

# The deliberative referendum: Learning democracy by doing

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The course "Deliberative Referendums" was a project-based University Study Course (USC), taught for the first time at Jacobs University Bremen in spring 2010. It was designed to connect democratic theory with action, enabling students to practice democracy in an innovative fashion. The course was divided into a theoretical and an empirical part. The first part consisted of regular classes and served to familiarize students with the literature on deliberative democracy and deliberative polling. In the second part of the course, students organized their own deliberative referendum on campus. The topic, mandatory student community service, was chosen by the students in consultation with the instructors and the university leadership. Students were asked to do three things: 1) to organize, design, and administer two surveys (one before, one after deliberation); 2) to organize a "Deliberation Day", including provision of relevant information, moderating, and quality control of the deliberative process; 3) to evaluate the outcomes in terms of knowledge gain and opinion change.

### The course

### Deliberation Day

For Deliberation Day, the student organizers randomly selected 20 undergraduate students to come together to deliberate. The participants were broadly representative of the Jacobs University student body. The aim of Deliberation Day was to inform participants about various aspects of community service and to allow them to deliberate about the ins and outs, the pros and cons, with experts in the field and in small groups under the supervision of trained moderators. The survey shows the participants were satisfied with the information they received and the quality of deliberation. Three-quarters agreed participation was a "valuable experience", almost all agreed such events should be organized more often, and a clear majority said this experience made them "want to become more active in student affairs at Jacobs University".

The Deliberative Referendum at Jacobs University is unique for five reasons:

1. It is the first Deliberation Day at a university;
2. It is the first Deliberation Day in Germany;
3. It is the first Deliberation Day organized by those affected by its outcome (the students);
4. It is the first Deliberation Day in a population of such a small size;
5. It is the first Deliberation Day that is combined with a referendum.

### Results

**Knowledge gain:** After Deliberation Day, students felt more confident they knew enough about community service (see figure 1). The number of correctly answered factual questions increased.

**Opinion change:** General support for community service grew (see table 1), especially among those participants who had no prior experience with community service.

**Support for community service:** After Deliberation Day, all 20 participants were in favor of community service. Nine out of 20 even favored mandatory community service and those who remained opposed were less negative afterwards.

We are still analyzing the data and preparing the final report. Yet, the picture is clear. There is broad support among the students for some form of community service, and this support increased significantly through the deliberative process.

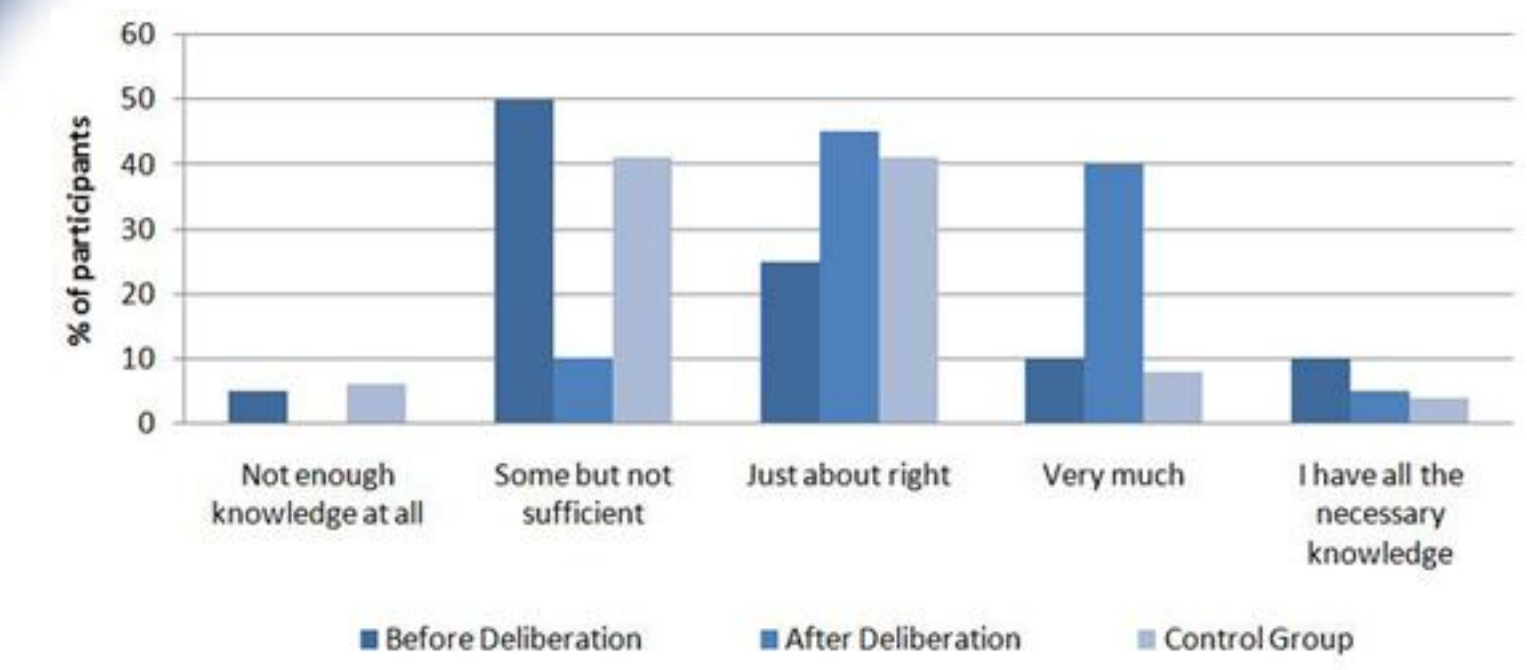


Figure 1: Self-reported knowledge level in %

Questions	Mean before deliberation	Mean after deliberation	Mean control group
In general to what extent are you in favour of community service? (1=Not at all; 2=Somewhat not in favour; 3=Neither in favour, nor against; 4=Somewhat in favour; 5=Very much in favour)	3.90	4.40*	4.00
Would you like to be involved in community service during your time at Jacobs University? (1=Not at all; 2=Maybe not; 3=I don't know; 4=Maybe yes; 5=Definitely yes)	3.75	4.20	3.73
Do you think mandatory community service could have a positive effect on you? (1=Not at all; 2=Maybe not; 3=I don't know; 4=Maybe yes; 5=Definitely yes)	3.75**	4.35**	3.47

\* statistically significant on 10% level

\*\* statistically significant on 5% level

Table 1: Attitudes towards community service in general

### Main pedagogical innovation

The main pedagogical innovation of the USC Deliberative Referendums is its connection between research, theory, and practice. It shows how political theory, research methods, and civic engagement can be fruitfully combined. The novel course format allowed students to practice *and* study democracy at the same time. Such a combination of theory and practice is vital for creating effecting democratic citizens, and yet is rarely found in universities today.

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