When representative democracy turns participatory: 
Interpreting Indi

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Abstract
Citizen participation in the standard model of representative democracy is typically limited to voting and party membership. However as citizens retreat from parties and find new ways of participating in politics, it is timely to consider how might our conventional institutions of representative democracy be reformed to (re)engage citizens in the democratic process. In this paper I turn to practice and examine how one electorate has sort to reconnect its citizens to the political process. Drawing on the recent democratic experiences unfolding in the Federal electorate of Indi, in rural North East Victoria, Australia, the paper tracks how a small community group, Voices4Indi, created a participatory movement that has reinvigorated the way constituents and their elected member enact representative politics. Particular focus is given to the participatory elements in the Voices4Indi movement as well as the ongoing participatory efforts of the local MP, Independent Cathy McGowan. The Indi experience informs recent debates on the role and place of citizen participation in contemporary institutions of representative democracy.
Introduction

Commentators of the state of contemporary democracy paint a mixed picture. Some describe deep distrust amongst citizens towards politics and a growing disillusionment with traditional party politics (Hay 2007; Hibbing Theiss-Morse 2002). From this perspective, the democratic future looks bleak: people particularly the young are turning away from all things political, and actively despising politicians, parties, elections and the system itself (Flinders 2012). Others argue that citizens are not ‘anti-politics’ but they are changing how and where they participate in politics (Dalton 2013, Norris 2011). Instead of joining political parties and voting, many citizens are embracing alternative forms of political expression and participation: they go to spaces online and offline to participate in ways they can, when they can (Bang 2003; Vromen 2003).

What is fair less contested is that modern democracies are in a rapid state of flux. Citizens, especially young people, are increasingly demanding to have a voice in matters that affect them (Dalton 2008, 2009). New spaces of political mobilisation and participation are opening up, many facilitated by the digital age (Allen and Light 2015; Bennet and Sergerberg 2012; Loader and Mecrea 2012). Around the globe, experiments in novel forms of public participation and democratic innovation are taking place (Fung and Wright 2003; Gastil and Levine 2005; Nabatchi et al 2012). Collectively, these changes represent a significant shift in the way citizens’ view and practice democracy.

Against this dynamic backdrop, conventional systems of representative democracy remain in place. Elections are still announced, political parties compete, campaigns fought, votes cast, and politicians elected. In other words, democracy in modern complex societies continues to be enacted in large part through the procedures of periodic elections and the performances of elected representatives. In the standard procedures of representative democracy, citizen participation is typically limited to voting and party participation (Somerville 2011; Fung 2006). Beyond formal democratic institutions, there is of course a rich world of more informal citizen participation such as protests, petitions, boycotts and digital campaigns (Allen and Light 2015; Hooghe and Marien, 2014). However, in many electorates there is an increasing disconnect between the
formal processes of periodic elections and the more informal spaces where citizens express and advocate their political views. The consequences of such disconnection are significant: not only do elected representatives risk losing touch with their constituents, but the core principles of representative democracy – representation and accountability – are deeply eroded (Mansbridge 2004).

In this paper, I consider what a more participatory form of representative democracy might look like. Rather than propose a series of institutional reforms or democratic innovations, I turn to practice itself and consider how one community in north-west Victoria Australia is seeking to transform its existing democratic institutions. Local communities have long been recognised as important sites of participatory governance and innovation (Putnam 1993; Stoker 2004). However, what is unusual about the case discussed here, the federal electorate of Indi, is how a group of local people used participatory approaches to reinvigorate and ultimately reshape the electoral landscape in the region, with consequences for national politics. The story of Indi sheds light on how participation can be incorporated more fully into the conventional processes of representative democracy, and the opportunities and challenges this generates.

In what follows, I briefly introduce the recent political history of Indi. Next I explore a series of participatory phases that have been unfolding in Indi since 2012. My account draws on extensive qualitative data including interviews, media coverage, campaign material, speeches, electoral data as well as relevant commentaries and policy documents. In ‘retelling’ the Indi story through the lens of participation, I show how participatory efforts have not only reconnected constituents to their elected member, but they have reinvigorated how the electorate views, and engages in, politics more broadly. In the final section of the paper I discuss how the case informs recent debates on political participation and representation in contemporary politics.
**The recent democratic experiences of Indi**

The Indi electorate is a federal division located in north-east Victoria, Australia with a population of around 130,000. Its composition is a mix of rural towns as well as three large regional centres including Wangaratta, Wodonga and Benalla.¹

In the 2013 federal election, the seat of Indi became the focus of national attention when an independent candidate, Cathy McGowan, ousted a sitting Liberal member, Sophie Mirabella. The Indi result was a national news story for several reasons. First, McGowan’s victory came as a complete shock to almost anyone from outside Indi. The electorate was one of the safest conservative seats in the country and had been predominately held by the Liberal Party since the 1949 election (AEC 2013). Second, independents rarely get elected into the lower house of the Australian federal parliament, and McGowan was the first female independent to do so (Gauja 2015). Third, it was a nail-biting finish with all the drama of counting errors (Wright 2013). After 10 days of waiting, Mirabella finally conceded defeat, with McGowan being elected on preferences mostly from the Australia Labor Party and the Greens. Fourth, Indi bucked the national trend: there was a 9% swing against the sitting Liberal member despite a national swing of 3.6% in the opposite direction (Green 2013).

Three years later, in 2016, another federal election saw Indi back in the national spotlight. This time McGowan was the incumbent with Mirabella recontesting to win back the seat for the Liberal party. McGowan was successfully re-elected, this time on first preferences. She won by a margin of 8705 votes after preferences were distributed (two candidate preferred)(AEC 2016).² At least for now, the seat of Indi remains in the hands of a local independent member.

For a nation whose electoral politics is dominated by strong party politics (Gauja 2015), the events in Indi over the past five years are remarkable. Indi has become ‘a story’ that has attracted three main political interpretations.

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¹An electoral boundary change in 2010 saw an additional 10,000 voters in the electorate many located on the NSW fringes of Melbourne. For an excellent overview of the political history of the seat of Indi prior to 2013 (see Curtin and Costar 2013).

For many, the Indi experience is consistent with a broader disconnectedness that many Australian electorates (particularly federal electorates) have been experiencing for some time (Costar and Curtin 2004). As in many rural electorates, the people of Indi are casting their votes in favour of independents over major political parties (Curtin and Costar 2013; Rodrigues and Brenton 2010).

Recent political events in Indi have also been interpreted as an extraordinary example of the power of being a well-connected local candidate, or what others have termed the ‘friends and neighbour’ effect in politics (Key 1949 cited in McAllister 2013). This particular interpretation of Indi surfaced amongst some conservative media commentators, particularly following the 2013 Federal election. For example, in 2014 Patrick Byrne (from the Christian lobby group, National Civic Council) argued that McGowan conducted a well-orchestrated campaign against Mirabella in which she used her feminist friends, her extended family and connections as well as ‘left-wing forces to effectively rally behind’. He also claims she had the strong support of the local media, especially the Border Mail.

A third and popular interpretation of Indi’s recent electoral experiences is to see it as part of the rising personalisation of politics in Australia (McAllister 2013). This has been the predominant narrative of Indi in the local and national media (e.g. Kennedy 2013, Legge 2013), with commentators depicting a personal ‘battle’ between two starkly different political personalities: ‘Ms Disliked’ (Mirabella) and ‘Queen of Nice’ (McGowan). In this interpretation, Indi is a story largely about who ‘Cathy’ is, her political etiquette and savvy campaigns, rather than how she leads and represents. For example, according to one commentator (Kennedy 2013):

   Cathy McGowan had the edge in her electorate thanks to her following basic rural etiquette: show up, and be nice.

In this paper, I interpret the recent political experiences in Indi through the lens of participation. I argue that participation was a strong feature of the community
activism that led to the reengagement of the Indi electorate in federal politics and in the way McGowan has subsequently conducted her ongoing constituency relations. These largely untold participatory aspects of the Indi story deserve greater analytical attention for they shed light on what can happen when representative democracy takes a participatory turn.

The participatory story of Indi story
My exploration of the participatory dimensions of the Indi story draws on multiple data sources, including interviews with members of the Voices4Indi (V4I) movement and Cathy McGowan; articles and commentaries in national and local press; relevant websites and Twitter accounts; speeches (campaign launch, victory, election night); publically available material from McGowan electoral office/website; publications by McGowan (on rural communities, public participation, and her role and experience as an independent MP) and electoral data from the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC).

In the following sections, I examine six overlapping, yet distinct, phases of participation that have unfolded in Indi since 2000.

Phase I: Non-participation - constituency neglect
The first phase, which occurred between 2001 and 2012, is a story of non-participation. During this period the federal seat of Indi was held by the liberal member, Sophie Panopolous (whose married name became Mirabella). Sophie Mirabella was a controversial local member who was seen by many constituents as a Melbourne lawyer with no connection to the region (Curtin & Costar 2013). She was also not particularly well known for actively connecting with her constituents. At one community meeting she reportedly told the audience that ‘the people of Indi weren’t interested in politics’ (Elder 2013). Subsequent events would reveal how badly she had misinterpreted the democratic discontent of the people in her electorate.

Like many voters in non-marginal safe electorates across Australia, by 2012 Indi residents were beginning to feel that their vote (and hence voice) did not count. According to Alana Johnson, one of the founding members of V4I (Interview
In 2012 we're looking at an electorate that had an increasing sense that we were a voiceless backwater. No-one took any notice of us, neither party, because we were such a safe seat. The Labor party would never put any resources into the electorate, and so there was really never any active competition for the seat... there was also a sense that our electorate was missing out. We were also looking at other electorates that were marginal....like Bendigo ....and it had strong muscle power. ...People also felt that there was no place to be heard ...there was a great sense that we really didn't even have an MP as, at that stage, the current member's career aspirations through the Liberal party were so far removed from Indi and that she really ignored her electorate.

Political participation amongst the youth was also particularly low, as Johnson explains (Interview 09.09.16):

At the time we were also hearing young people say, 'What's the point of voting because nothing will ever change.' It hadn't changed in their lifetime basically. So there was this sense that, ah, young people weren't even enrolling to vote...because they felt like their vote was worthless.

**Phase II: participation to re-engage locals in federal politics**

By mid-2012, there was rising frustration in the Indi community with a lack of political voice. This combined with the gender politics playing out during Julia Gillard’s Prime Ministership, inspired a group of about 20 people from within the Indi electorate to meet in the local library to discuss the state of democracy in their region. These meetings began secretly in late August 2012, as two of the participants describe (Klose and Haines 2013):

So constrained was political discourse in the area – and so strong was Sophie Mirabella’s grip on the seat – that these meetings began with a distinctly clandestine edge, for fear of retribution in participants' professional or personal lives. This motley group of various political colours became Voice for Indi [which later rebranded to Voices4Indi], and their goal was to begin a conversation that had not been taking place in Indi for a very long time – a conversation about needs, values and
political leadership.

The Voice for Indi (V4I) movement began with a number of overlapping goals. On the one hand they had an explicit intention to “be a voice for the people of Indi” and to “act as a conduit to our federal representative” (V4I 2013, p. 2). But it also sought to provide a “new means for political action” by “mobilis[ing] a voting public that is well informed and engaged, and develop[ing] political representation that is receptive and open to the broader community” (p.3).

To mobilise the community around a new way of doing politics, V4I engaged the community in various participatory activities, including over 55 Kitchen Table Conversations (KTC). Originally designed by Mary Crooks (VWT 2000, 2007),3 Kitchen Table Conversations involve a group of around 10 people meeting at a host’s house to participate in a structured, facilitated discussion guided by a set of questions (with one participant scribing) (Capper 2013). The Indi KTCs were structured around a series of starter questions such as:

- what makes for a strong community?
- what concerns do you feel should be brought to the attention of your elected representatives?
- what do you think makes for a really good political representative?
- are there particular issues of concern that you feel strongly about?

The citizens’ thoughts and opinions were recorded and collated into a Report (see V4I 2013).

According to Alana Johnson, the KTC not only mobilised people but it shifting the sense of democratic possibility in the electorate (quoted in Capper 2013):

> The Kitchen Table Conversations created a vehicle or a place that was not only welcoming and safe, because it didn’t matter what your party politics were, but you were there because your ideas were going to be valued.

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3 Instigated and run by local people, KTCs have been used by community groups to generate public debate across Victoria on controversial themes such as privatization of public assets and water reform (VWT 1999; 2007).
Up until this point, the V4I movement was about re-engaging people in politics and bringing their voice to the attention of the local member. As Johnson explains (Interview 09.09.16):

So we were trying to actually bring back and demonstrate the art of listening...and also the gift of listening. That when you listen to people, you actually accord them a huge amount of respect and worthiness and inclusiveness.

A small group (which included McGowan) arranged to present their cumulated report to the local member Sophie Mirabella. In the brief meeting – it ran for a mere 11 minutes – Mirabella is reported to have said: ‘the people of Indi are not interested in politics’ (Elder 2013). On local issues she is said to have summarised by saying (quoted in Elder 2013): “There are three issues: cost of living, cost of living, cost of living”.

**Phase III: The limits of informal participation - a step towards formal power**

As a result of Mirabella’s unwillingness to listen and engage with V4I, the movement began to reconsider other democratic opportunities, such as finding a candidate to run against her. Through the KTC process, the movement had heard first hand that there was an appetite for a different kind of elected representative. As Johnson explained (cited in Capper 2013):

It became really apparent people wanted more from their representatives, they wanted a different type of relationship with their representative, and many wanted their representative to be a rural person who understood them.

This was a difficult moment in the life of the V4I: it represented a decision to step into the adversarial politics it has so explicitly rejected. According to Johnson (Interview 09.09.16) there were divided views within the movement on which way to go. On the one hand some felt the political urge to engage in electoral politics and win Indi a more responsive elected representative. Then one the other hand there were those who wanted to focus on reinvigorated democracy in Indi by empowering people to engage and participate in politics beyond voting. Both
sides of the movement were passionate about creating democratic change – but one from within the formal system to achieve a political outcome, and the other from outside the formal system with a focus on community engagement and process.

Ultimately, the movement decided to take a combined approach, which was conceptualised as a ladder (see Figure 1). One side of the ladder represented participatory democracy, and other the side of the ladder, the election campaign. The two sides of the ladder were stabilised by various ‘rungs’ of community activities (Johnson, Interview 09.09.16).

This two-sided strategy involved the movement endorsing an independent candidate to run in the forthcoming 2013 federal election: Cathy McGowan. Prior to politics, McGowan worked as a farmer, community worker and teacher. Between the 1980s and early 2000s McGowan focused on the role of women in agriculture. Here she learnt numerous political skills, including the value of participation and inclusion (McGowan 2014). Her decision to stand for the 2013 election was strongly influenced by the lack of services for young people in rural and regional Australia (McGowan 2014).
Phase IV: a community-driven election campaign

To promote their candidate the V4I movement shifted gears and began running a savvy election campaign. The movement’s election campaigns differed from those of the big party machines: they combined traditional on the ground community activities (bush-dances, singing circles, movie nights, protest rallies and so on) with sophisticated on-line activities (targeted use of social media, crowd-funding to source donations, and managing their campaign efforts using the US developed political software, Nationbuilder) (Klose and Haines 2013). They also undertook some unorthodox campaign techniques such as ‘cash mobbing’ where a group spends money collectively at a small business and then circulates the story via social media to promote a cause (Cassidy 2013).

One particularly participatory aspect of the election campaign, according to Johnson (Interview 09.09.16), was the form and nature of the campaign offices or ‘hubs’ as they became known. The ‘hubs’ were meeting spaces where people came to volunteer, but which also represented sites of community activity and fun where people would share creative works, food or thoughts on the campaign. Overall, the campaign was an extensive community effort involving over 600 volunteers, 1000 donors and 5000 online supporters (Klose and Haines 2013).

Another unusual aspect of McGowan election campaign was that, from the start, the movement was committed to changing the tone of election campaign. Each volunteer was required to sign a ‘values statement’ which amongst other things rejected negative personal politics. For many people who were motivated by the desire to oust Mirabella, this was a difficult but important part of the campaign’s success (Johnson, Interview, 09.09.16).

In the weeks leading up the 2013 election, the movement began to realise that it was closer to realising formal political change in Indi than many had previously thought possible. As two members of the V4I movement explained (Klose and Haines 2013):

Indi has never seen anything like this before. For the first time in living memory, thousands of people from all walks of life were engaging in politics and having a say in how they would like to see their electorate
represented. For too long they had been taken for granted. Labor knew it couldn't win it, so it hadn't ever bothered trying; the Liberals knew they were going to win, so they didn't bother either.

The final Indi result in the 2013 Federal election was extremely close. After 10 days of counting, McGowan stepped up to be the newly elected member winning by a margin of just 439 votes (AEC 2103).

**Phase V: participatory recalibration and outreach**

In the wake of McGowan's electoral victory, the V4I movement had to reconsider its role and function. While many had created the conditions for a new Indi elected member to step forward, only one could legitimately walk the corridors of power in Canberra.

In the post-2013 election period, V4I reconsidered its core agenda. Its narrative shifted back to one side of the ladder: improving the way people engage in democracy. Part of its narrative (which is distinct from McGowan's) is that it "exists to build an active 21st century democracy in Indi and will be involved in every election for the long term" (V4I 2016). It places particular emphasis on encouraging youth political participation (e.g. “to build a democracy in which they want to engage”) and on ensuring that the impacts of government policy on rural and regional communities are considered. In the end, they are about “people not parties and about, we the people, having the greatest influence.”

V4I has also become a champion (and trainer) of democratic reform for other communities. It runs workshops and convenes events to share the lessons on how Indi reinvigorated politics. For example, it ran an 'Indishares Summit' on participatory grassroots campaigns in 2014, which was attended by over 70 people (Chan 2014, Alcorn 2014), and another in 2015 with a focus on the next Federal election (see V4I 2015).

Following the 2013 election V4I also rebranded. This was part of an intentional strategy to delineate its participatory work from McGowan’s. Both V4I and McGowan needed to be seen by the public (and media) as distinct entities. This
rebranding had practical ramifications. For example, the colour of orange no longer belonged to V4I for it had become the signature of Cathy McGowan as an independent MP. In response, the movement rebranded itself from ‘Voice for Indi’ to ‘Voices4Indi’ - now with green as its communiqué colour.

At the time, the distinction between the participatory movement and the newly elected member was especially important for McGowan. She needed to outwardly demonstrate that she was no longer working in her role as community advocate (promoting democratic reform in Indi), but now stood as an elected representative responsive to all the people of Indi. Moreover, McGowan's close association with V4I could ironically be her political undoing. Commentators have, for example, labelled McGowan as “supported by Melbourne feminists” and suggested strong ties with left-wing political actors in Victoria (Byrne 2014).

Today this is how McGowan describes the distinction between her work and that of V4I (Interview 16.03.16):

I'm an advocate for the electorate and I'm going to bring everyone with me ...Voice for Indi is not about me being elected. They're not Cathy McGowan, they're not the Member for Indi, they're a philosophical group about participatory democracy....

In practice, the distinction between V4I and McGowan dissolves especially in their participatory and campaign efforts. There are overlapping memberships between those in the V4I group that brought McGowan into power, and those that volunteer for her electoral campaigns. This is something that McGowan intimates in her 2016 campaign speech (McGowan 2016):

My role as I see it, is to be the elected representative in Canberra. To facilitate the partnership but I am not the movement. The movement is orange – it is all of us....And the most effective way for this movement to grow is by having conversations.

It is also something that the V4I movement explicitly addresses on its website: Voices for Indi is a community democracy movement, not a campaign team. As in the 2013 election campaign, some individual members of the V4I team are also active leaders in the Cathy McGowan election campaign while others are less involved. Similarly, some have previous memberships of political
parties and others do not.

The relationship between V4I and McGowan appears to be an ongoing theme that both are seeking to publicly (and privately) manage.

**Phase VI: participatory constituency relations - McGowan in office**

One of the least well-known participatory aspects of the Indi story is the range of participatory activities undertaken by Cathy McGowan in her role as Federal Member for Indi. McGowan entered parliament with extensive skills in community building and outreach, which she is adapting and applying to her work as an elected representative. As she explains (Interview 16.03.16):

So how do you engage people? So you use the tools that are available... And I’m a skilled community developer, that’s what I’ve always done...

McGowan’s community-based approach is reflected in the way she utilises her parliamentary office. It contains various whiteboards listing projects and priorities, and pieces of well-used butcher’s paper with coloured scribbles hanging all around the room. McGowan’s office is an active space where the voices and projects of people from Indi hang (literally) from the walls. It looks like it belongs to a community outreach officer from local government rather than a federal member in Parliament House.

As an MP, McGowan has continued to use Kitchen Table Conversations along with many other mechanisms for consultation and communication to engage and stay connected with her constituents. Collectively, McGowan describes this as a “large consultation campaign” involving numerous activities, many listed in Figure 2.
Community Engagement

Kitchen Table Conversations (March - May 2013)
425 people, 55 conversations across 40 postcodes

Election Reflection & Next Steps (November 2013)
120 people, Benalla
We asked “did we make a difference” and “how can we keep our issues to the forefront, and get solutions for what matters to us?”

IndiShares (June 2014)
90 people, Oxley
Sharing the indi Way with organisations and individuals from across Australia – how we listened, committed, planned and worked together.

IndiTalks Democracy (October 2014)
220 people, Swanpool and Yackandandah
Dr Simon Longstaff AO, Executive Director of the St James Ethics Centre, and Tony Windsor, former independent federal politician, led community hall conversations about ethics in politics, the contemporary practice of politics in Australia, and how citizens can influence the political process.

INDI Issues to Canberra
Well over 2000 people actively engaged in democracy through the Budget Impact Tour, Get in Cathy’s Ear Postcards, and Kitchen Table Conversations, as well as community meetings across Indi.

Pre-Indi Summit Working Groups (July- September 2015)
60 people, across the electorate
14 Pre-Summit Discussion papers were developed and submitted by groups of community members with specific interests and expertise. They met face to face and electronically to prepare the discussion papers.

Indi Summit (October 2015)
220 people, 15 facilitators, 4 guest speakers
Post Summit working groups (continuing)
At least 50 people (and room for more) community volunteers who met at the Summit are actively working on actions from ideas generated at the Summit.

Figure 2: A self-reported list of participatory activities undertaken by McGowan 2013-2015 (from McGowan 2015b. p. 5)
It is worth noting that a number of the engagement activities listed by McGowan in Figure 1 were undertaken by the V4I movement including the KTCs in 2013, as well as the Indishares and IndiTalks Democracy events. Here we see clear evidence of the intertwined nature of V4I movement and McGowan’s participatory style of representation.

In addition to the activities listed in Figure 1, McGowan has also conducted another round of KTCs to explore emerging issues in her electorate in the lead up to the 2016 election. (These built on but were a distinct set of conversations to those conducted by Voice4Indi in 2013). In this round, 103 conversations were held involving 610 people, with each conversation submitting an online report that was then summarized into a final report (McGowan 2015a).

McGowan also uses participatory processes to source views from her electorate about decisions in Canberra. For example, following the 2015/2016 budget, McGowan conducted a Budget Impact Tour which involved receiving feedback on the budget via ‘listening posts’, online surveys and contact with McGowan’s office (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: McGowan’s Budget Impact Tour in 2015
(from McGowan 2015c p.2)
Then there are mechanisms used by McGowan to update her electorate on relevant issues/events. For example, weekly newsletters (Indi Weekly Scoop), Videos, as well as active use of her website and social media platforms including Twitter and Facebook. Like other MPs, McGowan is also out and about frequently in her electorate and has undertaken a number of ‘valley visits’ and school tours/visits. She has also established an internship program with ANU where undergraduates can experience political life by working in Parliament.4

McGowan is also keen to bring her constituents to parliament through a Volunteers Program. This is more than civics education; it is designed to encourage her constituents to utilise the political system for the issues they care about and to improve their understanding of opportunities for influence. Participation here is used to make her constituent’s better lobbyists and advocates (McGowan, Interview 16.03.16). By early June 2016, over 85 volunteers from the Indi electorate had taken up this opportunity (McGowan 2016). According to one of these volunteers (from a small business background), the scheme has been invaluable because it has provided her with greater insights into how their voices can affect change (Interview, 16.03.16):

A lot of people feel, I think, disillusioned that sometimes there’s not a conduit between their real life needs and what they see as perhaps bureaucratic systems. But this volunteer program has been great…. I absolutely see that needs are being met and the voices coming through. Many people in small business do not know how to access or how to be heard at this level…but I now see that somebody is speaking up for you…. we do have a way to, you know, have some input.

The Volunteer program reflects McGowan’s pedagogical approach to participation. For her, participation is about encouraging people to learn how the democratic system works so that they can then work with it to get the outcomes they seek. McGowan explains this empowerment approach as follows (Interview 16.03.16):

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... what I’m trying to do is say to everybody, here’s what the rules are. It’s open slather. If you can get in, get your case organised, go and see the - work out the parties and how they work, because they all follow rules. Play the game, coming from a competitive seat you’re in a strong position, you know, work both the parties, do the system that you need to do, get in there and play the game.

The following comment from one volunteer suggest that the scheme is making Canberra appear more accessible: (Interview, 16.03.16):

This program certainly allows for that circle of influence to be really tapped into. ...just talking to a few of those [volunteers] about their experience and it’s been fairly consistent in that it was a real eye opener, but they also now understand that accessibility of Canberra. And I think Cathy’s always been very accessible as a person...but I think the surprise has been the accessibility to the rest of government.

Overall, McGowan is an active user of various forms of participation in her role as an elected representative. She employs participation for various ends: to mobilise support, to keep the community updates, to hear what the community wants, and to empower people to engage in the political process. She also explicitly uses participatory approaches to get re-elected (Interview 16.03.16):

I’m standing for election and I want to get re-elected and I’m going to use these [participatory] tools to get re-elected and I’m really clear about what my process is.
Discussion: Democratic insights from the Indi’s participatory experiences

In drawing attention to various participatory phases of recent political events in Indi, we see that there is a rich democratic experience unfolding in the electorate. Below I discuss three key lessons that Indi offers about the effect of participation on representative democracy.

1. Participation can re-engage communities in the democratic process.
Participation can be used as a means to reengage people and their communities in politics. The reinvigoration of political life in an electorate is an important yet oft overlooked aspect of the Indi experience. Indeed political reengagement was the fundamental goal of what V4I set out to achieve. In the wake of the 2013 election, two core members of movement explained (Klose and Haines 2013):

> While the rest of Australia switched off at this election, we switched on. We are now an engaged electorate. The people of Indi are claiming the power to be the architects and authors of our community’s future. Whoever is elected as the Member for Indi will have a strong, engaged, opinionated community to answer to and that is a win for any democracy.

While becoming a competitive seat has certainly helped to re-politicise the electorate, the participatory experiences in Indi appear to have shifted the way people talk and think about politics, and democracy more broadly. In 2014, McGowan made the following observations on a television panel discussing the state of Australian democracy (ABC 2014):

> I think there's a general sense that there’s apathy ... But my experience of what's happening in rural and regional Australia and certainly in Wangaratta and north-east Victoria is that's how it was and it's changing. And some of the work we’re doing up here is absolutely making a difference. We had some seminars a couple of weeks ago looking at democracy and we had over 250 people turn up to country halls to talk about - and the topic was democracy. And the level of discussion and the level of interest was huge. So, I’m thinking that we're actually on a cusp between how things were and the movement that we’re creating here is really creating some change... I think [there is] enormous interest in what the future, what 21st
Century democracy really could look like.

It is not just that people in Indi are talking and thinking about politics, it's the nature of those political conversations. According to Dennis Giovannan, one of the founding members of V4I (pers comm. 1 August 2016):

I think politics has transformed locally...the people of Indi are talking beyond two parties....so what's happened is that the tone of politics has elevated and when people have conversations about politics now, it just seems more mature...

2. Participation can strengthen connections between elected representatives and their constituents.

The Indi case also demonstrates that there is an important role for participation in strengthening links between representatives and their constituencies. When done effectively, participatory approaches enable representatives to move well beyond standard notions of constituency activity such as fund raising, attending local functions and speaking at public meetings (Studlar and McAllister 1996).

McGowan's style of representation demonstrates that electorates respond positively when their representative actively connects and listens to constituents on an on-going basis not just during campaigns when they are seeking re-elections. As an independent, she has been able to focus on policy issues (such as infrastructure) rather than being consumed by party related matters. This attention to 'policy' has been core to McGowan's political narrative, which she describes as (2015b): “The ‘Indi way’ – policy over personality, people over politics”.

Another key element of McGowan’s electoral success is that she understands how to work directly with communities, how to engage them and how to empower them. This is a product of her career working closely with rural communities, and in particular working with, and for, women (McGowan 2014). As she explains (Interview 16.03.16):

... most of my politics I've learnt through the feminist movement, about being open and inclusive and listening for the other voices.
In many respects, McGowan’s participatory approach to political representation embodies Mansbridge’s (2009) ‘selection model’ where representatives are intrinsically motivated to make good public policy. According to Mansbridge (2009) this has normative benefits over the more common ‘sanction model’ (where representatives are primarily motivated by re-election) because it encourages voters to select “a representative who is honest, competent, and already has policy goals much like the constituents” (p. 370). To work effectively, this kind of political representation “demands a communicative relationship” between the representative and those being represented (p. 392). This kind of selection model of representation is evident in much of McGowan’s political work: she a self-motivated agent who actively employs forms of citizen engagement to enhance relationships with citizens, and to ensure that her objectives and those of her constituencies are well aligned. Unable to lean on party affiliation, she has had to work hard at demonstrating her intrinsic motivations. She interacts regularly with her constituents so that they are well placed to judge her internal motivations. She has used participatory processes to enable her constituency to get to know her, build trust, and to form a kind of partnership relationship.

The participatory and reflective aspects of McGowan’s style of being an elected representative appear to come naturally to her. Indeed she does not believe what she is doing is particularly radical. McGowan’s own interpretation of the way she enacts representation is that she is simply trying to make the democratic system work as it should (Interview 16.03.16):

> I’m fundamentally a great believer in people participating in democracy … finding ways for people to participate in democracy so that their needs can be met. …So the system, to me, works. It’s a good system, and I don’t want to change it. And I’m not doing anything other than working the system that already exists, quite frankly.

The effectiveness and popularity of McGowan’s participatory style was put to the ultimate accountability test in the 2016 federal election. The electorate seem to like her style of representative politics and what she is achieving. Her victory is not just the product of another savvy election campaign (Price 2016); more
importantly it suggests that the Indi electorate trust and value the way she works as an elected representative. Consider the follow tweet she sent just after the announcement of the election result:\(^5\)

> Hard work and being a good local member of parliament helped create this victory. People have chosen the future. Indi matters #indivotes

Later in her victory speech, she is reported to have said (Quoted in Klose 2016):

> This election result demonstrated that people want a local representative who will put them first and above party politics. People want positive politics. If you keep to your values and keep positive, the people will respond and you can win.

Reflecting on McGowan’s 2016 Federal election win, Cam Klose, a founding member of V4I, argues (2016):

> In an era when political expediency often comes above values, and the major parties are finding an increasingly apathetic and hostile electorate, Cathy's victory in this election shows there is another way to do politics. It doesn't have to be based on fear, division and reductive slogans: In many cases, the electorate is actually crying out to be treated like adults.

### 3. Participation blurs the informal and formal spaces of democracy

This far I have discussed how participation can strengthen how citizens engage in both the informal spaces of democracy (through the participatory activities of a community movement) as well as in the formal procedures of representative democracy (through the participatory activities of an elected representative). Here I discuss how participation can also blur the boundaries between the informal and formal spaces of democratic systems. Here I am referring to how the participatory activities that were closely associated with a grass roots community movement became a core part of the political work of an elected representative in parliament. Such ‘coupling’ between the informal and formal spaces of our democratic system is thought to have normative advantages because it helps to ensure effective transmission of public concerns into decision making venues (Mansbridge et al 2012). The case of Indi provides insights into

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\(^5\) Tweet from Cathy McGowan’s Twitter account, @Indigocathy, 2 July 2016.
how the informal world of the public sphere and formal worlds of electoral politics can productively integrate, but also highlights the challenges that can arise when the distinction between the two blurs.

There are some particular aspects in Indi that make for an effective relationship between the informal democratic work of a community movement and the formal representative role of an elected representative. First, there is a long, close and productive working relationship between those in the V4I movement, and McGowan as a formal political representative. Second, they share a common commitment to community engagement and empowerment. While the movement includes many men, according to McGowan, one reason the 'Indi way' works is a strong commitment by her and the movement to feminist principles (Interview 16.03.16):

So I've always been a feminist, I've always been a community organiser, I've always worked with women, I've always worked in the patriarchy. I know it. It doesn't frustrate me. I understand it. How can I use it? So.... then in Voices for Indi there's a lot of women. Because we've all worked together, we know each other. ... We're inclusive and open... we are truly feminist in our work.

However, the Indi experience reveals that such democratic coupling can carry risks for both community movements and elected representatives.

For V4I, it risks losing its critical edge by associating too closely with McGowan. This is a common conundrum that civil society groups face when they are invited to step into the realm of formal politics (Dryzek et al 2003): is it more effective to work with those in power at the risk of co-option, or stand at a critical distance?. In Indi there is a slightly different kind of tension: the blurring of participatory initiatives (and their brand) that emerge from outside the system (V4I) and those occurring within the formal system (as part of McGowan's constituency relations).

For McGowan, there are also challenges ahead as she navigates between her ‘outsider’ and ‘insider’ activities. McGowan's political character is cast as a political outsider: to the electorate she is projected as a ‘normal local person just
like you’. This appeal to ordinariness is particularly evident in her 2016 election campaign material where she runs as ‘Cathy’, who is ‘local, independent and effective’. However, the longer McGowan stays in federal parliament the more she risks being viewed as a ‘political insider’ who is part of the formal system.

The other challenge participatory representatives like McGowan face is managing community expectations. This is something that all elected leaders face but it is particularly challenging when you are bringing people so actively with you as they necessarily face many of the highs and the lows of politics. As her 2016 campaign manager, Phil Haines put it (Price 2016):

*Cathy’s got her failings like all people have, so she’s not the Messiah...I don’t think people should expect she’s going to solve things. I think what she can demonstrate is a different way to bring people with you.*

For McGowan there was a life before politics, and there will be one afterwards as well. As she puts it (McGowan 2014, p.54): “being an Independent MP is one station on a life-time journey.”

### Conclusion

*Only two years ago Indi was ignored by both major political parties, it was an electoral backwater. A long-held Liberal seat with seemingly no real choice for voters. Today Indi is known across the country as an example of a modern democracy at work and there is constant interest and reference to Indi in state and national media. The people of Indi are now heard in a positive and constructive way and many other electorates are seeking to achieve the same result.*

(V4I 2016)

The lessons from Indi for scholars of democracy are both sobering and inspiring. From Indi, we learn about the deep frustrations that some citizens feel about the conduct and institutions of contemporary representative democracy. In 2012 many residents in Indi felt abandoned by the political system: the local member at the time appeared unresponsive, the party system offered few choices and, in such a safe seat, the act of voting felt worthless. Yet rather than disconnect (as many citizens do) a group of locals formed a community movement to bring
people back into the political landscape. Collectively their efforts to mobilise the community through participatory processes and informal gatherings switched democracy on. They reinvigorated local democracy by making political discussion meaningful to local people: they sought people’s views, they listened and they made it fun. Politically they have made considerable progress: as the movement gained momentum their voices became more politically significant, and subsequently the electorate has become a competitive seat.

There are several broad lessons from this case for democratic theory and practice. First, Indi sheds light on how participation can be used in different stages of the representative model. Participation in the Indi electoral has been used for community mobilisation, electoral reengagement, campaigning and political representation.

Second, the Indi story suggests that it is possible to connect two increasingly disconnected parts of our democratic systems: the informal world of political expression, and the formal system of political representation. One of the successful elements of the V4I movement has been its capacity not just to mobilise and engage, but to make politics positive and fun for everyday people. The story of V4I is more than sophisticated community-organizing; it is a story of how communities are reproducing and relying on quasi-institutional participatory forums to mediate between local communities and the official world of formal political institutions. In this case, the transformative impact of various participatory activities on the functioning of mainstream democratic activities well exceeds what community organizing and citizen activism traditionally achieves. What began as a small group of disgruntled voters talking together resulted in significant changes in local and national politics.

Third, McGowan’s two community-driven electoral campaigns provides evidence that competitive elections can be successfully won when candidates focus on issues and people, rather than parties and personalities. Her ongoing attempts to communicate and empower her constituency demonstrates that political representation can be activated well beyond the goal of re-election. McGowan’s ‘participatory’ approach to representation is facilitated in part because of her
freedom as an Independent, but also because she is (at least for now) viewed as an everyday local person who has made it into the formal world of politics.

Whether the democratic experiences of Indi might be replicated in other electorates, especially those rife with party politics, remains to be seen. However, what all elected representatives and political parties can perhaps learn from Indi is this: contemporary citizens want (and reward) political representatives when they interact and actively listen to their constituents and focus on representing and achieving policy outcomes.
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