

Review: Unraveling a Mystery: The Influences of Deliberative Minipublics on Public Decision-making (PhD by Julien Vriydagh, University of Stuttgart)

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In ‘Unraveling a Mystery: The Influences of Deliberative Minipublics on Public Decision-making’, Julien Vriydagh takes the reader on a stimulating journey through three critical questions surrounding the increasing use of deliberative minipublics worldwide: (1) How do organisers justify the use of minipublics? (2) What is minipublics’ influence on policymaking? (3) And what usage and influence can and should they have? Since the thesis is article based, the three questions are addressed in separate chapters, which are set up as standalone pieces. Yet, Dr Vriydagh ties them nicely together – both in the introduction and the conclusion as, *in a nutshell*, he examines (1) what minipublics are said to do, (2) what they do and (3) what they should do. Thereby, he performs an impressive triangular balancing act between empirical political science, engagement with the work of practitioners and political theory.

The Purposes of Minipublics in Practice and Theory

In the first chapter, he departs from a very nice intuition when wondering about the actual match between politi-

cal theory and political praxis in the justification of minipublics. Put differently, do those who theorise minipublics and those who put them into practice have the same view and objectives? The question is not only relevant scientifically but also has very concrete implications for practitioners. The idea to examine this question by looking at the reports formulated by minipublics is empirically original. The amount of collected data is impressive. The thematic analysis is well conducted.

While he discusses the limitations of his data thoroughly, the critical reader will wonder a bit about the statute of minipublic reports as main data source. In particular, one may question whether some functions are left out of these reports because organisers focus on what seems essential to them to convince politicians to act upon the formulated recommendations – inflating inclusion and will-formation justifications, while deflating decision-making justifications. That being said, I agree that final reports remain minipublics’ main public documentation and, as such, have an important (per)formative function.

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The Influence of Minipublics on Public Decisions

The second chapter, which is co-authored with his supervisor, Prof. Didier Caluwaerts, makes an original contribution to assessing minipublics' influence on policymaking – conceptually, methodologically and practically. The sequential approach they propose for the assessment is not only theoretically sound but also useful for visualisation. Their argument regarding the necessity of data triangulation when assessing minipublics' influence is well taken and justified vis-à-vis the lack thereof in existing approaches.

In the sequential approach, minipublics' influence is defined as the set of preferences (z), which result over time (T) from the interaction between a minipublic's recommendations (Y) and politicians' initial preferences (X) (see Figure 1). In this respect, a further differentiation might be worth considering between the set of preferences politicians share with the minipublic, but which they had already before (ii), and those set of preferences politicians developed based on the recommendations of the minipublic (iii). While the former could be deemed 'coincidence', the latter can certainly be considered 'influence'.

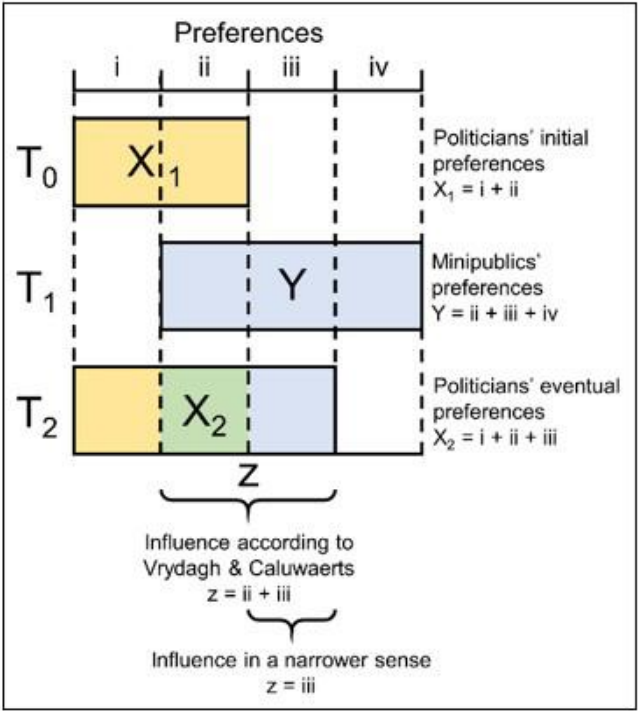
Managing Expectations

The third chapter, finally, by looking at what minipublics can and should do, adds an interesting normative opening to the two preceding empirical chapters. Dr. Vrydagh comes to the sobering conclusion that, as small-scale processes, most minipublics have only a limited capacity for bringing about large-

scale policy change. Elaborating on Lafont's (2019) critiques on minipublics' accountability, he identifies the potential mismatch between minipublics and public opinion as a serious drawback on their legitimacy.

While the attempt of the chapter to go beyond an idealist account of minipublics is stimulating, one may wonder if some of the critiques would not need to be put into perspective. In particular, when minipublics are set up as small-scale processes, as most admittedly are, it seems logical that they only have small-scale effects. However, this is not a necessity and a properly institutionalised minipublic with a sufficient number of participants and time may actually be able to perform larger-scale functions and effects. Similarly, while the critiques of minipublics' legitimacy are to be taken seriously, the same critical standards should also be applied to the two other sources of political legitimacy that are considered: public opinion and elected politicians. One may indeed wonder if public opinion, as such, exists and how legitimate non-reflected public opinion is. Equally, the legitimacy of politicians who are elected with decreasing turnouts, based on programmes that they only partially implement, to take decisions that, albeit relying on electoral accountability, result from a poorly deliberated, aggregative, short-term rationale, is to be put under comparable scrutiny.

Figure 1 *Rethinking ‘influence’ in the sequential approach to minipublics’ impact*



This is even truer when considering the relative novelty and ongoing development of minipublics, compared to the relatively established and matured stage of electoral representative democracy.

Conclusion

Taken together, the PhD of Julien Vrydagh stands out by the topical relevance of the questions it raises, by the conceptual novelty of the frameworks it uses to answer them, as well as by the rigour of the empirical analyses. The combination of empirical political science and political theory is original and refreshing, even if some of the theories

in Chapter 3 deserve further consideration. While it speaks to the literatures on democratic innovations and deliberative democracy in the first place, it also contributes in a broader sense to the scholarship on democratic fatigue, reform and legitimacy.