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Deliberative Mini-publics as a Response to the Crisis of Representative Democracy: First Attempts at Institutionalization in European Cities¹

Abstract: The growing crisis of representative democracy and associated citizen dissatisfaction has stimulated innovative thinking about democracy. Over the past two decades, a wide range of democratic innovations have emerged to increase the involvement of ordinary people in politics, combining direct mass participation with in-depth dialogue on pressing public policy issues. The innovations are rapidly spreading territorially, becoming increasingly institutionalised and tailored to specific political, cultural and social contexts. Mini-publics, which are forums for small-scale debate, are particularly remarkable. Faced with citizens' dissatisfaction with the practice of the public sphere, there are attempts to institutionalise one-off deliberative forums and make them part of a broader political system. This challenge was first taken up by the German-speaking community of Belgium (Ostelbelgien) and followed by other public authorities. Attempts to incorporate mini-publics into the decision-making space have also been made by local authorities – Paris, Newham and Aachen. In this article I argue that citizens' assemblies are the most advanced method of institutionalising deliberative democracy. I demonstrate that although the first citizen assemblies realised in the world were one-offs, following their example, particularly because of the success of the unique Ostelbelgien model, subsequent public authorities have begun to see this innovation as an opportunity to permanently (rather than just one-off) power democracy and make it more resilient to crises. I also show that local authorities can play a leading role in strengthening and institutionalising deliberative processes using mini-publics.

Key words: Democratic innovations, deliberative mini-publics, citizens' assemblies, local government

Introduction

Mini-publics are forums, usually organised by policy makers, where citizens representing different viewpoints gather together to discuss a specific issue in a forum and in small groups (Fung, 2003; Goodin, Dryzek, 2006; Grönlund et al., 2014). Well-designed deliberative forums can serve important functions in democratic politics (Niemeyer, Veri, Dryzek, Bächtiger, 2023). To be a space for the promotion of dialogue and the exchange of ideas rather than political monologue and the display of rhetoric. Compensate for those structural deficiencies that relate to problems of scale, complexity, lack of information and knowledge, and opportunities to speak out and be heard (Chambers, 2009, p. 330). By acting as a kind of “deliberative filter” or “democratic mirror”, they represent a distinctive innovation that can contribute to the effective reform of contemporary political systems (Curato et al., 2021, p. 13).

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While deliberative innovations such as mini-publics do not yet constitute deliberative democracy, they are an important element of it (Curato et al., 2021, p. 16). They are expected to constitute “more perfect public spheres” (Fung, 2003, p. 338) than those we know from the practice of electoral politics. Their advocates argue that they can make up for the weaknesses of the – largely undesigned – mass public sphere (Chambers, 2009, p. 330), provide a remedy for the failure of large and mass communities to cope with authentic deliberation (Goodin, Dryzek, 2006, pp. 219–220) and as such be a response to the crisis of representative democracy. Deliberative mini-publics are one possible answer to the question of how democratic ideals can be put into practice. Given the experience in many countries around the world, it seems that mini-publics may be a key democratic innovation with sufficient potential to address the inadequacies of contemporary representative democracy.

In my article, I start from this premise. I argue that the greatest advantage of deliberative democracy is its empirical applicability, which accounts for its immense value for current politics. I argue that mini-publics, and citizen assemblies in particular, are the most advanced method of institutionalising deliberative democracy (Elstub, 2014, p. 166; Elstub, McLaverty, 2014, p. 14). I ask the question of whether, although the world’s first realised citizens’ assemblies were one-offs, following their example, particularly because of the success of Ostelbelgien’s unique model, might subsequent public authorities begin to see this innovation as an opportunity to permanently (rather than just one-off) empower democracy and make it more resilient to crises? Furthermore, I wonder whether local authorities can play a leading role in strengthening and institutionalising deliberative processes using mini-publics such as citizens’ assemblies? My overall aim is to contribute to the debate on deliberative democracy and to support the conceptualisation of future institutional designs. I aim to achieve this by pursuing the specific objective of answering the two research questions identified above. In this paper, I use the desk research method to analyse desk sources, primarily the literature on the topic under study and data from the databases <https://participedia.net>; <http://politicize.eu/> and OECD (2020), which record and systematise cases of mini-publications carried out worldwide. In order to discuss and explain the deliberative processes I have selected, I use the case study method (Yin, 2012). I use data published on the official websites of the particular citizens’ assemblies.

I begin this paper by discussing the idea of deliberative mini-publics, which are innovative forums for small-scale debate (Fung, 2003; Smith, 2009; Warren, 2009; Grönlund et al., 2014; Curato et al., 2021) that are expected to address the growing crisis of representative democracy. I identify their types and features and refer to exemplary processes implemented in different countries around the world. The empirical examples I have chosen are all citizens’ assemblies because, in my view, this formula creates the best conditions for the institutionalisation of a deliberative forum.

I refer to the first successful experiments of citizens’ assemblies around the world (Canada and the Netherlands) and subsequent successful attempts to integrate *ad hoc* deliberative forums into politics (Ireland). I then discuss the unique model of *Permanent Citizens’ Dialogue* adopted in the German-speaking Community of Belgium Ostelbelgien, before moving smoothly on to identify further examples of attempts to institutionalise deliberative forums. The assemblies I have referred to, established over the past three years in Newham, Aachen and Paris – inspired by the Belgian model – have been designed to complement representative institutions, and the ambition of the local gov-

ernments of the cities indicated is to involve them permanently in local decision-making processes. The choice of local government units for the study was deliberate. I chose examples, firstly, showing territorial diversity (England, Germany, France), and secondly, I took into account the size of the municipalities (small – Newham, medium – Aachen and large – Paris). My narrative is located in the local space, the reasons for which I explain in the last part of the discussion. I conclude the article with a summary.

Democratic innovation as a response to the crisis of representative democracy

Most contemporary democratic systems are based on a representative model in which electoral procedures and the concept of representation play a key role. Public debate takes place in elite and weakly representative spaces that are remote from the influence of citizens (Hibbing, Theiss-Morse, 2002; Papadopoulos, 2012). Representative assemblies (parliaments, councils, commissions) operate on an electoral model of representation in which cyclically elected representatives make decisions on behalf of their constituents. Their interests are located in geographically defined spaces (Urbinati, Warren, 2008) and decisions are filtered through political parties and the best organised lobbying groups. Many politicians prioritise their own interests (e.g. career advancement) or the vested interests of their electorate (territorial constituencies) over a general concern for the public good (Steiner, 1996; Hendriks, 2005).

Empirical evidence shows that people are disillusioned with how representative democracy works in this way (Dalton, 2004; Smith, 2009, p. 4; Norris, 2011; Bedock, Pilet, 2021). Processes of turning away from democracy have been evident since the 1980s all over the world, including in Europe. They result, among other things, in increasing electoral instability, a decline in citizens' interest in belonging to and being active in political parties, declining levels of political participation, especially with regard to voter turnout (Blais et al., 2004; Norris, 2011), growing problems with the legitimacy of representative democracies, the mediatisation of politics, populist and demagogic rhetoric by radical or unconventional political outsiders (Körösényi, Illés, Gyula, 2020), ever-increasing levels of distrust of government institutions and authorities (Fournier et al., 2011). These trends appear to be strongly linked (Levi, Stoker, 2000).

Democracy is under increasing strain and pressure. It is exposed to polarised partisan politics (Przeworski, 2008). Rather than acting as gatekeepers, political parties contribute to opening up political space to demagogues, radicals and outsiders (Levitsky, Ziblatt, 2018). In response to growing crises of democratic values, “ordinary” citizens are becoming increasingly passive or even withdrawn. In addition, the dramatic events of the last two years – the global COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian aggression in Ukraine – have made support for democratic processes more necessary than ever. Democracy is sufficiently “in crisis” to warrant a rethink at the institutional level (Landmore, 2020, p. 25; Dalton, 2004). Democratic institutions need to be strengthened, to become more resilient to emerging socio-economic challenges and more strongly open to citizens. Democracy cannot survive without citizens – it is hard not to agree that this would be a completely abstract vision. Unfortunately, all signs in heaven and earth, including hard statistical data, indicate that citizens are in retreat.

These trends have stimulated innovative thinking about democracy. Over the past two decades, a wide range of democratic innovations have emerged that seek to increase citizen engagement in politics, combining direct mass participation with in-depth dialogue on pressing public policy issues (Smith, 2009). Innovations are rapidly spreading territorially, becoming increasingly institutionalised and tailored to specific political, cultural and social contexts (OECD, 2020). They are expected to change the nature of the political system, giving the public a more central role in politics (Landemore, 2020). They take different forms, but what they have in common is that they provide ordinary citizens with new and effective ways to influence public policy (Fung, 2003; Smith, 2009; Warren, 2009). In fulfilling this role, they become a component of broad and deep democratic renewal.

Mini-publics and their types: the citizens' assembly

A variety of deliberative forums comprised of randomly selected citizens (Stone, 2011) have attracted much scholarly attention in terms of their theoretical underpinnings and internal functioning (Grönlund et al., 2014; Farrell, Suiter, 2019; Roberts, Escobar, 2015; Jacquet, 2017; Niessen, Reuchamps, 2020; Escobar, Elstub, 2017; Fishkin, 1996; 1997; Fung, 2003; Dryzek, 2010; Landemore, 2015, Giraudet et al., 2022). Mini-publics are defined by Ryan and Smith (2014, p. 19) as forums consisting of citizens (lay people) recruited through stratified random selection to discuss a specific issue at a fixed time in a structured (facilitated) setting. They are “mini” because they are designed on a small scale. They are “public” because they reflect a larger audience and resolve public issues (Fung, 2003). They can be applied at any level of decision-making and also in weakly democratic and even non-democratic contexts such as the international system.

The researchers note, however, that the place and systemic role of deliberative mini-publics in decision-making is not yet sufficiently clear (Goodin, Dryzek, 2006; Parkinson, 2012; Hendriks, 2011). Evidence suggests that innovative institutional designs are poorly integrated into existing democratic practices and institutions (Ercan, Hendriks, Boswell, 2017; Rangoni, Bedock, Talukder, 2021; Goodin, Dryzek, 2006; Parkinson, 2012; Hendriks, 2011). Admittedly, there are examples of the use of deliberative mini-publics in combination with direct democratic institutions, e.g. popular initiatives and referenda (Warren, Pearse, 2008), as well as in combination with representative decision-making (Setälä, 2017). There are also data from Ireland (Farrell, 2014; Suiter, Farrell, O'Malley, 2016; Farrell, Suiter, 2019) and Belgium (Niessen, Reuchamps, 2020; Macq, Jacquet, 2023) on the institutional link between deliberative mini-publics and the political system. However, a systematic approach to this integration remains a challenge.

Advocates of deliberative practice propose two paths to deal with this dilemma. One is to integrate deliberative mini-publics into public policy decision-making processes. The other is to look at deliberative democracy much more broadly, as a political system that places a high value on debate, both informally in the public sphere and formally in face-to-face meetings (Chappell, 2011, p. 78). These two formulas are interrelated and are not alternative; on the contrary, they are compatible and, depending on the context, can be developed, adopting practical formulas. This is why deliberative democracy theorists warn against mistakenly equating deliberative mini-publics with deliberative democracy (Chambers, 2009; Curato

et al., 2021, p. 10). Indeed, debate is a tool of the work also (or primarily) of representative institutions – parliaments, councils and committees – embedded in contemporary political systems, but it also appears in social organisations such as political parties or associations and in other institutions of collective life. This broad deliberative system thus consists of many different “sites” of deliberation (Habermas, 1996, pp. 238–315), and one should not forget the everyday conversations of a private nature (Mansbridge, 2012).

Although mini-publics are still mostly insular experiments, as participatory “sites” they are important for a number of reasons. They are a chance to practice designing institutions that can become truly deliberative in the future. They allow us to see what elements and aspects will have the potential to be implemented in other cultural and political contexts. For citizens, they are a school of democracy and an important civic experience. Their impact on public policy-making by adding a civic perspective to the decision-making process is also important. They thus bridge the gap between lay and expert perspectives (Chambers, 2009, p. 330; Curato et al., 2021).

In general, mini-publics involve a randomly selected group of citizens (using, for example, a stratified random sample). Participants, with the help of experts, learn in detail about a specific issue, and the organisers provide them with access to balanced information material to enhance their knowledge of the topic under discussion. They then exchange insights and arguments in a moderated debate (offering appropriate facilitation techniques to counteract patterns of dominance in the discussion). Finally, they present their position or formulate proposals to the authorities at the appropriate level. However, the process may vary depending on the specific type of mini-public.

Data suggests that more than 2,000 different democratic innovations have already been implemented worldwide (<https://participedia.net>). However, many of these are organised locally, without being located within a specific type of mini-public and are therefore difficult to classify clearly. This is why various research teams and community organisations undertake to collect and organise data on the subject (Paulis, Pilet, Panel, Vittori, Close, 2020; OECD, 2020). According to the OECD (2020) classification, there are 12 different types of representative deliberative processes. Escobar and Elstub (2017) divide deliberative processes into 5 basic types: Citizens’ Juries, Consensus Conferences, Planning Cells, Deliberative Polls and Citizens’ Assemblies. To this group, Curato et al. (2021, pp. 7–10), add another form: Citizens’ Initiative Review. The attribution of each type of mini-publication to a particular category is determined, among other things, by the number of participants, the duration, the number of meetings, the type of public issues decided or the outcomes. The examples of mini-publics I will refer to in this article are in the form of Citizens’ Assemblies. For this reason, I will only discuss this formula.

Citizens’ Assemblies are a relatively new and innovative way of enabling citizens to actively participate in decision-making (Fournier et al., 2011). They have been initiated in two Canadian provinces: British Columbia (2004) and Ontario (2006–2007) and in the Netherlands (2006). In subsequent years, they became popular in Australia, the United States, Germany, Austria, Ireland, Belgium, France, the United Kingdom and Poland, among others. They are currently used in more than 25 countries around the world and are organised by more than 40 specialised NGOs (Flanigan, Gözl, Gupta et al., 2021).

Although the organisation of citizens’ assemblies requires intensive organisational work and specific resources, they are currently one of the most popular deliberative inno-

vations in the world. They are also one of the most spectacular methods. Two Canadian assemblies preceded a referendum on electoral reform (Warren, Pearse, 2008). In the case of the Netherlands, the citizens' recommendation was forwarded to the government for consideration. Very high-profile and innovative processes were carried out in Ireland. In the case of The Irish Constitutional Convention (2013–2014), the composition of the forum was composed of 70 per cent citizens and the remaining 30 per cent were active politicians (Farrel, Suiter, 2019).

A citizens' assembly can last a month (several weekends) or even a year. Past assemblies around the world have typically attracted 100–160 participants. Citizens are selected in a two-stage procedure using the official voter register. First, a few hundred or a few thousand random individuals or households receive letters inviting them to participate, and then, in the course of further selection, an appropriate group is selected from those who express an interest in participating. The selection takes into account certain quotas related, for example, to gender, age, place of residence, education, economic status, ethnicity, etc. The method is therefore not strictly random, but stratified-random, as the composition of the congregation is intended to be representative of the wider population. The process takes place in three phases: learning, deliberation and decision-making (Podgórska-Rykała, 2020; Gerwin, 2018).

The world's first assembly – **The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform** (BCCA, 2004) was established by the government of British Columbia, Canada. The deliberations of the BCCA lasted a total of 11 months at a cost of \$5.5 million. The Assembly was an independent forum consisting of 158 randomly selected provincial residents. In recruiting participants, criteria such as age (minimum 18 years), gender, and place of residence were used to maintain representativeness. Also included were two Aboriginal people and a chairperson (Jack Blaney), who voted only in the event of a tie. The total number of participants was 161. Participants were offered an allowance of USD 150 per day and support with childcare (*ad hoc* kindergarten). The assembly was tasked with examining the provincial electoral system and proposing fairer alternatives for it (Smith, 2009, pp. 73–74; Warren, Pearse, 2008; Lang, 2007). In October 2004, the assembly decided to replace the First Past the Post (FPTP) system with a Single Transferable Vote (STV) system. The final report, *Making Every Vote Count*, and the assembly's recommendations were presented to the public in December 2004, and the final decision was put to a referendum held concurrently with the provincial election on 17 May 2005. Residents were asked: "Should British Columbia move to a BC-STV electoral system, as recommended by the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform?" Despite a sizable majority in favor, the referendum ultimately failed to approve the assembly's decision, due to the need for a so-called double majority. For one indicator, 57.4% was obtained while 60% was required (Fournier et al., 2011; Warren, Pearse, 2008). The fact that more than 57% of voters supported the changes proposed by the BCCA was interpreted by a wider international audience as an "impressive" and "exceptionally high" result indicating that the provincial population trusted the BCCA's judgment (Dryzek, 2010, pp. 169–170; Lang, 2007, p. 37; Curato, Böker, 2016, pp. 180–182).

Two further citizens' assemblies, in Ontario (Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, 2006–2007) and in the Netherlands (Burgerforum Kiesstelsel, 2006), were also

dedicated to electoral law reform. Their institutional design was modeled on the British Columbia assembly.

The next prominent example is Ireland, where deliberative experimentation began more than a decade ago and to this day public authorities periodically reach out to citizen assemblies at the national and, more recently, at the municipal level (Dublin). It began in 2011 with a pilot experimental citizens' assembly, organised by university staff and community activists as part of the **We the Citizens** project (Farrell, O'Malley, Suiter, 2013; Farrell, Suiter, 2019). It was completely independent of the public authorities, but proved to be such a success that the Irish government decided to establish **The Irish Constitutional Convention** (2013–2014).

The purpose of the Convention was to involve citizens in the process of preparing the burning (and controversial) amendments to the Irish Constitution in force since 1 July 1937 (Farrell, Suiter, 2019; Farrell, 2014; Suiter, Farrell, Harris, 2016). The Constitutional Convention deliberated with a 100-member composition of which 2/3 were drawn from the public, while the remaining 33 participants were active politicians: members of the Irish Parliament (Dáil and Seanad) and representatives of the Northern Ireland Assembly (Farrell, Suiter, 2019; Farrell, 2014; Suiter, Farrell, Harris, 2016). Among the topics discussed at the Convention were the regulation of the office of the President – the length of his or her term of office, the age of passive eligibility and the possibility for people living outside Ireland to vote in presidential elections; the electoral system – the lowering of the age of eligibility to hold active voting rights; marriage equality regardless of gender; the role of women in private life and increasing their participation in public life; the crime of blasphemy; and, added by Convention members, the topic of Dáil reform and the issue of economic, social and cultural rights (Farrell, Suiter, 2019; Farrell, 2014; Suiter, Farrell, Harris, 2016). A total of 38 recommendations were made, 18 of which required the Irish electorate to decide by referendum in order to implement. This happened for some of them, ultimately resulting in constitutional amendments (Farrell, Suiter, 2019; Farrell, 2014; Suiter, Farrell, Harris, 2016).

On the wave of the success of the Constitutional Convention, the Irish authorities decided to organise another – followed by the public around the world because of the subject of abortion that was addressed – **The Irish Citizens Assembly** (2016–2018) (Farrell, Suiter, 2019; Farrell, Suiter, Cunningham, Harris, 2020).

The Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality was held in Ireland in 2020–2021. Two further assemblies started in the period 2021–2022. The first was **The Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss** (2022–2023). It was accompanied and complemented by first **Ireland's Children and Young People's Assembly on Biodiversity Loss**². The second was an urban venture, the **Dublin Citizens' Assembly**, which concluded its deliberations in October 2022 with a debate on changing the way the mayor is elected (to direct election). The assembly in Dublin had a total of 80 members, including a chairman, 67 randomly selected Dublin County residents and 12 councillors elected from the four local authorities. Then, on 15 April 2023, the **Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use** began its work.

² This invited the participation of 35 randomly selected members aged between 7 and 17 from across Ireland, who submitted their recommendations to the Irish Minister for Heritage on 25 October 2022.

Both the Constitutional Convention and all subsequent Citizens' Assemblies were schools and exercises in deliberation for Ireland and its citizens. As the examples above show, the themes of the deliberative processes implemented in Ireland in many cases focused on issues that were clearly divisive to society, introducing a so-called "state of disagreement" (Thompson, 2008). According to this concept, deliberative assemblies can lean into controversial topics that reveal either strong divisions in public opinion or a high degree of citizen indecision on an issue. Politicians are keen to turn to deliberative solutions wherever a difficult, socially divisive issue arises, such as the abortion issue in Ireland (Suiter, Farrell, Harris, 2016). When no one wants to take up the issue, it is best to shift this responsibility to the citizens, after all they are the "sovereign" and they are "in charge". However, analyses of the subject matter of the processes that have so far been implemented in many places around the world show that deliberation will also work well for less controversial (and very "mundane") decisions that are the responsibility of local and regional authorities, e.g. urban cleanliness – Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2021 or air quality and public transport – Cambridge, UK, 2019 (Escobar, Elstub, 2017; Podgórska-Rykała, 2020; Podgórska-Rykała, 2022).

While some types of deliberative mini-publications have a legal framework (e.g. the Deliberative Poll® patented by Professor James Fishkin of Stanford University), others do not and are therefore implemented based on different principles in different parts of the world. For this type of innovation, good practices – especially when there is no defined legal framework – provide valuable guidance that cannot be ignored. A catalogue of good practices for citizens' assemblies has been proposed by the OECD (2020). Based on the experience of hundreds of processes implemented in OECD countries and other parts of the world, it developed a set of key ones that should guide the initiators and organisers of such deliberative processes. Among these are accountability, transparency, inclusion, representativeness, information, collective deliberation, time, fairness, privacy of participants and evaluation. To this list should be added influence, i.e. the potential power to transform the recommendations of citizens' assemblies into actual policy decisions. Moreover, regardless of technical and organisational differences, the core of deliberative processes must remain impartial. Bias at any stage (e.g. in selecting participants or experts, setting the agenda, moderating discussions, voting) destroys the purpose and stands in clear contradiction to the basic idea of the forum.

An example from Belgium

In this paper I want to focus on the institutionalisation of mini-publics. I examine cases of moving away from the organisation of an ad hoc assembly (e.g. in connection with an important and difficult topic) towards the creation of a permanent institution composed of randomly selected citizens. In approaching this topic, I will start with an example coming from Belgium. The system implemented in Ostbelgien (*Permanenter Bürgerdialog* – PBD), based on the model of *Permanent Citizens' Dialogue*, is cited as the greatest success of the institutional integration of deliberative mini-publics into the representative system (Macq, Jacquet, 2023, pp. 160–161).

The *Permanenter Bürgerdialog* model was launched on 25 February 2019 and was developed in collaboration with an international group of experts and the Belgian G1000. It is formed by 3 entities: (1) The Citizens' Council (*Bürgerrat*) consisting of 24 people drawn by lot for an 18-month term, (2) The Permanent Secretary for Civic Dialogue who is an employee of the regional administration (*Ständige Sekretärin*), (3) the Citizens' Assembly (*Bürgerversammlung*) – cyclical assemblies of randomly selected citizens. The system is supported by the Government and Parliament of the German-speaking Community of Belgium. The Council and the assemblies consist of persons selected by lot according to the rule of representativeness (age, gender, place of residence, education). The task of the Council, which meets monthly, is to decide on the topics to be consulted. Each topic is then discussed in a separate citizens' assembly (about three per year are planned) in order to develop concrete recommendations to the authorities. The recommendations of the assemblies are forwarded to Parliament, which organises a minimum of two debates per year on them.

This is a particularly interesting case because it goes beyond a number of citizens' assemblies organised only on a one-off, experimental basis (Elstub 2014; Grönlund et al., 2014). Interestingly, the project to introduce the model in Ostbelgien was supported by all six political parties in the regional parliament. There is a real political will to implement the recommendations developed in this process, although formally they are not binding, which would be contrary to the Belgian Constitution (Macq, Jacquet, 2023; Niessen, Reuchamps, 2020).

The adoption of the Ostbelgien model was preceded in Belgium by other deliberation experiments. Three of these appear to be of the greatest importance in this context. One was implemented at the level of the whole country, the second at the level of the city and the third at the level of the region.

The first deliberative mini-public in Belgium is the so-called **G1000**. The initiative was taken under special circumstances for the country. After the 2011 elections, there was no effective government at the federal level for several months because the parties were unable to find agreement. As a result of this crisis, a group of independent citizens decided to create a mini-public of 1,000 citizens with the aim of supporting politicians in breaking the deadlock of partisan politics. The initiators wanted to show that citizens are also able to express their voice between election campaigns. The deliberations took place on 11 November 2011; 704 participants eventually took part. The case represented one of the largest face-to-face mini-publics in the world. Three burning issues were leaned on: social security, immigration and redistribution of social security. Following the deliberations, a report was prepared and submitted to the presidents of the seven Belgian national parliaments (Caluwaerts, Reuchamps, 2015; Jacquet, 2017).

Another Belgian mini-public was the **G100** project, which followed on from G1000. Its initiators were residents of the commune in the south of Brussels, Grez-Doiceau. The organising group consisted of active residents of the commune and two associations. As with the G1000, the experience was completely independent of the public authorities. A two-day session was held (11–12 October 2014). With regard to the selection of participants, the organisers decided to adopt a mixed method, combining a general appeal to residents (it was possible to self-apply) and a random selection based on telephone numbers. In the second case, a municipal list provided by the post office was used. Partici-

pants in the G100 were first asked to imagine their ideal municipality thirty years from now. They were then asked to propose development goals and to join working groups and work as a team. At the end of the deliberations, a report was prepared and given to the municipalities (Jacquet, 2017).

The third Belgian case, the **Climate Citizens Parliament** (CCP, 2014), was organised by the public authorities of the province of Luxembourg, the local level of governance in Belgium. It was chaired by the regional minister responsible for sustainable development. The timing was linked to the United Nations Climate Change Conference scheduled for 2015 in Paris. The mini-public deliberated over three weekends, from September to October 2015. The result was a final report in which participants included their concerns and proposals for local public policies. The report was presented at a plenary session of the Provincial Council (Jacquet, 2017).

Newham, Aachen and Paris – the first cities in the world with permanent citizens' assemblies

Belgium and its model of permanent citizen dialogue has been followed by other public authorities. Here I will point to three examples of cities that have opted for permanent citizens' assemblies. They are diverse in terms of geographical location in Europe and size. The London Borough of Newham is a very small entity, one of the 32 boroughs of Greater London, located in its eastern part. Together with 19 other boroughs, it is part of what is known as Outer London. Aachen is a medium-sized German city with district rights, located in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, in the Cologne region. It is the seat of the Aachen Urban Region. Interestingly, it lies directly on the border with Belgium and the Netherlands. Paris is the capital and largest city of France.

All three of the identified local authorities have decided to establish permanent citizens' assemblies in the period 2021–2022. All three mini-publics have been established by decision of the municipal councils and include randomly selected citizens to reflect the demographic structure of the local governments. All three also represent the first permanent citizens' assemblies in selected countries.

The Newham Citizens' Assembly is the first permanent citizens' assembly in England. It was established by a decision of Newham Borough Council in July 2021 to improve the level of engagement of Newham residents in local democracy. A recommendation to this effect was first made by Newham's Democracy Commission.

From the 10,000 households invited by letter to take part, 50 people were eventually drawn, taking into account gender, age, occupation, neighbourhood of residence (4 areas of Newham), disability and ethnicity. The public authority was also supported in designing the assembly by community organisations – Democratic Society, Involve and Sortition Foundation. It was assumed that in order to maintain continuity of learning, half of the members from the first assembly would attend the assembly the following year along with 25 new attendees.

The topics for the various assemblies are to be chosen by residents through online voting. Based on indications from 31 per cent of citizens, the importance of parks and green spaces for residents ("greening the borough") was chosen as the first topic. Par-

ticipants considered two questions: “How can we work together to make our parks and green spaces even better for residents and visitors?” and “How do we ensure that everyone has access to quality green spaces?” The theme of “the 15-minute neighbourhood” was identified as another, supported by 3 per cent of voters. The question for consideration was: “How can we make sure that our local neighbourhoods are vibrant communities where people can work, meet, shop and access the everyday services they need within a 15 minute walk or cycle from home?”

The first assembly was held in July 2021, there were a total of 3 weekends and 3 weekday evenings. Participants were paid £330 for their time. The second assembly was held in January–February 2022. Due to concerns about the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the assemblies were held online. The results of both rounds of meetings were presented to the city council, which considered the recommendations and gave a formal response to each of them.³ Based on the evaluation conclusions of the first assembly, a small modification was made, namely the duration of the Sunday assembly was reduced to half a day. Both assemblies held so far have been positively evaluated by 100% of the participants.⁴

The idea of a permanent citizens’ assembly was supported by Newham’s previous experience with this form of mini-public. In January 2020 Newham held the Newham Citizens’ Assembly on Climate Change, where 36 randomly selected residents developed recommendations in response to a question: “How can the Council and residents work together to reach the aspiration of being carbon zero by 2050 at the latest?”⁵ The assembly concluded with recommendations, which were then forwarded to the municipal and national authorities. Their response was reflected in the *Climate Emergency Action Plan*.⁶

Another remarkable permanent mini-public is the **Permanent Citizens’ Assembly in Aachen** (*Bürgerrat für Aachen*). Aachen is the first German municipality whose City Council has made such a commitment. This happened on 30 March 2022. It was modelled and inspired by the model of citizen dialogue in the nearby German-speaking Community of Eastern Belgium (Ostbelgien), with which the city borders.

The Aachen citizens’ assembly is to be a municipal body consisting of 56 randomly selected members. Proposals for topics can be made by citizens (minimum 125 signatures), councillors, officials and the previous assembly (whose term of office has ended). The results of the assembly’s deliberations are to be documented in a citizens’ report and submitted to the city council for discussion and final decision. The first assembly will start after the summer break in 2023. Proposals for topics could be submitted until 10 March 2023. A total of 58 proposals were received, of which 17 received a minimum of 125 votes. In the end, it was decided that the question would be: “How can Aachen’s city centre become an attractive shopping destination again?”⁷ Further work is under-

³ <https://www.demsoc.org/projects/newham-permanent-citizens-assembly>, 21.06.2023; <https://www.newham.gov.uk/council/citizens-assemblies>, 21.06.2023.

⁴ https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/Projekte/Demokratie_und_Partizipation_in_Europa_/Test-Democracy-R_D-Network-Annual-Meeting/TS_01-3.pdf, 21.06.2023.

⁵ <https://www.newham.gov.uk/public-health-safety/newham-climate-now/1>, 21.06.2023.

⁶ <https://www.newham.gov.uk/downloads/file/1882/climate-emergency-action-plan>, 21.06.2023.

⁷ <https://www.buergererrat.de/en/news/permanent-citizens-assembly-in-aachen/>; <https://www.buergererrat-aachen.de/>, 21.06.2023.

way, including drawing participants. The city plans to send out invitations to 3,500 residents over the age of 16, inviting them to attend the first meeting of assembly. The 56 participants will then be drawn from those who apply. The assembly is planned for the autumn of 2023.

Paris in 2021 became the first major city in the world with a permanent citizens' assembly. The decision to do so was taken by the Paris City Council on 14 October 2021. **The Paris Municipal Assembly** (*l'Assemblée citoyenne de Paris*) is made up of 100 citizens, elected at random for a period of one year, renewable for six months. They were selected by a two-stage lottery. First, 5,000 adult citizens were selected at random from the 1,350,000 people registered on the Paris electoral rolls. Then a second draw was organised, in which only voters interested in participating in the new body took part. Those aged 16–17, as well as non-EU residents, were drawn from among the citizens' card holders. Four criteria were taken into account: gender, age, place of residence and education. The Assembly, which started work in November 2021, will meet regularly: in plenary sessions (every three to four months) and thematic workshops (every month). Half a day's work is to be remunerated with a per diem of €44. The city has provided the assembly with an annual budget of €40,000. Decisions are to be taken either by consensus or by a majority vote of support with a quorum of half the participants each time. The functioning of the assembly is administratively supported by the General Secretariat of the Citizens' Assembly (*le Secrétariat général de l'Assemblée citoyenne*). In addition, a "committee of guarantors" (*comité de garants*) has been set up, consisting of a representative from each municipal political group and academics.

The first session took place on 27 November 2021 and was followed by further sessions at cyclical intervals. Although the Paris model was inspired by the procedure in place in the German-speaking Community of Belgium in 2019, it goes much further in terms of the assembly's powers. It has been decided that it will be able, for example, to propose local bills (*délibérations*), which will then go to the Paris City Council for debate and voting. It will also be able to request scrutiny reports on various issues, ask questions at city council meetings, determine the subject matter of the Paris participatory budget and independently propose at least one issue per year for its agenda. Among the assembly's other powers is the right to convene a citizens' jury of 17 drawn citizens, the purpose of which is to investigate the topic under discussion in greater depth and to present its recommendations to the assembly.⁸

Although the examples identified above and briefly discussed differ in many respects, all three attempt to systematically integrate deliberative mini-publics into public authority policy. Each of these attempts is "tailor-made" for the local community in question, taking into account its potential, size, location and previous participatory experience. The examples cited demonstrate that although the first citizens' assemblies realised around the world were one-offs, over time, especially due to the success of Ostelbelgien's unique model, more and more public authorities have started to think of mini-publics as an opportunity to power democracy on a permanent (rather than just a one-off) basis. Evidence from the world shows that also local authorities can play a leading role in strengthening or institutionalising deliberative processes.

⁸ <https://www.paris.fr/pages/assemblee-citoyenne-20187>, 21.06.2023.

Why the local level?

The cases presented for the institutionalisation of citizens' assemblies are located at the local level for a reason. I believe that local public life is the best space in which to implement a participatory perspective. As Stroker (2000, p. 6) points out "This political level is easily accessible, and its proximity makes it an ideal base for participation. It provides a forum to exploring collective interests and introducing citizens to the world of politics in a manner conducive to learning and personal development."

Systems of local democracy have the power to generate greater power of citizen participation in public life. This power is expressed in the creation of a space accommodating different views and positions, which is open to their reception and consideration. Local politics is a living, constantly changing, and transforming process. To shape local politics is to shape a better life and a more open society. Drawing on diverse experiences allows for evidence-based decision-making, which is at the core of modern, effective public policy. As such, the most profound advantage of local government is that it provides governance not just of the local area, but governance according to what we term "wisdom of place" (Mill, 2010 [1865]).

One of the most important positive correlations to emerge from empirical research on political behaviour and attitudes occurs between participation and what is known as a sense of political efficacy or a sense of political competence. This has been characterised as a sense that individual political action has or can influence the political process (Campbell, Gurin, Miller, 1954, p. 187). People who have a sense of political efficacy are more likely to participate in politics than those who lack this sense. A sense of efficacy motivates activity and participation.

This is also confirmed by the findings of Almond and Verba (1965, pp. 206–207). In their cross-cultural study of individual political attitudes and behaviour, covering five countries (USA, UK, Germany, Italy and Mexico) they looked into the topic of feelings of political competence and their development. Almond and Verba found that in all five countries there was a positive relationship between sense of political efficacy and political participation, although sense of competence was higher at the local level than at the national level. They also found that levels of competence were highest in countries where there were the greatest institutional opportunities for local political participation (the United States and the United Kingdom). This demonstrates the important importance of local political institutions as a training ground for democracy. Almond and Verba note that political participation at the local level plays an important role in the development of competent citizens. Where local government allows and reinforces participation, a sense of competence develops at the same time, which then spreads to the national level (Almond, Verba, 1965, p. 145).

Citizens can generalise their experience, moving from the local to the national level. Given the evidence and arguments presented above, I believe that local politics measuring itself against multiplied, topical challenges is an excellent experimental space. It provides the best laboratory for democracy. Deliberative democracy can very easily complement traditional forms of representative democracy at this level. In the face of the increasingly visible descent of national decision-makers into authoritarianism, deliberative democracy promotes openness, inclusion and transparency in governance.

Conclusion

In this article I have presented some interesting examples of citizens' assemblies from around the world. Two Canadian provinces, British Columbia and Ontario, hosted the first citizens' assemblies in the world (2004 and 2006–2007). They were followed by the Netherlands (2006). All three assemblies were about electoral law reform. The processes that have been going on for more than a decade (2011) in Ireland prove that mini-publics can do well even on very complex and controversial topics (e.g. abortion, same-sex marriage). The unique model of permanent citizens' dialogue developed and implemented in the German-speaking Community of Belgium (2019) is cited as the greatest success story of the institutionalisation of deliberative processes. Other public authorities have followed in Belgium's footsteps – models of permanent citizens' assemblies have been implemented in Newham, Aachen and Paris. As these examples show, deliberative methods are often used as a valuable complement in the preparatory phase of the decision-making process, directly involving citizens in setting the agenda on sensitive policy issues. They can help break deadlocks when issues polarise the political scene (Ireland), but they can also prove their worth at the local level, engaging the community in debate about very “down-to-earth” issues.

The various mini-publics differ in a number of factors. First and foremost is the mandate, and therefore the potential influence and scope of causation. The British Columbia Assembly (2004), its sister assembly in Ontario (2006–2007) and most Irish assemblies were initiated by governments and their decisions were legally mandated and became the subject of subsequent referenda. Others, notably ventures such as the Irish We the Citizens project (2011) or the Belgian G1000 and G100 initiatives, were implemented by community organisations independent of public authorities and only forwarded social recommendations to legislators without any guarantee of implementation. The Belgian model, on the other hand, and the permanent municipal assemblies modelled on it in Paris (2021), Newham (2021) or Aachen (2022) are attempts to institutionalise deliberative innovation.

Formally opening up the decision-making process to participants outside the institutions of the political system enables them to take a stand and put it to power. Participation in the process is symbolic because it shows that the public is taken seriously. The debate and the citizens' final recommendations are made public, which increases the transparency of the decision-making process. For all these reasons, deliberative processes can increase citizens' trust in democracy, breaking the deadlock of cyclical citizen participation, as they support the maintenance of a state of permanent mobilisation throughout the term of office.

Deliberative democracy is an example of a concept that, on the one hand, recognises the limits of public policy and, on the other, attempts to push the boundaries of what is politically possible and feasible. It suggests recommending what should be done in the light of what can be done, rather than seeking and recommending only so-called “politically feasible” solutions (Friedman, 1953, p. 264). It is important to remember that policies are feasible or unfeasible only in relation to specific constraints. And constraints are created and removed by people. The best testing ground, offering ample room for

experimentation with existing constraints, is local governments, with the perspective of their residents and own knowledge of “place”.

Given the arguments presented in the paper, I argue that mini-publics, and citizens' assemblies in particular, are the most advanced method of institutionalising deliberative democracy. I have shown that although the first citizens' assemblies realised in the world were one-offs, following their example, especially due to the success of the unique Ostelbelgien model, subsequent public authorities started to see this innovation as an opportunity to permanently (and not just one-off) energise democracy and make it more resilient to crises. I have also shown that local authorities can play a leading role in strengthening and institutionalising deliberative processes using mini-publics such as citizens' assemblies. Locally implemented deliberative innovations power democracy in general, and their effective use can contribute to better decision-making and better public policies to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Author Contributions

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Deliberatywne mini-publiki jako odpowiedź na kryzys demokracji przedstawicielskiej: pierwsze próby instytucjonalizacji w europejskich miastach

Streszczenie

Rosnący kryzys demokracji przedstawicielskiej i związane z nim niezadowolenie obywateli pobudziło innowacyjne myślenie o demokracji. W ciągu ostatnich dwóch dekad pojawił się szeroki wachlarz demokratycznych innowacji, które mają na celu zwiększenie zaangażowania „zwykłych ludzi” w politykę, łącząc bezpośrednie masowe uczestnictwo z pogłębionym dialogiem na temat pilnych kwestii polityki publicznej. Innowacje szybko rozprzestrzeniają się terytorialnie, stają się coraz bardziej zinstytucjonalizowane i dostosowane do konkretnych kontekstów politycznych, kulturowych i społecznych. Na uwagę zasługują szczególnie mini-publiki, będące forami debaty na małą skalę. W obliczu niezadowolenia obywateli z praktyki funkcjonowania sfery publicznej pojawiają się próby instytucjonalizacji jednorazowych forów deliberatywnych i uczynienia ich częścią szerszego systemu politycznego. Wyzwanie to podjęła najpierw niemieckojęzyczna wspólnota Belgii (*Ostelbelgien*), a za nią poszły inne władze publiczne. Próby włączenia w przestrzeń decyzyjną mini-publik podjęły też władze lokalne – Paryża, Newham i Akwizgranu. W artykule twierdę, że panele obywatelskie są najbardziej zaawansowaną metodą instytucjonalizacji demokracji deliberatywnej. Dowodzę, że choć pierwsze zrealizowane na świecie panele obywatelskie były jednorazowe, to za ich przykładem, szczególnie za przyczyną sukcesu unikalnego modelu *Ostelbelgien*, kolejne władze publiczne zaczęły postrzegać tę innowację jako szansę na stałe (a nie tylko jednorazowe) zasilenie demokracji i uczynienie jej bardziej odporną na kryzysy. Wykazuję też, że władze lokalne mogą odgrywać wiodącą rolę we wzmacnianiu i instytucjonalizacji procesów deliberatywnych z wykorzystaniem mini-publik.

Słowa kluczowe: innowacje demokratyczne, deliberatywne mini-publiki, panele obywatelskie, samorząd lokalny

