

# THE CONVERSATION

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## In a Voice campaign marked by confusing, competing claims, there's a better way to educate voters

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With parliament now having passed the Voice to Parliament referendum bill, and with the campaign about to get underway in earnest, there is a critical need for more trusted information. As scholars of deliberative democracy, we suggest Australia borrow from the US state of Oregon a new way of informing the public in referendums.

The federal government has already announced a civics education program for the referendum campaign. Better information can't come soon enough, given the spread of confusing and sometimes misleading information in the lead-up to the referendum so far.

But will the government's plan work? Not if it mostly involves top-down communication to voters, with information solely written and communicated by experts and politicians.

The trouble is, as good as this information may be, many voters are uncertain whom to trust. That's especially so as the campaign descends into the rabbit hole of debate over technicalities. Few voters are deeply versed in constitutional law or Indigenous affairs.

This is where a “citizens’ referendum review”, first used in Oregon but later adopted in many other places, could be beneficial.

This kind of review is based on a public engagement tool called a “mini-public”, a body of randomly selected citizens who form a microcosm of the wider society in both demographics and attitudes.

Members of such a body first learn extensively about a topic from a diverse range of experts and advocates. They then engage in extended deliberations with each other to hash out a fair and informed recommendation to provide the public.

This is called a “citizens’ statement”, which explains precisely what’s at stake in the referendum, doing so in clear, balanced, accurate and accessible terms.



Indigenous Australians Minister Linda Burney has been one of the most prominent Lukas Coch/AAP

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***Read more: What can history teach us to ensure a successful referendum for A First Nations Voice to parliament?***

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## **How mini-publics have worked elsewhere**


Mini-publics have been used hundreds of times around the world, if not more – often with considerable success.


When a matter is complex and contentious – say, policies related to climate change or COVID-19 – mini-publics can be especially effective.




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The second deliberative mini public on the [#ClimateCrisis](#) and [#UrbanTransportPolicy](#) is now underway in Berlin! A warm welcome to our first expert, [@DiegoRybski](#) of the [@PIK\\_Climate](#) [@policyatkins](#) [@suzanne\\_khall](#) [@kirstie\\_hewlett](#)



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For instance, in Oregon, some of the first citizens' reviews considered the wisdom of referendums aiming to impose minimum criminal sentences for sex crimes and drunk driving, and to legalise medical marijuana.

These were complex issues. But the Oregon experience showed that a collection of citizens could be brought up to speed on the issues and effectively communicate the pros and cons of the referendum proposals to the wider population.

One of the crucial aspects of these bodies is they tend to be better trusted than more top-down models led entirely by governments or academic elites. Voters often view the members as being “just like me”.

Indeed, mini-publics are usually designed to be demographically, regionally and politically diverse. Participants are also not politicians. Thus, they tend not to be as stuck in their polarised tribes. Comparatively speaking, ordinary citizens generally lack the same motivation and desire to wage no-holds-barred battles with the other side.

We are not the only ones calling for this model in Australia. The non-partisan newDemocracy foundation has also suggested it as a potential model for providing better information to voters about the Voice.

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Great discussion about the Oregon "citizen initiative review" process that is starting to catch on in other states in the US and further afield. Makes voters more informed about the issues they're going to vote on in referendums. Would be wonderful to try it here too.

**John Gastil** @jgastil

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### **A fair and trusted source of information**

There needs to be a source of information on the Voice that is informed, reasonable, fair and trusted. The government's Voice campaign materials so far may be fair, but in our hyper-polarised political environment, any information authorised by the government of the day may not be widely trusted.

Information pamphlets distributed in past referendums – which included contributions from political leaders and other partisans – have faced similar problems.

As University of Sydney constitutional law expert Helen Irving recalls, the push for the republic in 1999 ran into problems partly because voters had low trust in three types of elites:

*there were the alleged 'elites' ('Chardonnay drinkers') at the heart of the republican movement, those classed as 'elites' merely by being residents of Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra, and another version of 'elites' meaning simply federal politicians.*

The citizens' referendum review model shows more promise. We know from many studies of mini-publics around the world that they are, on the whole, fair, informed, flexible and highly trusted by a wide cross section of people.

They may provide what political leaders cannot – a fresh and open mind, and a sense of perspective about which arguments do or don't hold up.

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***Read more: How we can avoid political misinformation in the lead-up to the Voice referendum***

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### **What a mini-public could do in the Voice campaign**

Importantly, though, running a citizens' referendum review should not be an excuse to reassess what question should be put to voters. That has already been decided.

Moreover, the review must be well-designed. Rather than being dominated by one side in the referendum debate, it must be deliberatively broad-ranging and non-partisan. The promise of mini-publics depends on their being genuinely independent and impartial.

The review should also not reach any single verdict for or against the Voice, but rather cover all reasonable arguments and provide a set of pro and con arguments for dissemination in the referendum campaign.

The federal government should fund the review adequately and publicise its results across the country. The panellists could even write the "yes" and "no" pamphlets being sent to Australian households.

The Australian voting public should have the benefit of this kind of review to help inform their votes. In a campaign already cluttered with confusing, competing claims, we need a better approach.