Summary: Unravelling a Mystery: The Influences of Deliberative Minipublics on Public Decision-Making

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Minipublics are a popular democratic innovation to address the democratic malaise. These deliberative participatory processes involve randomly selected lay citizens who engage in a structured deliberation and exert a public influence (Setälä & Smith, 2018). Their implementation in the past decade has mushroomed in Belgium and abroad, to the point that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) optimistically describes their proliferation as a 'deliberative wave' (OECD, 2020). The optimism surrounding the rise and success of minipublics is, however, dependent on their impact on policymaking: minipublics must exert influence on public decisions to be a credible solution to the democratic crisis. Otherwise, they dissolve into tokenism, discrediting themselves and causing frustration among participants and the broader public. Despite its importance, minipublics' impact remains somewhat enigmatic – a 'black box' in the field of democratic innovations. My PhD thesis sought to disentangle the different influences of minipublics on policymaking, how to measure them and clarify what we can expect from them.

The PhD thesis starts with a comparative analysis of minipublics' purposes in theory and practice. Drawing from a thematic analysis of the stated justification in the public reports of fifty-one minipublics held in Belgium between 2001 and 2021, the findings show that influencing policymaking is their most common purpose, further stressing the need to study their impact more closely. The analysis also reveals important discrepancies between theory and practice, as the latter tends to have much higher expectations. This finding suggests the formation of a *minipublic bubble* which inflates their actual potential to solve problems. This minipublic bubble is problematic because it is destined to burst and lead to the discredit of minipublics, as people will witness that society's problems persist and worsen in parallel to and despite the proliferation of minipublics.

The PhD thesis next introduces a new analytical framework to measure minipublics' influence on policymaking. Previous studies mainly relied on a *congruency approach*, which assumes that there is an impact if there is a textual correspondence between a minipublic's recommendations and public policy documents. The congruency approach is, however, unsatisfactory because it lacks transparency, relies on a simple textual correlation to infer an impact and implies that the minipublic takes place in a political vacuum. I therefore developed a sequential impact matrix (SIM) which integrates the initial preferences of decision-makers

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into the measurement of a minipublic's impact. Considering the relationship between decision-makers' agenda and a minipublic's recommendation allows for distinguishing five types of influences, namely continuous, enriching, innovating, shifting and inhibiting (see Table 1). The SIM moreover relies on a mixed method to triangulate the findings of the desk research with interviews of key actors involved in the follow-up of a minipublic.

Figure 1   *An overview of minipublics' influences*

T0	T1	T2	Kinds of uptake	Kinds of influence
A	A	A	Uptake	Continuous influence
		a	Partial uptake	Limited continuous influence
		B or o	No uptake	No influence
a	A	A	Uptake	Enriching influence
		a	partial uptake	limited enriching influence
		B or o	No uptake	No influence
o	A	A	Uptake	Innovating influence
		a	Partial uptake	Limited innovating influence
		B or o	No uptake	No nfluence
B	A	A	Uptake	Shifting influence
		a	Partial uptake	Limited shifting influence
		B	No uptake	No influence
		o	Uptake	Inhibiting influence

[A] = a preference; [a] = part of the preference A; [B] = a different preference; [o] = no preference

I applied the SIM to the citizens' panel (Make Your Brussels – Mobility) initiated by the Brussels Regional Parliament in 2017 in preparation of the Good Move Plan – a ten-year plan defining regional and municipal mobility policies. The SIM (see Figure 1) reveals a more precise and nuanced measurement of a minipublic's impact. It indicates that the citizens' panel exerted a significant influence on the Good Move Plan, but the majority of the adopted recommendations were in line with the official agenda of decision-makers. The panel did not put forth recommendations that conflicted with the government's agenda, and policymakers showed less enthusiasm for adopting proposals suggesting something entirely new. The interviews, however, indicate that all absent or partial uptakes are not the result of an instrumental or partisan strategy by decision-makers, as they may also have sound reasons for amending or rejecting them, such as contradicting or legally unfeasible recommendations.

Figure 2   *The results of the SIM analysis of the citizens' panel*
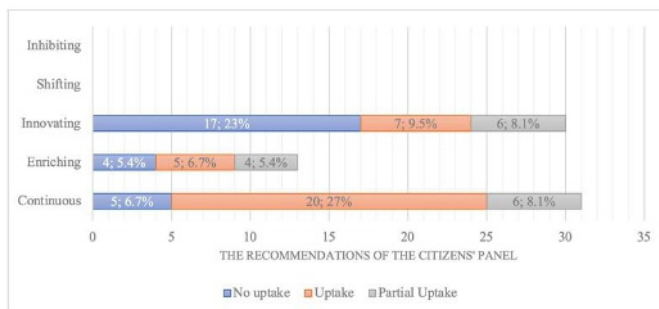
Moreover, the combination of the SIM with interviews reveals a subtle yet important distinction between the citizens' panel impact on policymaking and its political influence on decision-makers. Interviewees viewed the citizen resolution as a set of general political directions and principles, rather than considering recommendations individually. Minipublics are thereby considered as a sort of sophisticated poll which gives policymakers an indication of the responsiveness of their policy project to the expectations of a group of informed and diverse citizens. When policymakers discovered that the citizen panel supported an ambitious reform, they used the citizen resolution to convince the opposition of the need to reform mobility, serving as a trigger for the losing side to shift their preferences and accept the political outcome. Had the citizen panel formulated a resolution in favour of the status quo, it is unlikely that policy- and decision-makers would have dared to propose such a reforming mobility plan, nor is it likely that other political parties would have ratified it. The case study indicates that minipublics can exert a more diffuse influence that weakens or reinforces existing political preferences, thereby creating political winners and losers.

Lastly, I examined what we can expect from minipublics' impact on public policy. I first delved into the actual potential of minipublics to effect large-scale policy changes by conducting a comprehensive review of the literature on public policy and policy change. The analysis confirms the assumption behind the SIM: minipublics can only expect to generate a non-incremental policy change if their recommendations align with the agenda and preferences of decision-makers. The 'communicative power' emanating from a minipublic's reasoned and inclusive deliberation is unlikely to overcome the psychological, substantial, procedural and political obstacles that condition decision-makers. The literature review warns us against any indication that a minipublic single-handedly effected a substantial policy change. Not only must problem, policy and political streams converge in a policy window that must, in turn, be converted into public decisions by policy entrepreneurs, but such policy changes are the result of long-term processes that involve a multitude of individual and collective agents in advocacy coalition

frameworks. These arguments invite us to reconsider the outstanding political achievements of some high-profile minipublics, such as the Irish Citizens' Assembly which led to the adoption of same-sex marriage (Farrell & Suiter, 2019). We must assess such achievements in the light of the broader political and policy context, as well as in combination with the other actors and organisations setting the stage for such groundbreaking decisions both in the short (e.g. elected representatives) and long term (e.g., scientists, civil society organisations).

Hence, a minipublic occupies a small spot in the gigantic constellation of policymaking and politics, and any non-incremental public decisions require a delicate and rare 'alignment of the stars'. Minipublics are thus neither necessary nor sufficient for such outcomes. Yet, it does not mean that they are useless: they can either contribute or trigger a policy change, helping open a policy window or policy entrepreneurs to spur the reform. However, for minipublics to produce *legitimate* policy changes, we must look at the alignment between their recommendations, public opinion and decision-makers' agenda. Legitimate political outcomes can only occur when the broader public supports a minipublic's recommendations. I therefore claim that we should opt for less but grander minipublics. Convening a long and large minipublic is more likely to capture the public and political attention, attracting media and public opinion, taking the time to involve stakeholders and political parties, so that its recommendations are likely to generate a broader public influence and be used as a resource by the actors outside the policy subsystem to question and change existing power structures and policy decisions.

References

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