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Building Resilient Innovations in Democracy, Governance and Excellence

DELIBERATION:

DEFINITION, USE, AND FIT TO THE DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL PROCESS

Policy brief

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We strive to make science accessible to everyone. In this policy brief, left alignment has been used to eliminate visual barriers and improve readability.

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DELIBERATION: DEFINITION, USE, AND FIT TO THE DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL PROCESS

In recent decades, calls for greater citizen participation in democratic decision-making have led to a surge in consultative formats, such as public hearings. Yet, they often become platforms for “loud minorities” (Fung & Wright, 2003). As populist forces increasingly instrumentalize differences in people’s experiences and origins to foster societal polarization and undermine social cohesion, a different approach to citizen participation is needed. This brief presents deliberation as an alternative approach to citizen participation, introduces typical formats of deliberation with a focus on mini-publics, and presents conditions for maximizing its effectiveness and integrating deliberation into a democratic political process.

Methodologically, this brief relies on the systematic review of academic literature on deliberative democracy, including classic works on the functions and limits of deliberation (Pateman, 1970; Dryzek, 2000; Mansbridge, 1999; Smith, 2009), approaches to democratic innovations (Elstub & Escobar, 2019; Bächtiger et al., 2018), as well as empirical studies of mini-publics and practical formats of deliberation (Fung & Wright, 2003; Warren, 2008; Farrell, Suiter & Harris, 2018). Particular attention is given to analyses of the conditions for effective deliberation (Rapeli & Himmelroos, 2020; Eun, 2024) and the risks associated with excessive formalizing of deliberation without real impact (Curato et al., 2018).

Deliberation: definition and functions

Deliberation is an alternative format of public participation. While consultations and dialogues merely collect diverse opinions, deliberative participatory formats aim at creating reasoned decisions through collective discussion, mutual learning, and the exchange of information.

Unlike public consultations, which are common in representative democracy when authorities inform citizens about potential decisions and gather their feedback, deliberation goes beyond reaction and involves generating new ideas through the exchange of arguments (Smith, 2009; Elstub & Escobar, 2019). When participants are selected at random to approximate the social diversity of a nation, community, or city, such as in deliberative mini-publics, deliberation helps balance "loud" and "quiet" voices.

Thus, unlike other forms of participation, deliberation:

- does not fix preferences but allows them to change based on arguments (Fishkin, 2009);
- is not limited to symbolism but generates real policy recommendations (Fung & Wright, 2003);
- is not reduced to a simple statistical majority but seeks inclusion, legitimacy, and balance (Dryzek, 2000; Warren, 2008);
- combines both official formats and interaction with "everyday practices" (at the community level) (Mansbridge, 1999).

Deliberation cannot be situated either within the direct or representative democracy toolbox. Unlike direct democracy (e.g., referenda), deliberation does not presuppose binding decision-making

in a democracy. Unlike representative democracy, participants in deliberation, as a form of citizen participation, are regular citizens, not elected representatives. At the same time, deliberation can be used flexibly in combination with other democratic institutions, thanks to its **core functions:**

- → **Enhancement of legitimacy in political decisions and the strengthening of trust**. When citizens are involved in discussions and see that their arguments are heard, they are more likely to support even those decisions that do not fully align with their initial positions (Fishkin et al., 2021). In this sense, deliberation serves as a "trust bridge" between society and government. Citizen participation in decision-making generates a political socialization effect – people tend to trust institutions more when they feel their involvement in political processes (Pateman, 1970)

- → **Shifting focus in conflicts from (personalized) antagonism toward reasoned discussion**. Deliberation opens space for "rational discourse," where even polarized groups are compelled to listen to one another (Dryzek, 2000). At the local level, this is especially critical: issues such as budget allocation or land use often generate tension that can be mitigated through joint problem-solving.

- → **Substantive and civic learning from expert input.** Typical deliberative processes provide participants with access to verified information, opportunities to ask questions to thematic experts, and space to debate arguments with others. At the same time, given a task to arrive at collective recommendations or judgments,

citizens learn to listen to each other, change their views in light of arguments, and take responsibility for collective decisions. This fosters a sense of shared purpose and strengthens civic competencies.

→ **Correcting misconceptions and reducing the impact of biases and manipulations**. Listening to other participants, especially in mixed groups where individuals with different opinions discuss them with each other, helps correct mutual stereotypes (Rapeli & Himmelroos, 2020). When adequately facilitated, deliberative processes provide for the lacking "everyday talk" (Mansbridge 1999) with the "other" in the age of disinformation and online fragmentation.

→ **Reducing self-interest in policy preferences**. Through listening to others, their needs and preferences, participants become more supportive of collectively beneficial policy choices even if those choices do not directly benefit them (Eun, 2024).

Choosing the right format for deliberation

Before choosing an appropriate format or tool for deliberation, three criteria should be considered: **who participates, how communication occurs, and the level of influence participants have** (Fung, 2006). When it comes to participants, typical deliberative formats ("mini-publics") rely on random and stratified sampling for participant selection, which enables the representation of society across key social characteristics and, consequently, produces more balanced outcomes than ordinary opinion surveys (Fishkin, 2009). This feature is also one of the largest challenges, since there is a high rate of rejection to participate among randomly selected people due to the way individuals

conceive their own roles, abilities, and capacities in the public sphere, as well as in the perceived output of such democratic innovations (Jacquet, 2017). Participants can also be invited based on their expertise, interest, and specific characteristics without random selection, depending on the purpose.

In terms of communication, deliberation is not just about collecting opinions but about **dialogue and argumentation**. Participants receive balanced information, have time to reflect, and then discuss together. The key here is reciprocity, reason-giving, and facilitation – so that the conversation is constructive, inclusive, and oriented toward joint recommendations. Everyday conversations among citizens can evolve into genuine deliberation that fosters collective decision-making, but only when certain conditions are met (Mansbridge, 1999).

Finally, the level of influence can vary. In some cases, participation is **consultative**, with recommendations that authorities may or may not follow. In others, it can mean **joint decision-making**, where citizens and officials co-design policies. And in the strongest formats, there may even be **delegated authority**, where citizens' decisions are binding. The higher the level of influence, the more crucial it is to engage in genuine deliberation, as it requires responsibility and careful consideration of the broader public interest.

Deliberative mini-public as a common form for institutionalized deliberation: main features and types

Deliberation can take many forms – from "everyday conversations" in a community to parliamentary hearings, digital and institutional deliberation (Bobbio, 2010). Regarding deliberation as a form of citizen participation, the most common set of deliberative formats is known as "mini-publics." They are typically structured and oriented toward inclusion, reason-

giving, and transparency (Fishkin, 2009; Fung & Wright, 2003; Warren, 2008; Mansbridge, 1999).

In light of contemporary challenges – such as institutional distrust, martial law, or demographic shifts – the choice of type must be strategically grounded, taking into account goals, resources, the expected level of influence, and the policy context. Deliberative practices are evolving, often combining online participation tools with offline discussions and seeking to engage previously marginalized groups. This broadens the scope of deliberation from local planning to national reforms (Escobar, 2014; Geissel & Newton, 2012).

The table below summarizes common types of mini-publics along the three criteria (participant composition, mode of communication, and level of influence). It also provides clarifications regarding the advantages and potential risks associated with the type of mini-public.

Table 1. Types of mini-publics: characteristics, advantages, and risks.

Type of mini-public	Participant selection method	Mode of Communication	Level of Influence	Advantages	Risks
Deliberative Polling	Random sample	Small groups + experts + pre/post surveys	Communicative Influence / Consultation: shaping informed public opinion, but no binding obligations for authorities	Opinion change, legitimacy	Costly, challenges with neutral information, and weak policy feedback
Citizens' Juries	Random sample (12–24 people)	Hearings, argumentation, recommendations	Advice / Consultation (sometimes joint decision-making if embedded in the political process) – authorities receive recommendations, may take them into account	Depth, trust	Small number of participants → representativeness issue; scaling difficulties; challenges in implementing recommendations
Planning Cell	Randomized, multiple groups	Facilitated work, experts	Joint decision-making – co-production of policies in collaboration with the administration	Institutionalized decisions	High cost, administrative complexity, lack of flexibility, difficulty in replicating across contexts
Citizens' Assembly	Stratified random sample (50–200)	Extended facilitated discussion	Advice / joint decision-making, sometimes Delegated Authority (if authorities commit to implementing results)	Legitimacy, inclusiveness	Scaling challenges, high organizational costs, and a need for a clear institutional implementation mechanism
Consensus Conference	Random citizens + experts	Hearings + joint position development	Advice – joint production of a consensus position presented as recommendations	Citizen–science dialogue	Group pressure and consensus may undervalue less popular views

Other formats of deliberation

Besides mini-publics, with their institutionalized and structured methods, deliberation can take other forms. The following table summarizes semi-formal (advisory) and informal formats, where deliberation is a constitutive element, participants are not randomly selected citizens, but either self-selected citizens or self-selected, invited experts:

Table 1. Formats of semi-formal and informal deliberation.

Format of Deliberation	Type of Format	Level of Deliberation	Participant selection method	Mode of Communication	Level of Influence	Advantages	Risks
Citizens' Panels	Institutional/ permanent	Partial	Volunteers / selected residents	Periodic discussions	Advice / Consultation – participants provide regular recommendations, but no guarantee of implementation	Regularity	May be unrepresentative, low level of influence, sometimes a symbolic function
Advisory Panels	Institutional	Partial	Experts + community representatives	Formal meetings/ exchange of positions	Advice – classic advisory body format	Direct link with authorities	Low openness
World Café / Dialogue Sessions	Informal	Partial	Open participation	Group discussions, exchange of views	Communicative Influence – idea generation, public debate without formal impact	Inclusiveness, accessibility	Superficiality, lack of influence, dominance of active participants, difficulty summarizing outcomes

Format of Deliberation	Type of Format	Level of Deliberation	Participant selection method	Mode of Communication	Level of Influence	Advantages	Risks
National Dialogues / Strategic Dialogues	Hybrid	Partial–full (depends)	Stakeholders, citizens, & sometimes politicians	Facilitated strategic discussion	Joint decision-making / Delegated Authority (e.g., in post-conflict or constitutional dialogue)	Trust, transformation	Scaling difficulties
Deliberative Town Halls	Hybrid/ local	Partial	Open participation	Moderated discussions, dialogue with authorities	Communicative Influence / Advice – depending on context, may play an advisory role	Direct interaction	Risk of formality, superficial discussions, dominance of active participants, difficulty summarizing outcomes
Scenario Workshops / Future Labs	Hybrid/ planning	Partial	Representatives + community	Co-design of policies/ visions	Advice / Joint decision-making – scenario planning often leads to joint policy development with authorities	Innovativeness, co-creation	High facilitation requirements, risk of abstract discussions, may lack direct policy impact.

ORGANIZING DELIBERATION: TYPICAL PITFALLS AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

As with any other participatory format, planning deliberation involves certain risks, specifically:

- **“Deliberation-washing”** – the superficial use of the term without meeting the actual criteria of genuine exchange of arguments and consensus-building. For instance, online surveys without mutual discussion, or the use of “consultation” and “deliberation” as interchangeable terms, lead to confusion of goals and expectations. Such a devaluation of the term deliberation undermines its capacity to serve as an effective instrument for making well-reasoned and legitimate decisions (Fung, 2006).

- **“Tokenism”** – the illusion of participation without any substantive meaning, which often is caused by the lack of feedback (Curato et al., 2018). Thus, even when citizens take part in discussions, authorities may fail to communicate how their recommendations were actually considered (Irvin & Stansbury, 2004). Typical examples include public hearings without minutes or responses to submissions, online surveys without published results, and discussions that have no real impact on the final decision. Such practices not only devalue the very idea of participation but also reduce citizens’ trust in democratic institutions (Bryson et al., 2013). At the same time, without embedded mechanisms of influence, even the best-organized deliberation may leave participants disappointed (King et al., 2004).

- **Neglect of the social context** – for example, low levels of trust, a lack of facilitation skills, or domination by more active participants (Escobar, 2011; Cornwall, 2008) – can reduce the quality of deliberation and its outcomes.

- **Inappropriate choice of format to the purpose –** choosing with inertia or just by following innovation, without considering the topic, level of tension, access to information, or expected outcomes. As a result, even well-organized initiatives may turn out to be structurally inaccessible to broad groups of the population, such as internally displaced persons, youth, or people with disabilities. Inclusion does not occur automatically; it must be carefully planned through the use of quotas, support, effective communication, and enabling environments (Cornwall, 2008).

Considering these challenges, deliberation can have real substance rather than merely a symbolic function only if certain structural conditions are met – in particular, clear criteria for selecting the appropriate format. Effective deliberation requires:

✔

Broad diversity **of participants**:
The selection of citizens must aim to represent the social, gender, geographic, and other forms of diversity within a community.

✔

Informational support is critically important: participants should have access to balanced and reliable materials, as well as input from technical experts and interest groups, to account for diverse perspectives on an issue.

The process must last long enough to allow participants to review the materials, reflect on positions, and engage in meaningful dialogue.

Neutral facilitation and an **official mechanism for responding to results** are key elements for maintaining trust and influence (Fishkin, 2009; Elstub & Escobar, 2019; Curato et al., 2018).

DELIBERATIVE MINI-PUBLICS AND THE POLITICAL PROCESS IN A REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY: MAKING RESULTS OFFICIALLY COUNT

The results of deliberative processes cannot remain “behind closed doors”: they must be made public, and authorities should provide an official response to each recommendation. The legitimacy of deliberative formats depends on transparency and accountability, which also prevent them from becoming merely symbolic (Fung & Wright, 2003). At the same time, citizens are more willing to participate in deliberative formats if they feel the process is transparent and that their voice genuinely influences the outcome (Neblo et al., 2010). Therefore, it's critical to plan how to embed deliberation in a political process.

Practical examples

Practice shows that deliberative formats can be successfully integrated into the policy process at both local and national levels.

At the national level, deliberative practices are increasingly being integrated into formal political cycles. The example of Ireland (Farrell, Suiter & Harris, 2018) demonstrates how citizens' assemblies became a tool for preparing constitutional referendums (same-sex marriage, repeal of the 8th Amendment). In Canada, the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly (Warren, 2008) showed the possibility of institutionalizing the role of citizens in policymaking. Deliberation also matters in the global context, though its legitimacy is most deeply rooted in local practices (Dryzek, 2000). Such examples can be seen within the broader approach of "deliberative systems" (Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012), where local and national practices interact and reinforce one another.

At the local level, deliberation becomes particularly important, as municipalities are a "natural environment" for democratic innovation where decisions directly affect residents and can be more easily integrated into policy (Fung & Wright, 2003; Fishkin, 2009). Through instruments such as participatory budgeting, neighborhood councils, and citizens' assemblies, deliberation can be embedded into agenda-setting, strategic planning, and conflict resolution (Warren, 2008). Everyday conversations within communities also foster social cohesion and strengthen the legitimacy of political decisions, showing that deliberation occurs not only through formal institutions but also through local practices that underpin the broader democratic system (Mansbridge, 1999).

Conditions: How to embed deliberation in a policy process

Several directions can ensure effective integration of deliberative outcomes into representative democracy (Fishkin, 2009; Fung & Wright, 2003; Warren, 2008; Mansbridge, 1999; Dryzek, 2000; Sørensen & Torfing, 2023):

01 **Mandatory consideration of recommendations in representative bodies.**

This means that the results of citizens' assemblies, deliberative polls, or other formats must be officially submitted for review by local councils or parliaments. Authorities should publicly respond to each proposal. Such a practice significantly enhances transparency and trust. In addition, it is crucial to conduct systematic research on the actual impact of deliberative processes on policy, taking into account the design and format of these processes (Dacombe & Wojciechowska, 2024). Evaluation of deliberation should consider empirical analysis of real debates (Steiner et al., 2004; Thompson, 2008; Bächtiger et al., 2018).

02 **Linking deliberation to political cycles.**

The most effective formats are those organized not "after the fact" but precisely at the time when key documents – budgets, development strategies, master plans – are being adopted. This enables the integration of citizens' recommendations into decision-making processes at the stage of policy formation.

03 **Institutionalizing deliberative practices in community charters or council regulations.**

For example, it may be mandated that citizens' assemblies be held on strategic or conflict-sensitive issues. At the same time, there is a risk that such institutionalization may be purely formal. To avoid this, additional mechanisms of accountability and reporting are required. Additionally, since formal deliberative mini-publics are costly, institutionalization clauses should account for a public body's ability to allocate or raise funds for them. This is especially an issue in developing economies.

04 **Connecting deliberative outcomes with referendums or votes.**

This is especially relevant for decisions of constitutional or strategic importance. An example is the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly, whose recommendations were put to a provincial referendum (Warren, 2008). At the same time, there are pertinent risks that majority voting without deliberation preceding it may reject the results if the issue is highly controversial.

05 **Involving the executive branch.**

Governments and administrations can embed recommendations into development programs, strategies, and budgets. Since the executive branch is often the key actor in the practical implementation of policy, its engagement is critically important.

06 **Creating mechanisms of accountability and monitoring.**

Authorities should report regularly on the implementation status of recommendations and establish independent committees or advisory bodies to oversee the process. This practice prevents results from being “forgotten” and avoids discouraging citizens who actively engage in

07 **Developing hybrid formats.**

These may include neighborhood councils, advisory bodies attached to municipalities, or working groups on budgetary issues. Such institutions ensure the continuity of participation and the ongoing integration of deliberative outcomes into the political process.

Thus, the integration of deliberative formats into representative democracy must be comprehensive, encompassing mandatory governmental responses and institutionalization, as well as transparent reporting and the creation of permanent mechanisms for joint decision-making. This would transform deliberation from an episodic tool into a sustainable component of democratic governance.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

We encourage authorities, municipalities, civil society organisations, and international development projects to take into account the following recommendations for effectively using deliberation:

- Select deliberative formats strategically, aligning them with the problem, policy stage, and expected outcomes.
- Design inclusive participant recruitment through random or stratified sampling.
- Develop balanced and accessible briefing materials, and invite experts representing diverse perspectives.
- Allocate sufficient time for participants to study materials, deliberate together, and revise their views.
- Engage trained and independent facilitators to ensure equal voice, respectful dialogue, and prevent dominance.
- Publish deliberative outcomes and require official responses from decision-makers.
- Provide feedback to participants and the public on how the recommendations informed the final decisions.
- Integrate deliberation into political cycles by linking it to budgeting, strategic planning, and reform processes as early as possible.
- Anchor deliberative practices institutionally in statutes or council rules while maintaining flexibility.
- Establish monitoring and evaluation systems to track implementation and assess impact on policy and trust.

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