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Field Code Changed

## Putting faith in randomness and personal contact

In this conversation, Dan Durrant invites Linus Strothman to explain the power of combining random selection and personal outreach in recruiting participants for deliberative minipublics.

By Linus Strothman and Dan Durrant | Apr 26, 2022



**Dan:** For readers who don't speak German, can you explain what the Aufsuchendes Losverfahren approach is?

**Linus:** It doesn't translate very well because it literally means 'outreach lot selection process' but what I have developed is a process of random selection that places a strong emphasis on personal outreach to the people who have been selected. I start with random selection as, I believe, it gives you the best and most diverse group you can get. The next step is to put a lot of effort into

getting the selected people to attend. This involves going to people's homes, knocking on their door, talking to them and finding out what they need to participate.

**Dan:** It was the personal outreach side of it that really impressed me at first. It was so different to the approach I had seen as part of some [research](#) I did into how a Citizen's Assembly had been used to address questions of transport infrastructure in Cambridge, UK. What took me a while to understand was how this works alongside random sampling. I realised you meant something different by 'diversity.' I had always seen the aim of diversity achieved by having a range of different social groups represented as would be normal in random, stratified sampling normally used for a minipublic. Particularly because in the UK, our approach to equal opportunities is to collect data on ethnicity to see whether or not certain groups are systematically excluded. I realised you don't do this in Germany and the way you organise deliberative forums is a bit different.

**Linus:** The problem I have with turning society into categories, and then saying diversity is 'having one from each group,' is that you reduce people to the demographic that they are part of. You could always find more demographic categories and so there is a lot of input into the sortition process that comes from deciding which categories to use. I think that injects a lot of bias into the process. Whereas the way I have been doing it, just starting with addresses selected at random by a computer doesn't have that bias. Generally, not many people will reply but if you only have a small percentage who do actually respond who then make up the group you select from, you have another big problem. Those people are from that section of the population who are willing to respond to a letter from the local council inviting them to take part in a deliberative process. So, you could divide society along the lines of willingness to participate in deliberative forums with that small group who actually respond not being particularly representative.

You are right about the difference in demographic data collection. But it is also important to look at this another way. Say you have a large ethnic minority in your area, say 20 percent. If you find that of your respondents only one or two percent are from this group, whereas the response rate for the population as a whole is higher, something interesting happens. If you wanted a sample of 100, you would need 20 people from this ethnic group. If you have written to 3,000 people and only got 15 responses from members of this

group, these respondents would all be in the sample. Because the response rate for this group is so low, you could then argue that by responding, these 15 people are both atypical of their own group and of the population as a whole.

**Dan:** So, would you say that the legitimacy of this approach and its ability to avoid this type of problem comes from the theoretical possibility that anyone could participate because anyone could be randomly selected?

**Linus:** Definitely, everyone needs to have the same chance to participate which is true if you only send out letters—you could say they got the chance. But I think if we stop there, we have two big problems. First, these are very low response rates—between three and ten percent—and that is a general problem for the legitimacy of deliberative forums. Second, which is almost always more of a problem, you get this strong bias towards people who are willing to participate in the random group. Certainly, I have found that with personal outreach, we can almost double the response rate but that in itself isn't enough if you are still only getting the same type of people.

**Dan:** I noticed that you don't pay people. In the UK, it is often seen as an important incentive but also a way to bring in people who are excluded because of practical issues like the need to work or have someone look after their children. The downside is that it can make organising deliberative forums very expensive. If you argue that randomness creates a theoretical possibility, then don't you need further steps to ensure people selected are able to participate?

**Linus:** Usually we don't have the resources to pay people but I would say any incentive is a good incentive. Childcare is a good example. We are able to provide it but when I go door-to-door, people are often reluctant to take up the offer. However, if you want to also broaden the range of participants as well as increase numbers you need to address the basic problem that many people don't think their input is sufficiently valuable. I can give them this confidence when I talk to them and say, for example, 'It's really important that we have people like you with small kids contributing your perspective to this process.'

**Dan:** Isn't some of this down to your personality but also your person? For some groups, the request from a young, middle-aged white guy who works for the local authority may be perceived differently to a request from someone else. How do you deal with that?

## **You need the belief that the person behind that door could be the most valuable participant and could change the outcome dramatically.**

**Linus:** In an ideal world, we would have democratic structures that allow us to work with people from the local community who can then also talk to the people selected. Along with colleagues at Es geht LOS, I am still working on developing the approach but what I would like to achieve is getting the response rate higher. How you organise that in different communities might be different.

**Dan:** Don't people find it intrusive?

**Linus:** So far, we haven't found any problems with this approach in Germany. But I think the most important thing is that when you go to the door, you need the belief that the person behind that door could be the most valuable participant and could change the outcome dramatically. As long as you go into the conversation with that intention, I find it is often much more important than what you look like.

**Dan:** Do you think that there is also a question of how you manage the process, for example, if people—who wouldn't normally participate in politics—attend and end up sitting on a table with everybody else who is white, middle class and speaks in a certain way, it then puts greater onus on the facilitators to ensure that people don't feel excluded by the nature of the discussion?

**Linus:** Yes, definitely. That's why I think it's really important that when you reach out to people, what you experience there becomes part of the planning process for the facilitation. If, after half an hour of speaking to someone you get them to realise 'maybe my input is of value,' but you know it took you half an hour to get to that point, then you know that it is really important that when they actually attend, we don't forget that. It is important to see the discussion at the doorstep as part of the facilitation process and as part of a preparation to ensure that everyone can participate in the way that works best for them.

If I go to someone's door and the person tells me that 'I will come but I need support to make it happen,' it would be horrible not to try and facilitate that, for example, with translators or other forms of support. In one instance, a 16-year-old girl was selected but didn't reply. After several reminders and phone calls, her mother finally called me back to excuse her daughter. She said her daughter

has Down Syndrome and would not be able to participate in the forum we were organising. When I asked why, it was because her daughter would find the social setup of the workshop stressful and that she would need more time, compared to others, to understand complex questions. We then adapted the process a little. We initially did a preparation talk with her mother in my office but then she attended the forum on her own. Although she only stayed for an hour, she relayed the input she wanted to give. I think it is really important that before we rule somebody out, we should at least think about how we can help them to participate on their own terms.

**Dan:** What seems to be really interesting about this process is that in focusing on the response rate and bringing in as many and as wide a range of people as possible, you are much more in line with the part of deliberative democratic theory that argues taking part in political deliberation re-engages people with politics.

**I'm not against stratification; I'm against accepting low response rates.**

**Linus:** If people would think more about what it means to have a response rate of five to ten percent, they would not accept these deliberative councils anymore. I think there is a danger there. This is why I don't want to press this too much, but I think this is where we really have to worry. I'm not against stratification; I'm against accepting low response rates. In my opinion, if we get the response rate up, I'm fine with people saying that we have here a question where categories would be useful: if, say, it is important that we have participants from every district within an area. But I think there needs to be a good reason in choosing your categories. For example, I don't think it's necessary to control for gender as actually with a random sample you can be pretty sure male and female participants are quite evenly balanced. In other cases where you don't have that, then you certainly do need stratification to make sure certain criteria are met in order to ensure certain perspectives or groups are included in the process because they are particularly important to the question being discussed.

**Dan:** Would you say that it is the personal outreach that helps push up the response rates but that random, as opposed to stratified, sampling helps to widen the range of participants?

**Linus:** It's not quite that simple but certainly the more categories you introduce, the smaller group of respondents you have to choose from. We had a chance to compare the two approaches in a recent project with Es gehts LOS. In one Wahlkreisrat, the member of parliament was interested in comparing the usual process of stratified sampling based on demographic categories and the randomised sampling process we use. He was interested in seeing whether there was a difference between the two approaches and whether you get a different group by making direct contact with people in their homes.

**Dan:** So, you got a chance to do a kind of natural experiment.

**Linus:** Yes, what we found was that the random process matched the general demographic for the district but when we looked at levels of political activity and voting in the stratified group, there was a much higher level of political engagement. For example, 96 percent had voted in the last election; by comparison, this indicator was only 70 percent for the random group, much closer to the turnout for that district in the last election.

### **So, for me the big question is, who gets to benefit from deliberation?**

**Dan:** So, the group selected by stratified sampling had a bias towards people who were more politically active?

**Linus:** Yes, but what was even more important was that across the two groups, we found that the impact it had on people was pretty much the same. For both groups, the same number of people who reported taking part in a deliberative forum had increased their trust in politicians, in the opinions of others or the value they had placed on open deliberation and democratic processes. But the difference is that if you achieve that in a group that is not so politically engaged compared to people who are already politically engaged, the impact is greater.

I would say anyone who participates in a deliberative exercise that is well organised will gain something from it. But as a society, I think it is more important that the benefit is felt by people who are less politically engaged, have less trust and are not voting or participating anymore. So, for me the big question is, who gets to benefit from deliberation? I think the future is about finding the right combination of getting the response rate up and allowing randomness as large an impact as possible.

**Dan:** That seems to be a good place to leave what is still an ongoing discussion. There is a lot more we could talk about, but one final thing: I believe you have a book out.

**Linus:** Yes, it's a project with colleagues from Es gehts LOS. It's mostly practical advice on things like facilitation methods aimed at people interested in the topic and who want to implement it at the local level. It also deals with what it means to be representative and crucially why it is so important to reach out to people. It is available as an Ebook but, unfortunately, only in German. It's called '[Wir holen euch ab!](#)' ('We'll pick you up!') as kind of a response to the saying: 'Those who turn up are the right ones.' We can't just assume that, so we need to actively bring more people into deliberative processes.

#### **About the Contributors**



Linus Strothman is a practitioner in the field of public participation and has been developing the *Aufsuchendes Losverfahren* approach at the local level for two German city councils. He is also a member of the think tank Es geht LOS whose main objective is to introduce more and better random selection processes into the German political landscape—this includes everything from campaigning for a National Bürgerrat (a fourth, deliberative arm of government), a Wahlkreisrat (electoral district deliberative forum) for every constituency in Germany and the use of sortition and deliberation more widely in government, companies and civil society organisations..



Dan Durrant is a lecturer in infrastructure planning at UCL's Bartlett School of Planning and Humboldt Foundation Fellow at Humboldt University's Integrative Research Institute on Transformations of Human-Environment Systems (IRI THESys). His research is into large, controversial infrastructure projects. He is also interested in deliberative democracy as a means of addressing the kind of issues these projects generate.