



Project *demoscans*

Citizens' panel in Sion (Valais, Switzerland), November 2019

Scientific report: Executive Summary

I. Introduction

- The *demoscans* citizens' panel assembled over two consecutive weekends (16/17 and 23/24 November 2019) twenty randomly selected enfranchised voters of the municipality of Sion.
- The main task of the panel was (1) to get informed about and to deliberate on an upcoming 2020 federal popular initiative on affordable housing, and (2) to collectively write a 2-page statement summarizing key facts, pros and cons of the popular initiative. In January 2020 the statement was sent to all voters of Sion, one month before the popular vote scheduled for 9 February 2020.
- The process featured professional facilitation in plenary and small group discussions. Presentations and extensive Q&A sessions with the advocates and opponents of the popular initiative, as well as two panels of three experts each plus an in-call expert, supplied the panelists with necessary input.

2. Random selection of the citizen's panel

- A random selection in two stages – combining pure and stratified sortition – was used to select participants for the citizens' panel, approximating the diversity of the municipality's population. In the first stage (August 2019), 2000 randomly selected enfranchised citizens of the municipality of Sion received an invitation letter signed by the mayor of Sion, Philippe Varone, and by the project's leader, professor Nenad Stojanović of the University of Geneva. The letter was enclosed in an official envelope bearing the coat of arms of the municipality.
- A financial reimbursement (500 Swiss francs per participant) was offered as an incentive for participation, together with compensating arrangements for childcare.
- In the second stage (September 2019), a random stratification by (i) age, (ii) gender, (iii) education, (iv) frequency of participation in elections and popular votes, and (v) left-right self-placement led to the selection of the final panel of 20 panelists. The stratification ensured that the panel would reflect a diverse set of people, approaching the city's socio-demographic composition among eligible voters aged 18 and above.
- The final panel was drawn by relying on 205 (i.e. 10.2% out of 2000) positive replies received at the end of the first stage. An alternate panel, also of 20 members, was drawn in order to ensure adequate replacement of potential drop-outs. Indeed, one member of the main panel dropped out one day before the first weekend of deliberations and could be replaced. Another member of the main panel dropped out after the first weekend of deliberation and was not replaced. Hence, the final statement was written by a panel of 19 members.



3. Panel design and process

- The citizen's panel was designed after the process model institutionalized in the US state of Oregon since 2009, called the Citizens' Initiative Review (CIR).
- A representative of the non-profit organization "Healthy Democracy", which was in charge of organizing numerous CIRs in Oregon and other US states, oversaw the process and helped the Swiss organizing team to apply contextual adaptations where necessary.
- The panel design ensured a high level of discursive quality in the discussions among participants by arranging conversation guidelines, professional facilitation, varying plenary and small group discussions, and invited advocates and experts.

4. Assessing the citizens' panel

- The citizens' panel fared well on self-evaluation questions eliciting the quality of discussions, like inclusion, respect, sincerity. These survey measures had been used in previous CIRs in the US and indicated similar levels of process satisfaction.
- Compared to some of the previous CIRs, the Swiss pilot scored comparably well in terms of participant's overall satisfaction with the process.
- Participants were satisfied with almost all aspects of the process, including advocates' presentations and expert panels.
- The process scored well on eleven OECD evaluation criteria assessing the performance of participatory processes among the dimensions of purpose, accountability, transparency, inclusiveness, representativeness, information, group deliberation, time, integrity, and privacy.

5. The citizens' summary statement ("Rapport citoyen")

- Participants put together, selected, ranked, and edited the information displayed on the two-page-long statement sent to the municipality's voters ahead of the popular vote. The panelists reached conclusions that were consistent and articulate.
- The statement summarizes the eight most important key facts concerning the popular initiative, together with three claims in favor and three claims against the initiative. The total number of key facts and claims had been set in advance; the panelists had the task to select the facts and claims that they considered the most relevant for their fellow-citizens to reach an informed decision. The claims for and against feature a short statement each on why that information is relevant to voters, along with a global pro and con summary below the two corresponding sections.
- The panel members' final vote – 11 (57.9%) against and 9 (42.1%) in favor of the initiative – was taken by secret ballot at the very end of deliberation (24 November 2019). It was taken only for the purposes of scientific research and was not included in the final statement. Interestingly, however, it reflected almost perfectly the eventual outcome of the popular vote that took place on 9 February 2020, both at the national level (57.1% of "no" votes) and in Sion itself (58.7% of "no" votes).

6. The impact of the statement on the larger public

- Three different surveys – conducted in December 2019, January 2020 and February 2020 – inquired the impact and the value of the statement on/for the larger public. They also explored citizens' attitudes and trust towards a randomly selected panel, compared to attitudes and trust towards elected bodies (e.g. the federal parliament). The first survey was sent via regular post to 3000 randomly selected enfranchised citizens of Sion. The subsequent survey questionnaire was sent – by regular post or by email – to the individuals who responded to the first survey. The final survey was sent to the individuals who responded both to the first and the second survey.
- The first survey was an experimental survey that included four treatment groups and two control groups (N=1159). It revealed that voters randomly assigned to read the statement written by the citizens' panel scored significantly higher on their intention to participate in the vote than people only assigned to read a short text on the citizens' panel's proceedings. Voters assigned to the statement condition also had substantially higher scores on knowledge questions regarding the popular initiative.
- On average, respondents declared to trust the citizens' panel as much as the Swiss Parliament when asked to indicate their generalized trust values for both institutions separately. However, they also declared to have more political trust in the citizens' panel because it was selected via sortition.
- In a follow-up survey conducted about four weeks before the popular vote (N=472), 53.9% of participants indicated to have used the official pamphlet of the Federal Chancellery as a source to make up their opinion on the popular initiative on affordable housing, while 44.9% declared they had used the statement produced by the demoscan citizens' panel. All other sources of information (political parties, media, pro and con campaigns etc.) scored lower.



Members of the demoscan citizens' panel unanimously approve the outcome of their four-day-long deliberation at the end of the panel's last session. (Sion, 24 November 2019).