Positive evaluation, continued funding

A mid-term evaluation of the four Centers of Excellence at Åbo Akademi, D:CE being one of them, was carried out in the autumn of 2012. The chief objective was to determine the extent of funding for 2013-2014.

D:CE submitted its report for the evaluation process in October, 2012. This detailed account (48 pages) covered the period 2008-2012 and described achievements so far as well as plans for the remaining two years. Matters such as published and planned research, dissertations and other theses, international cooperation, additional funding and academic and community services by D:CE scholars were detailed in this report.

Professor David Farrell, University College Dublin, served as external reviewer. His review was strongly positive: “This is world-class quality research, which will continue to place this Centre on the map internationally”. Professor Farrell finds the D:CE publication profile “very impressive” and the output of dissertations similarly “highly impressive”. He also gives praise for the center’s record on international cooperation and its ability to secure additional funding. His conclusion is that D:CE is “producing work of the highest quality that brings great credit to your institution”.

On the basis of this evaluation, D:CE has been granted 500,000 Euros for the final two year period.

International conference

In June 2012, a conference which gathered some 50 participants from 14 countries was organized in Åbo.

Keynote speeches were delivered by Professor John Dryzek (Australian National University) on the topic of Deliberative Capacity and by Professor Mark Warren (University of British Columbia) on Deliberative Democracy and the Corruption of Language. Moreover, papers were presented and discussed in two parallel workshops. Deliberative capacity and scaling up deliberative democracy were the themes of the workshops. Deliberative capacity implies differences between individuals and societies in being able to fulfill the normative ideas of deliberation. Scaling up, on the other hand, refers to the difficulty of institutionalizing deliberative democracy in representative government, especially when it comes to the role of deliberative mini-publics consisting of lay citizens. The presented papers included both theoretical and empirical contributions.

Experiment on enclave deliberation

Inspired by the thoughts of Cass Sunstein, the deliberative task force of the D:CE organized an experiment in the spring of 2012.

Sunstein fears an increased tendency toward deliberation between like-minded people especially on the Internet might become a threat to democracy. If no counter-arguments are presented and people only strengthen each other’s views, opinions will polarize within the group. In our case, the topic of the experiment was immigration policy and the 207 subjects were randomly allocated to liked-minded and mixed groups. The experiment was carried out in collaboration with a research project funded the Academy of Finland under the leadership of Professor Kimmo Grönlund.
Visiting scholars and new associates

The D:CE community has attracted much appreciated external interest, and we have had the pleasure of hosting several visiting scholars and new associates from various countries during recent months. We asked each of them to kindly answer the following questions:

1. Describe your background and research in a few words!
2. How long will you be with us? What made you choose our department for your stay?
3. What are your impressions so far?

Inga Saikkonen
1. My current postdoctoral research project, funded by the Academy of Finland, examines changes in political behaviour (especially electoral participation) in the post-Soviet space. My doctoral dissertation at the University of Oxford looked at subnational democratisation and the formation of ‘electoral authoritarian’ regimes, using subnational data from the Russian Federation between 1991 and 2005. Before coming to Åbo Akademi I also taught Comparative Government at University College in Oxford.
2. My current funding from the Academy of Finland is for three years (2012-2015). The ÅA Politics Department has a focus on democracy and electoral behaviour, and thus is an excellent fit with my research interests (not to mention D:CE!).
3. The department is oriented towards rigorous empirical research, and yet the atmosphere is friendly and encouraging. I’ve been particularly impressed by the insightful comments during the monthly research seminars.

Fabricio Vasselai
1. I am a PhD student at the University of São Paulo, Brazil, where I develop a research I had started while being a visiting researcher at the Spanish Juan March Foundation. My research focuses on the relationships between the spatial distribution of votes and the formation of party systems in 50 democracies. I am mainly interested in the impact that different geographical distributions of electoral preferences can have on the characteristics of party systems and on electoral outcomes.

Himmelroos summarizes his dissertation as follows: “The interest in deliberative democracy has grown exponentially in the last few decades. Although different deliberative practices have become increasingly popular as a tool for improving democracy, we still have fairly little empirical evidence of what democratic deliberation looks like in practice.

New dissertation

This thesis examines citizen deliberation in practice and sheds light on a previously understudied area of research. What does citizen deliberation entail and to what extent do ordinary citizens meet the expectations of deliberative theory? By analyzing group discussions from a deliberative forum, where ordinary citizens gathered to deliberate on development of nuclear power in Finland, the potential of deliberative democracy is assessed.

Content analysis was employed to gather data on different aspects of deliberation, allowing for extensive analysis at both the group and individual level. The study shows that the participants, through deliberation, are able to justify and further clarify their own views. The deliberative process also shows some troubling signs of inequality. Women, younger people and the less educated are systematically disadvantaged when it comes to speech activity and exercise less influence over how the discussions evolve.”
Karvonen’s research on preferential voting and on professor Anckar’s work on social heterogeneity measures. Secondly, Brazil and Finland share a preferential voting system to the national chamber, yet no comparisons have been presented so far.

3. I am delighted with the reception by the Department and very impressed with the exchange I’ve had. I have had the chance to learn more about Finnish electoral rules, discuss with scholars and colleagues about mine and their researches, and participate the Department seminar. Overall, my experience has been very productive.

Gustav Lidén
1. My general interest is in comparative politics, and I received my PhD from Mid-Sweden University in Sundsvall in May 2011. I currently have a postdoctoral position there. I am continuing my research and, in particular, studying certain characteristics of political regimes.
2. I arrived in late November and will stay until Christmas. I have some previous connections with the department and was invited by Professor Carsten Anckar for a visit as a guest researcher.
3. I am really impressed by the high standards of the seminars organised by the department, as well as the research produced by its leading scholars. My impression that political science at Åbo Akademi University represents one of the leading departments in comparative politics has been confirmed. Of course, I cannot be anything but satisfied with my stay that definitely has stimulated my own research in a really positive way.

Marlène Gerber
1. I am working on the Swiss National Science Foundation project "Potential for Deliberation among EU Citizens", managed by Professor André Bächtiger (University of Lucerne, Switzerland). In my PhD project, I analyse the deliberative behaviour of EU-citizens in a pan-European deliberative poll on immigration and climate change.
2. I will stay here from early January until the beginning of March 2013. I chose your department because within the D:CE network, you gather a lot of expertise in the field of citizen deliberation. For me, this is an excellent opportunity to gain more insights on the organization and analysis of deliberative experiments. It will also be interesting to discuss similarities and differences in findings with researchers involved in last year’s deliberation event where the discussion topic was immigration too.
3. I have only been here for a few days but so far I already had interesting talks and am looking forward to more scientific exchange.

Gustav Lidén (visiting scholar)

Marlène Gerber (visiting scholar)

Book presentations


This book is the first comparative study on citizens’ initiatives in European democracies. Citizens’ initiatives allow citizens to influence the political agenda by collecting a certain number of signatures in support of a policy proposal. Policy proposals raised in popular initiatives can either be voted on in a popular vote (full-scale initiatives) or decided at the legislature (agenda initiatives). The book explores national level initiatives in various European countries as well as the state level and regional initiatives in Germany and in Spain. The book also discusses the recently adopted European Citizens’ Initiative which the first initiative instrument at the transnational level.

As a recommendation concerning institutional design, the book suggests that both full-scale and agenda initiatives would benefit from well-established procedures of interaction between initiators and parliaments. In several cases discussed in this book, the biggest reason for the weakness of initiative institutions seems to have been the lack of political will to develop these institutions.


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Associated institutions
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DCERN
Democracy, Citizens and Elections Research Network, University of Manchester

NED
Nordic Elections and Democracy Research Consortium

Center for Citizenship and Democracy
University of Leuven

Recent publications


