

Forthcoming in *Australian Journal of Political Science*

Citizen-led democratic reform: Innovations in Indi

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Abstract

Contemporary political systems are experiencing a democratic disconnect between formal institutions of representative government, and the more informal spaces of political participation. Rather than offer an institutional remedy, this article turns to practice and considers how citizens themselves are seeking to transform dysfunctional democratic practices. The article provides an in-depth analysis of democratic events that have unfolded between 2012 and 2016 in the Australian federal electorate of Indi. The analysis explores the intertwined participatory efforts of the citizens' group, Voices4Indi, and the local Independent federal member MP, Cathy McGowan. The Indi experience demonstrates that while citizens may be frustrated with 'politics as usual', they are not rejecting the system but rather instigating creative democratic reforms.

Keywords: democracy, participation, citizen engagement, movements, community,

Introduction

Emerging democratic trends suggest a growing disconnect between formal democratic institutions, and the informal ways in which people are choosing to engage in politics. Membership in mass political parties is in decline eroding their capacity to act as effective vehicles for collective political representation (Whiteley 2011; Mair 2013). In most liberal democracies citizens have little direct involvement in formal politics (Stoker 2006) and are increasingly distrustful of political elites (Dalton 2013). Yet in the realm of informal politics citizens appear to be engaging actively in various spaces of communication and contention, particularly on specific issues they care about (Bang 2009, Norris 2011; Micheletti and McFarland 2015). So rather than join a political party many citizens are preferring to join advocacy groups, participate in protest movements, sign online petitions, connect and share via social media, write blogs, boycott products, engage in urban interventions or crowd-fund political issues (Marsh and Akram 2015; Theorcharis and Van Deth 2016).

Reconnecting citizens to the formal world of representative democracy is a central challenge for modern politics. Pessimists contend that contemporary citizens dislike politics and would prefer to leave collective decisions to experts; they reluctantly participate only to hedge against corrupt self-interested elites (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Yet emerging empirical research challenges this claim and suggests that while citizens may be dissatisfied with 'politics as usual' they would be willing to engage in a more participatory and non-partisan form of politics (Neblo et al 2009). Drawing on experiments in which citizens engaged online with their member of US congress, Neblo et al (2010) found that citizens will recalibrate their engagement with politics if they are given meaningful opportunities to participate (Neblo et al 2010). Similarly, recent survey research in Australia involving hypothetical questions suggests that citizens want to reconnect with representative practice, and that they "would respond positively to a more open politics" (Evans and Stoker 2016 p. 284). What remains unclear, however, is "what reforms might convince citizens that politics is more open and attract them towards further political engagement"? (Evans and Stoker 2016 p. 285).

To date proposals for creating more open and participatory politics have focussed on specific institutional designs, such as citizens' juries, participatory budgeting or collaborative forums, aimed at engaging citizens in political decision making (e.g. Fung and

Wright 2003; Nabatchi et al 2012, Smith 2009). In practice such participatory forums typically find their home in the context of executive government where the “functional incapacities of electoral democratic institutions and the demands and aspirations of citizens” come head to head (Warren 2009 p. 7). Over the past decade there has been a rapid uptake of participatory innovations around the globe, including in Australia (e.g. Grönlund et al 2014; Nabatchi and Amsler 2014; Weatherill 2005).¹ Research finds that while such participatory mechanisms involving citizens might generate more inclusive and deliberative conditions for policy debate, they struggle to produce long-term democratic reform (e.g. Goodin and Dryzek 2006; Johnson 2016; Michels 2011). In practice one-off participatory events typically have limited capacity to influence relevant governance institutions and their elites (Papadopoulos 2012). As Pateman (2012 p. 10) argues, designed participatory forums “are not integrated into the overall system of representative government or democratic institutions, nor do they become part of the regular political cycle in the life of a community.”

In this article I suggest that the path to reconnecting citizens to their democratic systems may not lie in specific institutional designs but in citizens themselves. Through an in-depth case study I demonstrate how in the mess of everyday local politics, creative democratic reform can emerge from citizens who are disillusioned and frustrated with existing political practices. My argument draws on democratic events that have unfolded between 2012 and 2016 in the Australian federal electorate of Indi, in north-east rural Victoria.² Indi represents a ‘revelatory case study’ (Yin 1984, 43-4); it presents a rare opportunity to study how a group of citizens creatively reengaged their community to successfully reform their formal democratic institutions. The single case study is not intended to produce grand generalizations (Stake 1994); instead it offers contextual knowledge on the complexities of ‘citizen-led’ democratic innovation, and these ‘contextual learnings’ (see Flyvbjerg 2006) are used to enrich debates political participation and democratic reform.

My approach to researching democratic reform in Indi is interpretive (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). I focus on the perspectives of citizens involved in mobilising the local community that brought Cathy McGowan to power. In the research, ‘participation’ and ‘democratic reform’ are understood not as predefined ideals but rather as constructs with particular meaning for actors in the case study. My analysis draws on multiple data sources including: interviews conducted mid to late 2016 with several members of the Voices4Indi

(V4I) group, and two interviews with the current sitting member (MP Cathy McGowan); direct observation of V4I at a community event in mid-November 2016; articles and commentaries in national and local press; relevant websites and social media accounts; and publically available material from McGowan's electoral office and website including reports, speeches and media releases.

I begin with a brief overview of the recent political events in Indi. Next I discuss six overlapping phases of citizen-led democratic reform that have unfolded in Indi between 2012 and 2016. In each phase, I draw attention to how local citizens have sought to mobilise and reengage the broader community in politics. I argue that collectively the recent participatory efforts in Indi have not only reconnected constituents to their elected representative, but they have reinvigorated how the electorate views, and engages in, politics more broadly. I conclude by reflecting on how the Indi experience informs recent scholarly debates on how to reconnect citizens to contemporary democratic systems.

Analysing Indi: a case of citizen-led democratic reform

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 a number of 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), growing her margin from 0.5% in 2013 to almost 5% (AEC 2016).

For a nation whose electoral politics is dominated by strong party politics (Gauja 2015), the events in Indi over the past decade are remarkable. 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). Some view Indi as an illustrative example of the declining trust in politicians and political parties in Australian democracy (Evans et al 2016; Grattan 2016). Others have argued that Indi's electoral experiences are indicative of the rising personalisation of politics in Australia (Economu 2013;). This has been the predominant narrative of Indi in the 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 article, I analyse the recent political experiences in Indi through the lens of democratic innovation, focussing in particular on the communities' participatory path to reform. Local communities and their associations have long been recognised as important sites of participatory governance and innovation (e.g. Putnam 1993; Warren 2001). However, what is unusual about the recent democratic reforms taking place in Indi is how a small group of local citizens in Indi, used informal participatory approaches to successfully mobilise and reconnect their broader community to the electoral process, resulting in significant changes for local and federal politics.

I turn now to discuss six overlapping, yet distinct, phases of democratic reform that have unfolded in Indi since 2012.

Phase I: Community discontent with constituency neglect

As a non-marginal safe seat the citizens of Indi have long felt that their vote (and hence voice), especially in the federal arena, did not count. This was especially so between 2001 and 2012 when the seat of Indi was held by Federal liberal party member, MP Sophie Mirabella. From the start Mirabella was a controversial local member and viewed by many constituents as a Melbourne lawyer with no connection to the region (Curtin and Costar 2013). She was also not well known for actively or constructively connecting with her

constituents (Elder 2013).

In early 2012 Mirabella's constituency neglect became a particular source of frustration for local residents as they jealously watched neighbouring electorates receive scarce political attention and resources. As one local resident, Alana Johnson, explained (Interview 09.09.16):

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...We were also looking at other electorates in the region that were marginal....like Bendigoand 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.

By mid-2012, there was rising frustration in the Indi community with a lack of political voice. Frustrations with the current MP were widespread and peaked before the 2013 federal election. According to an online poll conducted in early September 2013 by the Border mail, 69% of respondents (n=679) rated Mirabella's performance as 'very poor' (Kotsios, 2013). There were also concerns among locals about the growing political disengagement of younger generations, 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: Community mobilisation for a more engaged polity

Exasperated by the democratic status quo, a group of about 20 people from within the Indi electorate met in late August 2012 in the local library to discuss the state of democracy in their region. This was the first of a series of meetings that took place under fairly secretive conditions, as two 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 group soon formed a citizen organisation called ‘the Voice for Indi’ (V4I), which was later rebranded to Voices4Indi. V4I 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 V4I 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).

According to members of the original V4I group, their primary motivation from the outset was to reengage people in the political process. It proposed to do this in the first instance by convening a series of participatory activities to explore community concerns and ideas. In December 2012 a small group from V4I (which included McGowan) arranged to meet with the local member, Sophie Mirabella MP, to discuss their participatory proposal, and explore her willingness to engage in the process. In the brief meeting (which ran for about 10 minutes) Mirabella is reported to have said: ‘the people of Indi are not interested in politics’ (Elder 2013). Subsequent events would reveal how badly she had misinterpreted the democratic discontent of people in her electorate.

Despite Mirabella’s refusal to engage with the community, V4I went ahead with its proposal to engage local people in community conversations about politics and democracy. To this end, between March and April 2013, V4I convened 55 Kitchen Table Conversations (KTC), which involved 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).³ The 2013 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?

Collectively the KTCs not only mobilised over 400 people across the electorate but they

shifted their sense of democratic possibility (Johnson 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.

Up until this point, the V4I group was about re-engaging people in politics and bringing their voice to the attention of the local member. With this goal in mind, the citizens' thoughts and opinions from the KTCs were recorded and collated into a Report (see V4I 2013), which was then hand delivered to Mirabella's office in May 2013 (pers comm. McGowan 2017).

A more receptive elected member would have ended the story here. But according to members of the V4I, Mirabella rejected the citizens' report and it was this that triggered a serious discussion within V4I to consider other democratic opportunities, such as finding a candidate to run against her. As Johnson explained (Interview 09.09.16):

...until that point, there'd been no conversation within v4I about having a candidate or doing anything. We just were at the stage of thinking, this is such a clear, wonderful statement by the people of this electorate about what they want – that anyone would be mad not to take any notice of it. ...But Mirabella rejected our report...it was a slap in the face....and the only thing left for us to do was to stand somebody against her.

Phase III: Citizens strategize about formal power

According to members of the V4I group, the KTCs had revealed that people in the community were keen for a different kind of elected representative. As Johnson explained (cited in Capper 2013):

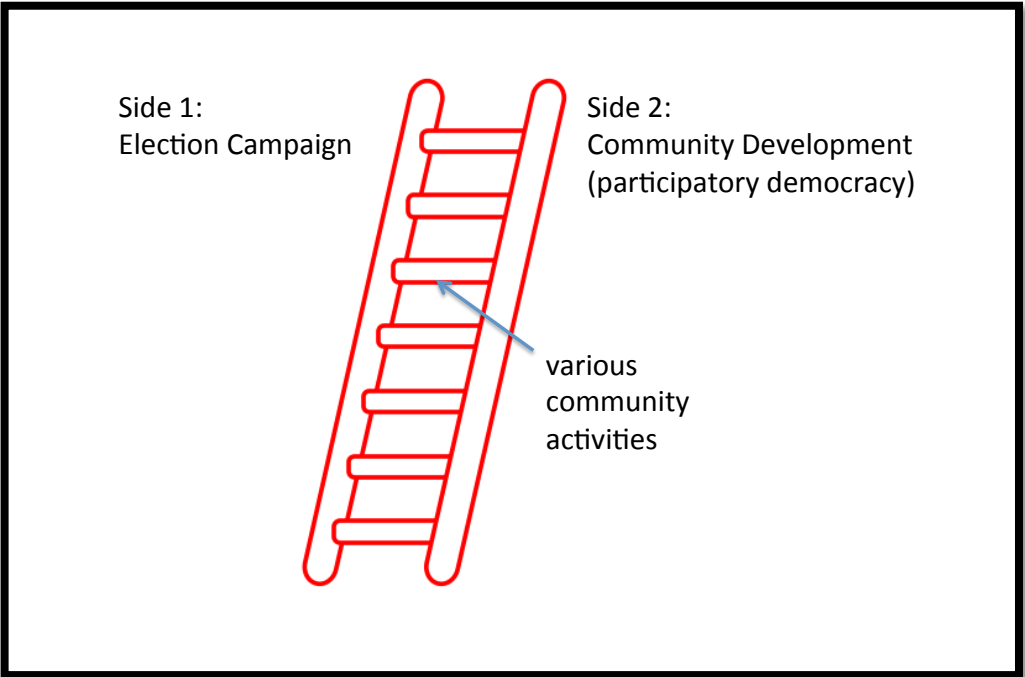
It became really apparent people wanted more from their representatives, they wanted a different type of relationship with their representative, and many wanted their representative to be a rural person who understood them.

This was a difficult moment in the life of 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 group 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 on the other hand there were those who wanted to focus on reinvigorating democracy in Indi by empowering people to engage and participate in politics beyond voting. Both sides of the V4I 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 group 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).

Figure 1: The ‘Indi Ladder’ - two sides of the V4I movement



This two-sided strategy involved the group endorsing an independent candidate to run in the forthcoming 2013 federal election: Cathy McGowan.

As the convener of V4I at the time, McGowan shifted her role from community leader to political candidate. Prior to politics, she 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). According to McGowan, her decision to step forward as an independent candidate was a response to strong calls from “the grass roots for some one to

do something.... at the time I had a strong leadership role, so there was a lot of community pressure on me...." (pers comm. McGowan 5 July 2017). She was also motivated to address the lack of services for young people in rural and regional Australia (McGowan 2014).

Phase IV: A community-driven election campaign (2013)

To promote their candidate the V4I group shifted gears and began running a savvy community-driven campaign for the 2013 election on 7 September. It is in this phase where V4I evolved from a small group into a broad grassroots movement. Like other independent candidates in Australia's two-party dominated system (e.g. Smith 2006), McGowan was unable to lean on the machinery of a party for resources and popular support. Instead McGowan's campaign was lead and powered by V4I, who helped to mobilise hundreds of volunteers. McGowan's 2013 election campaign 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). The campaign also involved some unorthodox 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). (Similar numbers were recorded for the 2016 election campaign as well, see Haines et al 2016).

Another unusual aspect of McGowan's election campaign (in both 2013 and 2016) was that, from the start, V4I was committed to changing the tone of the election campaign. Each volunteer was required to sign a 'values statement', which among 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 V4I movement began to realise that it was closer to achieving 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 2013).

Phase V: Democratic recalibration and community 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 around Australia. 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 2016 Federal election (see V4I 2015). It has also inspired similar local grass-root movements, for example, *Strathbogie Voices* and *Voices for the Valley* (Latrobe Valley).

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 V4I 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).

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.

According to McGowan there is a clear 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....

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: Citizens reconnecting with federal politics

Since McGowan entered parliament in late 2013 many citizens in Indi have been reconnecting with issues and events in federal politics. This is in large part due to various consultative activities and community events that have been convened by McGowan for various ends: to mobilise support, to keep citizens updated, to hear what the community wants, and to empower people to engage in the political process. Collectively, McGowan describes this as a “large consultation campaign” involving numerous activities, many listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Key participatory activities by McGowan 2013-2015
(from McGowan 2015a, b, c)

When	Participatory Activity	Number of Participants
Nov 2013	Election reflection and Next Steps	120 people
June 2014	IndiShares	90 people
Oct 2014	IndiTalks Democracy	220 people
March-May 2015	Kitchen Table Conversations	610 people, 103 conversations
May 2015	Budget Impact Tour = <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 Listening Posts • Community surveys • “Get in Cathy’s ear” postcards 	351 responses
July – Sept 2015	Pre-Indi Summit Working Groups	60 people
Oct 2015	Indi Summit – developing a community vision for the region	220 people

McGowan also brings 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). Between 2013 and late July 2017,, 127 volunteers from the Indi electorate had taken up this opportunity (McGowan pers. comm. 2017b). 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.

Of course, this participatory style of constituency relations is aided by the fact that McGowan is not tied down to party politics. Like other Australian independents (see Smith 2006), she has been able to focus on policy issues (such as infrastructure) rather than being consumed by party related matters. In her 2016 campaign speech she claims

responsibility for the commitment of over “\$800m of taxpayers’ money” to Indi. Her biggest regional policy achievement has been to improve mobile phone coverage by securing more than \$6.6million in Commonwealth funding (McGowan 2016). 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”.

The effectiveness and popularity of McGowan’s participatory approach 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 following tweet she sent just after the announcement of the election result:⁴

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.

Discussion

There is no doubt that the citizens who formed Voices4Indi (V4I) are effective community organisers with skills to run savvy election campaigns. Yet this case is more than a story of effective community organising and mobilising. It demonstrates how citizens, who are frustrated and disillusioned with the political status quo, are not rejecting formal democratic institutions but rather they are going to great lengths to reinvigorate and reshape them. In this section I argue that at the heart of the citizen-led democratic reform in Indi was the goal of political reengagement, rather than formal power. The citizen-led reforms involved facilitating the political engagement of Indi citizens in both informal and formal capacities, and in doing so they were able to form important connections between the informal and informal worlds of political participation.

The ‘Indi’ effect: a reengaged and reconnected polity

The community movement Voices4Indi not only mobilised disgruntled citizens into political action, but in doing so they reengaged them in the political processes. The goal in

the first instance was not to oust the local member but to reengage the electorate and the elected representative in the formal systems of democracy. In the wake of the 2013 election, two core members of V4i 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 Denis Ginnivan, one of the founding members of V4I (pers comm. 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...

What was it about Indi that made democratic reform possible? Below I argue that Indi provides important insights into how democratic reform requires providing opportunities

for informal and formal political participation, and ensuring that these two modes of participation interconnect.

Creating opportunities for informal participation and community listening

Democratic reform was enabled in Indi because citizen reformers provided informal spaces, such as the Kitchen Table Conversations and the community hubs, where people in the community could connect socially and can share their political views. This is a particularly bottom up and informal approach to democratic innovation. In contrast to highly designed participatory mechanisms, the informal participation in Indi sought to create political meeting spaces that were respectful, fun, social, inclusive, and meaningful . These informal participatory spaces provided opportunities for everyday people (as opposed to elites and experts) to engage in conversations about, and activities for, politics. As one local volunteer explained in a volunteer survey conducted after the 2016 election (Haines et al 2016, p. 10):

I had never seen the level of positive energy and commitment by a diverse range of people to a local movement. It brought people to life in such a wholesome and positive way.

V4I also placed considerable emphasis on the need to create spaces for effective political listening. For example, the Kitchen Table Conversations were specifically structured to provide opportunities for not just voice, but also listening. As Johnson explains (Interview 09.09.16):

In the KTCs 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.

In each KTC everyday people were engaged in open political conversations often with those with different views. This emphasis on community listening is a feature found in other successful social movements dedicated to democratic reform, for example the Industrial Areas Foundations (IAF) in the US (Warren 2001, Coles 2004). In an era when many citizens feel that they are not being heard by political elites, creating spaces where citizens can interact and listen to each other politically appears to be especially empowering.

Thickening formal political participation and representation

Indi provides important insights into what active political representation can involve. From the outset McGowan's motivations for politics were driven by impulses to connect and represent the community in the legislative process. For example, prior to the 2013 election she described to the local media how if elected she would work not just in the circle of legislation (where Mirabella is), but actively work on the intersection between community, representation and legislation (Freer, 2013).

Since being elected McGowan has sought to interact regularly with her constituents; and through these interactions they are better placed to judge her internal motivations (Mansbridge 2009). She is not afraid to work directly with communities, to engage them and 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.

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.

McGowan's approach to constituency relations is also pedagogical. For her, engaging with her electorate 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):

... 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 how to work out the parties... coming from a competitive seat you're now in a strong position...get in there and play the game.

Democratic coupling: mixing informal and formal political participation

This far I have discussed how citizen-led democratic reform involves engaging citizens in informal community spaces as well as in the formal procedures of political representation. The case of Indi provides insights into how the informal world of the public sphere and formal worlds of electoral politics can productively integrate. 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). Yet from Indi we also learn that challenges can arise when there is a blurring between the informal and formal world of political participation. Here I am referring to how the participatory activities that were closely associated with a grass roots community movement v4I became a core part of the political work of an elected representative in parliament.

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.

Third, the broader participatory movement generated by V4I was facilitated by strong community ties and high levels of political connectedness in Indi – a characteristic found elsewhere in rural Victoria (Alexander 2015).

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 their brand and participatory initiatives 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.

Conclusion

In this article I have studied the world of everyday local politics to explore how disillusioned and frustrated citizens are transforming established political institutions. Five years ago many citizens in the Australian electorate of 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 disengage (as many citizens do) a group of locals formed a community movement to bring people back into the political landscape. They instigated democratic reform by creating opportunities for the broader community to engage in informal participatory spaces that were non-partisan, non-elite, social and fun. In the first instance these spaces facilitated meaningful political talk where people could listen and be heard and be inspired to act; but over time they resulted in a recalibration of democratic practice in the electorate where citizens now openly discuss politics and connect with their elected representative. The Indi experience has motivated everyday citizens in the electorate to engage in various democratic activities (see Hendriks 2016), with some stepping forward as political candidates for local and state elections (e.g. Bunn 2016).

The case of Indi provides empirical support for the proposition that contemporary citizens would support deeper engagement in representative democracy if given meaningful opportunities (Evans and Stoker 2016; Nelbo et al 2010). What we learn from the Indi case

is that while citizens may be frustrated and dissatisfied with conventional democratic practices, many support opportunities for greater citizen engagement, a finding consistent with surveys in the UK and Finland (Webb 2013; Bengtsson and Mattila 2009).

The recent democratic experiences in Indi demonstrate the importance of community organising efforts and civic agency for reinvigorating democratic life (Boyte 2010; Warren 2001). While designed participatory forums have their place in facilitating broader democratic reform (Dryzek 2010 p. 155-176), this article joins a nascent literature that seeks to identify other sources and sites of democratic renewal (e.g. Ercan and Dzur, 2016; Levine 2015). What we learn from Indi is that when communities instigate and champion democratic renewal they are able to create more effective and sustained democratic change. Future research needs to shift from designing optimal participatory mechanisms, towards understanding how citizens themselves are seeking to reconnect with political institutions and their leaders.

Whether the democratic experiences of Indi can be replicated in other electorates, especially those rife with party politics, remains to be seen. However, there is emerging evidence in other countries such as Spain where citizens from popular activist movements are creating alternative political parties and successfully stepping into formal politics (e.g. Tormey and Feenstra 2015; Feenstra et al 2017). Collectively these experiences suggest that contemporary citizens are keen to change the democratic system not to reject it. They might participate in informal democratic spaces to express their political frustrations, but the limitations of such spaces encourages them to step into the formal system of electoral politics in order to shape reform.

Endnotes

1. For a good overview of the growth in participatory experiments and democratic innovations around the global, see *Participedia* catalogue <http://www.participedia.net>
2. Located in north-eastern Victoria with a population of around 130,000, Indi is composed of small rural towns as well as three large regional centres including Wangaratta, Wodonga and Benalla. An electoral boundary change in 2010 saw an additional 10,000 voters in the electorate many located on the NSW fringes of Melbourne. For an overview of the political history of the seat of Indi prior to 2013 (see Curtin and Costar 2013).
3. Instigated and run by local people, Kitchen Table Conversations (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 (see VWT 1999; 2007). They were originally designed by Mary Crooks (VWT 2000, 2007).
4. Tweet from Cathy McGowan's Twitter account, @Indigocathy, 2 July 2016.

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