

Deliberative minipublics has made it to mainstream politics: A dispatch from Belgium

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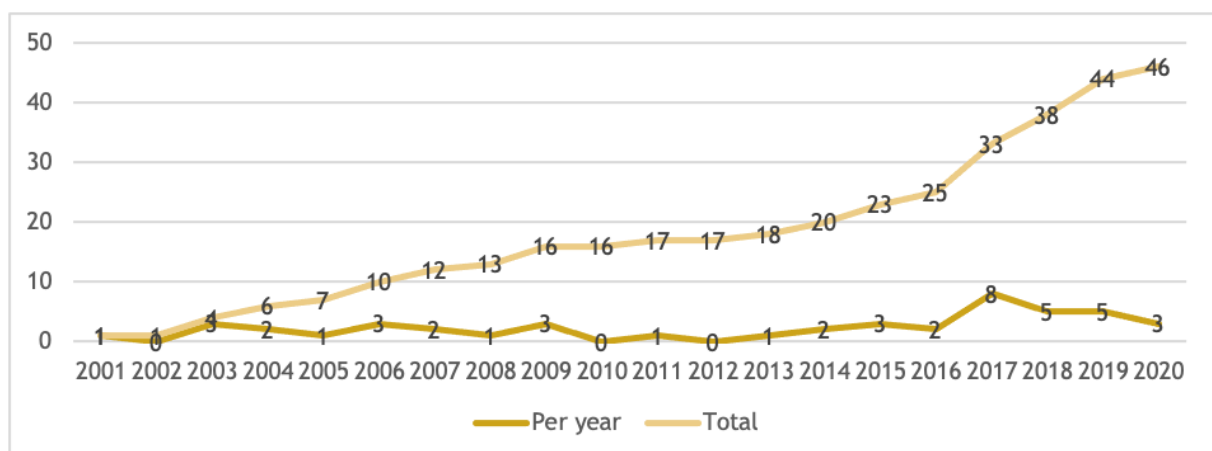
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When the *Journal of Public Deliberation* was born fifteen years ago, convening a randomly selected sample of citizens – or minipublic – to deliberate on policy recommendations was a strange idea. A handful of activists, practitioners, and scholars put forward this vision, and they were often met with skepticism, if not disregard.

Things are different today. Deliberative mini-publics are increasingly popular inside civil society, but also among traditional representative actors. This procedure is defended in opinion piece of [mainstream newspaper](#) and endorsed by some prominent political figures such the [former Secretary-General of the United Nations Kofi Annan](#). More importantly, more and more countries have experienced structured deliberation on major political issues. For instance, the Icelandic government and the Irish Parliament have relied on such processes at the highest level of policy reform : [constitutional revision](#). Federal entities of Belgium have even gone one step further by establishing permanent randomly selected bodies that will work in collaboration with elected parliaments in the long term.

How did we get to this position? Our team of five political scientists has tried to answer this question by listing and analyzing all the minipublics convened in Belgium. This contributes to understanding how marginal democratic reform proposals can enter traditional political institutions.

Graph 1. The evolution of minipublics in Belgium between 2001 and 2020



The figure above tells a story of how deliberative minipublics gained traction in Belgium. We stopped the count on November 14th, 2020. We only counted minipublics that had effectively started. As a consequence, we do not count several minipublics that were delayed or postponed

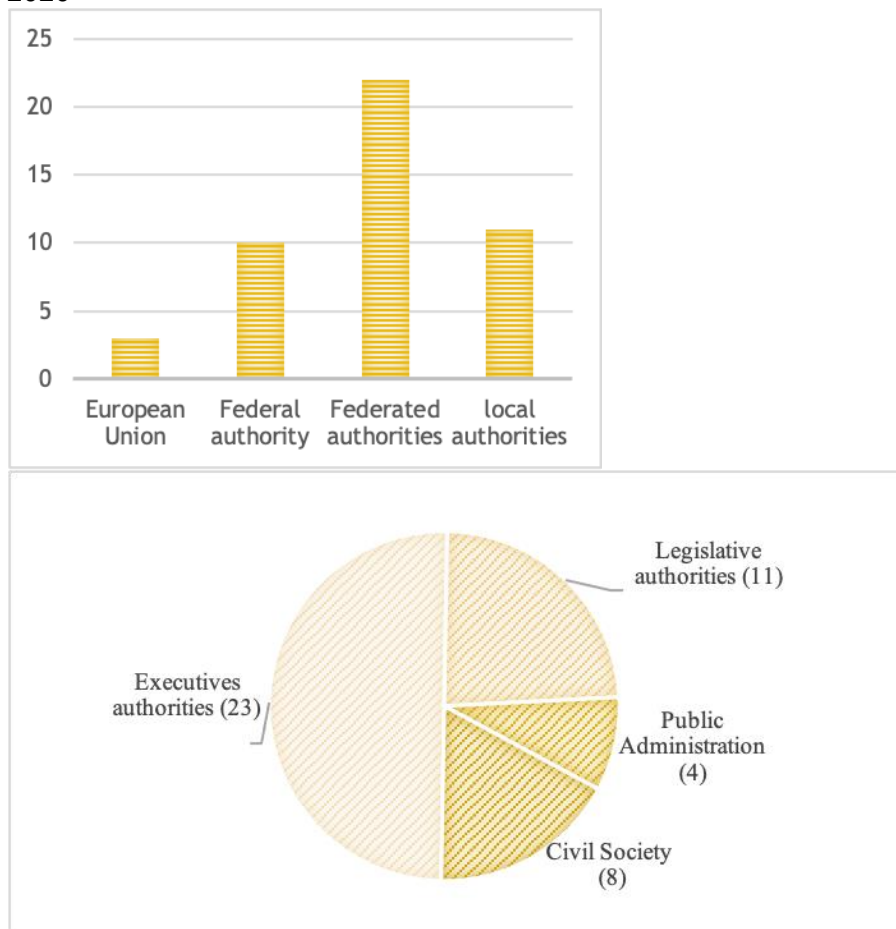
due to the COVID-19 sanitary crisis. The first phase of the evolution of minipublics in Belgium is the emergence of minipublics at the beginning of the 2000s. At that time, they were preliminary organized by a specific ministry in collaboration with a civic foundation such as the King Baudouin Foundation or the Foundation for Future Generation. These foundations pushed for selecting participants by lot in order to attract a more diversified sample of the population than roundtables of stakeholders that were usually convened by ministers. At that time, the media coverage of minipublics was relatively marginal. Political leaders considered them as a tool, among many others, to collect information from the field.

The second phase started in 2013. We observe an increase of minipublics, with a mean of 3.5 cases per year. This acceleration can notably be attributed to one event that attracted lots of attention: [the G1000](#). Artists, public figures and academics initiated this grassroots minipublic. It gathered more than 700 randomly selected people for a deliberation of one day. The G1000 was a response to the political crisis that saw Belgium break the length record (541 days) of a state without a government. Political parties from the Dutch-speaking Flanders and those from the French-speaking Wallonia could not find an agreement on the future federal architecture of the country. Thanks to an important communications campaign with spokespersons that were famous public figure in the country, the G1000 succeeded in attracting lots of political and media attention on sortition and the virtues of citizens' deliberation. This was helpful in shaping how the public viewed minipublics. Minipublics were conceived not only as a tool to increase the efficacy of public action, but also as a way to cure the democratic malaise experienced within representative democracies.

The G1000 also acted as a catalyst for a network of actors committed to the implementation of democratic innovations in Belgium. Although the network does not have a formal structure, they form a lobby in favor of opening up the political system to new forms of citizen participation. As the informal network grew stronger and larger, their influence on the public agenda also increased and they have succeeded in putting the issue of participatory and deliberative democracy on the public agenda. The action of certain public personalities such as David Van Reybrouck – author of the book [Against the elections. The case for democracy](#) and founder of the G1000 – also reinforces the network's visibility. In the wake of these developments, minipublics have mushroomed in Belgium and have become a widespread mechanism to involve ordinary citizens.

The graph below (Graph 2) shows that minipublics are convened at all levels of governance, including high levels such as the federal or the European ones. Its initiators are also diverse, with a majority of cases initiated by the executive, and the rest by the civil society, parliaments, and public administrations (see Graph 3).

Graphs 2 and 3. The geographical space and the initiators of minipublics between 2001 and 2020



Since 2019, we can observe a rather exceptional third phase, namely the institutionalization of deliberative instruments. Indeed, three federal entities in Belgium have established permanent bodies composed of randomly selected citizens. The German-Speaking Community, the smallest entity of the country, has initiated the movement by creating in 2019 a [permanent citizens' dialogue](#). This randomly selected assembly has the power to convene minipublics on specific policy issues and, most importantly, to work in collaboration with the parliament to guarantee that the citizens' recommendations are taken into account by policy-makers. The legislation indeed provides that meeting will be organized with the members of randomly selected assembly, members of the parliament and the executive. The latter must systematically explain how they implemented each recommendations, or justify why they did not do so.

The Walloon and Brussels Regions have thereafter transformed the functioning of their respective Parliaments. Both regions have introduced [mixed parliamentary committees](#), in which randomly selected citizens will serve alongside elected representatives. This will enable ordinary people to deliberate with MPs on preselected themes and to formulate recommendations. At the local level, cities have also followed the movement by progressively institutionalizing their own minipublics, often in the form of randomly selected neighbourhood councils. These small minipublics show innovative design features. They can be organized alongside a participatory budgeting, like in the municipalities of Auderghem and Brussels-city or in parallel with the city council like in Saint-Gilles and Mechelen. In the case of Brussels-city, these minipublics have mixed composition with ordinary citizens and representatives of the civil society, both randomly selected. In all these cases of institutionalization, the minipublic percolated into the center of representative systems.

Contrary to the previous period where minipublic were mainly ad-hoc experiment at the margin of the political system, randomly selected assemblies are now a component of the Belgian democratic structure.

Two elements might shed light on the rise of deliberative minipublics in Belgium.

First, the network of activists that emerged in the second played a crucial role. Its members succeeded in convincing some political leaders that deliberative randomly selected assembly is an appropriate solution to face the malaise experienced by representative democracies. They popularized some international examples such as the Irish Citizens Assembly that have shown that randomly selected assemblies can be associated with the public debates on urgent public problems. Consequently, political actors, even if they are usually cautious about such mechanisms, gradually let themselves be convinced by these activists in the implementation of deliberative minipublics in their own institutions. Additionally, they also helped political actors in the actual organization of deliberative mini-publics. For instance, several mini-publics launched by Ministers or public agencies were accompanied by practitioners and activists of the G1000 network or other organizations active in deliberative democracy-related areas. In the wake of a growing political dissatisfaction among the citizenry, the increased desire of political leaders to restore political trust and the proliferation of deliberative solutions provided by activists converge into triggering a growing use of minipublics at different levels of power in Belgium.

Second, the entry of the green Party within the government coalition of two regions out of three has given a decisive push to the vote of the reforms and their implementations. Belgian green parties have been pioneers in the promotion of deliberative tools in order to cure the democratic malaise: they managed to convince their coalitions partners to establish deliberative processes.

This short historical description shows how a marginal democratic innovation can, step by step, enter mainstream representative institutions. This can give lots of hope for all democratic reformers that seek to reshape the way our democracy functions: reforms are possible. But we also want to remain cautious regarding the institutionalization of deliberative instruments. Actually, minipublics remain top-down processes. They are not related to massive popular movements that ask for the institutionalization of citizen participation or random selection. On the contrary, citizens tend to be rather neutral toward sortition and are fragmented regarding the question of who should rule – between elites, experts and citizens. It will thus crucial to scrutinize whether the broad public endorses these reforms and changes its attitudes towards politics.

Bios

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