
Part 4: **Different perceptions of citizens' assemblies**

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23 Citizens' support for citizens' assemblies

Abstract: In this chapter, David Talukder and Jean-Benoit Pilet analyse support for a greater use of citizens' assemblies among citizens. They combine new analyses of recent comparative survey data with published studies on support in various countries in order to examine how much citizens would like to give a greater role to citizens' assemblies and what are the main characteristics that split citizens in their support for CAs. Their contributions are threefold. First, they show that while CAs might enjoy wide support as additions to representative institutions, they are not seen by the majority of citizens as an institution that could replace assemblies composed of elected politicians. Second, they show that the greatest support for CAs is found among citizens who are politically dissatisfied, who are politically engaged and who trust the political skills of other citizens. Finally, they show that support for CA is context-contingent and is especially dependent on how CAs are institutionalized (composition, prerogatives, ...) and on the topics they will be in charge of.

Keywords: democratic innovations, citizens' assemblies, deliberation, democracy; citizens' perception, sortition

23.1 Introduction

During the last decades, citizens' assemblies (CAs) have become widespread, especially in Europe, and to a certain extent in North America and Oceania. In Europe, since 2000, the POLITICIZE dataset lists at least 127 *Deliberative Mini-Public* (DMPs, a generic appellation for citizens' assemblies). CA as an object is often analysed and discussed by scholars, yet little is known regarding support for those types of reforms. Literature on this later topic has however grown significantly over the last decade (Landwehr and Faas 2016; Caluwaerts et al. 2018; Bedock and Pilet 2020, 2021; Gherghina and Geissel 2020; Colm and Elkink 2021). Insights could also be found in the broader literature on citizens' support for different models of democracy, and that covers deliberative democracy as one of the models (Font, Wojcieszak and Navarro 2015; Bengtsson and Christensen 2016; Fernandez-Martinez and Font 2018; Gherghina and Geissel 2019; Goldberg, Wyss, and Bächtiger 2020).

In this chapter, we propose to build upon this consolidating literature and to provide a comprehensive view regarding what we know about citizens' support for CAs. First, relying on empirical data, we describe how widespread citizens' support for instruments of deliberative democracy is. The data show that many citizens tend to be in

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favour of those instruments. Nonetheless, a majority of the citizens are against CAs to replace elected politicians. Bearing those elements in mind, we then discuss more specifically what are the factors that could explain citizens' support (or not) for CAs. Indeed, although rather recent, several theories and empirical studies might provide explanatory elements regarding why citizens are in favour or against CAs. More specifically, scholars underline four approaches to better understand citizens' support for CAs: political engagement, political frustration, social trust, and ideology. Finally, going further than those approaches, we discuss the role of general and contingent support for CAs. As recent studies suggest, while analysing political reforms, one should take into account the fact that there might be differences between general support for CAs and support for CAs regarding specific policy issue.

23.2 Do citizens support the organizations of citizens' assemblies?

The first question one might be tempted to ask when it comes to discussing CAs as a new instrument to associate citizens to policymaking could be to know if citizens are willing to have such a reform. More specifically: "Are citizens in favour of the organizations of CAs?" and "How widespread the support for CAs?". In this section, we propose to have a brief look at support for CAs among citizens in general. In order to do so, we rely on data from the EPIS web-based survey coordinated by Damien Bol and André Blais (see Blais et al. 2021), in which 15,406 citizens from 15 European countries¹ were surveyed between 13 March and 2 April 2020. The countries are quite different and cover different types of political systems which allow to draw a general picture of citizens' support toward CAs as a replacement for elected politicians and to identify cross-country variations.

However, one of the common criticisms when it comes to studying citizens' support for CAs is related to the fact that citizens do not necessarily know in detail what CAs are. Indeed, despite the popularity of deliberative democracy in academia and among practitioners it is likely that many citizens have never heard of/never been confronted with an actual CA. In order to take that into account, we relied on a very specific question asked in the EPIS web-based survey which is the following:

We live in countries in which citizens vote for politicians who then make decisions on various topics. People sometimes talk about the possibility of letting a group of citizens decide instead of politicians. These citizens will be selected by lot within the population and would then gather and deliberate for several days in order to make policy decisions, like politicians do in parliament.

¹ Austria (976), Belgium (1,845), Denmark (997), Finland (977), France (977), Germany (934), Greece (787), Ireland (989), Italy (990), the Netherlands (973), Norway (992), Portugal (1,003), Spain (991), Sweden (1,001), and the United Kingdom (974). Representative samples of each countries' population were recruited by a polling company (DyNata) based on age, gender, education, and region quotas.

Overall, do you think it is a good idea to let a group of randomly-selected citizens make decisions instead of politicians on a scale going from 0 (very bad idea) to 10 (very good idea)?

The question is rather specific as it allows to measure citizens' perception of deliberative tools after being briefly described to them. The vignette mentions two crucial components of CAs: they are composed of citizens selected by lot, and those citizens gather to deliberate. It does not stress, however, that in most CAs, deliberation starts with an information phase with auditions of experts and various actors affected by the policy issue at stake. Moreover, the formulation of the question asks citizens' perception of letting a group of *randomly-selected* citizens to make decisions *instead of politicians*. As a consequence, the question captures support for the replacement of politicians by citizens as well as support for randomly selected citizens, while in most real-life cases, CAs are formulating policy recommendations and do not take decisions. Nevertheless, data from this survey is the first one to provide a view on support for CAs across a wide range of countries. The graph below shows the distribution of citizens in each country. More specifically citizens are divided into three groups, those who hold a negative view of CAs to replace politicians (answer between 0 and 4), those who are neutral (answer of five) and those who hold a positive view (answer ranging between 6 and 10).

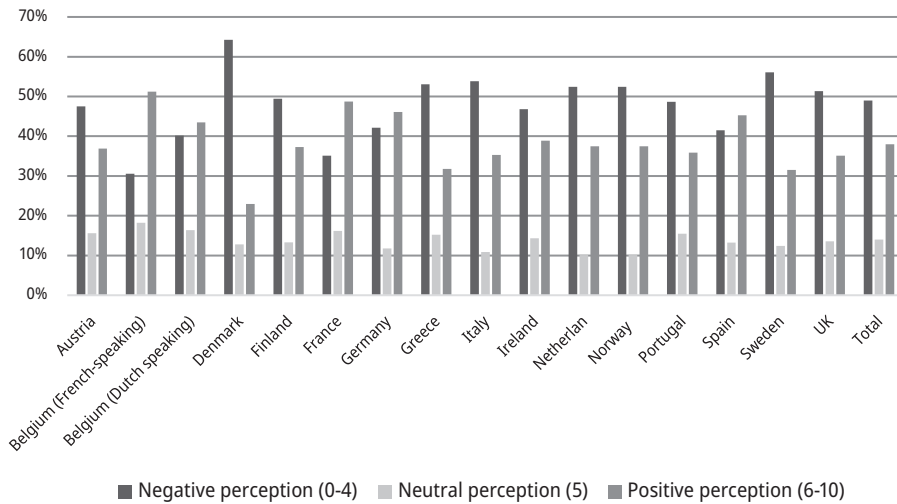


Figure 23.1: Support for the replacement of elected politicians by citizens' assembly

The graph (Figure 23.1) shows that citizens tend to be rather opposed to the replacement of elected politicians by randomly selected CAs. In almost each country, the largest group of respondents are those who think that it is a *very bad idea* to replace elected politicians by randomly selected citizens or those who are neither against nor in

favour. The mean of the answer is higher than 5 for only one country (France with a mean of 5.2) and for French-speaking Belgium (with a mean of 5.3).

The descriptive statistics suggest that citizens tend to be rather opposed to the idea of replacing the elected politicians by a body of randomly selected citizens. Those results echo the study of Vandamme and colleagues (2018) in which similar results are found regarding the Belgian case; or Goldberg and Bächtiger's (2022) recent study in Germany. Nonetheless, other studies (Bedock and Pilet 2020; Gherghina and Geissel 2019, 2020; Pilet, Talukder, et al. 2020) regarding the support for *consultative* deliberative mini-publics, show that citizens might be more in favour of initiatives, such as CAs, to complement (rather than replace) the work of elected politicians. Those preliminary elements lead us to investigate the matter further by examining theoretically the different reasons that could explain citizens' support for CAs.

23.3 What factors appear to drive citizens' support for citizens' assemblies?

The question of attributing a greater role for citizens in the policymaking process has been investigated by several scholars and among those studies, some scholars have tried to understand citizens' support for instruments of deliberative democracy (Font, Wojcieszak and Navarro 2015; Bedock and Pilet 2020, 2021; Gherghina and Geissel 2020). More specifically, in this section we focus on the following question: "Why would citizens be in favour of instruments of deliberative democracy instead of the classic representative system?" The existing literature regarding citizens' support for CAs highlights four key factors that are discussed in the following paragraphs: citizens' dissatisfaction, citizens' engagement, social trust, and ideology.

The main approach to explain citizens' support for CAs as well as other forms of democratic innovation (like referendums or participatory budgeting) is related to citizens' dissatisfaction with the political system. The rationale behind this approach is rather simple. Citizens who are dissatisfied with the way politics works in their country would be willing to have reforms of the political systems that enhance the role of citizens in the policymaking process. This argument, first used to explain support for a greater use of referendums (Bowler, Donovan and Karp 2007; Schuck and de Vreese 2015), has been studied regarding support for deliberative democracy and has been referred to the "enraged citizens" hypothesis (Bedock and Pilet 2020).

When it comes to the relationship between political dissatisfaction and support for CAs, studies generally use generic measures of political dissatisfaction such as the classic indicator of "satisfaction with democracy". However other studies suggest that rather than relying on generic support toward the political system, one might go back to Easton's (1965) classical distinction between specific support for actors of the system and diffuse support for the principles of the political system in itself. In this regard, Gherghina and Geissel (2019) found that dissatisfaction with specific institu-

tions such as the government and the parliament are affecting support for citizens as decision-makers in Germany. Nonetheless, they also found an effect regarding dissatisfaction with the political system in general. Alternatively, other scholars rather distinguish between different objects of political support such as the political regime, political institutions, and political actors (see Norris 2011). Bedock and Pilet (2021a) found, for instance, that support for mini-publics among French citizens was strong when support was low for political actors, but was even stronger when support was lower for institutions and the regime.

If the “enraged citizens” hypothesis is often mentioned when one studies support for reforms of the representative system, another line of explanation regarding support for CAs is the so-called “engaged citizens” hypothesis (Schuck and de Vreese 2015). Further than dissatisfaction with politics, this approach argues that citizens’ perception of their own characteristics might explain their support for CAs. More specifically, the rationale behind this approach is referring to the fact that citizens who are interested in politics and who feel competent might be more in favour of reforms, such as CAs, that give a direct say to citizens in the policymaking process (Colm and Elkind 2021). In other words, citizens who feel competent in terms of political skills might be more in favour of reforms that could enhance their possibility to have an impact on policymaking processes. These elements connect to traditional explanations of political participation: citizens with more resources and more (perceived) ability to participate support more opportunities to have a say in politics (Almond and Verba 1963; Brady, Verba and Scholzman 1995; Dalton 2004). Several studies have confirmed that it was also playing a role in shaping opinions towards deliberative democracy (Jacobs, Cook and Carpini 2009; Bedock and Pilet 2020; Gherghina and Geissel 2020).

A third group of explanations examined, though to a lesser extent, in the literature relates to factors associated with political under-representation (Gherghina, Mokre and Miscoiu 2021; Talukder and Pilet 2021). The question posed is whether citizens belonging to groups that are politically disadvantaged and less represented in elected institutions such as women, younger citizens, lower educated citizens, or citizens with more precarious jobs would hold different views towards CAs. Two contradictory expectations might be formulated in that respect. On the one hand, citizens from those groups are often underrepresented in parliament. By contrast, CAs are composed to be representative of society in its diversity. Specific attention is therefore paid to the inclusion of citizens from those groups. It might consequently be expected that citizens from groups underrepresented in representative institutions would be more in favour of CAs (Traber et al. 2022). On the other hand, as explained above, political science has widely demonstrated that citizens from those groups tend to participate less in politics (Almond and Verba 1963; Brady Verba and Scholzman 1995). They could therefore be less in favour of CAs as they require greater and wider citizens’ participation. The few studies published on the attitudes of citizens from traditionally underrepresented groups provide mixed findings (Talukder and Pilet 2021). Some of these characteristics, and especially being a woman, are indeed associated with greater support for CAs and deliberative instruments. Yet, other characteristics such as lower education or precari-

ous job conditions do not produce the same effects. Those findings seem to validate the idea that underrepresentation in representative institutions could trigger support for CAs as more inclusive alternatives, but this link does not cancel out the negative impact of resources on support for greater citizens' participation.

Another, less common approach has been developed to explain citizens' support for CAs: the role of social trust or the evaluation of the competences of fellow citizens. The logic behind this approach is directly related to the use of sortition and deliberation. Indeed, in the case of an election and a referendum almost all citizens are entitled to participate. By contrast, in CAs, only a handful of unelected citizens are invited to take part (commonly via sortition mechanisms). In most cases, it means that most of the citizens would not directly participate in CAs and would have to delegate their sovereignty completely to other citizens (MacKenzie and Warren 2012). Trusting the political competence of the fellow-citizens therefore becomes more important. Consequently, one might expect citizens who trust their fellow citizens to be more in favour of CAs than those who believe that their fellow citizens are not competent enough to take part in the decision-making process. The role of social trust regarding support for CAs has been emphasized in several studies. It had been earlier underlined in Spain by Adrian del Río and his colleagues (2016) and had been central in the qualitative work of García-Espín and Ganuza (2017) on "participatory sceptics", which demonstrated that a good share of citizens might be opposed towards deliberative democracy because they doubt that most citizens would have the competence to take part. More recently studies on French (Bedock and Pilet 2021a) and Belgian (Talukder and Pilet 2021) citizens showed that trust in fellow-citizens is one, if not the main, explanatory factor regarding support for CAs.

Finally, a last approach to explain citizens' support for CAs might be related to ideology. In particular, a few studies have tried to connect support for CAs with citizens' positions along the left/right cleavage. There is not much research on the positions on other cleavages. The dominant finding is that left-wing citizens are more in favour of reforms that are supportive of a greater citizens' involvement (Bedock and Pilet 2021a; Bengtsson and Mattila 2009; del Río, Navarro and Font 2016; Donovan and Karp 2006; Webb 2013). Right-wing citizens, on the other hand, tend to be more in favour of reforms that involve citizens less and to develop *stealth democratic* attitudes (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Webb 2013). Those differences between left-wing and right-wing citizens are empirical regularities. They have not been widely theorized, but might be associated with research showing that left-wing actors tend to have a more inclusive vision of politics, willing to involve all social groups into politics. This has especially been examined regarding political parties in relation to electoral institutions (Bol 2016; Bowler, Donovan and Karp 2006). Several studies (Jacquet, Niessen and Reuchamps 2020; Junius et al. 2020; Rangoni et al. 2021) found that left-wing MPs were more supportive of CAs than right-wing MPs. The same line of reasoning could be expanded to citizens and how they evaluate instruments increasing citizens' participation (see the chapter by Niessen in this *Handbook*). More left-wing citizens would be supportive of CAs based on the idea that they would guarantee the fair inclu-

sion of citizens with various backgrounds to ensure that participants would reflect the diversity of society. Left-wing citizens also tend to be in favour of a redistribution of power within society towards a more egalitarian structure. They support, in particular, the empowerment of citizens from more disadvantaged groups. Empowerment is precisely one of the goals of deliberative democracy (Curato, Hammond and Min 2019; Fishkin 2011; Fung 2006).

23.4 Is it only a matter of process? General vs. contingent support for citizens' assemblies

All the studies that we have discussed above are built on the assumption that citizens would show some kind of generic support (or opposition) to deliberative mini-publics. Yet, over recent years, new research has been published showing that citizens' attitudes towards such form of democratic innovation could also be contingent on how the citizens' assembly is going to be implemented or would perform. First, it has appeared that the institutional characteristics of the CA could influence how citizens evaluate its use. More specifically, research identifies at least two types of institutional characteristics that could have an effect of support for CAs: the composition of CAs and its (non-)binding nature.

The composition of the CAs is an important factor regarding support for this type of democratic innovation. Indeed, as suggested above, CAs by definition imply that a representative subset of the wider population is drawn by lot to deliberate on specific topics (Curato et al. 2021). In other words, it means that each citizen does not have the opportunity to participate. Moreover, the representative relationship in a CA is different from one with elected representatives. In the case of CAs, participants are drawn by lot and are not bonded by a representative relationship in the sense that they are not directly accountable to their fellow citizens (see the chapter by Vandamme in this *Handbook*). Therefore, one might expect that citizens might not be in favour of CAs unless they have good reason to be in favour of CAs such as evaluating negatively political elites. Several empirical studies tend to corroborate this argument. In Northern Ireland, Pow, Van Dijk and Marien (2020) find that the perception of CAs participants as "like them" tend to increase citizens' support for CAs. In Norway, Arnesen and Peters (2018) found something similar through a survey experiment in which they showed that citizens were more inclined to accept a political outcome when the decision-makers were descriptively representative.

The other institutional element that might impact citizens support for CAs can be related to the prerogatives given to the assembly. If the outputs of a CA are binding rather than consultative, then support for CAs might differ. Indeed, several studies (see Pilet, Bedock and Vandamme 2021) emphasize the fact that several groups of citizens are not against complementing the current representative system with democratic innovations but are not necessarily in favour of bypassing elected representatives. In a

survey experiment conducted in the United States, Rojon and colleagues (Rojon, Rijken and Klandermans 2019: 219) found that public support for deliberative assemblies was slightly lower for binding models than for advisory ones. Examining support for CAs at the local level in Belgium, Bedock and Pilet (2020: 8) found the same pattern. Almost half of their respondents were in favour of advisory mini-publics, while about 31% wanted citizens selected by lot to form the local council, with all related policy prerogatives. These findings are actually in line with the recommendations in favour of advisory mini-publics made by Curato and colleagues (2021: 113).

Second, recent studies have also shown that some citizens evaluate CAs taking into account their policy outputs. They demonstrate that citizens are not policy blind. They primarily care about the policies that will be implemented, and less about the procedures and institutional arrangements to reach a decision (Arnesen 2017; Esaiasson et al. 2019). Pilet, Bol and colleagues (2020) found, for example, that across 15 Western European countries, support for CAs was higher when citizens knew that their policy preferences were shared by a majority of fellow citizens, and would therefore be likely to be well represented in a CA. By contrast, citizens knowing that they held minority position tended to be less supportive of gathering citizens in CAs when those citizens were likely to hold different policy preferences. Those findings concur with the findings of Beiser-McGrath and colleagues (2022: 548) who studied citizens' process preferences in Germany, Switzerland, and the UK, and concluded that such preferences should be perceived as stable and generic. They are susceptible to change when citizens examine the policy outputs associated to a process like a CA.

These last findings show that citizens' support for deliberative mini-publics as captured in surveys might not translate into the same evaluation when an actual mini-public would be installed. There might be differences between how citizens answer survey questions about the concept of mini-publics, and how they would evaluate an actual mini-public being held in their country, region, or municipality (see the chapter by Goldberg in this *Handbook*). In the latter case, their judgement will also be influenced by the information they would receive on citizens who composed the CA as well as on the content of the policy recommendations formulated. The spill-over effect of CAs on the wider public is often dependent on many factors (see van der Does and Jacquet 2021). For example, several studies underline that non-participants are often ill-informed about mini-publics and that there is a need for greater publicity around mini-publics that are held if we want them to have an influence on the citizenry at large (Boulianne 2018; Michels 2011). As Bächtiger and Goldberg (2020, p. 35) wrote: "In order to be trustworthy (in their views towards mini-publics), citizens must have acquired some knowledge of how mini-publics work internally and why they trump other venues in terms of trustworthy input." In the same logic, Germann and colleagues (2021) have shown that mini-publics could increase legitimacy perceptions, but it also depends on what elected authorities do with recommendations that have emerged from CAs. If elected authorities decide to ignore those recommendations, the boost in perceived legitimacy fades away.

23.5 Conclusion

Citizens' assemblies as an instrument of deliberative democracy have been studied for decades by scholars. Yet, most of the studies were focused on the instrument in itself and little was known regarding citizens' support for CAs. Recently, several researchers tackled this question and the aim of this chapter was to gather and underline the factors that could explain citizens' support for CAs.

First, based on a comparative survey, we have shown that a majority of the citizens were not in favour of replacing elected politicians by CAs. However, a significant part of the citizens tends to be “not opposed/in favour of” such a reform. Citizens tend to be even more in favour of consultative CAs which complement the current decision-making process.

Second, we identified the factors that could drive citizens' support for CAs based on recent empirical studies. According to the literature on the topic, four elements can be underlined when it comes to citizens' support for CAs. The first element is citizens' dissatisfaction with political actors and the political system (which refers to the “enraged” hypothesis). The second element refers to the “engaged” hypothesis and focuses on citizens' personal characteristics such as their resources, their background, and their (perceived ability) to participate. The third element refers to social trust and, more specifically, to citizens' trust in their fellow citizens to be competent enough to participate. Finally, the fourth element refers to citizens' ideology as several empirical studies found that left-wing citizens were more in favour of participatory reforms than right-wing citizens who are more inclined to develop stealth democratic attitudes.

Finally, further than the factors that drive support for CAs in general, we discussed in detail the contextual elements that can impact citizens' support for CAs. Indeed, several studies have shown that the context can matter a lot when it comes to citizens' support for CAs. More specifically, institutional elements as well as the potential performance of CAs are underlined by scholars. The former refers to how CAs might be implemented such as their composition or their prerogatives (consultative/binding). The latter refers to the potential policy outputs of CAs and their congruence with citizens' preferences.

Research has developed significantly across recent years on the topic. Yet, it should still be consolidated. Indeed, our examination shows that research is still very much needed regarding how to explain citizens' support for CAs. We can identify at least two directions for future research. First, most of the literature relies on case studies, looking at citizens' attitudes towards CAs in one country, or examining their impact on political legitimacy in one specific context. They implicitly assume that findings in one country will be exportable to other contexts. It is not self-evident, and several studies show contradictory findings in different countries. Comparative research is therefore more than needed. Second, few studies are examining citizens' attitudes towards deliberative CAs in the context of real mini-publics taking place (see Gastil et al. 2018). Most studies would be experimental (see Boulianne 2018). But research

shows that citizens are attentive to the details of the mini-public and to its output when evaluating it. Therefore, we would need more research following citizens in real situations of CAs running.

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