberative quality is also in agreement with the rules of the *Landsgemeinde*: as defined in the Constitution of Glarus, every demand is ‘to be justified’ (*zu begründen*; article 65.5).

For all these reasons, we employ a crucial element of the Discourse Quality Index (Steiner et al, 2004; see also Bächtiger et al, 2010b) and assess, for each speech, the breadth and depth of arguments used (see also Siu, 2009; Gerber et al, 2014). This results in a five-point scale:

- (0) no justification provided;
- (1) inferior justification: incomplete link between demand and justification;
- (2) qualified justification: one complete link between demand and justification;
- (3) sophisticated justification (broad): at least two complete justifications given for a demand;
- (4) sophisticated justification (in-depth): at least two complete justifications, embedded in inferences, that is, examination of a problem in a quasi-scientific way from various viewpoints.

Speeches were listened to on the official audio-files available online and coding was done by the authors separately, after a sufficiently satisfying inter-coder reliability test following Steenbergen et al (2003, 38) (RCA 80 per cent,  $K$  0.735,  $r$  0.933,  $\alpha$  0.963,  $N=30$ ). In order to examine whether politicians perform better in justifying their demands, we conducted a Bayesian logistic multilevel model with non-nested structure at the level of speakers and at the level of agenda items (random intercepts).

We also decided to collapse the five-point scale into two categories, differentiating between a) qualified justification or less (0–2) and b) sophisticated sophistication (3 and 4). The reasons for this are theoretical: arguments should be ‘accessible to rational criticism’ (Bächtiger et al, 2010a, 41), which clearly distinguishes qualified and sophisticated justification from lower levels of justification rationality. In case of the latter, the link between the premise and the conclusion is not clear. Given also that our interest lies in the degree of ‘argumentative convincing’ (Chambers, 1996), we assume that more elaborate justifications (code 3 and 4) are better able to do so than qualified justifications only. In setting the cut-off point between qualified and sophisticated justification, we can further account for argumentative breadth, since sophisticated justification entails elaborating on at least two different aspects of a particular demand. We, however, retain the code for excellent speeches (4) when analysing determinants of success (see below).

As controls, we include gender, a variable that captures whether the speaker was talking on behalf of a political party and whether the demand was challenging or supporting parliament. Since only a speaker's name and political status are known to the audience, we lack information on other, potentially important, socio-economic or psychological characteristics of individuals which might influence speech quality. It is also important to remember that we only assess those persons – citizens and office-holders alike – who actually spoke and that we lack information on their motivation for doing so. While this may present a downside for the study of input and throughout, output should not be affected (see also final section). Nevertheless, we also include a variable capturing the initiators of a single initiative, assuming their speeches to be particularly articulate. We record the number of speeches per item to monitor controversy, controlling for the assumption that citizens only present their best arguments when they see a need for it (Esterling, 2011). Lastly, we identify the policy area of every business item to proxy issue complexity (see Posner, 2004).

### ***Analysing output***

Finally, to assess whether citizen demands that are well argued for have a higher chance of success, we estimate Bayesian logistic multilevel models with a random intercept for the *Landsgemeinde* year. The dependent variable is '1' when a challenging demand was successful, that is, when a parliamentary proposal failed or was modified, and '0' otherwise. We focus on challenging demands because of the interlaced structure of our data: a challenge only succeeds if the demand to support parliament is defeated and *vice versa*.

As main independent variables for this part of the analysis, we use the *number*, *ratio* and *status* of pro- and contra-speakers, the *mean* and *maximum* levels of justification rationality of each camp as well as the *difference* between the means of pro- and contra-speeches on a demand. We also test whether a single excellent citizen or elite speech (in-depth and sophisticated justification, that is, code 4) in favour of a challenging demand (that is, against a parliamentary proposal) influences its success, as well as whether at least one excellent speech by a member of the elite has been given *against* that very same demand (that is, in favour of the parliamentary proposal). Finally, to test the law of group polarisation (Sunstein, 2002), we use the proportion of pro-speeches, while elite influence is assessed through the proportion of citizen supporters for a challenging demand.

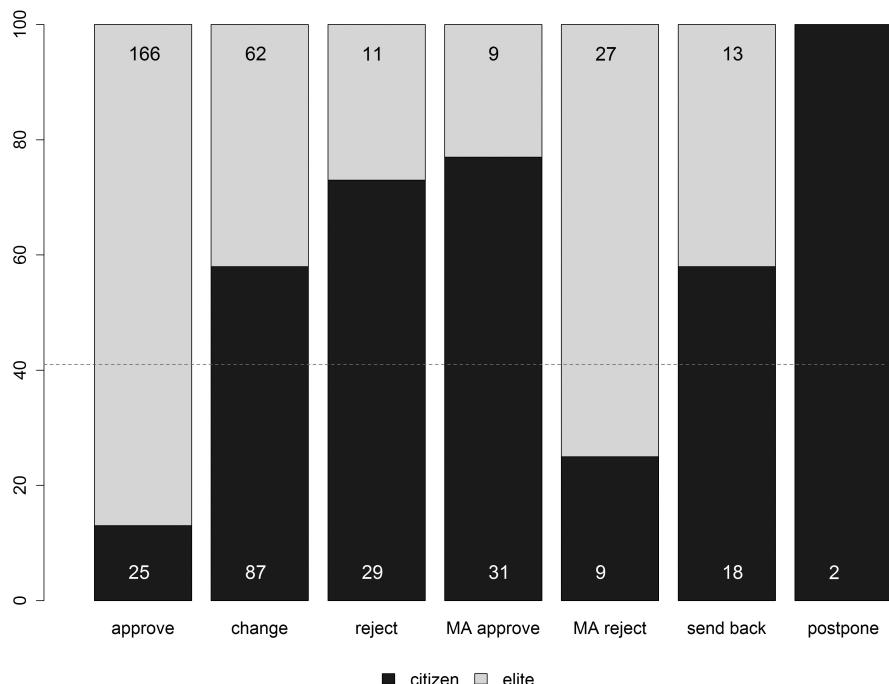
In terms of controls, we again include policy area, party support, and item controversy. Furthermore, we control for whether a challenging demand is aimed at merely modifying a parliamentary proposal, since this demand is easiest to be successful (16 per cent success rate). Finally, a dummy captures whether parliamentary elections succeeded the *Landsgemeinde* a few weeks later (2000, 2004, 2008, 2012). The reason for this is that politicians might be reluctant to table agenda items and/or speak if they anticipate a high conflict potential right before elections. All models have been estimated using the MCMCglmm package in R (Hadfield, 2010); convergence diagnostics are available upon request.

## Findings

### Input

What is now the extent of *active* citizen participation, that is, in terms of speaking at the assembly in addition to merely attending? Focusing on all issues which, due to at least one demand, were actually discussed, differences between the elite and citizens immediately become obvious (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Frequency of speeches by demand and speaker status



Notes: Entries in bars represent number of speeches per demand and elite status. Demands are sorted by the overall frequency of speeches promoting them. The horizontal line indicates the share of citizen speeches (41 per cent) from all speeches (N=492).

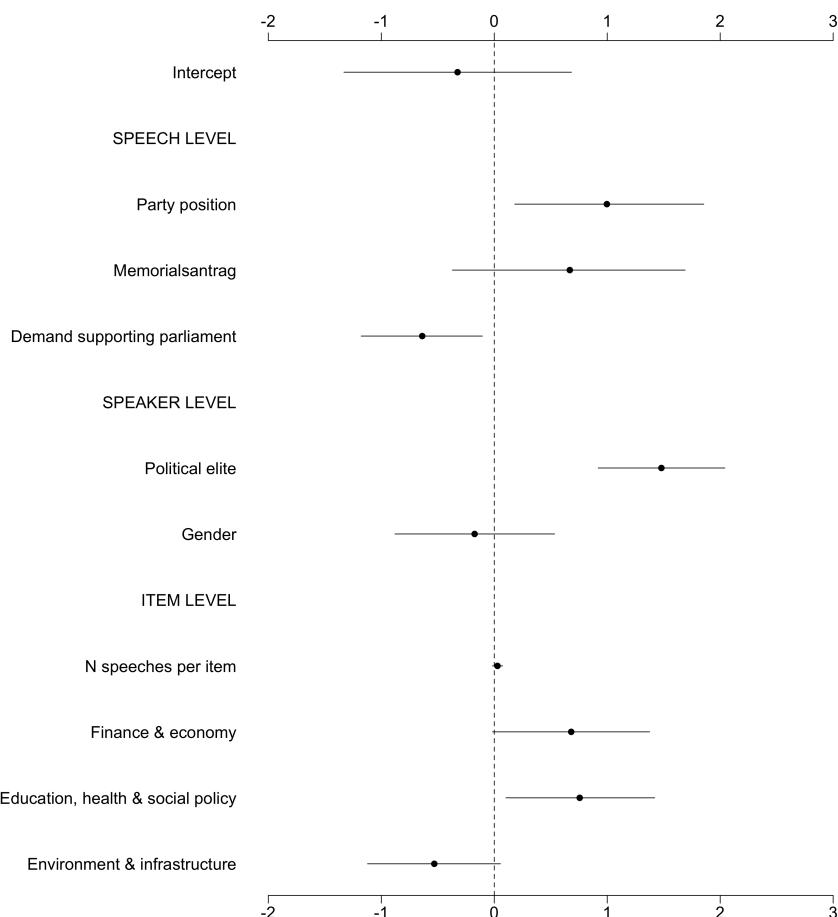
While 59 per cent of all speeches have come from politicians, citizens are more prominently represented among all those demands challenging parliament. So at least as regards challenger demands, the *Landsgemeinde* is not simply a different stage for the same old elite but at least some ordinary citizens participate. Yet we should keep in mind that the people show *implicit* support for parliamentary proposals in 57 per cent of all business tabled. Nevertheless, compared to the national level in Switzerland, the challenging rate is still substantial: of all legislative proposals subject to the facultative referendum, only 7 per cent were brought to a vote and about 3 per cent eventually rejected (Linder and Wirz, 2014). Yet in Glarus, 43 per cent of all parliamentary proposals were challenged and 7 per cent eventually defeated fully or partially during our period of investigation. Also, whereas at the national

level legislation is often moderated to make it ‘referendum-proof’, the fact that in Glarus *all* changes need to be brought before the people may additionally serve as an important indirect control mechanism.

### Throughput

How likely are citizens who have decided to speak to deliberate well? Turning to Figure 2, displaying determinants of sophisticated justification, evidently elite status is the strongest and most certain parameter. Advocating a cause on the explicit behalf of a political party also has a strong and positive impact on speech quality as measured here. Thus, in terms of justification rationality, even those ordinary citizens who have the courage and self-attested skills to speak publicly clearly rank behind politicians (see also Pedrini, 2014).

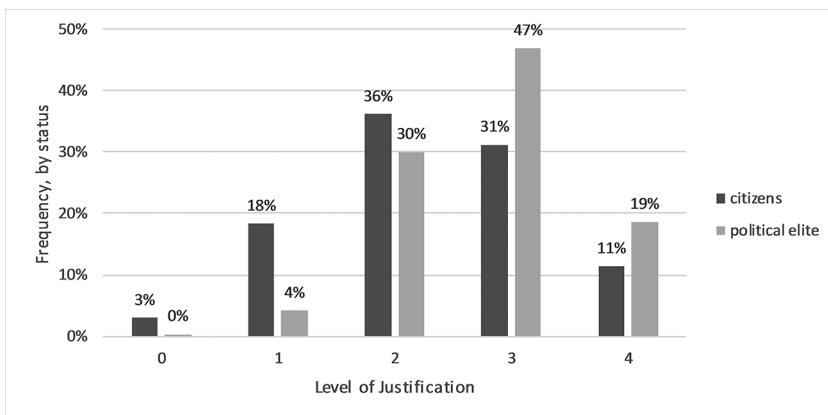
**Figure 2: Predictors of sophisticated justification rationality**



Notes: Shown are mean parameter estimates and 95 per cent-credible intervals for the fixed effects. Entries are based on a Bayesian multilevel logit model with random intercepts for agenda items and speakers (N speeches = 490, N speakers = 220, N items = 79; 50,000 iterations, burn-in: 5,000). Continuous predictors are centred at their mean. Baseline category for policy areas: state structure and voting rights.

There is, however, a wide variation in this sub-group of citizens, with one in five citizen speeches (21 per cent) not reaching at least a qualified level of justification (Figure 3). Thus, the argumentation contained in the great majority of citizen speeches is indeed accessible to the audience, allowing for the possibility for argument-based convincing. This clearly contradicts Schumpeter's assessment of incapability among *all* citizens.

**Figure 3: Frequency of speeches by level of justification and speaker status**



Notes: Shown are the frequencies of speeches in a given category of justification level (0–4) for both ordinary citizens and members of the political elite. Percentages are by total number of speeches by citizens (N = 202) or elite members (N = 290).

One might interject that, from a normative perspective, problems arise if the justification rationality of challenging demands (more frequent among citizens than among politicians) is systematically inferior to demands favouring a parliamentary proposal. However, we find demands supporting parliament to be *worse* argued for than challenging demands (Figure 2), which is again good news for direct democracy (since it lends credibility to the *Landsgemeinde* as a meaningful forum) although it potentially confirms the suspicion of mere intra-elite bargaining (if only elite members argue well in challenging parliament). This is addressed next.

### Output

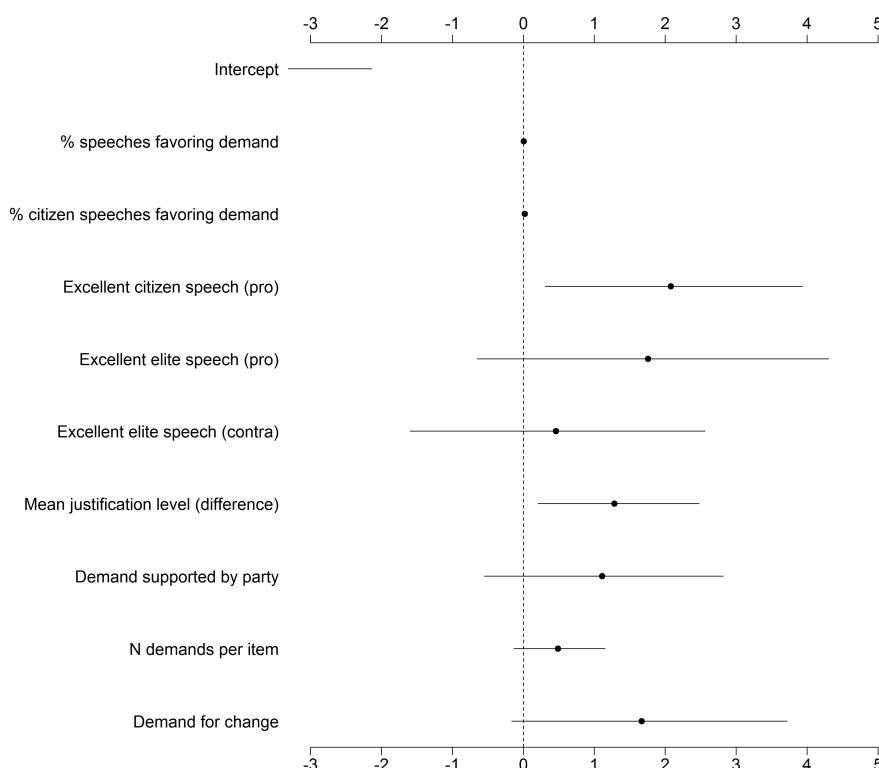
We now assess the extent to which citizen vs elite deliberation affects the success of challenging demands. The predictors displayed in Figure 4 show that deliberative quality, defined in degrees of justification rationality, can indeed make a difference. Thus, the *higher* the mean level of justification of government challengers compared to that of government supporters, the *greater* the likelihood for a challenging demand to be accepted. The importance of this finding is amplified by the fact that, with one exception, no other indicator in our model is certain to influence success.

The exception is that the existence of at least *one* excellent citizen speech, that is, a speech with sophisticated (in-depth) justification provided by a non-office-holder in favour of a challenging demand, substantially increases its chances for success. Moreover, not even a highly sophisticated elite speech *against* a challenging demand

is *per se* likely to diminish the challenger's success. By contrast, a highly sophisticated *elite* speech in favour of a challenging demand is not a certain enough predictor of its success. Since there were almost no highly sophisticated citizen speeches opposing a challenging demand, we did not account for that.

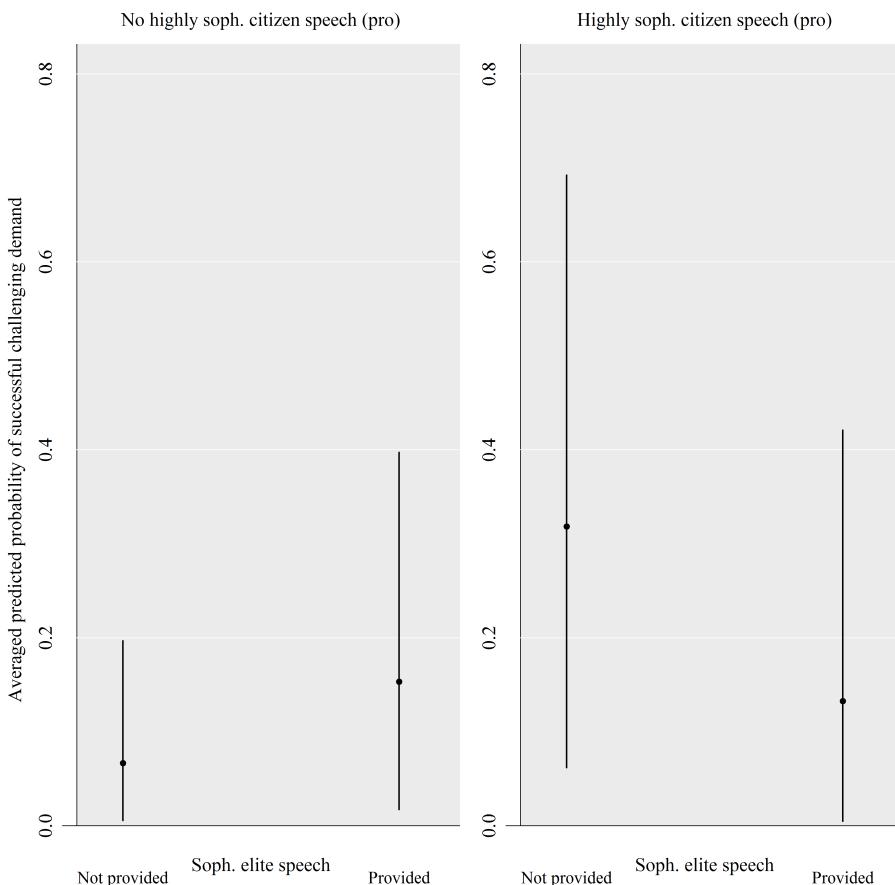
In a third and final step, however, we want to know what happens when a highly sophisticated *citizen* speech is countered by a highly sophisticated *elite* speech. Therefore, we interact excellent citizen speeches *favouring* a demand with excellent elite speeches *opposing* that same demand. The predicted probabilities, displayed on the right-hand side of Figure 5, betray our previous optimism as being too hasty: a highly sophisticated citizen speech can only make a difference if it is *not* countered by an elite speech of equally excellent quality. When unopposed at this high level, the model predicts a greater than 30 per cent chance of success for excellent citizen speeches, although the credible intervals are very wide (due not least to the scarcity of excellent citizen speeches). However, when at least one member of the elite eloquently argues *against* an excellent citizen speech, the chances of success are basically the same as when no highly sophisticated citizen speech is provided at all (around 10 per cent; see left-hand side of Figure 5).

**Figure 4: Posterior densities of main predictors on success**



Notes: Shown are mean parameter estimates and 95 per cent-credible intervals for the fixed effects. Entries are based on a Bayesian multilevel logistic regression with a random intercept at the level of *Landsgemeinde* years (N demands = 137, N years = 14; 2,000,000 iterations, burn-in 50,000). Further controls included are the policy area (state structure and voting rights; finance and economy; education, health and social policy; environment and infrastructure) and election year (full model specification available on request). Only demands challenging the parliament are included.

**Figure 5: Predicted probabilities of success for highly sophisticated speeches (provided by elite members or citizens)**



Notes: Predicted probabilities are based on the model in Figure 4 including an interaction term for excellent citizen speeches in favour and excellent elite speeches against a demand (full model specification available on request).

## Discussion and conclusion

In analysing all speeches, active participants and decisions taken at the Glarus assembly between 2000 and 2012, our findings are mixed. On the one hand, opening up the realm of political decision-making to ordinary citizens has not led to ‘mob rule’ or even the demise of democracy itself, as feared by some (cited in Barber, 1984, 6). The assembly studied here is a far cry from simply being a relic from the past. Almost half of all parliamentary proposals are contested and one in six challenging demands is supported. What is more, at least some ordinary citizens do take to the floor and are capable of arguing reasonably well (though not as well as their elected officials). And while most assembly speakers are local or cantonal office holders, non-office holders are more likely to challenge (and far less likely to support) parliamentary proposals than politicians. What is more, the deliberative spark contained in both citizen and elite speeches even seems to fly over to the electorate: Not only the *overall quality* of

rational argumentation matters, but also *a single very good citizen speech* substantially increases the chances of success when challenging the authorities. So at least some citizens do have the power to defeat parliamentary proposals, but they need to be eloquent advocates.

On the other hand, even those citizens that speak publicly are less likely to offer a sophisticated justification than the more experienced political representatives. Given that citizen speakers disproportionately often challenge parliamentary proposals, the chances for successful citizen challenges without elite support thus remain limited. Furthermore, our findings also demonstrate that the elite can contain the success of highly sophisticated citizen speeches through speeches displaying *the same* maximum degree of sophistication. In one way, this is good news for deliberative theorists, since it supports the assumption that representatives who must justify their decisions facing the people are forced to better reflect on their policy choices and argue accordingly (Parkinson, 2009; Setälä, 2006). But then again, this finding challenges the deliberative criterion of equal voice in that it privileges views of people with higher ‘capacities and skills necessary to effectively articulate and defend persuasive claims’ (Knight and Johnson, 1997, 299). ‘Elite control’ may also be enhanced by the fact that final decision-making power is in the hands of the government (whose president adjudicates close votes without any appeal possibility) and that the last speech on any disputed matter is always reserved for the responsible minister (Reinisch and Parkinson, 2007). Nevertheless, our findings show that the chances of a challenging demand to succeed do not substantially increase simply because a higher share of its supporters belongs to the political elite, nor because its supporters are more numerous than its opponents.

This concluding observation, however, comes with important caveats linked to the limitations of this study. First, by analysing speeches only, we neglect the issue of who remained silent and why. The fact that more than half of the acts are adopted tacitly might be an indicator of social pressure operating covertly. Also, the open-air nature, long duration and non-secret voting of this particular assembly might deter certain groups from participating (Stadelmann-Steffen and Dermont, 2016, 111) and/or speaking publicly. What is more, tying the vote to one particular (Sun-)day per year – a clear disadvantage compared to ballot box systems and their possibility for early/postal voting – may exclude particular groups of citizens, such as parents involved in childcare, Swiss living abroad, the elderly or those having to work even on Sundays. With more data on the socio-demographics (other than gender) and political attitudes of speakers, we would also be in a better position to assess whether claims of certain groups have in fact been raised or not. All we can tell so far is that women are far less likely to take to the stage: only one in five speakers at the *Landsgemeinde* in Glarus (2000–12) was female. This calls for more research to investigate these inequalities and assess the recipient of speeches, the audience, as well as those not even showing up, willingly or unwillingly. Ideally, further research would incorporate views and arguments offered in other spaces of the ‘deliberative system’, in order to conclude whether and to what extent various interests finally made it to the *Landsgemeinde* stage (see, for example, Ercan et al., 2017).

A second issue is that our non-experimental research design does not allow for establishing a clear causal link between well-justified arguments and their persuasive power. For example, sophisticated citizens might anticipate that their side is going to lose and, as a consequence, only low-informed citizens would take to the floor (we thank one of our reviewers for highlighting this point). Although we cannot rule out

this possibility, Blum and Köhler (2006) show that the *Landsgemeinde* of Glarus is the most important venue for opinion formation and that there exists a widespread belief that a good speech can swing the mood. Furthermore, despite the comparatively low success rates of challenging demands, a considerable and recurring number of citizens continues to voice them and they repeatedly do so at a level of justification that is not significantly lower as when arguing in favour of parliamentary proposals (results available upon request).

A further avenue of improvement lies with refined measures of deliberation, for example, by taking into account humour, storytelling, emotions or argumentative innovation (for example, Cappella et al, 2002; Dryzek, 2000; Fuji Johnson et al, 2016). One could also gather additional data on the provided speeches, such as length, accent, dialect or position in the speech queue. Connected to the former, future research should also develop a deliberative theory of preference transformation, as already stipulated by others (Gerber et al, 2014; Landwehr and Holzinger, 2010; Neblo, 2007b). An important follow-up question would then be to assess the *nature* of decisions and address another claim by the ‘alarmists’ not properly tested here: that the people can sometimes take decisions that are worse than those of their delegates (for example, Gutmann and Thompson, 2002; Rawls, 1971; but see Sulkin and Simon, 2001).

Finally, one may wonder what general lessons can be drawn from such a peculiar case as the *Landsgemeinde*, held in a tiny canton of small and prosperous Switzerland. Although singular in its design, it offers an opportunity to observe if and how lay citizens perform alongside elected officials when the entry costs are almost non-existent (anybody with the right to vote can speak) but the stakes high and the implications real. A first inference thus concerns the already mentioned gap between citizens and the elite, which on average we found to exist not only on paper, but also as regards participation and deliberative quality. Since we can safely assume that those citizens speaking at the *Landsgemeinde* are particularly interested in politics and given that office-holders in Glarus are mostly part-time politicians, the gap between ordinary citizens and professional politicians is likely to be even larger elsewhere.

Nevertheless, we also demonstrated that a mass of sometimes up to 10,000 citizens, when exposed to an argumentative exchange of high quality, can indeed take decisions in accordance with deliberative criteria. Thus, while regularity and longstanding existence certainly help in this regard, contrary to a Schumpeterian view a majority of at least passively participating ordinary citizens *does* seem to be able to follow rational argumentation when making real-world decisions. There is thus at least some evidence against the null-hypothesis of citizen incompetence in policy-making.

In that way, possible remedies for the increasing gap, real or perceived, between voters and politicians can be sketched. Obviously, creating participatory-deliberative arenas on a national scale is impossible. However, politicians should take the time and create regular venues for argumentative engagement with citizens, rather than exchanging talking points among each other only (for example, during presidential ‘debates’). Proper deliberation is both time-consuming and demanding, but if reason is to win it must first be allowed to stand against unreasonable statements.

## Acknowledgements

We thank Hans-Peter Schaub and two anonymous reviewers of *Policy & Politics* for valuable feedback on earlier versions of this article. We are also grateful to participants at a workshop in the Democratic Innovation section at the ECPR General Conference in Glasgow (2014), at the research seminars of the Institute of Political Science at the University of Bern (2014) with the Institute of Social Sciences at the University of Stuttgart (2015) and at BA seminars at the Department of Social Sciences, University of Bern (2014–16). We thank all students and scholars for their useful comments delivered at these occasions. All remaining inaccuracies are solely our fault.

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