Australian Climate Action Groups in the deliberative system

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A systemic approach to deliberative democracy de-emphasises the role of discrete deliberative experiments involving minipublics. Instead, this systemic perspective focuses attention on the quality of deliberation achieved throughout distributed governance systems. It opens up the possibility that institutions that do not appear deliberative in isolation may have a positive impact on deliberation at a system scale. We draw on this systemic perspective to assess the role of climate action groups (CAGs) within Australia’s deliberative system on climate change response. These self-organised, voluntary groups, made up of like-minded people with a shared concern about climate change, do not meet traditional criteria for advancing deliberation. Unrepresentative and lacking discursive diversity they nevertheless advanced the quality of public deliberation by bringing new voices and preferences into public deliberation, holding decision-makers accountable and acting as trusted information sources for at least some citizens. From a deliberative systems perspective, self-organised, unrepresentative, but persistent groups such as CAGs may offer more fruitful sites for increasing public deliberation on climate change than temporary minipublics.

Keywords: deliberative democracy; deliberative system; climate action groups; climate governance.

# Introduction

Climate change poses an unprecedented challenge to local, national and global governance systems (Biermann 2007, Lidskog and Elander 2010, Dryzek and Stevenson 2011). It is a truly global problem, requiring cooperative global responses, and its impacts are often distant in time and space from the individuals and organisations causing those impacts. An effective response to climate change requires that individuals and groups act in ways that are not necessarily in their short-term self-interest in order to safeguard the interests of people elsewhere, future generations and natural ecosystems. So far, existing governance systems have not proven up to the challenge of facilitating an effective global response to this wicked (Rittel and Webber 1973) or “super wicked” (Levin *et al.* 2012) problem.

While the failures to date have led some to question whether democracy is a suitable governance system for responding to climate change (Shearman and Smith 2007), others argue that we can meet challenges like climate change by deepening and institutionalising democratic innovations that increase citizen participation in decision-making (Smith 2009, Dryzek and Stevenson 2011). Prominent among proposed innovations is a turn to deliberative forms of democracy. Deliberative democracy puts ‘communication and reflection at the center of democracy’ so that democracy ‘is not just about the making of decisions through the aggregation of preferences’ but ‘also about processes of judgment and preference formation and transformation within informed, respectful, and competent dialogue’ (Dryzek 2010, p. 3). Thus deliberative democracy puts talking, rather than voting, at the heart of democracy (Chambers 2003). Interest in deliberative democracy has risen, in part, as a response to citizens’ decreased trust in politicians and political institutions, which manifests as increased cynicism, disenfranchisement and decreased participation in elections within Western democracies (Rosenberg 2007).

Since its emergence in the 1990s, deliberative democracy has developed through some recognisable stages. Early work was *normative*, outlining reasons for incorporating deliberation into democratic governance systems. Deliberative democracy was positioned as a possible response to the distrust of existing democratic institutions, and a way of achieving more widespread public participation in decision-making (Fung 2003, Mackenzie and Warren 2012). Subsequent *empirical* work experimented with facilitating deliberation in minipublics and observing the outcomes. A minipublic is ‘a deliberative forum typically consisting of 20-500 participants, focused on a particular issue, selected and convened for a period of time sufficient for participants to form considered opinions and judgements’ (Mackenzie and Warren 2012, p. 95). Deliberative forums include citizen juries, deliberative polls, consensus conferences and citizen assemblies (Fung 2003, Goodin and Dryzek 2006, Mackenzie and Warren 2012). These temporary deliberative experiments have revealed a great deal about how citizens deliberate and what conditions can facilitate deliberation (Niemeyer 2011, Dryzek and Lo 2015). However, they often lack influence and authority, which means minipublic recommendations are too rarely implemented. Recognising the limitations of discrete deliberative experiments such as minipublics, democratic theorists recently developed a *systemic* view of deliberative democracy in which the goal is to advance the deliberative capacity of entire governance systems (Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012, Stevenson and Dryzek 2014).

Dryzek (2010) argues that a system has deliberative capacity to the extent that it can accommodate deliberation that is *authentic*, *inclusive* and *consequential*. Deliberation is authentic if it is ‘able to induce reflection upon preferences in noncoercive fashion and involve communicating in terms that those who do not share one’s point of view can find meaningful and accept’ (Dryzek 2010, p. 10). It is inclusive when it is ‘representative of the affected population and their diverse discourses and provide[s] equal opportunity for all to participate’ (Riedy and Herriman 2011, p. 6). It is consequential when it has ‘the communicative power to make a difference, whether by influencing policy and decision-making or facilitating broader sociocultural change (e.g. new discourses or networks)’ (Riedy and Herriman 2011, p. 7).

A systemic view of deliberative democracy opens up fascinating new questions. First, it draws attention to the possibility that a minipublic, despite achieving authentic deliberation within its boundaries, may not have a positive impact on deliberation in the broader system. For example, decision-makers and other key system participants may see the minipublic as lacking legitimacy and choose to ignore it. Goodin and Dryzek (2006) identify numerous ways in which minipublics may fall short of achieving macro-political uptake. Minipublics might also reduce net deliberation by displacing other useful deliberative institutions, such as social movements or partisan bodies (Mansbridge *et al.* 2012).While these are not new observations, a systemic view brings questions about the relationship of the minipublic to broader governance systems to the fore.

Second, and crucially, a systemic view of deliberative democracy implies that institutions that would not traditionally be seen as deliberative can nevertheless advance deliberation in a governance system. As Mansbridge et al. (2012, p. 3) put it:

Two venues, both with deliberative deficiencies, can each make up for the deficiencies of the other. Thus an institution that looks deliberatively defective when considered only on its own can look beneficial in a systemic perspective.

Thus, existing or emergent institutions that do not have deliberation as their primary goal may in fact have a positive impact on deliberation within a governance system. For example, the actions of lobbyists and advocacy groups can stimulate societal deliberation on issues that would not otherwise be deliberated at all. These groups may be unrepresentative, partisan, authoritarian, even lacking integrity, yet their existence could have a net positive impact on societal deliberation.

We pursue this line of inquiry with respect to one particular grassroots political innovation that emerged over the past decade in Australia (and elsewhere) – Climate Action Groups (CAGs). Many CAGs emerged across Australia from around 2006 to advocate for stronger political action on climate change. These self-organised, voluntary groups, made up of like-minded people with a shared concern about climate change, do not meet the above criteria for deliberativeness when considered in isolation. Deliberation within CAGs is rarely *authentic* because members shared many views, meaning that they were unlikely during group meetings to come across different views that might lead them to reflect on their preferences. The groups are not *inclusive* as they were self-selected, self-facilitated and unrepresentative. CAGs can point to *consequences* from their involvement in climate policy, but those consequences fall well short of their objectives. Our objective here is to look beyond the boundaries of each CAG to examine their role in deliberation on climate change response in the Australian political system.

The next section provides further details on the deliberative system perspective and how we apply it, focusing particularly on the analytical elements and normative functions of deliberative systems. We then explore the position of CAGs in a deliberative system for responding to climate change, and assess the contributions of CAGs to achieving the normative functions of this deliberative system. Finally, we discuss implications for the design of CAGs and minipublics and propose additional avenues for enhancing climate change deliberation in the Australian political system.

# The systemic approach to deliberative democracy

Mansbridge (1999) introduced the idea of a deliberative system that stretches beyond any single deliberative event and has recently developed this idea further with several colleagues (Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012). Mansbridge et al. (2012, p. 4) provide the following definitions:

A *system* here means a set of distinguishable, differentiated, but to some degree interdependent parts, often with distributed functions and a division of labour, connected in such a way as to form a complex whole.

A *deliberative* system is one that encompasses a talk-based approach to political conflict and problem-solving – through arguing, demonstrating, expressing, and persuading. In a good deliberative system, persuasion that raises relevant considerations should replace suppression, oppression, and thoughtless neglect. Normatively, a systemic approach means that the system should be judged as a whole in addition to the parts being judged independently.

Mansbridge et al. (2012, p. 7) see deliberative systems as including ‘all governmental and non-governmental institutions, including governance networks and the informal friendship networks that link individuals and groups discursively on matters of common concern’. The system boundary may be defined institutionally, or based on the issue of interest, but it includes societal decisions as well as state decisions. This does not mean that all talk is included. Instead, discussions are included if they ‘involve matters of common concern and have a practical orientation’ (Mansbridge *et al.* 2012, p. 8).

Building on Dryzek (2010), Stevenson and Dryzek (2014) make a valuable contribution by proposing a generally applicable scheme for analysing deliberative systems. Their scheme is outlined below with some initial comments on the elements of a deliberative system that are relevant to CAGs:

* *Private sphere*, which is the realm of the conversations or ‘everyday talk’ (Mansbridge 1999) that occur in the household, amongst friends or in workplaces (Stevenson and Dryzek 2014). Members of CAGs are distinguished by the fact that they choose to group together and take their private sphere deliberations into public space.
* *Public space*, ideally allowing free face-to-face or virtual communication with few barriers or legal restrictions on what can be said. Public space may contain a gamut of public and private, formal and informal actors, including: ‘journalists, bloggers, social movements, activists and advocates for different causes, politicians, public relations professionals, corporate spokespersons, and citizens’ (Stevenson and Dryzek 2014, p. 28). This is the space in which CAGs as collectives have emerged and developed.
* *Empowered space,* ‘home to deliberation among actors in institutions clearly producing collective decisions’ (Dryzek 2010, p. 11) and exercising some public authority (Stevenson and Dryzek 2014).These institutions can be formal or informal and include legislatures, cabinets, courts, international negotiations or informal governance networks. For many CAGs, a key objective is to influence empowered space to take stronger action on climate change.
* *Transmission* refers to ‘some means through which deliberation in public space can influence that in empowered space’ (Dryzek 2010, p. 11). Transmission can occur through advocacy, the provision of information, criticism, questioning, personal example, support or other means. Later, we will examine how CAGs have pursued transmission.
* *Accountability,* whereby empowered space answers to, or is responsible to, public space (Stevenson and Dryzek 2014). Elections are one form of accountability and others can occur through public consultation processes or simply giving a public account that justifies decisions. By focusing attention on the climate change issue and the limitations of political responses, many CAGs see at least part of their role as holding those in empowered space accountable.
* *Meta-deliberation,* ‘or deliberation about how the deliberative system itself should be organized’ (Dryzek 2010, p. 12). Dryzek argues that a healthy deliberative system should have the capacity for self-examination and potentially self-transformation.
* *Decisiveness* captures the idea that a functioning deliberative system should be able to make collective decisions that are responsive to the other five elements.

The analytical approach proposed by Stevenson and Drzyek (2014) is helpful for identifying the component parts of a deliberative system and where a particular innovation, such as a CAG, fits within such a system. Below, we will apply this schema to develop a more detailed description of the role of CAGs within a deliberative system.

Mansbridge et al. (2012, p. 10) develop a complementary framework that identifies three normative functions of a deliberative system. The *epistemic* function of a deliberative system is ‘to produce preferences, opinions and decisions that are appropriately informed by facts and logic and are the outcome of substantive and meaningful consideration of relevant reasons’ (Mansbridge *et al.* 2012, p. 10). This means that a healthy deliberative system should ensure all relevant considerations are brought forth and considered in some way. The *ethical* function of a deliberative system is ‘to promote mutual respect among citizens’ (Mansbridge *et al.* 2012, p. 11), which keeps the system running and is a good in itself. Finally, the *democratic* function of a deliberative system is ‘to promote an inclusive political process on terms of equality’ (Mansbridge *et al.* 2012, p. 11). This means not just avoiding systematic exclusion of citizens from deliberation but actively facilitating inclusion. Below, we consider whether Australian CAGs contribute positively to these three functions, and how they could better contribute in the future.

# Methods

We draw primarily on focus group research with eight Australian CAGs from two Australian states (Victoria and New South Wales). The CAGs invited to participate included urban, regional and rural groups, and groups taking diverse types of voluntary action (Kent 2012). The eight focus groups, held between November 2009 and May 2010, ran for 2-2.5 hours each and included between four and seven participants, drawn from a single CAG. Facilitated by one of the authors, focus groups were scheduled to take place during a normal CAG meeting to minimise disruption to normal meeting practices.

40 adults (20 women, 20 men) participated across the eight groups. The average age of participants was 53 years (with a range of 20 to 75 years). Each focus group was conducted to a series of focus questions, digitally recorded and transcribed. Transcripts from each group were coded against a combination of theoretical and emergent themes.

In addition to the focus group discussions, we draw on personal observations of CAG member participation in climate movement events, including the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen (2009), two Australian Climate Camps (2009 and 2010) and two Australian Climate Summits (2010 and 2011).

# CAGs in the deliberative system of climate change response

Australian CAGs are constituted by a shared concern about the issue of climate change, so an issue-based definition of the deliberative system in which CAGs act is appropriate. CAGs see their role as influencing the societal response to climate change, through diverse mechanisms and at multiple scales. Thus it is the deliberative system of climate change response that is of interest when assessing the role of CAGs. Below, we examine the position of CAGs within such a system, drawing on the system elements identified by Stevenson and Dryzek (2014).

In the *private sphere*, CAG members actively engage in ‘everyday talk’ on climate change with their families, friends, workmates and acquaintances. Many also take significant steps to align their personal lifestyles with their climate activism. The reported changes in lifestyle practices undertaken by CAG members were often substantial, and included taking up cycling rather than using a car, and giving up flying. These actions go beyond incremental changes in lifestyle and may indicate a more directly political counter to dominant cultural norms. Certainly, CAG members demonstrated that they felt individual agency to act on climate change within their private sphere.

An important progression for members of CAGs was to take these private sphere concerns and motivations around climate change into *public space*. Essentially, the group provided a facilitating mechanism for this move from the private sphere to the public sphere. The CAGs consisted of like-minded people, mostly middle class, highly educated, often free from immediate family responsibilities and with higher levels of risk perception regarding climate change. Becoming part of a group offered individual participants a supportive, cohesive environment where trust could flourish, confidence could build and learning was facilitated. CAG members indicated that their individual agency was enhanced by their participation in the group, enabling the development of collective agency and bolstering individual members’ confidence around their voluntary actions. CAG members acted as political agents and in the process of group dialogue and deliberation, they practiced democracy:

I've become more political I think. I'd written letters to politicians…before but…I'm not naturally…a particularly political person…and I suppose being involved in [CAG] has…convinced me that more of that is necessary and more people have to get involved…even if initially it’s not something that they are particularly comfortable with…to act in an overtly political way (Polly, 25, VIC4).[[1]](#footnote-1)

Without the structure and support provided by CAGs, many actors that had found individual agency in the private sphere would have found it difficult to take their concerns out into the public sphere. CAGs provided a valuable mechanism for private talk to become public deliberation. Group support helped individuals to express their private concerns about climate change in public settings, bringing new voices into public space.

In coming together within their community-based collectives to focus on voluntary action on climate change, CAGs played a distinct role in Australian climate politics. While they certainly sought to influence decisions made in *empowered space*, they also saw a need to influence the quality of deliberation in *public space*:

You've got to get down to the people (Livia, 61, VIC1).

You do, and it’s always been that way…The people have to speak (Raelene, 42, VIC1).

I think we see ourselves as having to influence the politicians or at least trying to influence the politicians. They need to hear from us. They need to hear voices because if we're all quiet they won’t take any notice. So we'd like to do both: get under the skin of the politicians and get the public onside (Bernadette, 72, VIC3).

In seeking to influence decisions made in empowered space, CAGs are aligned with many of the environmental NGOs (eNGOs) and other groups that are active political advocates on climate change response. Although many CAG members expressed cynicism about the likelihood that politicians and other decision-makers would enact strong responses to climate change, they displayed, for the most part, an essential faith in the political system. CAGs do not seek overtly to overthrow the state, nor are they proposing a radical reorientation of society. Through political advocacy, they directed their efforts towards influencing empowered space to take stronger action while leaving basic capitalist structures untouched:

It's gotta come from the government, it’s gotta come from above…this is an emergency and…that's what our job is to try and open the government's eyes and ears and minds to what the people are saying: this is an emergency, get on with it (Bernadette, 72, VIC3).

I'm trying to influence the political masters…by showing that there is a consensus for action and they needn't be scared, they'd be voted in if they act on the environment and they'd be voted out if they don't. So it's a whole chain of people, you've got to influence the local community but…the end goal is to get serious commitment, political action which means building big infrastructure and changing laws…and regulations and transport systems and everything else to make sustainability possible (Wayne, 68, NSW4).

However, many CAGs expressed frustration that the public space was failing to put sufficient pressure on empowered space to take strong climate action. This led many CAGs to focus on influencing the quality of deliberation and debate in public space, alongside their efforts to directly influence empowered space. CAGs tend to hold politically progressive positions and display more radical policy orientations than most eNGOs. For example, the Climate Emergency Network, to which many CAGs are aligned, seeks to return atmospheric greenhouse gases to pre-industrial levels, which is significantly more radical than targets proposed by other actors in the deliberative system. In taking up these more radical political positions, CAGs position themselves as ‘other’ or ‘alternative’ to mainstream eNGO actors. From this position, they can push more conservative groups within the climate action movement to raise their ambition. While some eNGOs adopt pragmatic stances as a strategy to achieve greater influence with the state, CAGs are relatively free to stay true to their interpretation of climate science and ensure that more radical stances are aired in public space.

Stevenson and Dryzek (2014, p. 28) define *transmission* between public and empowered space as involving ‘argument, the provision of information, personal example, rhetoric and performance’ as well as more subtle cultural changes such as the gradual development and infiltration of public opinion through social movements into cultural and political norms. CAGs were engaged in a wide range of transmission activities including direct action, civil disobedience, lobbying politicians, writing letters, holding street stalls and public meetings, blogging and other social media. For example:

Having direct appeals to politicians ourselves like the one standing outside our local member’s office every Wednesday evening and waving…no coal power signs so that's a direct trying to upset him but also you’re trying to influence lots of other people who will perhaps take action themselves (Kirsten, 62, VIC4).

We have focused some…action on our local MP, federal MP so we've been to see her a few times and we write to her (Jacob, 53, NSW3).

People who are in business, big business who have got a lot of clout because of the resources they control, the money that they have, they're the people I want to target (Jackie, 39, NSW4).

When I first got involved in the group I started to be more politically active. I started to go to protests and meetings, and sit-ins and things which I’ve never done before…I think now when people say, hey let’s go chain ourselves to something I’m much more likely to go ‘Yeah, OK, why not?’ (Linda, 27, NSW2).

CAGs see themselves as having an important *accountability* role, keeping governments and politicians honest by maintaining climate change in the public view and on the table:

So, the politicians can't lie to us as easily now…[T]here is nothing like public opinion to make politicians think about what they're going to say and it all feeds back into the world stage (Joan, 62, NSW1).

This quotation was typical of many CAGs, which saw their role as ensuring that governments remain accountable, transparent and authentic to their citizens (Dryzek 2009). We suggest this is not an agenda of radicalism that seeks to create wholesale social change. Rather, CAGs are operating here as cosmopolitan agents in order to legitimise state power, with the hope that in turn the state will bring about a social ‘good’ (Archibugi and Held 2011), in this case, a concerted effort to mitigate against dangerous climate change. CAGs want to ensure that existing political institutions respond to the legitimate concerns they raise. Bethany (20, VIC4) expresses this well:

We have legitimacy. This is a science based issue so we are trying to, using the science that we have available and that is available…we're not just raving lunatics with our own agenda, trying to force other people to change because we believe that is the way it should be.

As one small part of the deliberative system, CAGs can only play a small role in *meta-deliberation* on the system. Nevertheless, some CAG participants did reflect on the way that decisions about climate change are made and the role of individuals in that process:

I think…if you are going to give up your time and energy and money…that in itself…reflects…a lack of faith in the political process itself…[O]therwise, [if] you felt confidence that they would be able to deal with it, why would you bother? But there's no possible way at the federal or state level, I can’t for the life of me see either major party doing anything to take action on climate change and therefore the logical conclusion is that you have to do something yourself (Polly, 25, VIC4).

But I really have a strong sense that politically we are still being ruled by a minority elite in the world through our current western economic system which I don't believe is ultimately sustainable…And so my view is that we've actually got to generate people movements…but I don’t think that we're gunna actually bring about the change without a spirituality that frees people (James, 67, NSW1).

To the extent that these reflections move out into public space and inform public deliberation, CAGs can play a role in supporting broader meta-deliberation.

Finally, the contribution of CAGs towards the overall *decisiveness* of the deliberative system is unclear. Although public concern about climate change is consistently high in Australia (Leviston *et al.* 2014), deliberation on how to respond is yet to deliver a clear and decisive outcome. Political positions and policies continue to shift; the legislation of carbon pricing by Julia Gillard’s Labor government in 2011 and its subsequent repeal by Tony Abbott’s Liberal-National coalition government in 2014 is just one example of the political contestation on climate change in Australia. In this unpredictable policy environment, there is no clear evidence that CAGs either help or hinder decisiveness in the deliberative system.

The above analysis indicates that CAGs occupy an interesting position within the deliberative system on climate change response. They provide an important mechanism for people to move from the private sphere into public space, thereby bringing new voices and preferences into public deliberation. They seek to influence the quality of deliberation in public space and to hold empowered space accountable for decisions on how to respond to climate change. To further characterize the role of CAGs in the deliberative system, we now turn to the contribution that CAGs make to the normative functions of a deliberative system.

# The functions of CAGs in a deliberative system

As noted earlier, Mansbridge et al. (2012, p. 10) identify three functions of a deliberative system: epistemic; ethical; and democratic functions. In this section, we examine the contribution of Australian CAGs to achieving these functions in the deliberative system on climate change response.

## Epistemic function

As discussed earlier, the epistemic function of a deliberative system is ‘to produce preferences, opinions, and decisions that are appropriately informed by facts and logic and are the outcome of substantive and meaningful consideration of relevant reasons’ (Mansbridge *et al.* 2012, pp. 10-11). CAGs make two important contributions to the epistemic function of the deliberative system for climate change response. Firstly, CAG members are characteristically well educated and many of the focus group participants held formal qualifications in science and related disciplines, such as engineering, geography and agriculture. In keeping with their level of education, CAG members demonstrated a high degree of knowledge and understanding of the causes and consequences of climate change and displayed great confidence in the science of climate change:

The thing is, if you look at the Goddard Institute of NASA, look at the data coming through, and there's no argument the data's there. So people need to look at the data (Jeffrey, 64, VIC3).

I went to the climate summit at the beginning of last year and heard David Spratt who was talking about tipping points and I’d never really got my head around tipping points before and what that actually meant, like if we hit those points…there was no way we could return from that, and that’s when…my personal motivation went to a whole new level (Lenore, 28, NSW2).

CAG members can therefore be differentiated from the general public based on their ability to understand the implications of scientifically constructed climate change knowledge. As O’Brien (2010, p. 69) points out:

climate change is a cognitively complex issue: it is a “big picture” problem, and to understand its full implications a worldcentric perspective is required as well as an ability to handle both complexity and paradox.

Few people are informed of the details of climate science, so CAG members take on an important function by becoming informed. CAG members are cognisant of the “facts and logic” of climate change, base their reasons for action on climate science, and seek to convey this understanding to others within both their private and public spheres of action.

The second epistemic contribution relates to how “preferences, opinions and decisions” are developed and conveyed around the complex policy problem of climate change. As noted earlier, CAGs have low internal deliberative capacity because they include little diversity and few mechanisms to facilitate authentic deliberation. Nevertheless, for at least some citizens, CAGs hold the potential to act as “*trusted information proxies* to guide citizens’ political judgments in situations characterized by limited information” (Mackenzie and Warren 2012). Citizens who are already convinced of the merits of climate change action may be inclined to trust CAGs as a source of information on climate change and a guide on appropriate political preferences, opinions and decisions. Even citizens who are less certain of the need for action on climate change might place some degree of trust in the information provided by CAGs, particularly in light of the substantial voluntary effort that CAGs put into interpreting the implications of climate science for no financial gain. CAG members voluntarily give their time, energy and resources to influence and support action on climate change in their personal lives, communities, and in an effort to sway governments and politicians. This voluntary effort inspires trust and presents in distinct contrast to those in the broader public who choose not to engage in deliberation around climate change politics (see for example, Lorenzen 2014), and those who engage in deliberation but clearly have something to gain from doing so. Passivity of the majority around specific policy issues is a function of the individual citizen’s decision to allocate their ‘political labours between participation and trust’ (Mackenzie and Warren 2012, p. 97). Apathy, fear and denial also come into play when considering the issue of climate change (Norgaard 2006) and it may be that CAGs are acting on behalf of a public that is not only disengaged but also disempowered. Some CAG participants were clearly conscious of this representative role:

Fear. I've got a friend who's just fearful of it. Very intelligent girl but just doesn’t want to know about it, buries her head in the sand. ‘No, you're doing that bit for me. I don’t want to know about it’ Mandy (32, VIC1).

By representing the values and preferences of citizens, CAGs and other voluntary groups can overcome the problem of scaling up authentic deliberation and ‘do the hard work in sifting out the “wheat from the chaff” among those discourses that would otherwise manipulate the will of citizens who are just “like them”’ (Niemeyer 2012, p. 7). Not all concerned citizens can take the time to engage in ‘substantive and meaningful consideration of relevant reasons’, but members of CAGs do and, as illustrated in the quote above, can transmit these reasons into public deliberation on behalf of others. Of course, for this to lead to authentic deliberation in the political system, trusted information proxies would need to exist for people with all sorts of different perspectives on climate change, not just those who trust CAGs.

Like minipublics (Mackenzie and Warren 2012), CAGs can also play an *anticipatory* role by being the first to bring new arguments about climate change into the public domain. Other groups in the deliberative system, such as the media, bureaucrats and politicians, could come to at least partially trust CAGs as an important indicator of what they need to be aware of, check and respond to in the deliberative system.

## Ethical function

CAG participants have a fundamental affective stimulus to engage in climate change politics. There is an ethical concern at the core of their motivation to take action on climate change, most often stimulated by anxiety about their children or grandchildren, future generations or the state of the Earth’s environment more generally. For example:

I just feel that I’ve got too much knowledge to ignore it. I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t do anything about climate change (Mandy, 32, VIC1).

However, the ethical function of a deliberative system as proposed by Mansbridge et al. (2012) is less about individual ethical motivation and more about promotion of equality and mutual respect among citizens (see also Rosenberg 2007). The question of interest, then, is whether CAGs promote equality and mutual respect in the deliberative system.

Internally, it was clear that the participating CAGs held strong democratic principles, valued consensus decision-making and had respect for other group members. This is not surprising, because CAG members were similar in many respects. They tended to be well educated, middle class and financially comfortable, and these characteristics also formed the basis of their group identity. In most cases the CAG focus group participants displayed similar values, beliefs and opinions, making mutual respect an easy task. The situation is somewhat different when we consider whether CAGs promoted mutual respect outside their group, in the broader deliberative system. In some instances, CAG members were harsh critics of those within their families, communities or the public more broadly who failed to express concern about climate change. They accused others of public apathy, ignorance, laziness or lack of reflexivity and discussed conflicts with people that held different views. For example:

They are so focussed on their lives and living day-to-day…I suppose one of the things that always got me…people say yes I believe in climate change and then just continue on as before. It’s all very well just to come around and have a latte and talk about it but get them actually doing something about it and then you find the doers are a very small group and the talkers are a very big group (Jerry, 63, VIC2).

The CAGs had little respect for politicians who failed to take sufficient action, and climate change deniers. It would be fair to characterise the CAGs as elites who value mutual respect and equality within their group but do not always extend the same respect to those outside their group who fail to see or act on the urgent imperative to respond to climate change. Of course, it is not only CAGs who show a lack of respect for other views in the climate change debate, which is often bitter and rancorous. Indeed, CAGs arguably do more than most participants in the public space to promote mutual respect by modelling respectful processes inside their groups.

## Democratic function

Mansbridge et al. (2012) suggest that, within a deliberative democratic system, the democratic function is served by incorporating multiple and diverse ‘voices, interests, concerns and claims’ into the political process. CAGs cannot be considered representative of a broader public in this democratic sense, given that they consist of members drawn from a particular well-educated ‘elite’ of Australian society, with particular shared views on climate change. Dryzek (2000, p. 1) defines deliberation as a non-coercive, reflective and pluralistic process, allowing ‘argument, rhetoric, humour, emotion, testimony or storytelling, and gossip’, through which people arrive at a particular judgement, preference or view. Crucially, people may change their views and preferences during deliberation. While discussion in CAGs meets most of the criteria in Dryzek’s definition, it is difficult to argue that many participants change their views and preferences, given that the views and preferences of the group are not diverse.

From a systemic perspective, however, CAGs may still contribute to the overall health of deliberation even though they may not comply with definitions of deliberation like Dryzek’s. At the very least, they ensure that the voices of the particular social group to which they belong are injected into the public space to be considered as part of the cacophony of voices trying to influence empowered space. Alongside other groups, they ensure that a preference for strong and urgent action on climate change is never entirely absent from public debate. As noted earlier, CAGs felt strongly that they had a legitimate role in ensuring the issue of climate change remains firmly under consideration in the deliberative system.

A more distinct democratic role that we occasionally glimpsed in the CAG focus groups is for CAGs to represent the voices of others who cannot directly participate in public debate on climate change in Australia, including people affected by climate change in other parts of the world, future generations, and other species:

Part of it for me, was just the whole social justice thing…[S]o much of what we have we waste and we over consume and people in other developing countries would probably like the same basic essentials that we take for granted (Terry, 55, VIC2).

I think it’s pretty scary if you look at the ... the projections and wonder whether we'll be around when some of it starts to happen, if nothing else and I think, just in terms of, implications for future generations and the like. I kinda feel obligated to at least try to do something, so this was the way of doing it (Polly, 25, VIC4).

I think the main thing for me is that my kids, I've got four kids and I'm worried about their future and what it will be like for them so I guess that's one of the main reasons why I do it but also just because I care about what happens to our planet (Raelene, 42, VIC1).

While there is no evidence from the focus groups that CAGs consciously positioned themselves to bring the voices of the unrepresented into political debate, it was clear that many participants were motivated by impacts on the unrepresented. This raises the prospect that CAGs could more consciously bring other voices into public deliberation as a way of contributing even more strongly to the democratic function of the deliberative system.

# Discussion and conclusions

Climate change governance within Australia has seen significant flux since 2006, when the majority of Australian CAGs formed. The current political situation offers little confidence that a clear and ambitious climate policy will eventuate in the near future despite the growing impacts of global warming. The deliberative systemic turn in democratic theory offers an increasingly sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the normative conditions for enhancing public participation in climate change governance. Yet empirical evidence of how public space interventions at the local community level may transmit into climate governance networks is lacking (Ercan and Hendriks 2013). By examining the role of Australian CAGs in a deliberative system for climate change response, we sought not only to identify the deliberative contribution of CAGs but also to test whether a systemic perspective delivers fresh insights into facilitating better public participation in climate change governance.

In testing the deliberative systems approach, we chose to use two distinct frameworks – one developed by Dryzek and colleagues, and the other developed by Parkinson and Mansbridge. We found these frameworks to be complementary. The former focuses attention on the structure of a deliberative system and the elements that make up such a system, and encourages thinking about process. The latter focuses attention on the functions of a deliberative system, and encourages thinking about outcomes. Both perspectives are useful and generated different insights into the role of CAGs in the deliberative system. Integration of these frameworks would be a fruitful topic for future research.

From a deliberative systems perspective, CAGs play an interesting role. While they are homogeneous, self-selected, self-facilitated and unrepresentative, they nevertheless provide an important mechanism for people to move from the private sphere into public space, thereby bringing new voices and preferences into public deliberation. They seek to influence the quality of deliberation in public space and to hold empowered space accountable for decisions on how to respond to climate change. While their constitution as well-educated, like-minded elites means they are in no way representative, it allows their members to engage deeply with climate science and potentially to act as trusted representatives for those with similar viewpoints that do not have the means or inclination to engage in this way. Although CAGs may not demonstrate a lot of respect for those that do not accept the urgent imperative to act on climate change, they still model processes of mutual respect within their groups. Further, they ensure that a voice for urgent action on climate change is always present in public space. The voice of CAGs is a distinct one, less pragmatic than some of the other voices for action, but more true to the scientific evidence.

Clearly, while they are a long way from being a perfect deliberative institution, CAGs have many positive influences on the quality of deliberation when viewed from a deliberative systems perspective. The spontaneous way in which these groups emerged is particularly interesting. Many groups mentioned Al Gore’s film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, as a point of awakening that pushed them to become active on climate change. People who were able to grasp Gore’s message, communicated in quite scientific terms, looked around and saw that, in their view, nobody in the deliberative system was doing enough to combat climate change. They took matters into their own hands and tried to fill the perceived gap, in diverse ways. Most sought to influence existing political institutions to take stronger action on climate change through lobbying, advocacy and campaigning. However, some moved beyond just injecting additional voices into the deliberative system; they developed critiques of the nature of decision-making in the deliberative system as a whole. In other words, some CAGs deliberated on how the deliberative system on climate change should be organised. This is a contribution towards meta-deliberation, although it is clear that many other voices would need to be included to move towards genuine meta-deliberation on the nature of the deliberative system on climate change response.

Arguably, CAGs have been consequential by broadening discursive networks in the Australian climate action movement. They have made particular contributions to the emergence of networks on the health impacts of climate change (e.g. the Climate and Health Alliance, [www.caha.org.au](http://www.caha.org.au)), networks resisting development of new fossil fuel resources (e.g. the Lock the Gate Alliance, <http://www.lockthegate.org.au>) and networks pursuing the development of community-scale renewable energy (e.g. the Solar Citizens Campaign, <http://www.solarcitizens.org.au/>). These networks bring new voices into public deliberation.

While CAGs have done much to advance the quality of public deliberation on climate change, there is no doubt that they could be more effective. If we focus on CAGs as discrete institutions, the temptation is to argue that CAGs should strive to be more representative and to bring in more diverse views that could stimulate more reflection on preferences, i.e. more deliberation within the group. However, from a deliberative systems perspective, this strategy has the potential to dilute some of the important functions that CAGs currently play. For example, CAGs clearly play an important role in helping a certain kind of person – well educated, scientifically literate and with time to spare – to move from individual to collective agency. CAGs facilitate this move by providing a supportive and like-minded group that can reinforce the views of new members and help them to learn and test ways to take their private concerns into the public sphere. A more diverse group, where a new member is less certain that their views are shared, may not provide such a safe and attractive space for those that are taking their first tentative steps into political advocacy. Similarly, CAGs are made up of well-educated elites who have the capacity to grasp complex climate science and are able to translate it into motivation to act. A more representative group could spend a lot of time debating or explaining climate science rather than acting on a shared understanding of climate science. Even the appearance of contestation and uncertainty within the group could make it less likely to be accepted as a trusted representative by others outside the group (Center for Research on Environmental Decisions 2009). Thus, CAGs may contribute most to public deliberation if they remain spontaneous groups of concerned citizens who are responding to perceived failings in the deliberative system.

Of course, CAGs could be more effective at facilitating public deliberation than they currently are. One apparent improvement would be for CAGs to extend respect beyond the boundaries of their group to those who hold different views to their own. This is, of course, extremely difficult to do. People hold diverse values that underpin conflicting attitudes and behaviours (Crompton 2010). Nevertheless, developing respect for values other than our own is an important step towards effective communication. People who act on different values have different motivations with respect to climate change (Crompton 2010, Lorenzen 2014). CAGs that recognise this will be better placed to identify messages and strategies that can influence others to take action on climate change. They can then use the language of deliberation – ‘argument, rhetoric, humour, emotion, testimony or storytelling, and gossip’ (Dryzek 2000, p. 1) – to try to shift preferences in the public and empowered spaces (Dryzek and Lo 2015).

Another possible improvement would be for CAGs to more consciously bring unrepresented voices into the public sphere. While climate change is already having impacts, many of the impacts will affect people in other countries, future generations and other species. These voices have no direct access to the deliberative system on climate change response in Australia, so it falls on others to ensure that those voices are heard. Many CAG members were clearly motivated by concerns for social justice, future generations and impacts on biodiversity, so it would be a small step for CAGs to more consciously speak for these missing voices. This would allow for a more diverse set of discourses to exist within the public space and could improve the overall quality of public deliberation (Stevenson and Dryzek 2012).

Finally, it is worth reflecting on the relative merits of pursuing public deliberation through CAGs or minipublics. While minipublics place a premium on representativeness and authentic deliberation, the reality can fall short of the deliberative ideal. Minipublics are often made up of self-selected elites that ‘have resources, interests and time to participate’ (Fung 2003, p. 342). While they may be demographically representative, they are rarely discursively representative. Further, minipublics tend to be discrete interventions that may or may not achieve influence, but certainly do not persist over time. For a long-term challenge like climate change, this lack of persistence is a major limitation. While CAGs are even less representative than minipublics, their persistence is a significant advantage. Rather than focusing on creating ideal deliberative spaces in minipublics, deliberative theorists and practitioners may achieve more traction by spending time working with existing and emerging groups to help them to more consciously forward deliberation in the system. From a deliberative systems perspective, self-organised, unrepresentative, but persistent groups such as CAGs may offer more fruitful sites for increasing public deliberation on climate change than temporary minipublics.

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1. CAG members have been provided with pseudonyms. Each participating CAG is identified by state (New South Wales – NSW or Victoria – VIC) and a number. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)