

Forms of Mini-publics

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Forms of Mini-publics: An introduction to deliberative innovations in democratic practice

Introduction

This paper introduces a range of democratic innovations known as ‘mini-publics’ and outlines key features, how they work, and how they may improve opportunities for citizens to contribute to public deliberation and participatory governance.

The idea of mini-publics was first proposed four decades ago by political scientist Robert Dahl (1989). Inspired by democratic ideals and social science principles, Dahl envisioned an innovative mechanism for involving citizens in dealing with public issues. He called it ‘minipopulus’: an assembly of citizens, demographically representative of the larger population, brought together to learn and deliberate on a topic in order to inform public opinion and decision-making.

A growing number of democratic innovations have flourished around the world based on this idea (see Elstub 2014; Grönlund et al 2014; Chwalisz 2017; Elstub and Escobar forthcoming), from Citizens’ Juries, to Planning Cells, Consensus Conferences, Deliberative Polls and Citizens’ Assemblies (see Table 1). Mini-publics have been used to deal with topics ranging from constitutional and electoral reform, to controversial science and technology, and myriad social issues (e.g. health, justice, planning, sectarianism).

What is a mini-public?

Mini-publics are made up of randomly selected citizens, for instance, chosen by lot from the electoral roll or a similar source that may function as a proxy for the relevant population. The principle here is that everyone affected by the topic in question has an equal chance of being selected, and this underpins the legitimacy of the process. Participants are typically selected through stratified random sampling, so that a range of demographic characteristics from the broader population are adequately represented –e.g. age, gender, ethnicity, disability, income, geography, education, religion, and so on. The purpose is to use social science methods to assemble a microcosm of ‘the public’, a mini-public, with each citizen having an equal chance of being selected. Smaller mini-publics are not intended to be statistically representative of the population, but are still demographically diverse. Participants are remunerated, the discussions are facilitated, and experts provide evidence and advocacy of relevant information and positions and are then cross-examined by the lay citizens. They are usually issue specific, and dissolved as soon as the issue has been deliberated on. Despite these common features, there are a variety of types of mini-public, covered briefly in turn below.

Citizens’ Juries

Citizens’ juries (CJs) were first established in 1971 in the USA by Ned Crosby of the Jefferson Centre, but have been employed in many other countries since then including the UK, Netherlands, Ireland, France and Australia. They can cost between £10,000 and £30,000 (AUD17,250 and AUD51,800) depending on various factors (e.g. duration, geography). Approximately, 12-25 participants are assembled for 2 to 5 days to discuss an issue and produce a collective recommendation or ‘verdict’ (although newDemocracy has varied this). CJs can be designed to provide jurors with some control over the process including choice of witness experts and the nature of interaction with them.

Consensus Conferences

The Danish Board of technology devised Consensus Conferences (CCs) in the late 1980s in order to advise parliamentarians on science and technology issues. Although they originated in Denmark, and the vast majority have been held there, they have been employed in a number of countries including Australia, Argentina, New Zealand, Korea, Israel, Japan, Canada, UK and the USA. They cost between £30,000 and £100,000 (AUD51,800 and AUD172,500) and involve 10-25 citizens selected by stratified random sampling. Danish consensus conferences, are divided into two stages. Firstly, citizens meet for a series of preparatory weekends to learn about the topic, the process, and the group, and to select the experts and interest groups from a list to advise and present to the citizens in the second stage of the conference. The second stage lasts around four days and the citizens hear the presentations from their selected advocates and experts before questioning them and then compiling a collective report which outlines their collective decision. Both consensus conferences and CJs (at least in the USA) use an external advisory committee that selects the citizens, compiles the list of experts from which the citizens choose, develops information packs and selects facilitators. Again, newDemocracy has modified this and enables participants to choose experts (See, [Hearing from Experts](#)). This committee tends to be made up of academics, practitioners, issue experts, and interest group representatives from a broad range of perspectives on the issue at hand. The committee is the guarantor of impartiality and deliberative quality in the design and oversight of the process.

Planning Cells

Planning cells (PCs) originated in Germany and were created by Peter Dienel, of the Research Institute for Citizens' Participation at the University of Wuppertal in Germany in the 1970s. PCs have predominantly been held on urban planning in Germany but also in Austria, Switzerland, Spain and the USA. They cost between £90,000 and £120,000 (AUD155,500 and AUD207,300). A series of Planning cells, usually 6-10, sometimes as many as 20, with about 25 citizens participating in each run concurrently on the same issue for about four days, usually resulting in 100-500 citizens participating in total. This is not exclusive to PCs as CJs have also been run concurrently on the same issues, but where it is the norm with PCs it is an exception for CJs. They are also facilitated differently to CJs and CCs, with the facilitators more likely to be issue, rather than process, specialists. The planning cell convenors then aggregate all the preferences across all the cells into a report, which is then approved by a selection of the citizens from the various cells, before being published and distributed to relevant decision-makers and stakeholders.

Deliberative Polls

The deliberative poll was first set up by James Fishkin and the Center for Deliberative Polling in 1988. A deliberative Poll (DP) with its more representative 130-500 sample is designed to show what the public *would* think about the issues if it had time to learn about them and consider a range of perspectives. The first ever DP in the world was held in the UK in 1994, since then they have been run in many countries including Canada, USA, Denmark, Hungary, Bulgaria, Greece, Brazil, Australia and China, as well as in transnational contexts (i.e. European Union). They cost approximately £200,000 (AUD345,500). The process involves taking a probability sample of voters, surveying their opinions on an issue, sending them balanced information about the topic in question, gathering them together to discuss the issues with each other in small groups and with a balanced range of experts in plenary sessions, and then surveying their opinions again. Ideally they are televised, or at least receive broad media coverage to contribute to informing the broader public. The participants' preferences are aggregated, as they are not required to come to a collective decision themselves, through deliberation, as in CJs and CCs.

Citizens' Assemblies

Citizens' Assemblies (CAs) are the newest (since 2004) and potentially the most radical and democratically robust of all the mini-public types developed to date. They are difficult to assess as there have only been a handful of cases, notably in British Columbia, Ontario (both in Canada), the Netherlands and Ireland. The two Canadian cases preceded a referendum on electoral reform, for which the assembly determined the options on the referendum, as well as making recommendations for the referendum outcome. In the Dutch case the citizens' recommendation was passed to the government for consideration. The Irish case is the most recent, and it was innovative because it included not only citizens but also parliamentarians working with them. One of the well-known outcomes was the referendum on same-sex marriage. An assembly can last months or even a year. The cases so far have typically assembled 100-160 participants. In all the assemblies the citizens were selected randomly from the electoral register, a further random selection is then made from those who express an interest in participating, meaning they are not strictly a random sample. Nevertheless, it is still considered that all these assemblies were representative of the broader population in terms of age, gender and geographical location. The process progresses in three phases: the learning phase which takes several weekends and enables participants to get to grips with the complexities of the issues under consideration, the consultation phases where the randomly chosen citizens run public hearings in their local constituencies to gather information and opinions from other members of the public, and the deliberative phase when the citizens discuss the evidence and agree their final proposal. Following the deliberation, a vote amongst the participants is usually conducted to decide a final outcome of the assemblies.

Table 1 - Key features of mini-publics

	<i>Citizens' juries</i>	<i>Planning Cells</i>	<i>Consensus conferences</i>	<i>Deliberative polls</i>	<i>Citizens' assemblies</i>
Developed by (first instance)	Crosby (USA, 1971)	Dienel (Germany, 1970s)	Danish Board of Technology (1987)	James Fishkin (USA, 1994)	Gordon Gibson (Canada, 2002)
No. of citizens	12-26	100-500	10-25	100-500	100-160
No. of meetings	2-5 days	4-5 days	7-8 days	2-3 days	20-30 days
Selection method	Random selection	Random selection	Random + self-selection	Random selection	Random + self-selection
Activities	Information + deliberation	Information + deliberation	Information + deliberation	Information + deliberation	Information +consultation +deliberation
Result	Collective position report	Survey opinions + Collective position report	Collective position report	Survey opinions	Detailed recommendation
Destination of proposal	Sponsor and mass media	Sponsor and mass media	Parliament and mass media	Sponsor and mass media	Parliament, government and public referendum

Source: Elstub, S. (2014) in Elstub, S. and McLaverty, P. (Eds.), *Deliberative Democracy: Issues and Cases*, Edinburgh University Press. (Table based on Fournier 2011: 11)

How do mini-publics work?

Typically a mini-public comprises five stages:

1. **Planning and recruitment.** Usually, a Stewarding Committee oversees the process to ensure its quality and fairness. For instance, in the Canadian Citizens' Assemblies on Electoral Reform, the Committee included academics and public figures from a range of backgrounds and opposing views. Often, mini-publics deal with divisive topics, and thus their legitimacy and impact hinge on the buy-in from a range of voices across divides –as well as the public standing of their guarantors, stewards and funders.
2. **Learning phase.** Participants are supported to learn about the topic from diverse perspectives. This can be done by combining time for individual learning (e.g. citizens receive information packages agreed by the Stewarding Committee), with time for group learning. During the latter, they are exposed to a range of evidence, views and

testimonies covering the topic from various angles. Depending on the topic, this may include experts, officials, politicians, activists, and stakeholder representatives of various sorts (e.g. business, third sector, communities). Participants are empowered to interrogate these ‘witnesses’, and sometimes to choose them from a list prepared by the Stewarding Committee –who oversees that the mini-public is exposed to a balanced range of evidence and views.

3. **Deliberative phase.** Aided by impartial facilitators and recorders, participants then engage in small group face-to-face deliberation where they reconsider their initial ideas on the topic in the light of the evidence and testimonies from the learning phase, but also with respect to the arguments and experiences of their fellow deliberators.
4. **Decision-making phase.** The learning and deliberative work from previous stages enables participants to engage in considered judgement and informed decision-making (See, [Deliberation](#)). Depending on the topic, and the type of mini-public, this may lead to a particular recommendation or decision, which must be articulated through reasoned arguments in the final report or statement. That is the case in consensus-oriented mini-publics such as Citizens’ Juries –which, like court juries, respond to a ‘charge’– as well as Consensus Conferences and Citizens’ Assemblies. In research-focussed mini-publics, such as Deliberative Polls, the aim is not to reach consensus, but to measure through pre- and post- surveys how citizens’ preferences may change through learning and deliberation.
5. **Follow up.** The focus in this stage is impact.¹ Ideally, the mini-public has already been in the ‘public eye’ from its inception. One way to ensure impact is to involve key public figures and broadcasters in the process and Stewarding Committee. In this final stage, the outcomes and outputs of the mini-public are shared through all relevant networks, thus informing broader public deliberation and decision-making.

What is the point of mini-publics?

Mini-publics seek to answer a fundamental question: How would the public deal with an issue if they had the time and resources to learn and deliberate about it in order to reach an informed decision? As a method, it counters the criticism that survey research only provides snapshots of uninformed opinion by members of the public who may know little about an issue, or may not have even thought about it. Surveys are excellent to aggregate individual knowledge and opinion, but don’t help to foster evidence-informed public deliberation, nor provide insight into the development of citizenship skills and social learning. Mini-publics can also avoid some typical pitfalls in public engagement processes, including:

- *Self-selection and lack of representativeness.* Mainstream public participation processes tend to attract self-selected participants of certain socio-demographic characteristics and struggle to reach a cross-section of the population. Lack of inclusion and diversity provides a poor foundation for just and effective public deliberation.
- *Poor quality of interaction and communication.* In mini-publics, expert process design and facilitation are instrumental to avoid the usual problems of many public meetings and forums: dominant voices, silenced views, confrontational dynamics, lack of thinking time (reflex responses), shallow exchanges, rehearsed monologues, pre-packaged arguments, lack of opportunities to learn about diverse views, and so on (see Escobar 2011).

¹ See, [Wendy Russell’s research report here](#).

- *Need for division of labour.* Not everyone can participate in everything all the time. Mini-publics can function as proxies for the broader public, and citizens can use them as points of reference for their deliberations, e.g.: ‘I don’t have the time to engage substantially with this issue, but these recommendations were prepared by citizens like myself, so...’ Good examples of this are the recent Citizens’ Initiative Review model in Oregon and California, where citizens examine new proposed legislation and distil the pros and cons into a booklet that goes to every household prior to a ballot.

Mini-publics can also contribute to the development of a range of other democratic goods such as encouraging longer term levels of civic engagement; developing the capacity (self-efficacy) of communities to learn, deliberate and decide on complex issues; and providing an opportunity for citizens to learn and consider evidence on complex public policy problems. Our own research findings (having conducted seven mini-publics²) resonate strongly with a core message from decades of research on such participatory processes. Namely: when citizens are given the time, resources and support to learn and deliberate about public issues, they can engage with complex debates and collectively make considered judgements.

If citizens’ capacity is not in question, how about institutional capacity? Are our institutions fit for involving citizens? Here we face the problem of scale, or what Dahl (1998:109) calls the “law of time and numbers”: “The more citizens a democratic unit contains, the less that citizens can participate directly in government decisions and the more that they must delegate authority to others”. This partly explains why our democracy relies so much on intermediaries – i.e. people who speak on behalf of others.

This is not a problem in the case of elected representatives insofar as they are deemed to have a democratic mandate to speak on behalf of citizens. However, there are myriad other influential players involved in contemporary policymaking, including those who claim to speak on behalf of certain publics or communities of place, practice and/or interest. Their role makes consultation somewhat easier because it provides identifiable interlocutors that can be brought around a table. Another advantage is that they can develop specialist knowledge and expertise on the relevant issues. How else can the undefined and (sometimes) uninformed public be brought into the process? However, citizens in democracies around the world are becoming more educated, more critical and less deferential to traditional notions of authority – the level of civic aspiration and expectation is on the rise (Norris 2011) and citizens may feel underrepresented or misrepresented in a democracy overly reliant on intermediaries.

Decision makers willing to collaborate directly with citizens and communities thus face the challenges of scale and expertise. Mini-publics are one of many democratic innovations that seek to overcome those challenges (see Elstub and Escobar, forthcoming). Mini-publics address the problem of scale by involving small but diverse groups of citizens. They are selected by lot (Carson and Martin 1999), so that everyone has an equal probability of participating, which reduces the self-selection bias that gives undue influence to small sections of the population. Mini-publics also address the challenge of expertise by including an Information Phase to enable participants to develop an understanding of the issues to engage in informed deliberation. These features give mini-publics a democratic edge over traditional public consultation processes.

² See for example Roberts and Escobar (2015) or more recently: <http://www.healthinequalities.net>

Using mini-publics in representative democracy

Mini-publics can provide a unique bridge between citizens, experts and policy makers. On the one hand, mini-publics can work as a direct advisory body to elected bodies, articulating judgements and recommendations based on deliberation that draws on diverse views, knowledge and experiences. On the other, mini-publics can support communities to engage with decision-making in at least two ways. As part of the process, participants can be supported to act as facilitators of public forums in their communities, thus bringing into the mini-public a range of local perspectives. In this way, the deliberative process is expanded beyond the group of people serving at the mini-public. The mini-public thus becomes a catalyst for a broader public engagement process, which contributes to enrich the pool of arguments considered, while stimulating deliberation in communities.

Mini-publics can also support communities by functioning as ‘trusted proxies’ or ‘honest brokers’ that clear the ground by distilling the pros, cons and trade-offs of an issue or law into balanced information that can be shared with local communities as a resource and stimulus for participation (See, [Critical Thinking](#)). A similar logic has been applied in Oregon, and more recently California, as part of their ballot initiative system for new legislation (Gastil et al 2014).

This triple function (advisor, catalyst, honest broker) may be a starting point for institutional design. We avoid being too prescriptive here, because developing and embedding mini-publics in existing democratic procedures requires the know-how of local institutional entrepreneurs. Some of the existing generic suggestions that legislatures could consider include utilising mini-publics to contribute to the preparation of draft legislation and to supplement legislative debates, with the hope that the mini-publics will have ‘a significant influence on the outcome of parliamentary debates’ (Steiner 2014). In addition they could also scrutinise the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government (Leib 2004) and review and revise government legislation. This could be achieved by enabling mini-publics to formally feed into the select committee process (Hendriks and Kay forthcoming).

This paper has focussed on the use of mini-publics in an ad hoc manner –i.e. convened to assist with specific policy issues and then dissolved. But over the last few years there have also been proposals for having a citizen-led second chamber, for example, at the Scottish Parliament based on the idea of permanent mini-publics. This was proposed as part of the Demo Max process convened by the Electoral Reform Society in 2012, and more recently in a paper by the Sortition Foundation, newDemocracy and Common Weal (Hennig et al. 2017) (See, [Scottish Proposal](#)). There is merit in exploring this option for strengthening legislatures around the world, but there is no precedent for it –critics may argue that this is too risky and experimental, while supporters may say that this would propel global democratic innovation. In the remainder we offer some answers to frequently asked questions about mini-publics.

Frequently asked questions

How do citizens feel about mini-publics?

A recent study by Chwalisz (2015) suggests that citizens are open and supportive of the idea of using mini-publics. In our own research (Roberts and Escobar 2015), the citizens involved became enthusiastic supporters of the process. This is no indication of what non-participants may think, but suggests that using mini-publics more frequently may foster a virtuous circle of support for using mini-publics. In our research, after experiencing the process, 93% of participants thought that citizens are able to make decisions on complex issues. Participants highlighted three necessary conditions for their trust in the process: diversity of views, quality of evidence and effective facilitation. These are conditions that can be approached to a high standard in mini-publics.

Our research also shows that participants had confidence that another group of citizens involved in a similar process would produce similar recommendations. Participants placed great trust in fellow citizens and also indicated that if public authorities used mini-publics in decision-making the outcomes would be fairer. It appears that people may well accept an outcome which they did not agree to if they have confidence that it was reached through a fair process. Similar findings are seen in experimental research on (court) jury deliberations, which indicate that 'procedural justice' – i.e. the perception that the decision-making process was fair – leads to increased support for the group's decision (Delli Carpini et al 2004:327).

How do interest groups feel about mini-publics?

A key aspect of mini-publics is that they seek to recast the role of interest groups in decision-making. The goal of public deliberation is "to improve the legitimacy of democracy by making democratic institutions systematically responsive to reasons, not just the weight of numbers or the power of interests" (Parkinson 2012:170). Mini-publics use random selection to ensure diversity and thus "reduce the influence of elites, interest advocates and the 'incensed and articulate'" (Hendriks 2011:945). However, mini-publics should not be seen as a way of bypassing, co-opting or placating activists and advocates. Indeed, interest advocates play a central role in this type of process, as Stewarding Committee members and/or as witnesses who present evidence and arguments. What changes in mini-publics is the interactive setting where advocates scrutinise each other and the mode of engagement between advocates and citizens.

What is the role of elected representatives?

Elected representatives have a crucial role to play in convening and working closely with mini-publics. For instance, elected members may commission a mini-public as the advisory body and focal point of a broader public engagement process for policy development or the scrutiny of new legislation. Elected members would be responsible to take the recommendations into relevant committees to inform deliberations and final decisions by the elected body.

Another option is to include representatives working alongside citizens in the mini-public. However, this may present risks to the quality of interaction and deliberation. For instance, the risk that some politicians may dominate the discussions, that citizens may feel less comfortable contributing and that interaction may become characterised by partisan competition and rhetoric rather than meaningful deliberation. Nonetheless, some evidence that mixing citizens and representatives can work well has been found in mini-publics in Italy (Fiket and Memoli, 2013:139) and Ireland (Honohan 2014), but this is an area that deserves further research (Thompson 2016).

Mini-publics may offer welcome assistance to elected members facing the multiple challenges of representing citizens in a context of declining trust in politics and public institutions. Collaborating with mini-publics may add transparency, accountability and deliberative power to their work, and potentially build public trust and perceived legitimacy for their decisions. Deliberative public engagement may also help to overcome the challenge of ensuring that citizens judge legislation and decisions on their merits, rather than on partisan cues. Arguably, mini-publics could increase deliberative quality by functioning as 'honest brokers' that communities can rely on to evaluate competing arguments – and this offers an additional resource to the cues that citizens already receive from their preferred political party.

And what about accountability and legitimacy?

Is it democratic to give such powers (e.g. knowledge brokering, direct advice to policy makers and legislators) to citizen forums without traditional lines of accountability? Deliberative theorists understand accountability as a matter of ‘giving an account’ for the reasons that underpin a decision (Gutmann and Thompson 1996: Chapter 4). Accountability is thus underpinned by the principle of justification, which presses those engaged in deliberation to make decisions that can be reasonably justified to those bound or affected by them.

If mini-publics are used as part of a legislative process, at least four lines of accountability can be at play. Firstly, participants scrutinise each other’s arguments and reasons thus holding each other accountable. Secondly, they can also be made accountable to their communities by having to publicly justify the mini-public’s conclusions. If, as mentioned earlier, participants are supported to facilitate forums in their communities, and feed broader views into the mini-public, then a crucial step is to return to the community and give a reasoned account of the results. This publicity and transparency thus makes the mini-public more accountable. Thirdly, organisers and facilitators can be accountable to the Stewarding Committee that oversees the fairness of the process. Finally, the Stewarding Committee and the participants are ultimately accountable to the convening body – and if this is a representative institution, then the circle of accountability can be formally closed with the ultimate decision-making power in the hands of elected members.

Therefore, mini-publics can be designed to ensure accountability, both in deliberative and representative terms. Nevertheless, the lack of traditional accountability (i.e. a principal-agent bond between an individual and a constituency) can actually give an advantage to mini-publics in terms of deliberative quality: “randomly selected participants have few or no obligations to a constituency and are therefore free to consider the arguments on all sides of the debate” (Hendriks 2011:950).

Ultimately, the perceived legitimacy of mini-publics as democratic bodies will depend greatly on how the story of legitimacy is told. And here is where the role of the media is essential. Unfortunately, there has been scarce attention to the importance of the media in developing democratic innovations (but see Elstub and Escobar, forthcoming). New democratic practices require new media narratives, and these may be prevented if mini-publics are covered using the tropes of traditional political reporting (i.e. ‘winners and losers’, ‘governing by focus group’, citizen involvement as an ‘abdication of responsibility’). The value of mini-publics is amplified when their work and conclusions can become a stimulus for broader public deliberation via the media. Otherwise, they can be rendered as isolated instances, rather than integral parts of a deliberative system. The more mini-publics are used routinely in policy making activities, the more media attention they are likely to attract. The media has an important role to play in terms of scrutiny – but again, the standards for this must be appropriate for deliberative processes, rather than simply borrowed from the world of partisan politics.

Aren’t these innovations too expensive?

Mini-publics have been used quite often in countries like the UK, Canada and Australia (see Chwalisz 2017), but have not become part of mainstream public engagement. As Smith (2009:106) explains, there was some enthusiasm at the start of the 1997 New Labour government in the UK, but the Cabinet Office responded to increasing calls for mini-publics arguing that they are too expensive. In 2001, the House of Commons Select Committee on Public Administration reiterated support for mini-publics arguing that the government’s

argument “fails to take account of the cost – sometimes a very high cost – which can be attached to rushed decisions based on contested scientific judgements” (quoted in Smith 2009:106).

Price must be placed in the context of value. If mini-publics are framed and designed as ‘add-ons’, rather than as integral part of the policy making system, then they can be seen as expensive. Their price/value ratio is unavoidably relative to the political context and their purpose in the institutional landscape. The difference with regard to previous waves of support may be the current level of civic aspiration across the world. It may well be that the value placed in building a more participatory and deliberative democracy is now more widespread. If that is the case, the empirical question will be how much are we prepared to invest in fair and inclusive participation, and high quality deliberation, in democratic decision-making?

There are ways of reducing the price of mini-publics. They are costly partly because they are not systematically used. If they were to be mainstreamed, there are economies of scale and savings to be made by developing in-house expertise and resources on the most expensive aspects (e.g. recruitment; facilitation; design; logistics). There is also the question of shifting the overall approach to public engagement – i.e. instead of carrying out hundreds of consultations, resources could be shifted to fewer but higher quality deliberative processes on the most pressing issues. Moreover, if mini-publics help improve decision-making, as the House of Commons Public Administration Committee argued, the price tag may become small compared to the return on investment. In this vein, institutional entrepreneurs may be able to reframe ‘price’ as a matter of public value and ‘investment’ in deepening democracy to achieve better outcomes for citizens and communities.

And how about public apathy?

There is an ongoing research debate about the extent to which citizens are actually willing to participate more actively in politics and policy making –or whether they would rather leave it to trusted elites and intermediaries (see Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Neblo et al 2010). Sometimes ‘public apathy’ is invoked to justify the status quo although. As Eliasoph (1998) has argued, public apathy is not a natural occurrence and takes hard work to produce. From this perspective, the problem is not that citizens are apathetic, but rather that our democratic systems may have become proficient at generating apathy.

Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) draw from survey and focus group evidence in the USA, which they believe indicates that citizens do not want to participate in deliberation. They offer a ‘stealth democracy’ thesis, arguing that people reluctantly participate when corruption in representative democracy becomes excessive, and feel their input is required to address this imbalance, but ultimately would much prefer a functional representative system that required minimum involvement from citizens. In contrast, Neblo et al.’s (2010) survey research, again from the USA, found that there is a greater willingness amongst citizens to deliberate than Hibbing and Theiss-Morse suggest and moreover, ‘that those most willing to deliberate are precisely those turned off by standard partisan and interest group politics’ (Neblo et al. 2010, 582). While their evidence does suggest some citizens agree with the stealth democracy thesis, they ‘found vastly more evidence in favour of the deliberative thesis—that is, that people would participate more if they thought that the system were less corrupt’ as opposed to more. This study also found ‘more enthusiasm for specifically deliberative opportunities than for more general political participation’ (Neblo et al. 2010, 570). Moreover, the usual determinants and patterns of political participation such as education, age, gender, income, and race were not statistically significant indicators to attitudes towards deliberative participation. Indeed ‘younger people, racial minorities, and

lower income people expressed significantly *more* willingness to deliberate’ (Neblo et al 2010, 574). This is supported by a UK study which found that stealth democrats enjoy deliberative participation when they do engage in it; believe it to be fair and democratic; and seem as competent at engaging in it as other citizens (Webb 2013). The challenge is then getting them to engage in deliberation in the first place. Mini-publics help achieve this through random selection and remuneration.

Our research (Roberts and Escobar 2015) has shown that citizens of all backgrounds can enjoy addressing complex issues when they are adequately supported to do so as part of a fair and engaging process. This echoes research showing that people “really do like politics, if given the chance to properly engage with it, at least under deliberative contexts” (Curato and Niemeyer 2013:375). The challenge is to rekindle vibrant public spheres, rich in political talk across civic networks, public forums, church halls, pubs, kitchen tables etc.

Conclusion

Mini-publics can provide citizens with new opportunities to participate. Different types of mini-public can be used in different contexts, for example different policy issues or various stages of a legislative process. The mini-public model offers the only way we know to answer a key question: How would an informed cross-section of the public assess proposed legislation, or develop new policy, after balanced learning, substantial deliberation and considered judgement? This is not to suggest that mini-publics are the only relevant type of innovation that can deepen democracy and open up opportunities for citizen influence on public policy and legislation. Nevertheless, they do provide distinct and unique advantages and can be used in combination with other new and traditional forms of participation and representation.

In terms of broader impact, mini-publics can contribute to raise the level of public dialogue and deliberation in various ways. In current debates, it is common to hear concerns about the ‘uninformed public’, the ‘distorting media context’, and the lack of opportunities to ‘get a fair hearing’ for all perspectives. Furthermore, citizens can also feel uninspired to engage with public issues due to a lack of safe spaces for critical learning and deliberation, and the absence of new and trusted points of reference to guide their judgements. A robust mini-public can provide such safe spaces and trusted points of reference. The impact of a mini-public is not necessarily limited to the selected citizens, those involved through internet platforms that feed into the process, or those reached by outputs or through the media. There is a ‘capacity-building’ dimension that can further multiply the effects of the process. For instance, everyone involved (participants, organisers, experts, witnesses, etc.) can learn new ways of working through collaborative inquiry and deliberative communication, and take that back to their respective workplaces and communities. In particular, there is scope for including a training programme in facilitation skills not only for the facilitators but also for everyone involved. In the British Columbia Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform, for example, participants were encouraged to facilitate public hearings in their communities – spread across the province – so that they could then bring a range of other views to inform deliberations at the mini-public.

In sum, mini-publics are innovative in their principles, methodology and outcomes, and can help to improve democratic participation and deliberation and enrich democratic life. The real test for mini-publics is to become institutionalised in representative democratic systems and the media ecology. Then we can meaningfully assess their worth as integral part of an established system and learn about the next steps for democratic innovation.

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