

The Norwegian Centre for Human Rights wants to strengthen its competence in political theory.

This project proposes a paradox in deliberative democratic theory. The paradox consists in that deliberative opinion-formation aims for consensual agreement, while consensus, once established, will likely impede the conditions for further rational public discourse. Hence, over time, deliberative democracy might undermine itself. The project examines the paradox empirically and evaluates its theoretical implications.

Previous research has studied the *ex ante* effects of consensus on deliberation as a prospective goal. In contrast to these studies, this project shifts the focus to *ex post* effects by studying how consensus on a policy issue affects future public discourse on that issue – a previously unexplored phenomenon.

While the paradox is demonstrable in theory, it can be further substantiated by way of three socio-psychological and cognitive mechanisms which may explain why consensus might hamper the rationality of public discourse: after an agreement, participants stop developing new arguments, they forget existing arguments, and their fear of deviating from the social norm promotes conformism to the consensual agreement.

The project tests whether the paradox can be observed in real-world policy debates in deliberative arenas, especially parliaments. Operationalizing rationality as coherence, the project analyzes the reasons participants in parliamentary debates give for their opinions, and expect a prior consensus to have a detrimental effect on rationality in subsequent debates. The theoretical part of the project evaluates various strategies to cope with the consensus paradox in light of the empirical findings.