



Australian
National
University

Working paper 2013/1

Provisional Report Analysis of the Citizens' Initiative Review

Monteveglia (BO), 5-7 October 2012

Simon Niemeyer

Andrea Felicetti

Olga Di Ruggero

ANU College of Arts and Social Science
Research School of Social Sciences
School of Politics and International Relations
Centre for Deliberative Democracy & Global Governance
Authors Simon Niemeyer, Andrea Felicetti and Olga Di Ruggero
e-mail: simon.niemeyer@anu.edu.au

1 INTRODUCTION

This document provides a preliminary report of the analysis by the research team of the three-day Citizens' Initiative Review (CIR) conducted 5-7 October 2012. The CIR considered the question of amalgamation (or 'fusion') of five local council areas in the Valsamoggia valley region, near the City of Bologna, Italy. In brief, the process involved two days of presentations by third party speakers to give information of general relevance and advocates illustrating the pros and cons on the amalgamation and a final day of deliberation to produce a short report outlining the participants main findings.

The CIR included 20 participants, 16 of which provided viable data that could be used in the analysis of how the process impacted on their positions. It is the thinking of these 16 that this report focuses on. Later analysis will include a detailed assessment of the dialogue that took place, and an analysis of personality types of the participants to look for correlations between contributions to the dialogue, personality and deliberative transformation. But for now the objective is to provide a very brief snapshot of what the process did to transform individuals. We will also provide some analysis of how the findings might inform judgements about the deliberative process itself in relation to the wider politics of the issue. However, any such findings are very tentative, and are posed as working questions that deeper analysis will seek to address.

The report begins with a brief outline of the changes in preference — or overall position in relation to the question of fusion. It then moves on to analysis of changes that took place in the main beliefs (and values) of participants on the issue, at the subjective level. It then finishes with an overall assessment of the process, posing questions that arise from the findings so far.

2 PREFERENCES

Four options were presented to participants, which were ranked in order of preference (from 1 to 4) before and after the deliberative process. The options presented were as follows:

Option Identifier	Option	Option Description	Option Description English
A	Unione	Rafforzare l' Unione dei comuni	Increase the power unione
B	NO	Lasciare le cose come sono	Leave things as they are
C	YES	Procedere alla fusione	Go ahead with the amalgamation as proposed
D	Postpone	Fare la fusione in modi e tempi diversi	Postpone the amalgamation

Table 1 shows overall how participants voted before and after the CIR, in terms of the average preference that was allocated to each of the options. Participants could allocate a vote between 1 and 4 for the four options — where a "1" is given to the most preferred. In table 1 the lower the average score, the higher the overall preference for the option. Before the CIR is is Option A (increasing the

power of the Unione) that is most preferred, but only slightly more than amalgamation (Option C). Keeping things as they are (NO, Option B) is the least preferred by the group.

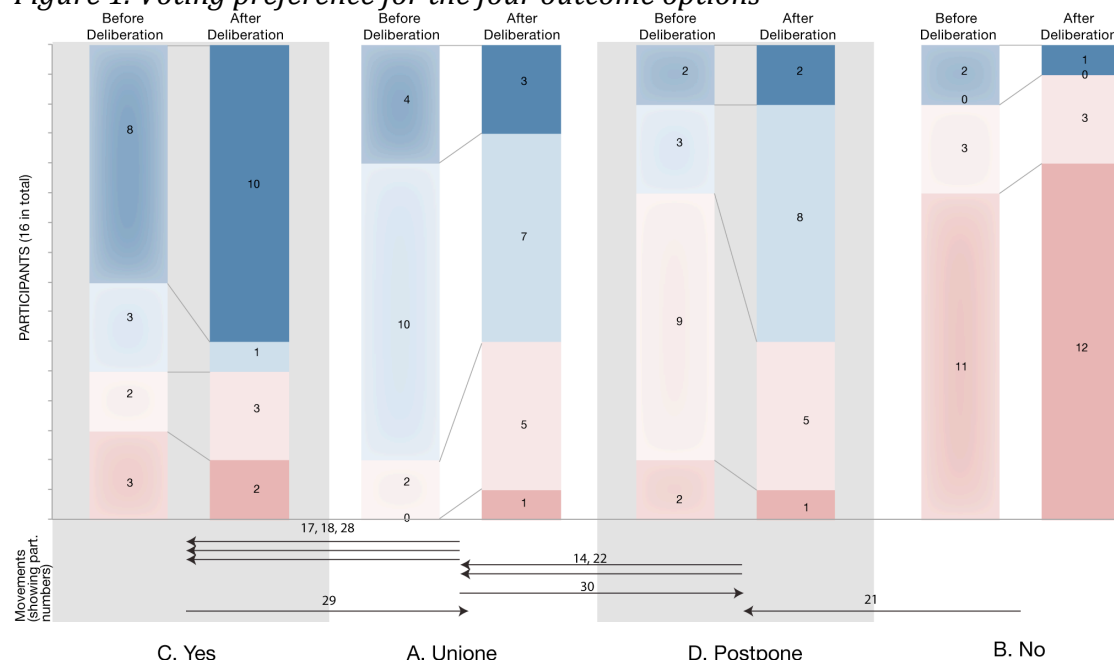
Table 1. Average Preference Ranking of the Four Outcome options

Option	Description	Pre deliberation	Post Deliberation
A	Unione	1.9	2.3
B	NO	3.4	3.6
C	YES	2.0	1.8
D	Postpone	2.7	2.3

After deliberation there is a slight movement toward “YES” (Option C), which is the most preferred overall. But there is also some movement toward Option D (postpone).

It is possible to see the nature of individual changes that led to this outcome, as shown in Figure 1. The figure breaks down how all the participants voted before and after the CIR on the four options. The order of the options has been changed from Table 1 (which shows the order that they were presented to participants in). Instead they are shown in sequence from the “Yes” option, followed by “Unione” and “Postpone” to the “No” option. The two bars for each option show the distribution of votes before and after deliberation. For example, at the beginning of the CIR there were 8 participants who most preferred the Yes option, 3 more who ranked it as their second preference, 2 who ranked it as their third preference and 3 who least preferred it. After the CIR the number who most prefer it increases to 10, followed by 1, 3 and 2 for the remaining rankings.

Figure 1. Voting preference for the four outcome options



The arrows at the bottom of Figure 1 show the way in which individuals changed their first preferences — along with their participant numbers. It shows that 3 participants changed their first preference from (A) Unione to (C) Yes, while one participant (29) moved in the opposite direction. Two other participants moved their first preference from (D) Postpone to (A) Unione, while, again, one

participant (30) moved in the opposite direction. And one further participant (21) changed their first preference from (B) No to (D) Postpone. The figure shows 8 participants (out of 16 surveyed), which means a further 8 did not change their first preference at all during the CIR. Those who held the Yes position at the beginning of the CIR were much likely to stay that way (87%) compared to the collective 'non-yes' vote, of which a similar proportion (87.5%) changed their vote, with 37.5% of those moving to Yes (the 3 from Unione mentioned previously).

Implications

It is notable that during the CIR participants only voted on options B and C — to move ahead with amalgamation or maintain the status quo. The vote resulted in 17 in favour of option C (Yes), 2 in favour of option B (No) and one abstain. We do not have data on who voted in what way — the vote was by secret ballot. But it is obvious that the results do not quite match up with the situation after the CIR that we are reporting above. If we assume that the four participants who did not provide a survey voted yes, there remains a deficit of three participants who voted yes following the CIR poll and their surveyed preferences.

The difference is probably explained by the presence of the additional two options (A and D), which is very likely to account for the single individual who abstained from the final vote at the CIR. There is a question whether the framing of the choice presented to participants at the CIR (Yes or No to amalgamation) framed the choice in such a way as to increase the "Yes" vote.

However, this conclusion seems contradicted by the arguments reported by participants. In fact, there was a discussion during the CIR regarding all the options reported in the survey, and participants decided that a preference for options A and D were tantamount to a "NO" vote. In other words, if this is true, and the survey data is correct, we should have witnessed a higher "NO" vote (by at least three participants) at the end of the CIR.

Nevertheless, the CIR would likely still have resulted in a clear "Yes" vote, there being a movement toward this position during the assembly. The next section of the report seeks to understand the underlying reasons for the move toward Yes. Finally, it is notable that these observed changes in preferred outcome involves a relatively small overall change. Indeed it is much smaller than is ordinarily observed in similar analyses of minipublics (such as the CIR) to the one conducted in this report. We will return to this question later. But we stress that we do not suspect any deep structural problems with the CIR design or implementation. That said, there are almost always ways in which deliberative processes could be designed and implemented. In an ideal world more than a single process is run on the same issue to both work through design issues and to improve the understanding of the outcome.

Our task in the remainder of this report is to try and understand how the CIR process led to this particular outcome, in a fairly preliminary manner.

3 SUBJECTIVE CHANGES

To help understand the thinking that underlay the positions of participants in respect to the amalgamation question, a survey was implemented involving the ranking of statements sourced from public discussion on the issue. The ranking involved distributing 36 statements (shown in The various arguments are

distributed between the positions in Figure 2. In the figure, each of the sphere represents each position, and the overlap between the areas of agreement that exist between two or more of them. The arguments are summarised forms of the statements shown in Table 1

Table 2) across a pre-defined distribution, otherwise known as a 'Q sort' in Q methodology.¹

The resulting "Q sorts" were then analysed (using inverted factor analysis) to produce four positions that best described the overall thinking of participants. These positions, which are described in Figure 2, include:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| A. Grand Opportunity | A belief that overall the fusion can bring considerable benefits (fiscal, economic, services, ...) |
| B. Implementation Concerns | A belief that fusion may be beneficial, but its implementation could be handled significantly better |
| C. Strong Scepticism | A belief that fusion won't work, and it has been imposed by political interests |
| D. Pessimistic Uncertainty | A view that amalgamation is fraught with uncertainties and, although intuitively appealing, may be too risky. |

The various arguments are distributed between the positions in Figure 2. In the figure, each of the sphere represents each position, and the overlap between the areas of agreement that exist between two or more of them. The arguments are summarised forms of the statements shown in Table 1

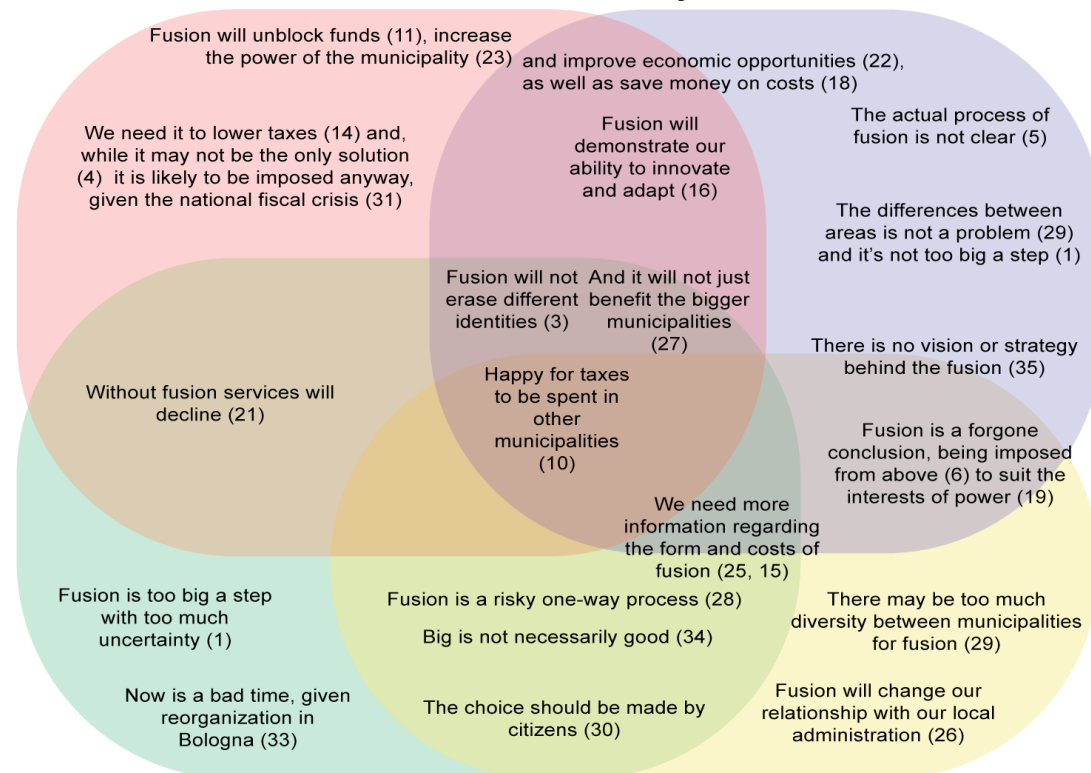
¹ See <http://www.mycoted.com/Q-Sort>

Table 2. Statements

No	Statement English version
1	the shift from the union to the fusion is too big of a step which brings too many uncertainties. If things are done more gradually the change will be painless because people will be already used to it.
2	the fusion is a small step to complete a path of amalgamation that started 20 years ago. The amalgamated municipality is already a reality in practice. How much do we have to wait still?
3	the amalgamation will erase local diversities
4	the amalgamation is not the only solution to the issues of our territory but it is the more concrete one
5	it is not yet clear how are they are going to amalgamate the contracts of the municipal clerks across the territory. Things like these should be decided before the amalgamation.
6	the fusion is a decision that has already been taken and they are trying to imposing it top-down. They are trying to sell the product "amalgamated municipality"
7	with or without the amalgamation, the important thing is that at in everyday lifenothing will change. For example the front-offices should stay where they currently are.
8	the amalgamation will benefit the employees and the citizens. The employees will increase their competences through more training. Therefore the citizens will benefit of more specialized professionals.
9	we are misusing the amalgamation. The needs of the territory are not being respected and the Valsmaoggia is being used as a lab rat
10	I would not like the money of my taxes to be used in the municipalities next to my own
11	through the amalgamation we will be able to delay the 'patto di stabilità' and therefore unblock some funds. The latter can be invested in the municipalities that are more in need
12	the amalgamation seems to me another way to change everything to eventually change nothing
13	the amalgamation is a leap in the unknown
14	the amalgamation is necessary to lower the taxes
15	there are not enough elements to decide in favour or against the amalgamation
16	the amalgamations is an innovative process that will make us an example to follow for Italy and the rest of Europe.
17	the amalgamation is the right answer to the limit of the Union
18	the amalgamation will offer the possibility of saving money by cutting the political and the bureaucracy costs and making the administration more efficient.
19	the choice of the amalgamation is due to the wish of certain political parties to maintain the political dominance
20	the amalgamation will bring the resources to make the intervention that our territory needs, like bicycle paths or public transport between the municipalities or improving high school system.

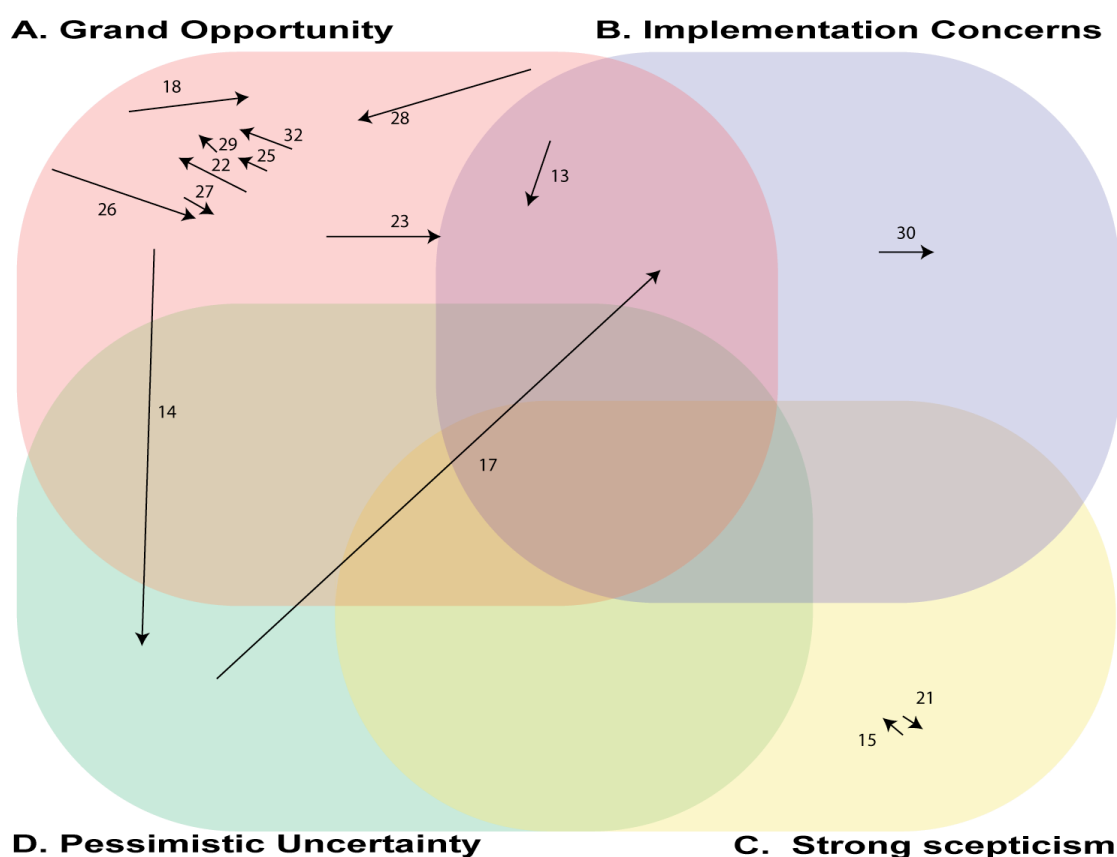
- 21 if the amalgamation will not be done, the single municipalities will not be capable of maintaining the current quality of services.
- 22 through the amalgamation we will be able to exploit the potentials of the territory to improve building-commercial- handcraft- and agricultural development.
- 23 the new municipality will be politically more powerful in front of other municipalities like Bologna's città metropolitana. In this way our interests will be protected outside our municipality.
- 24 the consequence of the amalgamation is that either we will pay more than before or they will cut the services
- 25 it is not possible to say yes or not to the amalgamation without knowing how it will be, how much will it cost and how it will be done.
- 26 the amalgamation will change our relationship with the administration. The amalgamation will move away the administration and the power from the local territory and centralizing it somewhere else
- 27 the amalgamation benefits bigger municipalities at detriment of smallest ones also with respect to external funding.
- 28 the amalgamation is too risky because is a one way process
- 29 the needs of the citizens are too different across the municipalities. It will be too difficult for the amalgamated municipality to answer to everybody.
- 30 if the administration chose for the amalgamation it means that it is the right choice. This choice should be taken by the experts not by citizens
- 31 in these days of crisis and changes at the European level, the amalgamation is necessary and opportune.
- 32 the Union is a failure and a cost, because it absorbed just a very small part of services and money
- 33 it is not worth to make the amalgamation in this time of reorganization with the città metropolitana in Bologna
- 34 it is not necessary to be big to be good. Small municipalities can be better managed than bigger ones and do more things. It is a matter of good administration.
- 35 in this amalgamation there is no project, no vision and no strategy. Things should be done in a very different way.
- 36 with the amalgamation there will be a deficit of democracy because the municipalities will be only consultative. The citizens will have no power

Figure 2. Underling/subjective Positions on the question of amalgamation

A. Grand Opportunity**C. Implementation Concerns****D. Pessimistic Uncertainty****B. Strong scepticism**

These positions have been identified because they best describe those positions of the participants in the CIR, both before and after deliberation. In Figure 3 we use this basic 'map' to locate where participants stood in relation to the fusion. Each arrow represents (broadly speaking) the way in which the positions of participants changed during deliberation, with the positions before deliberation indicated by the start of each arrow, and the head of each representing their final position. The further toward the outside edge of each position a participant lies, the more strongly (and uniquely) he or she is associated with that position.

Figure 3. Movement of participants on the position map during deliberation



The first thing to note about Figure 3 is that, as for preferences, there is not very much overall movement. Again, this is relatively unusual, compared to other deliberative process that have been analysed. As it turns out, the four longest arrows (which are labelled with the respective participant number) correspond to the only four participants who admitted to the CIR changing their minds on the fusion issue.

The other notable feature of the figure is that, those changes that do exist do not conform to any particular pattern — except that there is no movement at all in the direction of position C. This is also relatively unusual from experience. So, was there any systematic change at all at the subjective level? In Table 3 we try to answer this question by looking at those stages that experience the strongest overall change in average rank during the deliberative process.²

² Usually this analysis is done using unranked (rated) data using a standard Likert scale (which involves an unconstrained response from agree to disagree on a scale for 5 to -5). This would be more correct to use for measuring absolute changes in response. However, given the complexity of implementing the research, in this case with limited resources and involving language differences, it was decided to only implement the Q sort version of the statement questionnaire.

Table 3. Statements with greatest level of change in response

No	Statement	Average Response (stage)		Change between Stages	
		Pre	Post	Ave	Var
21	If the fusion will not be done, the single municipalities will not be capable of maintaining the current quality of the services.	-0.2	2.0	2.2	13.6
6	The fusion is a decision that has already been taken and they are trying to imposing it top down. They are trying to sell the product "amalgamated municipality"	-1.3	0.8	2.0	4.9
35	In this fusion there is no project, no vision and no strategy. Things should be done in a very different way	-0.8	1.0	1.8	4.7
18	The amalgamation will offer the possibility of saving money by cutting the political costs and the bureaucracy costs and making the administration more efficient.	2.8	1.8	-1.0	7.7
7	With or without the amalgamation, the important thing that is at the practical level, nothing will change. For example the offices should stay where they are	0.6	-0.4	-1.0	6.5
26	The fusion will change our relationship with the administration. The fusion will move away the administration and the power from the local territory and centralizing it somewhere else	-0.9	-1.9	-1.0	6.9
24	The consequence of the fusion is that either we will pay more than before or they will cut the services	-1.8	-3.1	-1.3	7.3
27	the fusion benefits the bigger municipalities at the detriment of the smallest also with respect to the external funding situation	-1.4	-2.8	-1.4	4.8

Interestingly, the some of the strongest changes in Table 3 tend to support increasingly sceptical views (6, 35, 18). However, most are generally favourable (21, 27, 24, 26).

While none of these changes are statistically significant, they do seem to reflect what was noted by the researchers observing the deliberative process: that, although many participants were generally increasingly persuaded by the arguments in favour of the fusion, they did not agree to the idea without question. Indeed, the participants' report appears to raise many questions in relation to the fusion, highlighting the uncertainties surrounding its actual

implementation. This feature will be discussed again below in the findings.

4 FINDINGS PROVISIONAL

So, overall the analysis finds that there is relatively little overall impact of the deliberative process on the positions of participants, either in terms of their underlying dispositions in relation to the issue, nor their preferences in terms of the actual outcome.

Deliberation is, ideally, supposed to result in deep reflection regarding political issues such as fusion — with citizens taking into account the relevant arguments, weighing them up, and drawing their conclusions based on their genuine assessment of the merits of arguments, rather than because of factors such as political power. And minipublic deliberation, such as the CIR is supposed to create a very special circumstance in which citizens get to engage in an information rich environment with their peers to collectively discuss and reflect on the issues in ways that just are not usually ordinarily possible in everyday life. Thus it is usually the case that minipublic events such as the CIR have a fairly strong impact on participants, often changing their positions dramatically and in ways that are consistent with an overall trend and the process of deliberation that unfolds during the minipublic event.

Why did this not happen with the CIR? There are a number of possible explanations, ranging from more problematic ones related to the way the CIR was conducted, through to issue and context specific ones that suggest a high level of public deliberation outside the CIR. We actually think that the final explanation, following detailed analysis, will involve a combination of several or more of these explanations, but for now, they include:

1. The CIR could have been more 'deliberative'

- a. **Design and Implementation Issues.** The CIR process did not involve deep enough reflection on the issues to induce a change in position. This could be because of a number of factors, such as too little time provided to deal with a complex issue; problems with the internal design of the process and/or implementation.
 - i. Time
 - ii. Process design
 - iii. Implementation
- b. **Commitment Bias.** There was a commitment bias in operation among participants, who tended to treat information according to their pre-existing positions. This phenomenon would be particularly sensitive to any selection bias.
- c. **Framing Bias:** The question put to the CIR participants framed their thinking in a way that induced the observed outcome.

2. Deliberation Happened!

- a. Selection bias in the recruitment could have resulted in the forum being populated by individuals with much more strongly felt positions than is generally the case for the rest of the community. And such individuals would be less likely to engage in the kind of deep reflection on the issue that ideally occurs during deliberation.
- b. Instrument error. The research instrument used to analyse the deliberative process did not capture the changes that occurred during deliberation

- c. If there were no real problems with either the implementation of the CIR or the selection of participants, then it is the case that members of the community tend to already have relatively well formed positions. Such positions were less likely to be influenced by the CIR, even though participants
- 3. The Vote Did Not Really Capture the positions of participants
 - a. A third (and more likely) scenario is that constraining the choices of participants via a simple yes or no vote did not capture that actual thinking of participants, who held much more complex and nuanced positions.

Our initial assessment is that, while there is room for improving the design and implementation of the CIR (which is almost always the case) on the whole it was fairly well conceived and implemented. However, there are some features of the design that may have contributed to a less than ideal outcome.

Design and Implementation

In terms of how deliberative the event itself was: there was certainly a very high level of respect, sincerity (so far it is really possible to tell), reasoning and engagement with the issues by the participants. Indeed, this feature of the process seemed impressive. However, we do have some concerns, which will only be possible to fully understand following detailed analysis of the process via analysis of the dialogue. One possibility is that the departure from the established program on the third day had an overtly directive flavour to it. If this is the case — and we can't be sure at this stage that is, if at all — any criticism would have to be seen in the light of the incredible difficulty of managing deliberation in order to deliver a written report by participants, all in one day. This is a difficult task by any measure.

Framing Effect

One factor that seems more likely to have had a seriously negative impact on the process relates to a framing effect. This comes in two forms. The first is procedural — participants were keen to put the referendum question to the vote on the final day of the process, something that was not originally scheduled. It is our understanding that the facilitator relented to the request under some pressure. This is very unfortunate, from a deliberative point of view. We would argue that a group vote at the end of deliberation, particularly where the process is very closely under public scrutiny, connotes a level of representation of the wider public in descriptive terms that is simply not possible with 20 participants. While it is reasonable that the CIR could, in principle, simulate the arguments within the wider community (which we refer to as 'discursive representation'), particularly if the participants are selected accordingly (more of which below), it cannot simulate voting patterns. The vote implied a kind of legitimacy for the preferred outcome (the Yes option) that cannot be justified when the detailed arguments are taken into account. The actual reasoning of participants was fairly nuanced and sometimes equivocal — although it is clearly the preferred outcome. But the sheer numbers in favour (17 for, 2 against, 1 abstain) belies this nuance. Forcing a choice at the end of the process to be communicated with the findings appears to have forced much of this nuance into a simple, near absolute endorsement of the fusion proposal. And it may have had a distorting

effect in the responses analysed in this report.

Another framing effect may have been observed by the fact that the CIR considered a fairly rudimentary fusion proposal, with details to be considered following the referendum vote. Thus, it was possible for participants to agree to the idea in principle, even though it is entirely possible for their position to change as details emerge. To be sure, many participants expressed considerable frustration during the process about the lack of detail. While we cannot make any definitive assessment about this effect, it is fairly clear that the dynamics of the deliberative event would be different if it were asked to consider the actual form of the fusion, rather than the principle.

Selection (and Commitment) Bias

There is a reasonable chance that there are some problems with the selection of participants, albeit unlikely to be fatal. The recruitment was very successful in achieving a demographically diverse sample. Impressive in fact. And the range of views — if viewed through the lens of dispositions toward the question of fusion — do seem to reflect the wider community. However, there is a lingering (unconfirmed) concern that the recruitment method might have produced a sample that, on the whole, was more strongly engaged with the fusion question than the rest of the community. It is well known that individuals who are more strongly engaged with issues are more likely to respond to recruitment letters. To counter this, it is usually desirable to use methods to identify and stratify by level of engagement (usually by asking questions relating to strength of attitude). But this is only possible if there is a fairly large volunteer sample to draw from, which was not the case for the CIR.

Instrument Error

There is also a reasonable chance that this analysis has not adequately captured the reflection of participants on the issue. However, the near perfect correlation between observation of changes and the self assessment of participants does suggest that the instrument did a reasonable job of capturing change, at least.

Deliberation Really Did Happen

One tantalising possibility is that the CIR was well conceived and executed; that all the participants took their role seriously and engaged with the issues accordingly; and that the outcomes really do reflect the considered responses of these participants. Although it will be necessary to take a very close look at the actual process of deliberation to make a definitive assessment, it is entirely possible that — some of our concerns notwithstanding — this is largely the case. Indeed, the research team (at least those who speak Italian) have observed a high level of public discourse surrounding the fusion issue outside the CIR; and in all kinds of everyday context. In other words, it is possible that the public sphere in what is a fairly small, tight knit and politically engaged community is well developed, such that positions within the community are both well informed and well formed (in a deliberative sense). There was no observation of obvious manifestation of the much-touted phenomenon of 'claro' — which suggests that Italian culture (particularly in the south) cannot be deliberative because of a tendency to speak over, rather than listen to arguments. While argumentation could indeed be passionate, as it was both within the CIR and

outside it, it was in the vast majority of cases respectful in high degree. Moreover, protagonists on both sides of the political argument engaged with the CIR in the belief that the best argument could 'win'. This particularly applies to the No advocates, who devoted considerable time in developing their arguments to present to the CIR, rather than exercising their right of exit and boycotting despite they were not present in any organizational structure, all advocates who presented at the CIR should be commended for their quality effort to present their positions in an appropriate fashion.

The Vagaries of Fixing Deliberative Outcomes

There is commonly a good deal of emphasis on deliberation producing definitive outcomes, either via consensus or by voting. However, there is a danger that doing so misrepresents the real positions of participants. This appears to be the case here. Participants voted increasingly in favor of amalgamation. But during the process itself they expressed increasing levels of reservation about the proposal, and the way it was going to be implemented. In other words, their positions were much more complex, and the outcome of the deliberative process should reflect this nuance. Preference aggregation failed to do this, with serious implications for the interpretation of the findings. We intend to pursue this analysis further.

5 CONCLUSION

In summary, although our research began with an interest in exploring the changes occurring inside the CIR event to see how they could be scaled up to the wider public, who do not get to engage in intensive deliberation, it is mildly plausible that we may have inadvertently discovered the kind of public sphere prized by deliberative democrats in the wider region. However, before drawing such a conclusion there are a few niggling concerns with the CIR that require closer scrutiny. Most important is the ability of preference orderings to capture the complexity of the deliberative process. And, ideally, it would be possible to do further analysis on 'deliberation' beyond the confines of the CIR, including that surrounding the referendum in mid-November. (Unfortunately this is unlikely due to lack of resources.)

Overall, although a definitive finding is not yet possible, we find that the CIR by and large worked well as a deliberative event. There are however some questions regarding late procedural decisions — and here we are loath to criticise and more likely to sympathise, given the cut and thrust of deliberative events — recruitment and framing.