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REVIEW



# The Integration of Deliberative Mini-publics in Collaborative Governance Through the Perspectives of Citizens and Stakeholders: The Case of the Education Reform in French-speaking Belgium

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## ABSTRACT

The integration of deliberative democracy within larger schemes of policy-making of collaborative governance is a key challenge. Such integration potentially means changes in the role and in the power relationships between the actors of collaborative governance. Indeed, it brings in citizens – who were traditionally not formally involved – along with stakeholders – who were traditionally involved. Through the case of a large-scale education reform in the French-Speaking Community of Belgium, this paper seeks to explore how these actors react to the use of deliberative mini-publics and regard their legitimacy.

## KEYWORDS

Deliberative democracy; collaborative governance; stakeholders; education reform

## 1. Introduction

Governance has increasingly become collaborative during the last decades (Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2009), with decision-making opening to non-state stakeholders in a consensus-oriented and deliberative process, fostering collaboration between various public and private actors (Ansell & Gash, 2008). In parallel, and from a similar perspective, deliberative mini-publics are increasingly used as a way to bridge the gap between citizens and policy-makers and enjoy a noticeable popularity both among policy-makers and scholars of political sciences. Mini-publics and collaborative governance are two different ways of giving citizens a voice. On the one hand, mini-publics give a voice to an inclusive and representative group of lay citizens. They engage in a structured deliberation under an independent facilitation, meant to influence public policy and public opinion (Ryan & Smith, 2014). On the other hand, collaborative governance includes citizens via stakeholders that represent specific groups of the population (Knill & Tosun, 2012a, pp. 62–65). As a consequence, whereas mini-publics directly involve lay citizens with non-vested interests to provide policy-makers with recommendations,

collaborative governance includes organised groups representing public and private interests.

Are these contrasting profiles willing to collaborate or to compete? In other words, how do stakeholders (who are the decision-makers in a collaborative governance scheme), who did not participate in a mini-public and hence belong to the maxi-public, perceive this mini-public? And how do these perceptions differ from the citizens' perceptions, who participated in mini-publics? Indeed, it is only if decision-makers, and more globally the maxi-public, perceive mini-publics as legitimate actors in the policy-making process that mini-publics can claim to have any impact on policy making.

Few studies have to date dealt with the deliberative mini-public's integration in collaborative decision-making (Hendriks, 2002; Niessen, 2019). This study pursues this research agenda as it seeks to understand how the main actors of these two forms of participation perceive the use of mini-publics in collaborative governance. More specifically, it looks at the perception of both the mini-publics' participants and the organised stakeholders. The case study focuses on a typical case of collaborative governance, education reform in the French-Speaking Community of Belgium, the so-called 'Le Pacte pour un Enseignement d'Excellence' (2015–2018). This case features three mini-publics alongside collaborative governance characteristics, that is a substantial collaboration between the State and a large scope of stakeholders in a policy-making process (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Data were collected through surveys among stakeholders and the mini-publics' participants as well as in-depth interviews with stakeholders.

The analysis shows that the design features remain crucial for the way participants perceive the legitimacy of a mini-public, especially the selection procedure, the involvement of citizens with high stakes and the agenda's openness. In addition to these characteristics, a lack of coherence in the sequence of the mini-publics at the system level also negatively affected the perception of legitimacy. Organised stakeholders seem relatively disconnected from the mini-publics. The analysis shows that they lack an understanding of the mini-publics' added-value and they tend to adopt a top-down approach, in which they assign a consultative and educative role to mini-publics.

## **2. The Difficult Integration of Mini-publics in Collaborative Governance**

### **2.1. Collaborative Governance**

Ansell and Gash define collaborative governance as

a governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets. (2008, p. 544)

Collaborative governance refers to a specific policy and decision-making design, and is thus more specific than the broader concept of participatory governance which focuses on 'democracy beyond governmental structures' (Heinelt, 2018, p. 1). It differs from other kinds of governance scheme in regard to the diversity of its stakeholders and the power it gives them. Regarding the stakeholders' power, the direct engagement of non-state stakeholders means that the State does not merely consult but devolves them power (Papadopoulos & Warin, 2007, p. 460). As a consequence, a mini-public

in collaborative governance must not only be perceived as legitimate by public authorities and the citizens who took part in them (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015; Vandamme, Jacquet, Niessen, Pitseys, & Reuchamps, 2018), but also by the various stakeholders that have a say in the decision-making. Several scholars have criticised collaborative governance assumptive democratic and deliberative credentials. Despite broadening the stakeholders' scope, collaborative governance tends to form an enclosed network lacking inclusiveness and accountability (Koenig-Archibugi, 2004; Papadopoulos, 2012b; Papadopoulos & Warin, 2007). Furthermore, although the theory asserts that collaborative governance and deliberation are closely intertwined (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003), empirical studies show deliberative shortcomings, as policy issues tend to be treated technically rather than politically (Hendriks, 2008). This technical bias is prone to group thinking (Papadopoulos, 1995) and constitutes the norm to exclude other sources of knowledge such as personal experience or local customs (Fischer, 2009).

## 2.2. Mini-publics

Mini-publics have been presented in recent years as a promising participation mechanism for bridging the gap between citizens and policy-makers, providing the latter with recommendations from a variety of perspectives (Setälä & Smith, 2018). Many scholars have argued that mini-publics can improve the deliberation quality (e.g. Curato & Böker, 2016; Dryzek, 2010, pp. 155–176; Niemeyer, 2014) and contribute to a more informed, legitimate, and accountable decision-making (e.g. Fung, 2006, 2007; Goodin & Dryzek, 2006; MacKenzie & Warren, 2012). These potential contributions could arguably as well help to address the collaborative governance deliberative and democratic shortcomings (Warren, 2009, p. 10). In order to produce these benefits, mini-publics must not only be connected to the decision-making arena (Hendriks, 2016; Mansbridge et al., 2012), but they must also be accepted by all involved decision-makers as a legitimate institution in the political process (Dryzek & Tucker, 2008). Otherwise, the mini-publics use could provoke a backlash and become detrimental to the deliberation quality (Curato & Böker, 2016).

Little is known however about the way stakeholders in collaborative governance perceive the mini-public's legitimacy. Legitimacy refers to the belief someone has 'about the normative appropriateness of government structures, officials, and processes' (Levi et al., 2009, p. 354). The mini-publics' legitimacy is best understood when it is divided into three dimensions (Bekkers & Edwards, 2007; Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015, 2016, 2018; Reuchamps & Suiter, 2016). First, the input dimension refers to the mini-public's inclusiveness. Second, the throughput dimension consists of the procedural quality. Finally, the output dimension entails the perceptions of the mini-public's outcome, whether citizens and stakeholders support and know about the results, and how they regard their authority and potential political uptake (Jacquet, Moskovic, Caluwaerts, & Reuchamps, 2016).

In the assessment of a process' legitimacy, one must also make a distinction between substantial and perceived legitimacy (Jacobs & Kaufmann, 2019).<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, substantial legitimacy consists of normative standards set by scholars so that they can evaluate the mini-public's deliberative and democratic credentials with a certain distance on

the process. The literature abounds of empirical studies evaluating the substantial legitimacy (e.g. Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2016; Reuchamps & Suiter, 2016; Smith, 2009). On the other hand, the perceived legitimacy refers to how someone more closely involved in the process perceives a process' legitimacy. For instance, studies on the perceived legitimacy tend to ask either citizens who participated in the mini-public (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015), the broader population (Gastil et al., 2018; Knobloch et al., 2019)), or decision-makers (Bächtiger, Setälä, & Grönlund, 2014; Hendriks & Lees-Marshment, 2019; Vandamme et al., 2018). In the latter group, little attention has been devoted to stakeholders, although these are obtaining more influence in policymaking through collaborative governance.

Previous research has shown that stakeholders adopt a negative stance towards the use of mini-publics because they see themselves as legitimate problem owners and as better representatives than lay citizens (Hoppe, 2011). When citizens are asked to give an input, they are expected to do so as 'customers' or 'clients' of a public service (Hendriks, 2006a, p. 589; Papadopoulos & Warin, 2007). Furthermore, once stakeholders enjoy an insider status and a privileged seat at the table, they tend to oppose any newcomers (Hendriks, 2006a; Papadopoulos, 2012a). They consider the collaborative scheme as a zero-sum game in which a new agent's addition challenges the existing roles and alters power relationships (Hendriks, 2002). A recent study by Niessen (2019), however, nuances these findings as he identified three views on the use of mini-publics. Besides the elitist and expert approach, he also found out that some stakeholders can support it as a way to reconnect with citizens or to reinvent democracy. Following this research agenda, this paper examines how stakeholders and mini-publics' participants perceive mini-public's legitimacy so as to gain a better understanding of their potential integration in collaborative governance. Hence, this paper does not intend to evaluate the whole mini-public's legitimacy, but rather to examine how two specific sets of actors closely involved in the process perceive the minipublic's legitimacy.

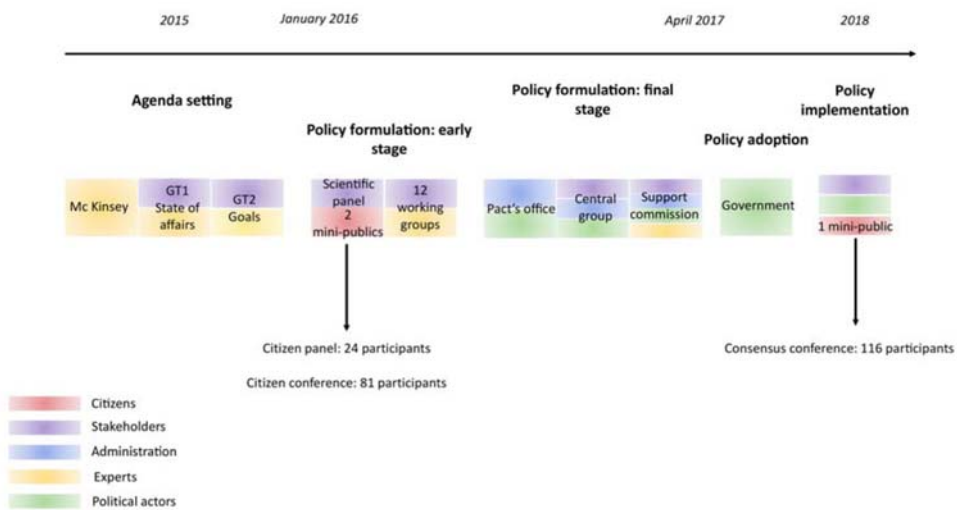
### 3. Case Study

In order to understand how citizens and stakeholders perceive the use of mini-publics in collaborative governance, this article draws on the case study of a large-scale education reform in the French-Speaking Community in Belgium, entitled 'Le Pacte pour un Enseignement d'excellence'. The idea of this *Pacte* comes from the coalition agreement between Socialists and Christian Democrats following the 2014 elections (Baudewyns, Dandoy, & Reuchamps, 2015). The two government partners agreed that: 'in order to identify the means to reach the objectives of improving our education system's performance and of reducing the inequalities that influence the performances, the Government will propose 'Le Pacte pour un Enseignement d'excellence' that will be enacted for the next ten years'.

The Education Minister wanted to generate a large and long-term support for the reform and opted for a collaborative governance scheme with the use of citizen participation. As pointed out by Ansell and Gash (2008, p. 544), the choice for collaborative governance stems from the previous failed policy education reforms which did not receive the field actors' endorsement. To gain their support, the Minister organised a large consultation process and included a wide array of stakeholders in the making of

the reform. The political, private and associative sectors, as well as lay citizens' involvement in the policy-making process is unusual in a neo-corporatist state such as Belgium (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2020). Neo-corporatism relies on a well-organised and permanent institutional triangle consisting of the State and the representatives of both employees and employers (Deschouwer, 2012, p. 205). The education sector in Belgium did not escape this rule and was also characterised by an enclosed policy network constituted by elected decision-makers.

Nevertheless the *Pacte* education reform opened up the decision-making arena not only to new actors such as parents' associations, schools' networks, academics, a private consulting firm but also to ordinary citizens. On the one hand, stakeholders together with the administration and Education Minister's cabinet formed transversal groups throughout the whole policy-making as well as 12 working groups during the policy formulation stage (Figure 1). Each of them was being assigned with drafting proposals for a particular education system's sub-field to be reformed. Ordinary citizens were invited, on the other hand, to contribute to this reform through deliberative mini-publics and other consultative mechanisms such as large surveys, focus groups, and various public meetings. The output of these participatory processes were then sent to the transversal working groups. They could use them as inspiration to draft their reports on their particular sub-field. These reports were also sent to the Central group, made of 19 representatives from the schools' networks, trade unions, parents' associations, Government's representatives and officials. The Central group is the piloting device of the *Pacte*: it coordinated the work of all other 12 groups and was in charge of making the final arbitration in terms of the *Pacte*'s content. At the end of the process, the Central group compiled all the recommendations made by the 12 transversal groups into a global report including all the key issues and solutions that gathered a consensus among all stakeholders present in that group. Based on this report, the Minister formulated the bills enacting the *Pacte*.



**Figure 1.** The reform process of the Pacte d'Excellence.

The three mini-publics featuring in the education reform do not precisely fit under the common definition of mini-publics, which we define as an institution with (1) a broadly inclusive and representative groups of affected citizens selected by a (quasi) random selection and (2) a deliberative process under independent facilitation (Ryan & Smith, 2014). Whereas they all three embrace the deliberative component, the selection procedure for two cases departs from the definition. In the very early stages of the policy formulation, from February to April 2016, 24 randomly selected citizens gathered in a *Citizen Panel* that met for three weekends to deliberate on what they believe to be the priorities for a twenty-first-century education system. The selection procedure combined targeted recruitment with an open call and letters randomly sent to 80 households. Out of the resulting volunteers, 30 citizens were recruited. Besides a socio-demographic heterogeneity (see [appendix](#)), participants consisted of a majority of ordinary citizens without direct stakes in the issue and of a minority of teachers and students. The mini-public's agenda was open and participants had six days to listen to experts and to freely discuss any topic of their choice (Figure 2).

Then, on 11 November 2016, 81 people gathered in a *Citizen Conference* to discuss the specific – albeit fundamental – issue of *redoublement*, that is the fact of having to repeat a school year.<sup>2</sup> The selection procedure was supposed to obtain a large pool of volunteers from an open call, before selecting participants with a stratified random sampling. The open call did not gather enough candidatures, so all the volunteers were eventually selected. Hence, the Citizen Conference does not correspond to Ryan and Smith's (2014) definition because participants were not broadly representative. It rather corresponds to what Smith and Ryan call an 'expansive definition' of mini-publics, that is when these involve ordinary citizens to develop deliberatively solutions to specific and tangible problems (Fung & Wright, (2003), p. 15; Ryan & Smith, 2014, p. 14). Such cases are still relevant and valuable to the literature on mini-publics, because they provide empirical insights on 'failed' mini-publics that are too often neglected (Spada & Ryan, 2017). Thus, this 'failed' mini-public was roughly equally composed of students, parents and actors of the education system (teachers, directors and other

	<b>Citizen Panel</b>	<b>Citizen Conference</b>	<b>Consensus Conference</b>
# participants	24	81	116
Composition	2 Teachers 13 Citizens 7 Students	43 Teachers 21 Citizens (=parents) 17 Students	82 Teachers 28 Citizens 0 Students
Selection	Random selection	Open call	Open call followed by stratified random selection
Agenda	Diffuse	Diffuse	Precise
Topic	Open	Semi-open	Closed
Policy stage	Formulation	Formulation	Implementation
Media attention	Low	Low	High

**Figure 2.** The design of the three mini-publics.

professionals). Because of self-selection, more participants had stakes in the specific issue of the *redoublement*.

The third mini-public, the *Consensus Conference*, took place on 20 January 2018. It aimed at reflecting on several scenarios about the curriculum's content and deciding which of these scenarios they would prefer to see implemented in the reform. This process came during the implementation phase's early steps, when decisions had to be made about very practical and accurate aspects of the reform. There was thus a clear agenda behind the process: participants had to first deliberate, weigh the advantages and disadvantages of each scenario, and then vote for the one they preferred. Based on 356 people that registered after an open call, 156 were randomly drawn in order to have 2/3 of teachers and 1/3 of citizens. 116 of them showed up on the day. This selection procedure resulted in an even larger proportion of participants with direct stakes than during the previous Citizen Conference. The Consensus Conference thus differs too from Smith and Ryan's definition (2014), as the stratified random selection followed an open call for volunteers. Although in contradiction with the idea of selecting a broadly inclusive and representative sub-group of citizens, this selection method is nonetheless relatively common in the organisation of mini-publics in Belgium (Vrydagh et al., Forthcoming). The Consensus Conference was also characterised by a widespread media coverage due to two factors: the Education Minister orchestrated an intense communication campaign around the event to recruit volunteers and, second, the *redoublement* issue was sensitive and it sparked a large public debate involving various branches within education sectors.

#### 4. Data

Our empirical analysis draws on four types of data: surveys, in-depth key stakeholders' interviews, the mini-publics' observation and document analysis. Considering our survey data (Figure 3), we obtained a response rate of 47.5% for the mini-publics' participants and of 32.6% for the stakeholders. In annex, we provide descriptive data of the respondents' socio-demographic profile with regard to the whole population of the mini-publics' participants.

Beside survey data, the analysis also draws on 11 in-depth interviews with members of the Central group, i.e. the piloting device of the entire process. Stakeholders played a key role in drafting the reform and they had the task of integrating mini-publics' recommendations therein. We interviewed representatives of parents' associations, two were members of the Cabinet of the Minister, three were representatives of school networks and four were representatives of teachers' unions.

	Participants	Respondents in the survey
Citizen Panel	24	10 (41.7%)
Citizen Conference	81	35 (43.2%)
Consensus Conference	116	60 (51.7%)
<i>Total</i>	<i>221</i>	<i>105 (47.5%)</i>
Stakeholders	251	82 (32.6%)

**Figure 3.** Response rates.

## 5. Participants' and Stakeholders' Perceptions of the Mini-publics

The participants and stakeholders's perceptions vary significantly. Table 1<sup>3</sup> shows the satisfaction within the mini-publics. Organised stakeholders do not hold negative views towards the mini-publics they were confronted with. They rather tend not to position themselves because, as the next section will show, many stakeholders have heard about mini-publics but were unaware of their functioning.

The participants' perception correlates with the kind of mini-public they attended. Citizen panel's participants hold more positive views while Consensus Conference's participants are rather disapproving. Table 1 shows that the Citizen Panel and the Citizen Conference's participants show warmer feelings for the mini-public they attended than for the Consensus Conference and even more so when compared with organised stakeholders.

These differences are confirmed when we dig deeper in the participants' perceptions, as the Table 2 shows. The ones in the Citizen Panel are the most optimistic regarding the process' openness and transparency, while the Consensus Conference's participants are the most critical. We interpret these results in light of three factors. First, mini-publics' composition affected the perceived legitimacy, as when more people with direct stakes in the reform were involved, participants were less satisfied. On the one hand, the Citizen Panel featured only lay citizens and received the highest degree of satisfaction. On the other hand, the Citizen Conference counted one third of, respectively, students, parents, and actors of the education system while the Consensus Conference counted two third of teachers and one third of lay citizens. Teachers had direct stakes in the topic and seems to have negatively affected the satisfaction with the mini-public. The difference legitimacy's perceptions could also be explained by the number of participants, with a small Citizen Panel while the two others gathered a large number of citizens. However, our observation indicates that this did not affect the participants, in contrast with the participants' profile.

The Consensus Conference illustrates how a mini-public's legitimacy can be harmed by the combination of two elements: the inclusion of citizens with high stakes and the mini-public's decisiveness. When it comes to the composition, there were indeed 2/3 of teachers involved in the process, whose work could be dramatically modified by changes on this specific topic. When it comes to the political stakes, there was an increased media attention before and after the event (compared to the two other events) and a greater involvement by the Minister of Education, who attended the event. Moreover, the outcome was officially meant to be directly implemented in the *Pacte*. Our direct observation of this mini-public confirms this allegation that the process entailed high stakes, as it appeared to have had an impact beyond the mini-public and its participants. On the day of the event, teachers tried to force the door to the event, and some of them were even allowed by the Minister to participate, even if

**Table 1.** Satisfaction with the mini-publics.

	Citizen panel	Citizen conference	Consensus conference	Stakeholders
Mean	4.0	3.5	2.7	3.3
N	10	34	56	45
Standard deviation	0.36	0.62	0.73	0.53

**Table 2.** Perceptions of the mini-publics' internal quality.

	Citizen Panel		Citizen Conference		Consensus Conference		Stakeholders	
	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree
The decisions were made by consensus	88.9%	0.0%	67.6%	17.6%	48.2%	23.2%	/	/
The participants were driven by the common good	90.0%	10.0%	64.7%	26.5%	50.0%	20.7%	/	/
I had enough opportunities to express my opinion	80.0%	10.0%	82.4%	8.08%	65.5%	15.5%	/	/
The others listened carefully to what I said	100.0%	0.0%	85.3%	8.8%	77.6%	13.8%	/	/

they were not initially selected as participants. Other teachers travelled from distant places just to come and affix sticky notes on the theatre's doors where the event was taking place, as an expression of their disagreement with the whole *Pacte's* process.

The combination of these three elements could have led participants to perceive that their participation was intended to have an impact on the reform and on the public debate through the media. When adding the fact that 2/3 of the participants were teachers, and therefore were likely to be impacted by a potential change in the Education policy induced by this mini-public, participants perceived that the others were there to defend their own interests, that they were less driven by the common good, compared to the participants of the two other mini-publics.

Lastly, the difference of participants' perceptions might be explained by the agenda's openness. If all three events were organised as deliberative mini-publics, involving discussions in small groups and in plenary sessions, their deliberative quality varied significantly. The citizen panel lasted for several days and involved a small number of people, who received an input from experts in different fields of the broader education sector. They furthermore had no particular agenda for their deliberation: the idea was simply to ask citizens to consensually draft a list of their priorities for tomorrow's education system, based on diverse information they received from experts and with the help of professional facilitators. The diversified information and the presence of professional facilitators being also present in the two other events, what changed was the openness of the agenda. While it was open for the Citizen Panel, this was less the case for the Citizen Conference and even less for the Consensus Conference.

The Citizen Conference's participants were indeed asked to deliberate on a particular topic (the *redoublement*) with, however, the freedom to find creative solutions to build an education system without *redoublement*, by focusing on other sub-topics within the broader education topic. Conversely, the Consensus Conference's agenda was much more restraining: the topic was strictly predetermined and the decisions were subject to a vote rather than to a consensus. As shown in Table 2, Consensus Conference had the lowest proportion of participants thinking they had enough opportunities to express their opinions. Our observation supports the explanation that participants felt constrained and that their involvement came too late in the reform. All in all, mini-

publics' design features therefore still remain factors of paramount importance for the input and throughout legitimacy.

## 6. Perception of the Outcomes of the Mini-publics

Concerning the legitimacy output dimension, we first examine how participants and stakeholders support the mini-publics' results. We subsequently investigate their awareness of the outcome, before concluding the analysis with their trust in the mini-publics' political uptake. In this section, we make use of the stakeholders' in-depth interviews in order to provide additional insights to the survey's results.

### 6.1. Support for the Results

For participants, it is not only crucial to perceive the process as fair and transparent but also to endorse its results. Interestingly, we observe that both dimensions are somehow linked, as the overall perception of the mini-public's quality they attended seems to play a role in the participants' satisfaction with the results of the mini-public (Table 3). The satisfaction with the mini-public varies according to both the event and the satisfaction with the results. The highest satisfaction in each dimension is therefore to be found among the Citizen Panel's participants, followed by the Citizen Conference and Consensus Conference. For the latter, the lack of input and throughout legitimacy negatively affected the support for the mini-public's results.

Stakeholders' support is as well essential for the mini-publics' influence. Without this, there is little chance they will be granted any role in the policy-making process (Hendriks, 2002, 2006b; Newton & Geissel, 2012; Parkinson, 2012). Our results are nonetheless mixed for organised stakeholders. Whereas a minority is satisfied with the results, a majority avoids positioning itself. We explain below this low level of awareness thanks to the in-depth interviews.

### 6.2. Awareness of the Outcome

Participants' awareness of the outcome depends on the mini-public (Table 4). The highest awareness is to be found among the Consensus Conference's participants. One explanation lies in the process' increased media coverage. Being salient in the media is likely to have augmented the stakeholders' awareness. Moreover, participants' stake can also foster their interest in following the outcome.

Stakeholders did not have a clear opinion on those questions, as they did on the questions about their perception of the mini-publics. They rather mainly tend to answer with the 'neither agree nor disagree' option. This is due to their unawareness of these events. Indeed, whereas a large majority of the participants followed the mini-

**Table 3.** Satisfaction with the results.

	Citizen Panel	Citizen Conference	Consensus Conference	Stakeholders
Mean	3.8	3.3	2.6	3.5
N	9	24	51	15
Standard deviation	0.51	0.71	0.78	0.46

**Table 4.** Awareness of the mini-publics' results.

	Citizen Panel	Citizen Conference	Consensus Conference	Stakeholders
Have you heard of the mini-publics organised at the margins of the Pacte?	/	/	/	80.0%
I followed the outcomes of the mini-publics with attention (press releases, etc)	70.0%	76.5%	96.4%	13.0%
Have you read the final report?	90.0%	72.7%	92.7%	25.9%

public's outcome they were involved in, the picture changes when it comes to stakeholders. This low awareness rate results from a combination of several factors. First, they might not have heard of these processes because of the rather weak communication around them. As one interviewed stakeholder noticed, *'There was not much advertising around these round tables and other participatory processes: only for the last one about the curriculum, everyone seized it all of a sudden. It was curious, because for the other events, except for a small column in one newspaper there was nothing'*. Second, their lack of awareness can also stem from their noninvolvement in both the decision to convene the mini-publics and their execution. One interviewee explains: *'I don't know what was the point ... for us the participatory process was a decision of the Minister ... this decision wasn't ours to make'*. Third, stakeholders had very little time to engage with all the policy documentation, mini-public's recommendations included. Other stakeholders complained that *'it came too late, there were too many files, so we ended up with 350 pages to read in one week'*.

### 6.3. Outcome Authority

The way participants perceive the outcome's authority also varies according to their perception of the mini-public's process and its outcome. Table 5 shows that participants assessing positively both elements are in favour of giving the mini-public's proposals the same power as laws. The Citizen Panel's participants are the most supportive of giving binding authority to their recommendations, with levels of support that largely exceed the ones in the Citizen Conference and the Consensus Conference. Conversely, all participants believe these mini-publics are a good idea that should be later reiterated.

The stakeholders' majority does not position themselves on this item. When they do, they oppose giving binding authority to mini-publics' recommendations. One

**Table 5.** Perceptions of the mini-publics' authority.

	Citizen Panel		Citizen Conference		Consensus Conference		Stakeholders	
	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree
The recommendations made by the mini-publics should have the same power as laws	80.0%	10.0%	50.0%	26.5%	29.3%	34.5%	9.6%	65.4%
In the future, citizens should gather again to discuss political subjects as they did during the mini-publics	100.0%	0.0%	88.2%	8.8%	86.2%	8.6%	53.9%	25.0%

interviewee told us: *'I will read what comes out of this conference as a source of inspiration, or maybe a questioning regarding what we think, but knowing that this is not necessarily representative'*. The stakeholders' interviews reveal as well that they do not conceive mini-publics as bottom-up mechanisms enabling citizens to fuel the decision-making with their ideas. They instead share a top-down vision, in which mini-publics are meant to fulfil two functions. First, they use the mini-publics' recommendations to check whether their policy preferences still correspond to their constituent's interest and hence with the position they defend in the negotiation. As one interviewee explained: *'it was reassuring to know that we weren't on the wrong track and that we rather did a good job overall'*. Another also said: *'It [the mini-public's outcome] confirms, reassures, makes sure that we are not completely disconnected, we tell ourselves that we are not completely disconnected from the field'*. Second, according to them, mini-publics should aim at allowing the decision makers to change the citizens' mentalities and practices regarding the education policy. One stakeholder notices:

The idea was also to work with the citizens to deeply change some cultural elements such as grade repetition, which is an institution (in the sociological sense), it is a norm, a value and it is difficult to change the perception of grade repetition people have.

This top-down vision about mini-publics is linked to the stakeholders' overall vision of who should be 'in' and who should 'out' of the policy-making process, which stems from their definition of an actor's legitimacy (Hendriks, 2005). The interviewed stakeholders do not perceive the mini-publics' participants as legitimate interlocutors in political decisions. Their idea of legitimacy relies on representativeness and segmental expertise, and therefore they believe that they are the legitimate representatives of citizens. One interviewee makes an illustrative comment: *'citizens would maybe have been questioned by the unions, but maybe a panel of teachers or a panel of adult instructors [would have been more legitimate]'*. Hence, stakeholders seem not to grasp that the mini-publics' strength lies in its diversity rather than its representativeness and segmental expertise.

Concerning the expertise, stakeholders tend to believe that lay citizens are not sufficiently qualified to understand the complexity and have an overview of the issue. One interviewee explained:

We have to be aware of the limits of the system. For issues that are relatively simple, this could work, but for issues as complex as the Pacte with its field agents and where each field agent has his opinion ... It is like football fans that remake the game [between them] after the game, they all have their own opinions and reconstruct the world. I think that this kind of participatory process, when dealing with education, quickly becomes this kind of discussion.

Two other interviewees refer to the citizens' individualistic perspective which make them unable to get the bigger picture: *'with these participatory processes, you have these points of view but these are points of view of actors, particular points of view that are difficult to articulate with an overview of the problems'*, and another notes:

I am not very optimistic because when you have this kind of meeting [participatory processes], often, the person talking focuses on her personal case, very often. And you know

well that everyone has an experience about school, everyone went to school, so everyone has an experience at school.

Hence, stakeholders do not believe that citizens, even when participating in professionally designed mini-publics, are able to participate in crucial decisions in terms of education. Moreover, some of the interviewed stakeholders see these alternative consultation mechanisms as ways to bypass their own representative channel. One member of the Minister's Cabinet explained the difficulty of justifying the use of mini-public and also suggests that they see mini-publics as a survey: 'there are power relations involved, we still had difficulties to assert the necessity of making surveys [through mini-publics] because the unions and the PO [organizing body of schools network] said 'we are the representatives' and 'why are you doing another survey on the side?'. This quote shows the difficulty of convincing stakeholders to organise a minipublic, even if this only has a consultative function as a survey.

#### 6.4. Trust in the Political Uptake

When it comes to predicting to what extent the Minister of Education will implement the mini-publics' recommendations, Table 6 shows that while stakeholders and the Citizens' Panel tend to distrust politicians in listening to the opinions or citizens being able to influence political decisions, they both believe that the Minister will take up the citizens' recommendations. Whereas 42% of stakeholders believe that the average citizen is not

**Table 6.** Perceptions of the political uptake.

	Citizen Panel		Citizen Conference		Consensus Conference		Stakeholders	
	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree
<b>In the context of the Pacte</b>								
The Minister of Education will integrate the recommendations made by the participatory processes in the reform	60.0%	10.0%	23.5%	35.3%	25.0%	30.4%	63.6%	25.5%
<b>In general</b>								
The average citizen is capable of taking part in political decisions	70.0%	10.0%	50.0%	26.5%	49.1%	26.4%	42.0%	32.0%
An average citizen has influence on political decisions	30.0%	10.0%	8.8%	38.2%	11.3%	32.1%	15.7%	33.3%
Decision makers listen carefully to the opinions of the citizens	10.0%	20.0%	11.8%	32.4%	9.4%	24.5%	22.0%	38.0%
Voting is useless, politicians still do whatever they want	70.0%	20.0%	26.4%	5.9%	30.2%	18.9%	11.8%	7.8%
Before the elections, politicians tend to make empty promises	100.0%	0.0%	61.8%	26.5%	73.6%	13.2%	42.0%	30.0%
Citizens have to participate directly in political decisions instead of letting politicians decide by themselves	80.0%	20.0%	53.0%	32.4%	58.5%	20.8%	36.0%	30.0%

capable of participating in decision-making and 22% think that decision-makers do not carefully listen to citizens' opinion, almost two third believes that the Minister will take up citizens' recommendations in the context of the Pacte. This suggests that many stakeholders believe minipublics can go beyond the general barrier for citizens' influence and enable citizens to have an impact and decision-makers to be attentive to citizens' input. With regard to the Citizens' Panel, its participants express a great distrust against voting usefulness and politicians' tendency to make empty promises. Yet, participating in a minipublic seem to transform their negative feeling as 60% of them are confident that the minister will integrate their recommendations in the reform. Their participation hence seems to give them confidence that the Minister is more responsive than the broader political system. Such optimism seems also related to the minipublic's legitimacy as participants from the Consensus Conference and the Citizens' Conferences are more pessimistic about their recommendation's political uptake, in the same vein as the other dimensions of the process' legitimacy.

## 7. Discussion

This study aimed at understanding how stakeholders and citizens perceive the mini-publics' legitimacy in collaborative governance and to examine whether their relationship relies on competition or collaboration. Our analysis shows that they are neither in competition nor in collaboration and that their perception of the mini-public's legitimacy stems from different factors. Regarding the stakeholders, they do not perceive mini-publics as a threat but they also do not consider them to be a legitimate full-fledged institution of collaborative governance. The literature review indicated that they would oppose this newcomer for three reasons. First, organised stakeholders are likely to perceive negotiations as a zero-sum game in which the power gained by one actor is lost by the other. Second, they see themselves as the most legitimate owners of the issue, thanks to their representativeness and expertise. Third, they tend to see citizens as customers or clients, which prevents them from granting them a more active role in policy making.

The analysis shows that stakeholders do not *per se* oppose mini-publics. In line with Niessen (2019), stakeholders have nuanced views and their relationship cannot merely be summarised as one of competition. Some stakeholders welcomed mini-publics as a way to check whether their policy preferences still correspond to their constituents' interests. They use the mini-publics' recommendations to verify whether they are on the right track to represent the broader citizenry, which could thereby contribute to reducing the collaborative governance's lack of accountability between stakeholders and their constituents. However, this could not completely offset it, because it sets an asymmetrical relationship between them and the constituents are thus not empowered to react to the claims made in their names (Saward, 2010).

Furthermore, the mini-publics' potential to address the collaborative governance's deliberative and democratic shortcoming is unlikely to become effective because stakeholders do not perceive the mini-publics' added value. They judge a mini-public according to a legitimacy conception which relies on segmental expertise and representation, and they therefore do not grasp that the mini-public's strength lies in its diversity and deliberation (Mercier & Landemore, 2012). Accordingly, they have a top-down approach

of the mini-publics' purpose which is meant to change the citizens' opinion on the education reform. As a consequence, stakeholders do not perceive mini-publics as legitimate policy-makers in collaborative governance.

Several reasons can explain this lack of perceived legitimacy, but their deficient connection with stakeholders is pivotal. Connections – or couplings - between deliberation sites have been advanced as essential for improving the deliberation quality at a systemic level (Hendriks, 2016; Mansbridge et al., 2012). Curato and Böker (2016, p. 186) suggest that a connection is optimal when deliberative norms prevail between deliberation sites. This case study indicates in addition that very practical implications, such as timing and stakeholders' involvement in the mini-public's implementation, are crucial for stakeholders to perceive the mini-publics as legitimate and thus for creating an optimal connection between deliberation sites. Stakeholders could not properly consider the mini-publics' recommendations because they received them belatedly. Moreover, they were neither involved in the decision to convene mini-publics nor were they invited to participate as observers or experts. Therefore, many stakeholders were unaware of the mini-publics and they failed to go beyond a superficial understanding of mini-publics. This deficient connection increased the stakeholders' suspicion on the whole collaborative governance, as some felt they were bypassed by the Minister. Hence, whereas literature asserts that the prevalence of deliberative norms is crucial for mini-publics' substantial legitimacy, this case study lends credence to Hendrik's idea of a 'designed coupling' (2016). To develop a relationship in which a mini-public can effectively influence public decision-making, a designed planning of their interaction is required. In that planning, one must not only think about involving stakeholders during and before the process, but also allow policy-makers to have enough time to engage with the minipublic's recommendations. This analysis suggests as well that the coupling's timing is of paramount importance, as it can prevent any successful transmission if not properly designed.

Regarding the participants, the analysis shows that two factors affected the way they perceive the mini-public's legitimacy: the inclusion of citizens with high stakes and the broader coherency of the participatory plan. First, the analysis shows that the legitimacy was the lowest when mini-publics included citizens with high stakes, highlighting the importance of the participants' selection procedure. The mini-publics literature tends to assume that their participants are equally affected by the issue under discussion. For instance, Ryan and Smith (2014, p. 20) refers to a 'broadly inclusive and representative subgroup of an affected population. Yet, the term 'affected' does not tell much about how and to which extent participants are impacted by the issue. The inclusion of citizens with high stakes indicates that a selection procedure should not only consider criteria of descriptive representation, e.g. being a teacher, parent or citizen, but also criteria of substantive representation that ensure a diversity of discourses supporting or opposing the reform. Like Dryzek (2010, p. 44) argues: 'there are times when it may be more important for the quality of deliberation that all relevant discourses get represented rather than all individuals get represented'.

Second, the inclusion of citizens with high stakes was detrimental to the perception of the mini-publics' legitimacy because the participatory plan lacked sequential coherence. In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of literature on the systemic approach to deliberation. Scholars investigate the role of deliberative mini-publics and

other forms of citizen participation from the perspective of broader deliberative and democratic system (Mansbridge et al., 2012; Parkinson, 2006; Warren, 2017). As previously mentioned, some scholars stress the importance of the connection between mini-publics and other sites of deliberation (Hendriks, 2016; Mansbridge et al., 2012), while others point out a common framework of deliberative norms (Curato & Böker, 2016; Owen & Smith, 2015).

This case study points out the importance of thinking about the sequential coherency within a deliberative system. A number of authors have already stressed the pivotal role of labour division and the deliberation sequence in a deliberative system (Goodin, 2005; Mansbridge et al., 2012; Parkinson, 2006, 2012). For instance, Parkinson observes that 'legitimacy problems arise in large measure because of the wrong techniques, even the wrong kind of representatives, being activated at the wrong times in a decision-making process (Parkinson, 2006, p. 168). This case study provides a genuine example of an incoherent sequence, as the Consensus Conference and the Citizen Panel illustrate. Citizens with high stakes were involved too late with an inappropriate participatory mechanism, whereas a small panel of ordinary citizens was supposed to legitimise a major policy reform of a sensitive policy issue. The citizens with high stakes participating in the Consensus Conference were frustrated to be only activated at the end of the policy-making process, when the whole reform was already determined. They were piqued by the constraining design and agenda, which required them to only vote with a majority rule the school schedule implementation. As a consequence, they grasped this participatory opportunity to voice their protest, which could not be adequately expressed in and heard through the design of the Consensus Conference.

According to the participatory plan, citizens were, however, well involved at the agenda-setting stage via the Citizens' Panel. Yet, due to its compact and backdoor character, the panel did not generate sufficient legitimacy beyond itself. Setting the agenda indeed requires that a large number of affected discourses have the opportunity to raise issues (Parkinson, 2006, p. 170), not that a small elite - be it elected decision-makers or randomly selected citizens that have become expert - dominates it (Lafont, 2015). Instead, a large mini-public involving citizens with high stakes and with public visibility would have been more likely to generate more positive legitimacy perceptions.

## 8. Conclusion

This paper aimed at exploring the relation between mini-publics and stakeholders in the context of collaborative governance. The few studies examining this question suggested that stakeholders would oppose mini-publics. A recent study, however, demonstrated that stakeholders hold more nuanced views (Niessen, 2019). In order to contribute to this debate, a case study analysis was conducted on the education reform 'Pacte pour un Enseignement d'excellence' of the French-speaking Community of Belgium, which combines a collaborative mode of governance with three mini-publics. Based on a survey of 105 participants and 82 organised stakeholders, 11 in-depth interviews of stakeholders, and the observation of the three mini-publics, this study examined how stakeholders and citizens perceive the mini-publics' legitimacy.

Stakeholders do not oppose mini-publics as such, but they do not understand their added value. They believe that citizens in mini-publics are not representative

and do not have enough expertise to deal with this complex issue. Moreover, stakeholders assume that citizens would defend their own particular interest instead of looking for a consensus. As a consequence, stakeholders do not conceive mini-publics as an equal partner but as a top-down participatory instrument, meant to inform the wider population about the policy reform or to validate their own political preferences.

Regarding the participating citizens, their legitimacy perception changed depending on the mini-public's design, and more especially whether it included citizens with high stakes or not. The broader participatory plan also greatly affected the mini-public's legitimacy, as these citizens with high stakes were only involved at the end of the policy-making process. Furthermore, the case study suggests that relying on a small scale mini-public at the agenda-setting stage to generate large scale legitimacy is not appropriate. Hence, although mini-publics have in theory great potential to improve the inclusiveness, deliberation and accountability of collaborative governance, an empirical examination of these alleged qualities suggests that there is still a long way ahead before mini-publics can actually achieve them.

## Notes

1. We thank the reviewer for the useful comment.
2. The issue of *redoublement* is a salient and sensitive topic in French-speaking Belgium. It is a widespread phenomenon by which one pupil out of two has to re-do at least one school year during her compulsory curriculum (until the age of 18), and it is subject to an important and polarizing public debate.
3. This indicator consists of six items measured on a five points scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree: 'My feelings towards the mini-public are'; 'My participation in the mini-public was'; 'I am satisfied with the process of the mini-public'; 'All important topics were discussed during the mini-public'; 'I could bring up topics that were initially not on the agenda', 'The whole process was transparent for me : I understood well what was expected and why'. For the stakeholders, only the items 'I am satisfied with the process of mini-publics' and 'My feelings towards the mini-publics are' were measured and merged into this dimension.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## About the Special Issue

Deliberative democracy aims to broaden democratic practices and deepen citizens' engagement in decision making by investing in competent and reflective participation. Democratic innovations following different designs and methodologies aspire to implement and transpose the abstract ideas of deliberative theory to concrete participatory initiatives. The literature has identified a number of important outcomes of deliberative procedures such as opinion shifts, enrichment in participants knowledge betterment of 'civic virtues' of citizens and the potential to reach more legitimate decisions. There is an increasing number of 'experiments' employing a deliberative design and face-to-face deliberation commonly identified as 'mini-publics'. We know a good deal about their internal workings and efficacy but much less about their potential impact on the maxi public and how elites and the public in general perceive and react to these practices. Another critical issue is how to integrate these deliberative procedures especially those that occur in local level in institutional and traditional decision making and, in general, in the formal bodies in which decisions are made in the end (e.g. Parliament, government etc.). This integration and their success seems to rely heavily on the acceptance of these innovations by elected public representatives and in general the public acceptance (or not) of them. Mini public experiments are expected to be able to provide some kind of feedback and influence to policy making. However, their impact on policy making remains unclear and the influence they wield to the policy agenda is not always identifiable. In addition, we should take into account that while all these small-scale innovations build on offline citizens engagement the new communicative environment of the Internet allows these initiatives to expand and also endorse potentially new features and capabilities.

This special issue will try to understand how participatory spaces and participants in these democratic innovations can actually have an effect on non-participants, how they can induce support and trust in institutions of representative democracy and issues relating to their design and their different types.

Papers in this special issue address, among other topics:

- the determinants of citizens' support for citizens' assemblies selected by lot;
- the capacity of Citizens' Initiative Review (CIR) to enhance voters' knowledge and capacity of judgement in ballot initiative processes;
- the integration of deliberative mini-publics in collaborative governance;
- the influence of mini-publics on public policy;
- the concept of representation as this is revisited in light of mini-publics;
- perceived legitimacy among the maxi-public;
- deliberating on a hot topic in the real world;
- the Institutionalisation of mini-publics.

Papers proceed to their analysis both from both a theoretical and empirical perspective and provide a cross-country comparative research.

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## Appendix

### Socio-demographic profiles of the participants

As the recruitment processes of the three mini-publics did not allow to gather enough data about the socio-demographic profile of the participants, we rely here on the results of a survey administered to the participants after the events took place. Consequently, the tables below show the data of only a portion of these participants, namely the 105 participants who agreed to fill the survey, out of the 221 who eventually participated in the three events.

#### Gender:

	Men	Women	Total	
	Respondents in the survey	Respondents in the survey	Participants in the mini-publics	Respondents in the survey
Citizen Panel	6	4	24	10 (41.7%)
Citizen conference	10	25	81	35 (43.2%)
Consensus conference	21	39	116	60 (51.7%)
Total	37	68	221	105 (47.5%)

The response rate of the survey reached 47.5% for the participants of the mini-publics. When it comes to their gender, we see that more women than men have participated in the events and answered the survey

### Age:

Age	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	Total
Citizen Panel	2	3	3	1	0	1	10
Citizen Conference	4	3	6	12	7	3	35
Consensus Conference	0	12	20	14	10	4	60
Total	6	17	29	27	17	8	105

Our respondents seem to be in majority middle-aged people. The youngest category, between 18 and 24 years old, along with the oldest one (over 65) are the less well-represented.

### Education:

	Education				Total
	None or primary	Secondary	High (non university)	University	
Citizen Panel	1	3	5	1	10
Citizen Conference	1	5	7	22	35
Consensus Conference	1	3	24	32	60
Total	3	11	36	55	105

When it comes to the educational background of our respondents, we see that the highly educated category is over-represented. Despite the efforts made by the organisers to compose the most diverse mini-public possible, we see that people with a higher education are still over-represented. It is less the case for the composition of the citizen panel, because the recruitment of its participants involved a random sampling with quotas accounting for gender, education or geographical location. Thanks to this method, the overall diversity of the mini-public was higher than the two other events, which relied first on self-selection and then on a stratified random selection among the ones who already agreed to participate. Because people with higher education degrees are generally more likely to accept to participate in such participatory processes, it is common to witness an over-representation of the two last categories.

Besides, in the precise case of the consensus conference, not only the education bias played a role in the over-representation of highly educated citizens. Indeed, the composition of the mini-public had to be split between 1/3 of lay citizens and 2/3 of teachers, who hold at least a high (non-university) degree. This also explains the weak diversity in terms of professional background, as approximately 70% of its participants are employees of the public sectors, among which we find mainly teachers.

### Professional sector:

	Professional sector of the respondents									
	Re-tired	Un-employed	Student	House-wife	Self-employed	Em- ployee of the private sector	Em- ployee of the public sector	Ex- ecutive	Liberal profession	Total
Citizen Panel	1	0	3	0	1	0	5	0	0	10
Citizen Conference	4	2	6	0	4	4	11	1	2	35
Consensus Conference	5	0	1	1	1	4	45	3	0	60
Total	10	2	10	1	6	8	61	4	2	105