



Common Ground

Country Report: Belgium

The Significance of Citizen Participation in Politics and Society

By Julien Vrydagh

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1. Understanding of Citizens Participation

1.1 What is meant by citizen participation in politics and society in Belgium?

Citizen participation is understood, as in most countries, as the involvement of ordinary citizens in policy- and decision-making processes. Citizen participation takes various forms, including:

- Participatory budgeting: citizens propose and/or vote on projects funded by public authorities.
- Consultative councils: citizens' assembly formulating recommendations on one or a series of issues.
- Local plebiscites: a local consultative process in which citizens can vote for or against a specific policy.
- Citizen interpellations: citizens can ask public authorities to justify themselves on a specific topic.
- Petitions: citizens gather signatures to put one topic on the institutional agenda.
- Citizens' initiatives: citizens can put a local issue on the agenda of the municipal or provincial agenda.
- Deliberative minipublics: randomly selected citizens deliberate together on one topic and formulate recommendations for decision-makers.

Article N° 33 in the Constitution stipulates that only the representatives of the nation, i. e., elected representatives, have the power to make decisions. This means that any participatory processes must remain consultative, and elected representatives make the final decision on the uptake and implementation of the output of citizen participation.

1.2 What are the most common forms of citizen participation in Belgium?

Belgium has emerged as a pioneer in the implementation of deliberative minipublics. Between 2001 and 2021, 51 cases were implemented at the local, regional, and federal levels in all its political entities¹. Not only does Belgium distinguish itself with the number of minipublics it organizes, but it also implements innovative and ambitious deliberative processes. Examples include the Permanent Citizens' Dialogue in the German-Speaking Community (referred to as the "Ostbelgien Model") and deliberative committees with randomly selected citizens and elected representatives in the three parliaments of the Region of Wallonia, Brussels-Capital, and the French-Speaking Community of Brussels. These permanent deliberative processes are innovative in their design and ambitious in the way they are integrated within the structures of the parliaments (more information on these processes below).

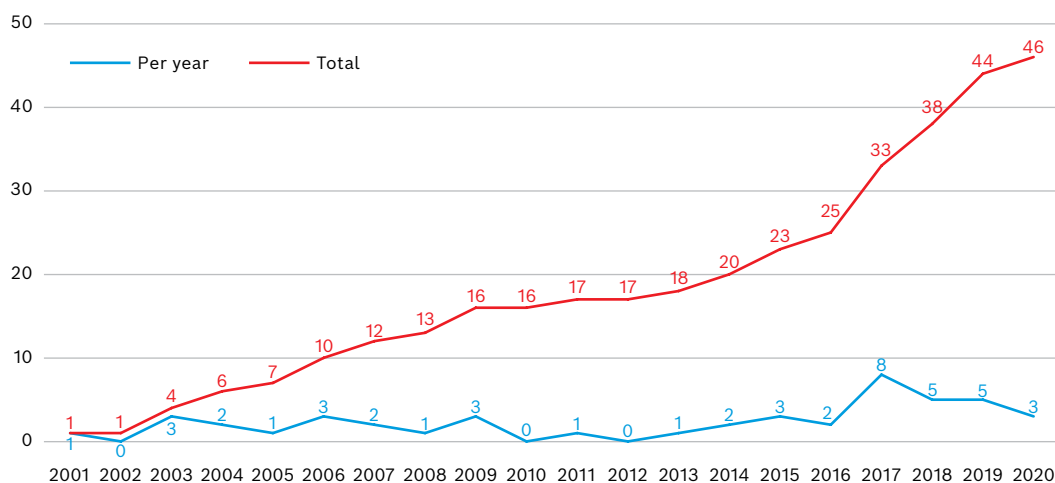
¹ Vrydagh, J. (2023). The minipublic bubble: how the contributions of minipublics are conceived in Belgium (2001–2021). *European Political Science Review*, 1–16.

1.3 How do historical and cultural factors shape the understanding of citizen participation in Belgium?

Citizen participation in Belgium was not always evident. In 1950, the return of King Leopold III after World War II to Belgium underwent a referendum, revealing a clear division between Flanders, Brussels, and Wallonia. This traumatic event instilled fear that consulting the citizenry would undermine Belgium's unity, leading to the establishment of a consociational

state. In such a state, elites from each subgroup monopolized political power, preventing direct citizen involvement. Consequently, Belgium avoided citizen participation for nearly 50 years. However, starting in the 1990s, laws were enacted to permit citizen participation. In 1995, consultative referenda, consultative commissions, and the right to interpellate were authorized at the local level, along with the consultative referendum at the provincial level. A few years later, in 2001, the first minipublic was organized in the province of Brabant-Wallon. While the number of participatory processes slowly increased, a significant turning point occurred with one citizen initiative which transformed the Belgian participatory landscape. In 2011, following a prolonged governmental crisis, a group of intellectuals and citizens led by David Van Reybrouck created the G1000 and implemented a gigantic citizens summit. The G1000 aimed to gather 1000 ordinary citizens to deliberate on Belgium's future, akin to the G8 summit but with ordinary citizens. This minipublic gained considerable public attention and, combined with the publication of Van Reybrouck's book "Against the Elections," had a significant impact on the public perception of citizen participation. Research indicates a substantial increase in the number of minipublics after the G1000, and the emergence of several practitioners was also observed. In recent years, citizen participation has become more mainstream, with decision-makers considering it a primary avenue to address the democratic malaise affecting Belgium and other electoral democracies in Western countries. Additionally, the decline of the consociational nature of the Belgian political system, coupled with decreasing memberships in traditional political organizations, may explain why politicians turn to citizen participation to bridge the widening gap between elected officials and their constituents².

Graph 1. The evolution of minipublics in Belgium between 2001 and 2021³



Research indicates that deliberative participatory processes are more common in Wallonia and Brussels than in Flanders. Flanders, often governed by more conservative political coalitions, shows less enthusiasm for organizing citizen participation at the regional level. While several large cities and smaller municipalities in Flanders have implemented participatory processes, such as participatory budgeting in Antwerp, consultations on mobility in Ghent and Leuven, or citizens' panels in Overijse and Oude-Heverlee, the Regional Flemish authority has in the last years organized only one citizens' panel on education. A recent report⁴ suggests that Flanders considers citizen participation more suitable for the local than the

² Caluwaerts, D., & Reuchamps, M. (2020). Still Consociational: Belgian Democracy, 50 Years after the Politics of Accommodation'. *Politics of Accommodation*, 2, 28.

Vrydagh, J., Devillers, S., Jacquet, V., Talukder, D., & Bottin, J. (2021). Thriving in an unfriendly territory. *Belgian Exceptionalism*, 59-76.

³ Jacquet, V., Talukder, D., Devillers, S., Bottin, J., & Vrydagh, J. (2020). Deliberative minipublics has made it to mainstream politics: A dispatch from Belgium. *Deliberative Democracy Digest*.

⁴ The report (in French) can be downloaded here: <https://www.itsme-id.com/fr-BE/blog/etudepart2>

regional level. In contrast, participatory processes have been proliferating in Brussels and Wallonia.

2. Legal framework and institutional structures

2.1 What laws and regulations are in place in Belgium to promote deliberative citizen participation?

The various levels of authorities in Belgium have their own legal structures organizing citizen participation, as shown in Table 1 below. A couple of laws in this table deserve further attention (see those written in bold and italics). First, Article 33 of the Belgian Constitution gives exclusive decision-making power to the parliament. As a result, direct decision-making by citizens is unconstitutional, explaining why all participatory processes in Belgium are consultative. This provision also accounts for the different voting procedures between randomly selected citizens and members of the parliament in the mixed deliberative committees of the Brussels-Capital Region⁵. Second, it is interesting to consider the particular institutionalization of the mixed deliberative committees in the Regional Parliaments of Wallonia, Brussels-Capital, and the French-Speaking Community of Brussels. Confronted with a series of legal obstacles that these regional parliaments could not overcome (e.g., modifying the constitution), they opted for a modification of their internal rules to introduce the mixed deliberative committees.

Additionally, most of the laws regulating citizen participation provide opportunities for participation; they do not mandate public authorities to use them. For example, the internal rules of the regional Parliament of Brussels-Capital do not impose the organization of a certain number of mixed deliberative committees. Instead, these are initiated either by petition or by the members of the parliament when they deem an issue fit. Likewise, the laws establishing the modalities for the petition right, population consultation, or participatory budgeting do not foresee any obligations; their use depends on the initiative of citizens (e.g., petition) or the will of elected politicians (e.g., participatory budgeting, popular consultation). The only exception lies in the German-Speaking Community and its permanent citizens' dialogue: the citizens' council (composed of 24 randomly selected citizens) decides the number of citizens' assemblies it convenes annually⁶.

⁵ For more information, see <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/fusing-representative-and-deliberative-democracy-a-dispatch-from-brussels/>

⁶ For more information, see Niessen, C., & Reuchamps, M. (2019). Designing a Permanent Deliberative Citizens' Assembly: The Ostbelgien Modell in Belgium. Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance Working Paper Series. Vol. 6

Table 1. An overview of the laws regulating citizen participation in Belgium

Level of authority	Legal text	Object of the legal text
Federal	Article 33 of the Constitution	All the power stems from the nation, that is only through its elected representatives and institutions and thereby excluding direct citizen decision-making
	Article 36	The legislative power belongs to the Parliament, the Senate, and the King, thereby excluding direct citizen decision-making

		Article 28 & 57 of the constitution Loi du 2 mai 2019 relative aux petitions adressées à la chambre des représentants	Right to send a petition to the Parliament if it gathers 25.000 signatures.
		Projet de loi 2944/001	To allow for the Parliament to use the national register for random selection
Regional	Wallonia & Flanders	Article 39 bis of the constitution	To authorize the organization of popular consultation in the Regions of Flanders and Wallonia
	Wallonia	Décret special de la Région Wallone du 19 juillet	To establish popular consultation
		Décret du 2 mai 2019	To organize popular consultation
		Rules of the Regional Parliament of Wallonia	To establish and organize the mixed deliberative committees
		Décret special du 3 septembre 2020 ⁷	To authorize the author of a petition to have the right to be heard by the authorities regarding the affairs covered by Article 138 of the Constitution. It also specifies the modalities of that right. It reduces the required number of signatures from 5.000 to 1.000.
		Décret du 20 janvier 2022	To allow for the Parliament to use the national register for random selection
	Flanders	Rules of the Flemish Parliament, Article 101	To organize the modalities of the petition right. To be received and discussed by the competent parliamentary commission.

⁷ To modify Article 41 de la loi spéciale du 8 aout 1980 for institutional reform

	Brussels-Capital	Article 25/1 of the Règlement Commun of the Brussels Parliament and COCOM and Article 42ter of the rules of the Assemblée de la COCOF	To establish and organize the mixed deliberative committees	
		L'Ordonnance du 17 juillet 2020 ⁸	To modify the right for the author of a petition to be heard by the Parliament	8 To modify the Ordinance of 20 juillet 2020
		Ordonnance Conjointe du 10 février 2022	To allow for the Parliament to use the national register for random selection	
German-Speaking Community	Décret de la Communauté Germanophone du 25 février 209	To establish a permanent citizens' dialogue		
	French-Speaking Community	The rules of the Parliament of the Federation Wallonie-Bruxelles, Article 129	To organize public consultation	
		The rules of the Parliament of the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, Article 85	To organize the modalities for the petition right	
Provincial	In Wallonia	Code de la démocratie locale et de la décentralisation (Wallonie), article L2212-31 avec appellation « conseil participatif » (2012)	To organize participatory budgeting	
		Code de la démocratie locale et de la décentralisation (Wallonie), article L2212-30	To organize consultative councils	
		Code de la démocratie locale et de la décentralisation (Wallonie), article L2214-1	To establish local popular consultation	
		Code de la démocratie locale et de la décentralisation (Wallonie), article L2212-28	To organize the citizens' interpellations	

		Stemming for the Article 28 of the constitutions; implementation ruled by municipalities	To organize the Petition right
	Flanders	Décret provincial, article 191 bis	To establish consultative councils.
		Provinciedecreet article 198	To organize the local popular consultations
		Provinciedecreet article 191 bis	To organize the citizens' interpellations
		Stemming from the Article 28 of the Constitution; organized in the Provinciedecreet, Article 191 bis	To organize the petition right.
Local	Wallonia	Code de la démocratie locale et de la décentralisation (Wallonie), article L1321-3 (2012)	To organize participatory budgeting
		Code de la démocratie locale et de la décentralisation (Wallonie), article L1122-35	To organize the consultative councils
		Code de la démocratie locale et de la décentralisation (Wallonie), article L1141-1	To organize the local popular consultation
	Flanders	Décret des autorités locales, article 304	To organize consultative councils
		Décret des autorités locales, article 305	To organize local popular consultations
		Décret des autorités locales, article 304	To organize the citizens' interpellations
		Stemming from Article 28 of the constitution, Décret des autorités locales, article 304	To organize the petition right
		Décret des autorités Locales, article 304	To organize the citizens' initiatives

	Brussels	Nouvelle loi communale, article 258 bis (2009)	To organize the participatory budgeting
		Nouvelle loi communale (Région de Bruxelles-Capitale), article 120 bis	To organize the consultative councils
		Nouvelle loi communale (Région de Bruxelles-Capitale), article 318	To organize the local popular consultations
		Nouvelle loi communale (Région de Bruxelles-Capitale), article 89bis	To organize the citizens' interpellations
		Stemming from Article 28 of the constitution; implementation ruled by municipalities	To organize the petition right

2.2 Are there specific guidelines or initiatives that support deliberative citizen participation in politics and society, such as local guidelines or national programmes?

For the first time, the coalition agreement of the Federal Government of Prime Minister Alexander De Croo mentions the need for democratic renewal and the use of new forms of citizen participation. The coalition agreements at the regional level in the Brussels-Capital Region and in Wallonia also refer to the need to use citizen participation. Political parties' manifestos also reveal a growing interest in citizen participation. Whereas only a few parties mentioned it in their manifestos before the 2010 elections, almost all political parties included proposals for citizen participation for the 2019 elections (see below).

Two other political initiatives are noteworthy. First, Magali Plovi (Ecolo, French-Speaking green political party), the initiator of the Brussels Deliberative Committees, has advocated for the implementation of a civil holiday that would allow workers to take up to 10 days off from work to participate in various civic activities, including participatory processes. However, her initiative was negatively received by the economic sector due to the costs it would imply for employers. It has not yet received wider uptake in politics and in the media.

Second, the federal government adopted a law in 2022 that allows for the use of the national register to randomly select citizens for (mixed) citizens' panels initiated by the Federal Parliament. A similar law has also recently been adopted by the Regions of Brussels-Capital and Wallonia, as well as the French-Speaking Community. This is a positive development that allows the parliaments of these political entities to directly rely on the national register to randomly select citizens for minipublics, instead of relying on samples from survey companies. However, only these parliaments can use the national register, implying that other public institutions (e. g., municipalities, civil society organizations) must still rely on alternative mechanisms for sortition.

2.3 Are there specific policies that hinder deliberative citizen participation in politics and society?

As depicted in Table 1, the multitude of legal provisions poses a challenge for navigating the (im)possibilities associated with each type of participatory mechanism. The absence of a unified and clear legal framework that defines and specifies the modalities of citizen participation results in inconsistent use of and reference to citizen participation. Each political entity has its own understanding of citizen participation, and most implementations take place outside the usual formal legal framework, leading to the need for improvisation. For instance, the citizens' panel "Brussels – Make Your Mobility" had no clear procedures for follow-up, and the President of the Parliament had to be creative to formalize the outcome of the minipublic⁹.

- What institutional structures exist to promote deliberative citizen participation (e.g. staff offices for citizen participation) on the national, regional and/or local level?
- How effective are these structures? Are there any obstacles or bottlenecks that limit their effectiveness?

Several institutes, companies, and foundations aim to promote citizen participation. Public institutes, mainly at the regional (e.g., Perspectives.Brussels or Vereniging van Vlaamse Gemeenschappen) and local level (e.g., Brussels-City Participation services) seek to create a network to monitor, fund, stimulate, and improve the use of citizen participation. For instance, Perspective.Brussels has created a new platform to help the municipalities in Brussels with their tenders for the design and implementation of citizen participation. There are also several foundations (e.g., Foundation Roi Baudouin, Foundation for the Future Generations) that promote deliberative citizen participation. They lobby decision-makers, advise them, or implement deliberative minipublics themselves. Finally, various practitioners (e.g., G1000, Particitiz) also lobby elected officials to encourage the use of citizen participation. According to Vrydagh et al. (2021), most of these structures have been quite effective and account to a certain extent the rise and success of deliberative citizen participation in Belgium.

⁹ Vrydagh, J. (2022). Measuring the impact of consultative citizen participation: reviewing the congruency approaches for assessing the uptake of citizen ideas. *Policy Sciences*, 55(1), 65–88.

3. Significant citizen participation projects

3.1 What significant citizen participation projects or initiatives have been carried out in Belgium in recent years?

In addition to Burgerbegroting Antwerpen, a participatory budget organized by the District of Antwerp where citizens have the opportunity to allocate 10%, and the G1000 citizens' summit in 2011/2012, several other cases also deserve highlighting due to their scope and/or innovative design. In 2022, the federal government launched an ambitious participatory process to reform the constitution. They first created an online consultation platform where citizens could answer a series of questions about the sixth reform of the State. However, criticisms were raised due to the complexity of the questions and the demanding format for answering them. The online platform collected 10,500 answers and is supposed to be followed by either mixed panels (i.e., with both elected members of the parliament and ordinary citizens) or by citizens' panels. Yet, these are yet to be announced and implemented.

In 2023, multiple civil society organizations (including G1000, Egmont Institute, the Club du Vendredi) launched a citizens' panel, "We Need to Talk", to discuss the funding of political

parties in Belgium¹⁰. The panel was preceded by a public consultation, hosted by Rethoric and under the scientific supervision of Prof. Dave Sinardet. The consultation consisted of 10 questions and received 2,344 arguments. Sixty citizens were then randomly selected to participate in a six-day minipublic. Almost all party leaders intervened during the process to present their position on the funding of parties. Interestingly, even though the process was not convened by elected officials, politicians regularly reached out to the G1000 to discuss the results of the panel.

¹⁰ <https://weneedtotalk.be/fr/home>

Finally, another noteworthy democratic innovation is the Deliberative Committee in the regional Parliament of Brussels-Capital and the French-Speaking Community Commission. Institutionalized in 2019, these deliberative processes gather 36 to 45 randomly selected citizens with 12 to 15 members of the parliament. Together, they deliberate on one issue during four days and formulate a series of recommendations for the responsible minister(s). The topics are either proposed by the Parliament or by petition. So far, six deliberative committees have taken place to discuss the following topics: the implementation of 5G, the role of citizens in times of crisis, homelessness, biodiversity, block release training, and noise pollution. Simon and Vrydagh¹¹ argue that the deliberative committees offer a new, meaningful space for dialogue between citizens and elected representatives. However, mixed deliberation produces a series of challenges and flaws. First, members of the parliament possess an epistemic advantage over citizens thanks to their expertise, and they sometimes rely on power politics to steer the outcome. As a result, citizens and elected representatives do not always have the same influence on the deliberation and its outcome. Second, there is a disconnection between the deliberative committees and the rest of the population. Despite the creation of a platform for all participatory initiatives in the Region of Brussels-Capital¹², the deliberative committees attract little or no public and media attention.

¹¹ <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/fusing-representative-and-deliberative-democracy-a-dispatch-from-brussels/>

¹² <https://democratie.brussels/>

3.2 To what extent have they influenced the social and political discourse on deliberative citizen participation?

As mentioned earlier, one should not underestimate the significance of the G1000 and David Van Reybrouck's book "Against the Elections" on public and political opinion. The size of the citizen summit and Van Reybrouck's public profile clearly enabled the organizers to capture media and political attention. While most minipublics usually go unnoticed, generating little media, political, and public interest, the G1000 had a broad and enduring impact on how citizen participation is perceived in Belgium. What is more, David Van Reybrouck's book, entitled "Against the Elections", greatly contributed to popularizing citizen deliberation and random selections among the public and politicians. For instance, the Minister-President of the Ostbelgien Community, Oliver Paasch, read Van Reybrouck's book and then invited him in his capacity as the founder of the G1000 to discuss the creation of a permanent assembly with randomly selected citizens¹³.

¹³ Macq, H., & Jacquet, V. (2023). Institutionalising participatory and deliberative procedures: The origins of the first permanent citizens' assembly. *European Journal of Political Research*, 62(1), 156–173.

4. Significance of citizen participation

Political perspectives

- How is deliberative citizen participation discussed and perceived in the political arena? Is it widely accepted or are there controversial views?

- What are the positions of relevant political actors on the issue of citizen participation?
- How has the significance/status of deliberative citizen participation in politics developed in recent years? Has there been a shift in perception?

Perspectives from society

- How is deliberative citizen participation discussed and perceived in society? Is it widely accepted or are there controversial views?
- What are the positions of relevant civil society actors on the issue of citizen participation?
- How has the significance/status of deliberative citizen participation in society developed in recent years? Has there been a shift in perception?

Belgium is often presented as a pioneer of deliberative citizen participation. This reputation mainly stems from the number, ambition, and innovative nature of the minipublics. Belgium receives considerable political, media, and academic attention after institutionalizing several minipublics at the regional level, such as the mixed deliberative committees in Brussels and Wallonia or the citizens' dialogue in the German-Speaking Community. For instance, the latter was the first case of institutionalization, putting Belgium on the international map, receiving news articles in major media, like *The Economist*¹⁴, quickly followed by similar media coverage of the mixed deliberative committees.¹⁵ It is important to note, however, that Belgium may be considered a pioneer primarily for its minipublics, as its other participatory processes do not distinguish it from the rest of the world. Moreover, Belgium received significant international attention for a couple of cases (G1000 citizens' summit, the citizens' dialogue, or the mixed-deliberative committees) in which international operators and scholars were involved in the design. The presence of these actors with an international network may explain why Belgium was catapulted as a pioneering country on the international stage. We therefore need more comparative research to determine if Belgium's minipublics are genuinely more innovative, numerous, and ambitious than in other countries, or if it has received more attention than other states with a participatory experience (e. g., France, Austria, Spain, or Germany).

According to Vrydagh et al., at least two factors can account for the success of minipublics in Belgium.¹⁶ First, there is a loose but efficient network of advocates that lobby decision-makers. This network revolves informally around a couple of key organizations – the G1000, the Foundation for Future Generations, or the King Baudouin Foundation – but it also includes a multitude of operators, such as Particitiz, CitizenLab, or Tree Company. While these organizations and companies sometimes compete against each other for tenders, they all advocate for involving more citizens in decision-making. Second, political parties have been endorsing citizen participation more since the G1000 and the 2014 elections. According to Vrydagh et al., the increasing support for public engagement can be partly explained by the awareness of decision-makers about public distrust, and politicians see in citizen participation a way to repair the damaged relationship between them and the citizenry.

Examining politicians and political parties' positions on citizen participation illustrates the wide support for various types of citizen participation. Table 2 is based on a study conducted by Laura Pascolo.¹⁷ As Table 2 shows, most political parties have a positive stance regarding citizen participation as a whole and multiple participatory processes. Only a few parties either

¹⁴ <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/10/03/a-belgian-experiment-that-aristotle-would-have-approved-of>

¹⁵ This international recognition however contrasts with the little awareness of these processes in Belgium. For example, the citizens' dialogue in the German-speaking Community does not generate much of local media coverage, while the mixed deliberative committees seem to remain unknown for a lot of citizens in the Region of Brussels-Capital.

¹⁶ Vrydagh, J., Devillers, S., Jacquet, V., Talukder, D., & Bottin, J. (2021). Thriving in an unfriendly territory. *Belgian Exceptionalism*, 59–76.

¹⁷ Pascolo, L. (2020). Do political parties support participatory democracy? A comparative analysis of party manifestos in Belgium. *ConstDelib Working Paper Series*, 1(9), 1–26.

oppose or do not mention citizen participation in their manifestos. Most notably, the N-VA (Flemish nationalist-conservative), the largest political party in Flanders and Belgium, is opposed to citizen participation as a whole and only supports advisory councils, as they claim that existing representative political institutions suffice. This may explain why the Flemish Region and its municipalities have implemented fewer participatory processes, as the nationalist-conservative party has been sitting in the regional government for almost 20 years. Conversely, we find greater support for citizen participation among French-speaking political parties, and three of them (PS, Ecolo, and cdH) even support the creation of permanent citizen assemblies (which have been introduced during this term in the Regions of Brussels and Wallonia).

Regarding the support of elected members of parliament and citizens for minipublics, a recent study by Jacquet et al.¹⁸ explores the extent to which both groups support four different types of deliberative minipublics: (1) a chamber with randomly selected citizens, (2) a chamber with both randomly selected citizens and MPs, (3) a municipal council with randomly selected citizens, (4) a citizens' panel with randomly selected citizens. Their findings reveal that both MPs and citizens tend to critically appraise the use of random selection for institutions with decision-making power. The municipal council with randomly selected citizens receives the largest opposition among MPs (89.5%) and citizens (51.4%). Citizens tend to support a mixed chamber (47.4%), while MPs support an ad-hoc citizens' panel (48.2%). When seeking explanations for MPs' support, Jacquet et al. find that the position of their party on the left-right axis is relevant, as they are more likely to support minipublics when they are from the left than from the right.

18 Jacquet, V., Niessen, C., & Reuchamps, M. (2022). Sortition, its advocates and its critics: An empirical analysis of citizens' and MPs' support for random selection as a democratic reform proposal. *International Political Science Review*, 43(2), 295–316.

5. Challenges and barriers

What are the challenges that hinder the development of deliberative citizen participation in Belgium?

The main challenge lies in the institutional structure of Belgium. The state possesses an impressive number of levels of authority, and the division of competences is extremely difficult to navigate. This has two negative implications. First, each level of authority has its own legal provisions on the modalities of citizen participation. It is, therefore, complex and demanding for elected representatives, public servants, and practitioners to implement citizen participation in this intricate setting. Second, participatory initiatives are restrained by the competencies of the public authority that launched it, and their recommendations often conflict with the competencies of other levels of authority. For instance, the citizens' panel "Make your Mobility-Brussels" took place in 2017 to formulate a new mobility plan for the Region of Brussels-Capital. Several recommendations dealt with competences from the federal and European levels, but it is very unlikely that these recommendations contribute to influencing decision-makers at those levels. Moreover, it can be a challenge to organize participatory processes that genuinely tackle an issue, as that issue is managed by several administrations at different levels of authorities. For instance, if a participatory process seeks to work on health, it needs to navigate among competencies of the nine ministers who are responsible for this issue in Belgium. Hence, citizen participation is booming in Belgium, but the institutional structure of the state may be its glass ceiling. As long as the state structure is not simplified, public engagement will always be constrained. While all actors pushing for

citizen participation agree with this observation, changing the constitution is a heavy and demanding political process, requiring a large political consensus, which goes beyond the power of these actors.

6. Author

Julien Vrydagh is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Stuttgart, where he works on the ERC funded project “Designing Democracy on Mars and Earth”. He holds a joint PhD from the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and the Université Catholique de Louvain. His research interests include the political impact of citizen participation, democratic systems approach, and citizens’ democratic preferences. He has recently co-edited the Handbook of Citizens’ Assemblies with De Gruyter.

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