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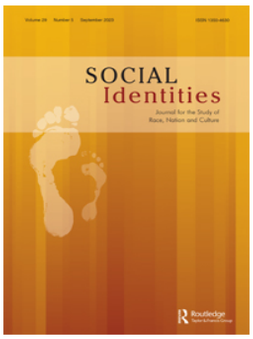

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ABSTRACT

Efforts to rewrite Iceland's constitution have attracted significant attention, being heralded as the world's first 'crowdsourced constitution' and a pioneering example of deliberative democracy. Such claims fit into a wider pattern of what this paper terms progressive borealism: exoticising Iceland as a progressive utopia at once both part of and removed from Europe, predicated on the systematic exclusion of marginalised groups. The aims of this paper are twofold. Firstly, it describes the phenomenon of progressive borealism, which relies on the reimagination of colonial-era depictions of Iceland's liminality, purity and wildness. Essential to this notion is the importance ascribed to whiteness and racialisation of ethnic minorities. Secondly, it considers how progressive borealism has impacted Iceland's constitutional reform process. Data is taken from a deliberative poll which formed the basis of recommendations to the Icelandic Parliament. The data demonstrate a diversity deficit, meaning that the most marginalised residents are unable to participate in debates over Iceland's future, challenging the claim that social diversity is irrelevant in democratic processes such as deliberative polling. The analytical framework draws insights from theories of intersectionality and superdiversity to reveal that the lack of inclusivity is a product of structural forces generating and perpetuating systematic exclusion of marginalised communities. The paper closes by considering the prospects for meaningful constitutional change in this context.

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Introduction

As a foreigner living in Iceland, I quickly became aware of what an Icelandic colleague described as the 'celebrity status' that comes from association with the country. Friends and fellow researchers elsewhere would almost invariably tell me how much they loved Iceland and commend me on my good fortune to live in such a progressive place: women's rights, LGBT rights, workers' rights such as the four-day week, the Nordic welfare state, renewable energy and pristine nature were among the praises regularly

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made of my new home. This notion of Iceland as a progressive utopia is ubiquitous in media coverage, and its influence can be observed in research on the country. However, as this paper shows, this imagined Iceland is a problematic construction. It rests on a hierarchy privileging whiteness, conceals the marginalisation of racialised minorities in Icelandic society, and reformulates colonial 'us and them' categories for the contemporary era.

Iceland being imagined as a special, advanced and exotic place can be considered an example (or perhaps the prime example) of what this paper terms progressive borealism. Progressive borealism draws from the colonial notion of borealism, which conceived of the Arctic lands as both wild and pure, with Iceland occupying a liminal space, part of Europe yet set apart from its civilisation (Bohlman, 2017; Størvold, 2018). Today, this notion of remoteness remains but the narrative has been subverted, with Iceland now fetishised as an exemplar of progressive ideals, such as equality and social justice, and held up as a model against which other countries should be measured. In common with the other Nordic nations, Iceland performs strongly on a variety of international rankings of rights and inclusion, and the Nordic model is referred to as a benchmark for achieving socially just development (Andersen et al., 2007). Iceland's process of constitutional reform has also attracted attention, with the document produced by the Constitutional Council hailed as the world's first 'crowdsourced constitution' (Oddsdóttir, 2014). This portrayal of Iceland as a socially and politically progressive model society conceals the reality of engagement mechanisms that exclude marginalised groups and are detached from the political system, which is characterised by entrenched nepotism and resistance to reform.

The first aim of this paper is to establish the concept of progressive borealism, which can be applied in contexts ranging from decision-making and civic engagement, the Icelandic political system, and research on tourism and marketing, to name a few. The second aim is to demonstrate the negative effects of progressive borealism with reference to a case study, using data from the deliberative poll on the Icelandic constitution conducted in November 2019. In doing so, a fundamental flaw with the approach to deliberative polling is uncovered. Deliberative polling engages a sample of citizens (with little interest in their ethnic or migration background) to deliberate on issues, supported with material written by subject-matter experts, which it is contended leads to consensus-building and engenders compromise between those who disagree, suggesting unifying solutions to issues (Fishkin, 2011). The data from the Icelandic deliberative poll is examined through the lenses of intersectionality (Hill Collins, 2017) and superdiversity, the latter of which denotes the 'diversification of diversity' (Vertovec, 2007). The two frameworks are synthesised following the approach outlined by Khazaei (2018) to show that the intersectional nature of inequalities means a failure to accommodate members of minorities in democratic processes, such as deliberative polls, excludes the views of the most marginalised groups in society, thus challenging claims of legitimacy and popular support for conclusions reached by these methods.

The analysis finds that the deliberative poll was characterised by a significant diversity deficit, most notably the total exclusion of migrants. While the idea of Iceland being ethnically homogenous is still occasionally encountered, the reality is that the country today is highly diverse. 18.8% of residents are first-generation migrants and only 73.9% of the population have no migration background (Hagstofa Íslands, 2023). Furthermore, the share of the population with a migration background continues to increase rapidly, with the number of new arrivals far outstripping the numbers receiving citizenship; for

example, over 2021 some 4,022 migrants arrived and 905 people were granted citizenship (Hagstofa Íslands, 2022). However, Iceland's growing diversity was not a factor in sampling participants for the deliberative poll on Iceland's future. This is rooted in assumptions made in democratic theory literature that social diversity factors such as race, gender, sexuality and class are unimportant when compared to cognitive diversity, such as voting behaviour (see Landemore, 2012). Moreover, when this incident is set against the broader backdrop of policies and practices that generate the marginalisation of migrants, it appears that the racialisation of minorities remains fundamental in how national identity is constructed in Iceland (Garner, 2014). This paper therefore builds upon research by Loftsdóttir (2011; 2014) which highlights the central importance of whiteness to Icelandic identity. The paper further argues that the failure of constitutional reform processes since 2010 may in part be attributed to a tension between growing (super)diversity on the one hand and the dominant progressive borealist conception of the Icelandic nation on the other.

This paper opens with a literature review that presents material framing Iceland as a progressive model. The colonial notion of borealism is also introduced, along with its contemporary reformulation as progressive borealism. To illustrate the flawed nature of such portrayals of Iceland, evidence on corruption and nepotism is presented, as well as data showing the widespread exploitation of migrants, to demonstrate the intersectional nature of marginalisation and diversity in Iceland. The analytical framework is then introduced. Following this, literature on democratic innovations is briefly presented to contextualise the deliberative poll. Participant data from the poll is analysed with respect to its diversity and representativeness. The intersectional superdiversity approach used here suggests that the diversity deficit observed is not simply an isolated incident, but instead fits into a wider pattern of freezing minority groups, and hence the views of the most marginalised residents, out of participatory processes. The paper concludes by reflecting on avenues for future research, as well as the prospects for achieving constitutional change in this context.

Literature review

Iceland as a progressive model

From *The Guardian* calling it 'the best place in the world to be a woman' (Hertz, 2016), the BBC (2015) naming it 'one of the most progressive countries in the world when it comes to gay rights', and CBS (2021) referencing its 'stunning natural beauty' alongside praising its environmental record, foreign media coverage of Iceland constructs the image of a uniquely progressive society – with the unspoken suggestion that this is what the rest of the world should aspire towards. Similar comments are made about Iceland's politics. An article in *Wired* described Iceland as 'a unique nation – wealthy with a small population and socially progressive' (Kobie, 2021). *The New York Times* situated the country's 'crowdsourced constitution' within 'their tradition of doing things differently', describing the Icelandic approach as a model for the rest of the world to follow (Morris, 2012). Descriptions of Icelandic progressiveness likewise appear in local media. Iceland Magazine (2016) referred to Iceland as 'the world's most progressive country' on addressing teenage substance abuse. *Iceland Monitor,* the English-language version of the national *Morgunblaðið* newspaper, claims the

country is 'universally regarded as … a gay rights paradise' (Gittins, 2016). An article in *Fréttablaðið* newspaper celebrated Iceland's progressive record on immigration, sharing the results of a survey naming it the second most tolerant country in the world (Gunnarsson, 2020).

It is not only in the popular press that references to Iceland's allegedly world-leading progressive society are found. A policy report on the four-day week claimed that 86% of Icelanders have the right to work a shorter week, holding this up as an example for other countries to follow (Haraldsson & Kellam, 2021). The reality is more prosaic: workers have the right to request to reduce their working hours, which remain the highest among the Nordic countries (Forsdick, 2021). In another case, researchers wrote about the perceptions of Iceland as a progressive, 'green' nation, known internationally for its commitment to sustainability and use of renewable energy (Hsu et al., 2016, p. 106). However, the truth is more complex, with much of Iceland's carbon footprint 'offshored' to poorer countries, demonstrating Iceland's intense engagement with international flows of production and consumption. Indeed, when emissions of products imported to satisfy demand are included, Iceland's national consumption-based carbon footprint is extremely high, closer to the likes of the USA than European countries with similar climates such as Sweden and Norway (Clarke et al., 2017). As such, depictions of Iceland as a progressive model misrepresent a more complicated reality. There is a long history of such inaccurate portrayals of the country.

Borealism and progressive borealism

Inspired by Said's notion of orientalism (1978), which viewed contemptuous depictions of Asia, North Africa and the Middle East as an expression of imperial power relations, scholars have similarly identified the phenomenon of borealism. With its roots in eighteenth century European Romanticism, borealism portrayed the lands and peoples of the Arctic as savage and inhospitable, yet simultaneously pure and uncorrupted by modernity (Bohlman, 2017). There was a further stratification, with Iceland, the Faroes and northern Norway on the periphery of European civilisation, depicted as waiting to be 'brought in from the cold' (Oslund, 2011). By contrast, Greenland, with its non-white population, was more comprehensively imagined as a colonised zone. Icelandic intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century were reportedly appalled at being portrayed as 'colonial savages' alongside Greenland and the Danish West Indies (Gunnlaugsson et al., 2018). Greenland excepted, the culture, literature and art of the boreal space were thus considered both part of and removed from European civilisation – or waiting to be reincorporated into it (Giles et al., 2016). Scholars note that similar exoticising tropes are employed today. For instance, the reception of Icelandic musicians such as Björk and Sigur Rós places them in a mythscape of pure Arctic landscapes, Norse mythology and the alleged folk beliefs of Icelanders (Størvold, 2018). Iceland is also fetishised in gendered tourism campaigns, with imperatives to market products and experiences as exotic and different leading to portrayals centring a depiction of the country as naturally pure, ethnically homogenous and populated by sexually permissive women (Loftsdóttir, 2015). There are also domestic stereotypes of the brave, pioneering spirit of its people as demonstrated by the *Útrásarvíkingur*, or 'business Vikings' of its finance sector (Ísleifsson & Chartier, 2011).

Fetishisation of the Nordic countries was a key strand of theosophy, a nineteenth century occult movement that was part of the wider turn towards esotericism in the Victorian period (Ferguson, 2020). Scholars have identified links between this esoteric thinking and twentieth century notions of eugenics and racial hygiene. A combination of aggrieved populist nationalism, millenarian occult fantasies, and the fantasy of a racial hierarchy headed by white 'Aryans' was instrumental in the emergence of Nazism in the dying years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Goodrick-Clarke, 1993). As such, contemporary portrayals of the Nordic states as model societies that can inspire the outside world have uncomfortable echoes of colonial-era representations of the region as a paragon of racial purity. Indeed, despite the progressive imagination of the boreal space today, the concept of a racial hierarchy persists, both in references to hitherto 'homogenous' Icelandic society and contemporary issues in how racialised ethnic minorities are imagined as not fully belonging to the Icelandic nation.

Racialisation refers to the ascribing of identities and behavioural characteristics to groups that did not hitherto identify themselves as such (Omi & Winant, 1986). Loftsdóttir (2011) notes the internalisation of the racialised, gendered and nationalistic ideologies of the European colonial project within Iceland's identity building process in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Whiteness was emphasised as a key component of belonging to the Icelandic nation and in turn to European civilisation, by extension granting the right to independent nationhood (Loftsdóttir, 2014). Today, it is not only non-white migrants who are excluded from this idealised white community. A growing body of literature considers issues facing Eastern European migrants in Iceland, including routine labour exploitation and abuse (Napierala & Wojtyńska, 2016; Wojtyńska, 2012), discrimination in hiring practices (Wojtyńska & Skaptadóttir, 2019), and media portrayals of migrants as sources of organised crime and gang activities (Loftsdóttir, 2017). Such data and testimonies from migrants undermine the central claim of progressive borealism: namely, that Iceland is a unique and especially progressive society.

Progressive borealism

Repeated references to Iceland as a progressive nation can be seen as a form of nation branding and identity building, which is a process directed both internally and externally (Ståhlberg & Bolin, 2016). Iceland is repeatedly presented as a progressive utopia, with a wild and pure natural environment waiting to be 'discovered' by outsiders (Loftsdóttir, 2015). These claims are made regardless of the more complicated reality. Nepotism, corruption and discrimination against ethnic minorities are deep-rooted issues in Icelandic society. These are of course common issues in states across the world. However, in the context of Iceland, the dissonance between myth and reality is particularly jarring.

For example, the European Court of Human Rights (2020) has ruled that an Icelandic government minister violated the European Convention on Human Rights through undue influence on the judiciary and the appointment of political allies to the Court of Appeal. An earlier report from the Council of Europe criticised the country, identifying structural issues in the enforcement of conflict-of-interest rules and the declaration of third-party gifts (Group of States against Corruption, 2018). The investigative outlet *Stundin* found that former Prime Minister Bjarni Benediktsson – who in 2008 was an MP on the parliamentary economy and tax committee – sold his shares in Glitnir bank on

the eve of its bankruptcy, suggesting he was aware of its looming insolvency (Vilhjálmsson & Jóhannsson, 2017). Another former Prime Minister, Sigmundur Davíð Gunnlaugsson, was compelled to resign after the Panama Papers showed that he and his family concealed millions of dollars in offshore accounts (Henley, 2016). These, along with many other examples, demonstrate that – beyond its progressive facade – nepotism and corruption are issues in Icelandic politics.

Iceland is ranked 17th of 180 for perceived levels of public sector corruption (Transparency International, 2021). This puts it ahead of the likes of Japan, France and the USA. However, scholars note that metrics of corruption generally survey perceptions, which can be manipulated by states or affected by news coverage; moreover, they focus on bribery, thus omitting informal corruption such as patronage appointments and influence peddling that are more typical in the Icelandic context (Erlingsson & Kristinsson, 2019) There is ample evidence that at least some Icelandic businesses engage in bribery. The Fishrot Files leak showed that Samherji, Iceland's largest fisheries company (operating in one of the country's most important economic sectors), bribed Namibian officials to secure access to fishing grounds, subsequently concealing earnings in an offshore shell company (Henley, 2019). Further leaks showed that the company engaged in a campaign to intimidate and smear whistle-blowers and journalists (Transparency International Secretariat, 2021). Incidentally, the OECD's Working Group on Bribery has called on Iceland to significantly improve its anti-bribery measures and increase training throughout the legal system to enhance the detection, investigation and prosecution of bribery (OECD, 2020).

Iceland's allegedly high degree of social rights and tolerance towards minorities is a particularly problematic aspect of progressive borealism. As noted, Eastern Europeans are vulnerable to labour exploitation and abuse in Iceland, and media portrayals link them with criminality, presenting migrants as a security threat (Loftsdóttir, 2017; Napierala & Wojtyńska, 2016; Wojtyńska, 2012; Wojtyńska & Skaptadóttir, 2019). Attributing characteristics to migrants from as heterogenous a group of countries as Central and Eastern Europe is an example of racialisation, ascribing a group identity and characteristics to individuals against their will (Omi & Winant, 1986). This also demonstrates how even members of 'white' ethnic minorities are racialised in Icelandic society. A report for the Nordic Council of Ministers showed that Eastern Europeans living in the Nordic countries tend to work in construction, distribution, low-skilled services such as hospitality and cleaning, and in manufacturing, including fish processing (Friberg & Eldring, 2013). This same report found that Polish migrants in Iceland earn substantially less than the national average, are more likely to be in precarious employment without a contract, and a significant minority feared for their job security if they talked to labour authorities or trade unions, suggesting a culture of fear or intimidation. Eastern European women are especially marginalised in the Icelandic labour market (Napierala & Wojtyńska, 2016). This accords with research on other Western European countries (see Hrycak, 2011). It is worth noting that such marginalisation of migrant workers is not unique to Iceland; for instance, research in the UK found similar issues (Ciupijus, 2011). These data suggest the value of the intersectional superdiversity approach described below, which highlight the interconnections between ethnic minorities, lower incomes and labour exploitation.

Precarity and exclusion affect other ethnic minority groups in Iceland too. Research on Thai migrants considers marriage as a migration strategy, noting that policy reforms may have increased the number of fraudulent marriages and rates of abuse of Thai women by

Icelandic husbands (Gisladottir Bissat, 2013). Scholars have likewise identified challenges faced by refugees from Middle Eastern countries living in Iceland, finding among other barriers to participation that limited opportunities for interaction with locals makes integration into Icelandic society very difficult (Kristjánsdóttir & Skaptadóttir, 2018). Other research has shown that intolerance towards ethnic minorities has a spatial dimension in Iceland. Data show that those living outside Reykjavík are less tolerant of immigrants, even when controlling for education levels (Bjarnason et al., 2020). This is not to claim that those living in rural Iceland are uniquely more likely to be intolerant of marginalised groups; intolerant attitudes have also been observed among parliamentarians and cultural elites. For instance, a secret recording of six MPs from the country's 63-member Parliament – including one former Prime Minister – caught them making misogynistic and homophobic comments, belittling survivors of sexual abuse, and discussing quid pro quo deals for political favours (Jónsson, 2018). More recently, a performance of *Madama Butterfly* by the Icelandic Opera sparked a debate (and defensive responses) over accusations of 'yellowface', with white performers in hair and makeup intended to make them appear East Asian for entertainment purposes (Ćirić, 2023).

While this is by necessity a brief overview, it suffices to say that Iceland is far from being a model progressive society. Progressive borealism is predicated on the notion that, while the liminality and exoticisation of borealism persist, the contemporary reincarnation of the concept centres an apparently uniquely progressive character of the country, targeting both domestic and international audiences. Progressive borealism therefore depends on many of the same features that were used to frame Iceland as wild and pure in the colonial era: its landscapes, its culture and its white inhabitants themselves. Iceland's landscapes continue to be promoted as untouched resources, now oriented towards touristic consumption with at times sexualised overtones. However, far from occupying a remote, liminal position, the country is in reality well-integrated into international flows of capital and migrant labour. Progressive borealism is contested internally, with academics (such as Loftsdóttir, among others) and representatives from various smaller political parties (such as the Pirate Party and the Social Democratic Alliance) voicing criticisms of regressive social policies enacted by the government. Despite this, the dominance of progressive borealist ideas can be observed in policymaking and the approach to participatory processes. To this end, the following section will consider how progressive borealism can be demonstrated through applying the framework of intersectional superdiversity to the country's ongoing constitutional reform efforts. Moreover, the analysis of findings from the deliberative poll reveal that the lack of concern given to social diversity in democratic theory literature functions to exclude the participation of the most marginalised groups in society, undermining claims to the legitimacy or popular consensus of the conclusions reached.

Intersectional superdiversity as an analytical approach

Intersectionality emerged from black feminist scholarship and social activist movements. It is the notion that social identities cannot be isolated and their individual effects analysed, but rather must be considered as overlapping, intersecting and potentially reinforcing each other (Hill Collins, 2017). Intersectional research reflects on how marginalisation – or social, economic and political exclusion – emerges when people 'experience an

accumulation of disadvantage in the society in which they live', due to factors such as class, age, ethnic origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation, health status or appearance (Vrooman & Coenders, 2020, p. 179). For instance, Møller and Harrits (2013) show how unequal power relations, the discrimination that flows from this, and stigmatisation of behaviours (both observed or assumed) are embedded within the process of constructing at-risk groups, who are in turn disproportionately targets of government interventions compared to the 'normal' population. While marginalised groups are often the focus of intersectional studies, there is also research that explores how individuals gain privilege from their intersectional identities, such as Levine-Rasky's (2011) study of whiteness and middle-classness. Nevertheless, a common criticism of intersectional scholarship is that it is highly abstract, with the concept considered difficult to operationalise in empirical studies (Khazaei, 2018).

As noted above, superdiversity might be summarised as an approach to studying the 'diversification of diversity', with Vertovec's (2007) work considering the legal stratification, socio-economic differentiation, transnational connections, places of origin, and time and generation of migration within what had hitherto been frequently treated as monolithic ethnic minority groups in the UK. In the Icelandic context, more than a quarter of residents have some degree of migration background. The country is thus a promising site for research on the dynamics of superdiversity. However, there are also debates around the limitations of this approach. For example, 'superdiverse' is frequently used as a descriptive term instead of as an analytical framework, and an important critique is that the approach tends to conceal power differences between individuals and social groups (Khazaei, 2018).

Intersectional superdiversity integrates the two concepts to enable researchers to 'study persistent power relations that operate through well-established patterns of racial, gendered, and class-based inequalities without neglecting context-based changes and transformations' (Khazaei, 2018, p. 16). This demonstrates how disadvantage accrues from intersectional identities (the objects of study) playing out in superdiverse situations (the objects of observation). It is thus a useful tool for analysing Iceland's constitutional reform process and thus casting light on progressive borealism in action, using the deliberative poll as an object of observation through which to consider the participation (or lack thereof) of individuals marginalised by their intersectional identities.

In the case of this paper, using intersectional superdiversity as an analytical framework substantiates the argument that contemporary Icelandic identity is shaped by progressive borealism, broadcasting a progressive image that conceals the exclusion of marginalised voices, particularly those with migration backgrounds. That is, beyond simply pointing out that a diversity deficit exists within the data, using this analytical lens makes it possible to illustrate the structural power dynamics at work. It also demonstrates that a lack of inclusion of racialised minorities in Icelandic politics and decision-making processes serves to silence the voices of residents who are far more likely to be poorer, in insecure or exploitative work, subject to stereotyping around criminality, and disconnected from the wider national community. Ultimately, it cannot be claimed that the diversity deficit of the deliberative poll presented below exists in a vacuum. There is also a lack of diversity among elected MPs in the country. A diversity deficit can likewise be observed among academics, business leaders and journalists. Intersectional superdiversity demonstrates that these are not disparate diversity deficits that happen to exist right across the

increasingly diverse Icelandic society, but instead are products of an exclusionary notion of identity generated by progressive borealism's racialising dynamics.

Situating Iceland's constitutional reforms in deliberative democratic theory

A constitution is a system of systems governing relationships between individuals and institutions, and in turn between institutions and the overarching order of a society (Vermeule, 2011). Constitutions articulate the political and economic rules of a state, such as how governments are chosen, decisions about the future made, laws upheld and markets regulated (Congleton & Swedenborg, 2006). Constitutions have been framed as mission statements, social contracts, embodiments of domestic power dynamics and reflections of the will of the people (Galligan & Verteeg, 2013). It is with reference to these debates around the purpose and meaning of constitutions that Iceland's constitutional reform process should be examined. In this paper, a constitution is taken to be above all a statement of a society's values and its collective identity, thus synthesising the various definitions outlined above.

Icelandic politics have a strong nationalist orientation, with roots in the struggle for independence from Denmark (Árnason, 2018). Indeed, criticisms of the country's current constitution typically reference that it was inherited from the Danes and has only been slightly modified thereafter. As such, calls to create a 'crowdsourced constitution' in the aftermath of Iceland's financial collapse in 2008 emphasise the need to create a document written by Icelanders themselves (Oddsdóttir, 2014). This paper does not aim to provide an account of the more than decade-long process of constitutional reform. However, it is worthwhile to note that the citizen engagement which led to the production of the 2011 draft constitution has been considered unprecedented, and that the document has been described as noteworthy for the extent to which it was shaped by public proposals (Hudson, 2018). This is despite criticism from some concerning the political machinations around the drafting process, as well as the fractious relationship between political elites and those who produced the draft constitution (Ólafsson, 2016).

Literature on democratic theory is relevant in contextualising the constitutional reform process, particularly the deliberative poll. Deliberative democracy is a form of democratic decision-making in which deliberation is key, meaning participants seek to reach consensus based on discussions underpinned by robust information (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). One example of a successful deliberative process is the Irish Constitutional Convention of 2012–2014, which proposed a referendum leading to changes in the country's law on same-sex marriage (Farrell et al., 2019). Fishkin's model of deliberative polling (2011), which was used in Iceland, engages a 'random' group of citizens in deliberation, supported with inputs from subject-matter experts, with the aim of reaching consensus on issues, which can in turn suggest areas of common ground among the broader population. The model advocates random sampling, rather than considerations of social identities such as race, except in rare cases where 'a small population is the explicit subject of the deliberation', giving the example of a deliberative poll in Australia that made sure to include members of the Aboriginal population (Fishkin, 2011, p. 39). While there is debate around the relative importance of cognitive versus social diversity, the focus on the

former in deliberative polling accords with the approach to deliberation set out by scholars such as Landemore (2012), who calls for prioritising cognitive diversity, such as voting behaviour, over social diversity such as race, gender, sexuality and class. A deliberative poll was conducted in Reykjavík in November 2019. Findings formed the basis of a report to support the ongoing process of revising the Icelandic constitution (Félagsvísindastofnun, 2020a).

Analysis and discussion

The deliberative poll (*rökræðukönnun*) was commissioned by the Icelandic Prime Minister's Office and conducted over two days, 9–10 November 2019, by a team from the University of Iceland, supervised by James Fishkin of Stanford University's Center for Deliberative Democracy. There was a series of articles in the Icelandic media in the run-up to the event and the months following. Outputs from the deliberative poll included a series of reports and briefings on areas of consensus relating to the Icelandic constitution.

Data showed that deliberation shifted perceptions of how the President should be elected (from a simple majority vote to the transferable vote system), along with major changes in attitudes towards the role of Iceland's Court of Impeachment and developing a mechanism to amend the Icelandic constitution to meet the obligations of international agreements (Félagsvísindastofnun, 2020a). However, the event was characterised by a closed agenda determined centrally by the government. This means that participants were unable to discuss topics of their choice, and some controversy was caused in the omission of natural resources as an area of deliberation (Pálsdóttir & Óskarsdóttir, 2021). Following the deliberative poll, the government put proposals to Parliament to change individual clauses of the constitution, including the law on referenda, the role of the President and the controversial issue of ownership of natural resources (Helgason, 2020). However, conflicts within the ruling coalition meant there was once again no progress on constitutional reform. Against this backdrop, a vigorous campaign by the Icelandic Constitutional Society (*Stjórnarskrárfélagið*) continues to demand that the government implements in full the original draft 'crowdsourced constitution' produced in 2012.

The focus here is on the representativeness of the deliberative poll. Participants were drawn from 2,165 people who responded to an opinion poll about the constitution, of whom 677 expressed interest in taking part in the deliberative poll. A further 482 people below the age of 45 who had not expressed interest were invited, in an attempt to make the sample more representative of the age distribution of the population (Pálsdóttir & Óskarsdóttir, 2021). Ultimately, 233 people took part in the deliberative poll. Data shows that the participants were in no way representative of the general population. 61% were men and 39% were women (Félagsvísindastofnun, 2020a, p. 17). No data was gathered on the inclusion of trans or non-binary individuals, which appears to have not been considered. Almost three-quarters of participants lived in the capital area and the age profile skewed significantly older; 27% were aged over 66 years old, compared to 4% under the age of 25 (Félagsvísindastofnun, 2020a, p. 17). Participants were also more likely to be university educated than the national average. As such, the 'usual suspects' were disproportionately represented at the event: that is, educated men who are middle-aged or older (Barrett et al., 2012). While the researchers used a series of weighting

formulae to attempt to address this sampling bias in their subsequent analysis, there are limitations to this approach, and it would undoubtedly have been preferable to create a more representative sample in the first place. The underrepresentation of women in particular may have impacted the cultural politics of the deliberative poll as a discursive space, affecting basic processes such as who speaks and what can be said (Fischer, 2006). In any case, as already noted, the agenda of the event was set in a top-down manner and there were limitations on what participants were allowed to discuss. One of the most fundamental flaws in the representativeness is the number of participants belonging to a minority group. There were no participants residing in Iceland but without Icelandic citizenship – in fact, only 2% of participants reported that both parents were born abroad – and only 1% identified as LGBT (Félagsvísindastofnun, 2020b). No data was provided on the numbers of disabled participants and it appears no effort was made to sample this marginalised population, despite specific issues not encountered by the wider population. This is disappointing, given research shows long-standing concerns about human rights issues affecting disabled people in Iceland (Rice et al., 2020).

There were several barriers to participation in the deliberative poll and basic issues with its claims to be a representative sample of Icelandic society. Firstly, participation was only open to those with Icelandic citizenship, thus excluding migrants who have been resident in the country for fewer than the seven-year period required for all non-Nordic nationals to apply for citizenship, as well as those who may not have applied for citizenship for whatever reason. Secondly, participation was only in the Icelandic language. As research shows, there are several barriers facing those who migrate to Iceland to gain proficiency in the national language, which is a criteria for applying for citizenship. These include the difficulty of learning Icelandic, the time it takes to do so, the lack of financial support available, and lack of courses on weekends and evenings when workers can access them (Innes, 2020). Crucially, a further barrier is the propensity of migrants to be employed in sectors alongside co-nationals – often in seasonal or temporary positions, such as tourism and construction – thus not requiring Icelandic in their working lives (Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017). These barriers can be considered practical examples of the racialisation discussed by Loftsdóttir (2014), in which migrants are excluded even from the possibility of participating as equal members of the community. Furthermore, with the event being held over a weekend in Reykjavík, barriers were created for those who live far from the capital or were unable to give up a full weekend to participate. This may explain the significant overrepresentation of those living in the capital area and underrepresentation of women, who are generally more likely to have caring commitments than men. No data was provided on the number of citizens of foreign origin who were contacted but refused to participate. This was not addressed in the reports for the deliberative poll, despite a section on to efforts to increase representativeness through outreach to citizens under 45. As such, it appears reasonable to assume that the participation of citizens and/or residents with a migration background was not viewed as a priority by the organisers.

Given that this event was commissioned by the Prime Minister's Office and recommendations were used to support the process of constitutional reform, the diversity deficit among the participants suggests a normalisation of the exclusion of minorities in decision-making processes, with the tools and language of progressive politics used to

mask exclusionary notions of who belongs. Viewing the deliberative poll as a site of observation through the analytical approach of intersectional superdiversity validates this interpretation, with no migrants lacking Icelandic citizenship represented and a very small number of citizens whose parents were born abroad in attendance, along with serious issues with regards to the representation of younger people, women, LGBT individuals, disabled people and those with fewer educational qualifications. While Pálsdóttir and Óskarsdóttir argue that weighting of the results made sure the findings were representative of the wider public (2021, p. 21), this argument cannot reasonably stand; it is not possible to adjust results for the specific views and values of people who were not in attendance, such as migrant workers facing the highest rates of exploitation and poverty. This diversity deficit was not simply an oversight in the organisation of the poll, but rather a deliberate product of its design and the conditions placed upon participation, supporting progressive borealist framings of Icelandic identity that fetishise an alleged embrace of progressive democratic methods while simultaneously ensuring the lack of representation of marginalised communities. What representation that did exist was further undermined by the discursive politics of the space itself, with a significant overrepresentation of the most privileged groups in society and control over the agenda maintained by those with political power.

A large body of democratic theory literature dismisses the need for representation of minority groups, favouring instead the notion of 'cognitive diversity'. Scholars such as Landemore (2012) claim that groups with heterogenous values arrive at decisions that are more legitimate and smarter, meaning there is no need to sample according to demographic characteristics. This emphasis is similarly found in Van Reybrouck's (2016) work on sortition, or the random selection of citizens to participate in decision-making processes. The deliberative poll in Iceland was conducted according to the model developed by Fishkin, which interprets the concept of diversity as '[t]he extent to which the major positions in the public are represented by participants in the discussion' (2011, p. 127). However, framing diversity as an innate cognitive or psychological characteristic wilfully ignores the social power dynamics of decision-making processes, political representation and how the media constructs marginalised communities. An important claim about deliberative polling is that this method can change people's opinions towards consensus and common ground. However, seeking to obtain diversity through using self-reported opinions that can shift, rather than on the basis of experience of marginalisation, upholds unfair power dynamics that privilege some groups over others. This refusal to engage with issues of intersectionality and superdiversity within a significant part of deliberative democratic theory has the effect of depoliticising scholarship that is only superficially engaged towards progressive ends, thus inhibiting the achievement of social justice goals (Hill Collins, 2017).

Moreover, even when judged on its own terms as an exercise in cognitive diversity, the sampling employed at Iceland's deliberative poll was a failure. Attempts were made to sample for voting behaviour, seeking to capture a representative group of the electorate based on results of the previous election. However, it is well-established that analysis based on voting is a weak proxy for individuals' values, which may comprise views from across the political spectrum (Evans et al., 1996). Likewise, social scientists using moral foundations theory have found important divergences between voting behaviour, individuals' beliefs, and their self-reported values: that is, political party supporters are themselves a disparate coalition of individuals who hold differing values and views to

one another (Haidt, 2012). As such, seeking to guarantee the representativeness of the deliberative poll by sampling according to how participants reported voting in the previous election – or how they placed themselves on a simple left-right scale – is a very weak mechanism for achieving the kind of cognitive diversity the organisers sought. A further problem highlighting the unrepresentative of the sample is that 98% of participants were voters, far exceeding the national turnout rate in elections (Félagsvísindastofnun, 2020b).

The deliberative poll as an event to engage citizens in constitutional revision therefore serves as a microcosm of progressive borealism in Iceland. Insurmountable barriers to participation were erected for those who have a migration background through the prerequisites to have full citizenship and total fluency in the Icelandic language, along with the ability to take time off work and caring commitments and access to the capital city for the duration of the poll. This symbolic act within mainstream political discourse can be considered as lying on a continuum of racist ideas and practices that ultimately privilege those who 'belong' to the nation vis-à-vis those who are excluded, in which racial hierarchies favouring the notion of whiteness are embedded (Garner, 2014). Indeed, the failure of the deliberative poll to affect change might itself be considered representative of Icelandic political culture, whereby over a decade of efforts to reform the country's constitution have as yet achieved little change in the face of powerful entrenched interests. The diversity deficit of the deliberative poll is thus typical of both the wider constitutional reform process and Icelandic politics writ large. The country's superdiversity remains unrecognised within the confines of progressive borealism. The enduring achievement of efforts to deliver a new constitution may therefore ultimately be sustaining domestic and international perceptions of Iceland as a progressive model nation, while leaving intact the country's dominant hierarchies of social and economic power.

Conclusion

The deliberative poll on the Icelandic constitution did not lead to tangible change, fitting into the wider pattern of attempts at constitutional reform since the financial crisis. It also did not achieve its stated aims of facilitating deliberation among a representative sample of Iceland's population. As this paper has argued, the diversity deficit at the event was not simply an accident or some isolated incident. The exclusion of marginalised groups can instead be considered rather typical. The concept of progressive borealism captures this selective deployment of the tools of progressive politics, such as deliberative democratic processes, while at the same time designing structural exclusion of marginalised groups into these processes. The exoticisation of the country's landscapes and fetishisation of its supposed remoteness and liminality found in historical borealism are retained in contemporary portrayals of Iceland; portrayals that are directed both domestically and internationally and conceal the country's active engagement with transnational movements of people, goods and capital. Rather than being imagined as a wild and savage land, in the framework of progressive borealism the country has been reimagined as a lodestar of progressive politics, a model for the rest of the world to follow.

As scholars such as Loftsdóttir (2011) note, structural forces of exclusion operate in Iceland, with migrants being comprehensively racialised and whiteness being valorised. To this can be added evidence of resistance to political and constitutional reform,

entrenched nepotism and evidence of corruption. However, while critical voices within Iceland may contest the progressive identity of the country, these criticisms have not been able to overcome the dominance of the set of ideas contained within progressive borealism, as the case study of the deliberative poll shows. Moreover, the unrepresentativeness of the poll's sample, and apparent lack of concern towards this issue among the organisers, points to a more fundamental issue in democratic theory literature that fetishises cognitive diversity, simplistically understood as individuals' self-identification on scales of left and right or reported previous voting behaviour. In doing so, events such as the deliberative poll exclude the excluded, marginalise the marginalised, and lead to recommendations that cannot claim to be either representative or seriously capable of achieving consensus, as the rejection of findings from the deliberative poll by the Icelandic Parliament highlights.

As the analytical framework of intersectional superdiversity demonstrates, minority groups in Iceland are systematically excluded, thus serving to perpetuate their marginalisation which takes multiple forms: labour market exploitation, lower incomes, stereotyping of association with crime, and barriers to acquiring Icelandic language skills, and hence social integration, citizenship and voting rights. These groups are thus frozen out, not only from positions of economic and political power, but also from the right to participation as members of the community in discussions about the collective future. There is a fundamental rejection of inclusion and diversity at the heart of progressive borealism. The prospects of meaningful constitutional reform within this context are therefore bleak. This is especially so when considering the confines of the current top-down, unrepresentative, rather lethargic reform process.

Further research on this topic may consider other ways in which progressive borealism manifests, considering in greater detail its relevance in decision-making processes, the Icelandic political system, and the role it plays in tourism and marketing of the country. Studies of the extent to which progressive borealist ideas are held by the public in Iceland may also be fruitful, and research could also consider the extent to which progressive borealism applies in other Nordic contexts.

In terms of policy responses, practical steps to overcoming entrenched marginalisation may include subsidising language training programmes and developing national schemes to promote role models from the country's rapidly growing minority populations. However, structural change necessitates a reflection on how to move beyond a conception of Icelandic identity wedded to its past, marked by struggles for independence and an obsessive fixation on a fetishised ethnic and linguistic purity. Building a more inclusive future requires overcoming the nation's structural diversity deficit and empowering Icelanders to actively participate and be represented in decision-making processes, no matter what their backgrounds.

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