

## **Supplemental material**

Picturing deliberation: How dissatisfied citizens make sense of it

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## SM1. Political disadvantage and dissatisfaction

As we note in the paper, previous studies indicate that citizens with a low socio-economic status tend to be less satisfied with the way politics and democracy works compared to other citizens. In Box SM1, we collate a series of quotes to illustrate that across the focus groups with politically disadvantaged citizens we find signs of such political dissatisfaction.

### Box SM1. Evidence of political dissatisfaction in focus groups with politically disadvantaged citizens

#### Molenbeek1

Example 1. “It was skipped in the elections, why? Everybody votes socialist, yes, to have a little more, money. But if it’s just to have a little more money but have shit in our communities, no.” (Sonia)

Example 2. “And, and the, and the big mistakes here, now? It’s not to the people, though. Even the toilets, I have to, I have to run left and right to go to the toilet. (Moussa) [Interrupting] It’s, it’s, it’s due to the politicians! It’s due to the politicians. So that we can have things available. (David) But in Molenbeek, is there a toilet for, uh, uh, public? (Moussa)”

#### Molenbeek2

Example 1. “I’m not in contact with political people. (...) I don’t know anyone here. Only normal people like me [laughs]. The people. (...) Politics? Only: blabla.” (Malik)

Example 2. “Here in Belgium. For me here, the courts, the politicians, they don’t give you the information, to explain the things that are going on [Note: he wants to talk about the radical Islamist terrorist acts]. They are the ones who have to explain and also understand themselves, they have to make it understandable, so that people know what it is about.” (Younes)

#### Molenbeek3

Example 1. [to the researcher] “You still came to our house. You still rang the bell, you still dared to ring at people’s homes; here we are. If you hadn’t made that effort, we wouldn’t have been here. You see? But she, what she did... The mayor did not make the effort to come to the inhabitants of such and such a place, to consult... So here we are, what do we do, which is negative, which is positive, and then we take a decision together. But afterwards, to make decisions by ourselves like that without talking to the inhabitants, I don’t find that normal, you know?” (Abbou)

Example 2. “Are there any problems with, uh, politicians, representatives for you? (Researcher) Well I don’t know anybody... (Abbou) [At the same time] We said that they are not present enough on, on the ground. (...) Well, when we see that the elections are approaching, we see them at the markets, and so on. After... [Shrugs] We don’t see them anymore! (Adil) Then they disappear, yeah yeah. [Laughing] It’s everywhere the same! (Tais)”

#### **Molenbeek4**

Example 1. “But I feel like, uh... I’m going to, I’m going to be mean without meaning to be. But when I go to some neighborhoods I feel like I’m in Belgium and in other neighborhoods, uh... I don’t know anymore. Which is unfortunate. And yet, it’s the same city. That’s what I think is a shame. It’s obvious. [Short pause]. I have the impression that the politicians are doing everything to... to keep it that way.” (Ayman)

Example 2. “The problem is that if we want to change, we have no choice but to do it. Just waiting for the policy... [resigned tone] We won’t get it. (Ayman) But it’s for the commune, that’s why. (Abdelkrim) Yeah, but the citizens, it’s us who have to do it. It’s the neighbor... (...) [further in the discussion] I think that a lot of young people who have their studies, I push them to go abroad, not to stay in Belgium. (Ayman)

#### **EU1**

Example. “I personally, as a Belgian citizen, I find that... Like, I’m not just talking about Belgium, I’m talking about politics in general, it’s all about the promise of a good day. At the time of the elections we get everything, and once we vote for them and the elections are over, we get nothing. (...) [further in the discussion] Honestly, I don’t listen any more than that because it annoys me. Because I see that, there you have it, we can talk, talk, express ourselves, express ourselves, the population, the people can express themselves as they want, and I see that there is nothing that changes anyway. That’s not why there is progress or change, so, uh...” (Cathie)

#### **EU2**

Example. “I would slightly disagree with what you say, because I can also send a letter tomorrow and I want to talk to my mayor. Uh, he’s going to receive me, but he doesn’t give a damn about what I’m going to tell him, eh. Don’t believe it, eh. It’s just politics.” (Alexis)

#### **Homeless1**

Example 1. “...what are they going to do? But they decide for you, they decide for you, but they never, they never come to exchange with you if... In any case in the Marolles, I have never been invited, never been informed that we are going to do something and that we are going to be asked for our opinion at the political level. This means that at the political level, we have no voice! We are never heard!” (Ilyan)

Example 2. “[Interrupting] Unilaterally, that is to say, one must submit to the word of the authority. There is a submission.” (Dimitri)

## Homeless2

Example 1. “No, but I’m just saying that. But it’s, there you go. It’s charity business, uh... It’s really a cha-, there’s a political will to keep poverty because it’s a way of life for so many people. (...) [further in the discussion] Because anyway, it’s the politicians and, and in the justice system, it’s more or less the same...It’s always the same friends everywhere. Uh, and let’s say, there’s not much that moves.” (Sophie)

Example 2. “...because she said politics, it’s the politicians [who are] a little corrupt. (...) Because the politicians, there, they take the poor hostage. (...) Everyone says ‘democracy, democracy,’ but I see it, it’s a, it’s a ‘democrushy’<sup>3</sup>” [everybody laughs] (Naïm)

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<sup>3</sup> The French word used by Naïm is *démocraser*, meant as a contraction of *démocratie* (i.e. democracy) and *écraser* (i.e. to crush or squash).

## SM2. The picture task: Justification and reflection

Our use of the picture task sets our study apart from prior focus group studies of citizens' views on deliberation (summarized in Table SM1). Following Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002), preceding studies have often asked participants to imagine an “ideal government” (p. 252) (see Ganuza et al., 2017; García-Espín, Ganuza, & De Marco, 2017; Gourgues et al., 2021). The open format of the ‘ideal government’ question allows participants to express freely what they would like government to look like. This arguably allows one to assess to what degree they ‘spontaneously’ mention the use of organized discussions among citizens and the conditions under which these should be employed. Nonetheless, it also provides a strong nudge for participants to think in terms of reform options related to existing representative institutions, as opposed to reform options that break with these ‘stereotypical’ forms of decision-making, such as citizen deliberation (cf. Coates, 1997; Ryfe, 2007, p. 2). To illustrate, using a similar ideal-design task in focus groups conducted in the United Kingdom, Stoker and Hay (2017) find that citizens’ ideas for reform often are about changing the functioning of representative democracy rather than instituting moments of citizen deliberation. This brings up several questions: Is this what participants actually want, or is it simply what they could come up with on the spot? What is it exactly that they do not like *about deliberation*? Have they considered options for deliberation among citizens at all?

The other prompt in the focus groups of Hibbing and Theiss-Morse partly addresses the latter question, inquiring into participants’ opinions about direct democracy in the form of a large New England town meeting. Yet, this question bundles deliberation (i.e. the town meeting) and direct decision-making on a mass scale, complicating an assessment of what citizens think about the many other forms in which deliberation may occur, such as the myriad sorts of small-scale, advisory forums that do not go hand in hand with direct decision-making. Much like other

qualitative studies that have zoomed in on specific settings for deliberation (e.g. Jacquet, 2017, 2019; Miscoiu & Gherghina, 2021), it thereby does not allow one to draw firm conclusions about what citizens think about the use of deliberation outside of such a specific setting or how they think about the place of citizen deliberation in democracy more generally.

**Table SM1. Overview of prior focus group research on deliberation**

| Study                              | Country | Participants                                                                                                                                                              | Questions related to deliberation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|------------------------------------|---------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Conover, Searing, and Crewe (2002) | UK, US  | Citizens from three communities with varying socio-economic and geographic characteristics in both countries (12 focus groups)                                            | “We asked the participants to talk about political discussion: why people did it; why they avoided it; when and where it felt most comfortable - or uncomfortable.” (p. 51)                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| della Porta (2005)                 | IT      | Activists in the global justice movement from different generations (6 focus groups)                                                                                      | “...the understanding of politics and democracy—with particular attention to the mechanisms, advantages, and problems of internal practices of democracy.” (p. 78)                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002)    | US      | Citizens from four communities across the United States, with participants varying “in age, race, socioeconomic status, and political leanings” (p. 251) (8 focus groups) | “... In a perfect world, what would the ideal government be? If you were designing a system from scratch, what would it look like?” (p. 252)<br>“Some people advocate moving toward a total direct democracy (...) Much like a large New England town meeting, the American people would be making all of the decisions themselves. What do you think of this idea?” (p. 253) |
| Ganuza et al. (2017)               | ES      | Activists and non-activists with varying socioeconomic positions and political ideologies (7 focus groups)                                                                | “...a script similar to that used by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002)” (p. 263)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |

**Table SM1. (Continued)**

| Study                        | Country | Participants                                                                                                              | Questions related to deliberation                                                                                                                                                                       |
|------------------------------|---------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| García-Espín et al. (2017)   | ES      | Activists and non-activists with varying socioeconomic positions and political ideologies (16 focus groups)               | See Ganuza et al. (2017).                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Stoker and Hay (2017)        | UK      | Citizens from eight towns, varying socioeconomic and geographic characteristics (14 focus groups)                         | “at the end of the focus group sessions, we asked the participants to identify, in writing, up to three reform ideas for improving politics, whether mentioned in the prior discussion or not.” (p. 19) |
| Gourgues et al. (2021)       | FR      | Activists and non-activists, varying socioeconomic and geographic characteristics and political ideology (8 focus groups) | “In a perfect world, what would democracy be like? If you were to imagine a system from scratch, what would it be like?” (p. 6 [own translation]) <sup>4</sup>                                          |
| Miscoiu and Gherghina (2021) | FR      | Residents of <i>banlieues</i> with a migration background <i>not</i> involved in the Great Debate                         | A series of questions directly related to the Great Debate (e.g. “What do you generally think about the President Macron’s Great Debate initiative?” (p. 17)                                            |

Notes: ES = Spain; FR = France; IT = Italy; UK = United Kingdom; US = United States.

Others focus group research has partly circumvented this issue by focusing on citizens’ views on political discussion more generally. In focus groups among British and American citizens, Conover et al. (2002) “asked the participants to talk about political discussion: why people did it; why they avoided it; when and where it felt most comfortable - or uncomfortable” (p. 51). A key advantage of this approach is that it enables one to assess citizens’ views on political talk in general, without

<sup>4</sup> The original reads: “*Dans un monde parfait, à quoi ressemblerait la démocratie ? Si vous deviez imaginer un système politique à partir de zéro, à quoi ressemblerait-il ?*” (Gourgues et al., 2021, p. 6).

priming them to think about specific discussion formats or institutional designs (such as the New England town meeting above). At the same time, it does not allow one to tap into people's attitudes towards deliberation as a form of *organized discussions on policy issues* -what many tend to have in mind in discussions on the institutionalization of deliberative democracy (Dryzek et al., 2019).

Focus group research that focuses specifically on such organized discussions has so far been conducted only among activists. In focus groups among members of the global justice movement in Italy, della Porta (2005) and her colleagues asked participants to talk about the "internal practices of democracy" (p. 78) of the movement, including deliberation. While this research zooms in on activists' experiences of organized discussions, it does not allow one to draw conclusions about what these citizens think about the use of deliberation *in the wider political system*.

The picture task sought to address these limitations by focusing the discussions on the general practice of deliberation as organized policy discussion while leaving the interpretation of the picture up to the participants themselves. Participants thereby decided how much they wanted to talk about deliberation, what kinds of deliberation they wanted to talk about, and what links they wished to draw with other political practices (see section SM5).

Besides the goal to deal with methodological challenges identified in the prior literature, the picture task also sought to deal with practical difficulties we encountered in the field. Prior to the focus groups reported on in the paper, the research team conducted a pilot among five citizens (3 female, 2 male) frequenting a socio-economically deprived neighborhood in Brussels. Participants were recruited via direct contacts with citizens in the neighborhood and local support organizations such as soup kitchens. Two of the participants were homeless, one was unemployed, and one was retired. One participant did not talk at all during the focus group. One of the authors observed the focus group discussions. During the discussions, we noticed that participants found it



very difficult to articulate their ideas about various political practices and institutions without the use of any prompts. The pictures we introduced in the subsequent focus groups, hence, sought to lower the costs of participation in the discussion, giving all participants the opportunity to be minimally part of the discussion by simply pointing at some of the pictures or choosing their favorite picture(s).

In addition to the purpose of studying how participants linked deliberation to other practices, the specific political practices we chose next to the one on deliberation were meant to deepen our understanding of what participants thought about deliberation *in specific*. The pictures of protests served the analytical purpose of being able to assess to what degree participants' reactions to deliberation were specifically aimed at organized discussion or, instead, at the more general practice of seeking recognition or voice (on a discussion of political practices relevant to democracy, see Warren, 2017). The picture of community action provided the counter-point of citizens not demanding voice but action instead (here: taking matters into their own hands). This sought to help participants to discuss matters of influence and performance in relation to deliberation. The image of the expert meeting was meant to enable one to verify whether participants' evaluations were about discussion in general or among citizens in specific (rather than, for example, among experts). The comparison to voting was meant to enable the comparison to participants' talk about influence on politics and vote- rather than talk-centric ways of involvement (Chambers, 2003; Rojon, Rijken, & Klandermans, 2019).

How did it work out in practice? We have to admit that in some focus groups it was difficult to start any detailed discussion about the pictures.<sup>5</sup> The most obvious example is the focus group among members of homelessness association (Homeless 1). In this group, the task never fully took off in the sense that the discussion focused mostly on other topics brought up by the participants, dealing mainly with their own significant life experiences and social problems. Most of time, however, participants did engage with the task. They did so at three different levels: *playing* the game, *mastering* the game, and *questioning* the game.

At the first level (playing the game), participants simply mentioned which picture(s) they preferred or even just pointed at those. This occurred especially among participants who did not feel comfortable speaking the language of the focus group and in the groups with the most socio-economically precarious citizens (EU1 and Homeless 1). Yet, more common was the second level (mastering the game) at which participants described and contrasted the various pictures and motivated their choices. The third level of engagement with the task (questioning the game) involved questioning its rules and logics. Participants exposed the bias and limitations of the picture task by pointing out that some options were lacking and that the questions we asked (e.g. what's your favorite?) did not make sense, because the answer is always contextual or because all political practices only make sense in relation to each other. Importantly, nearly all our focus groups exhibited all three levels of engagement and understanding, suggesting that such levels of sophistication are not reserved for the most politically active or educated citizens. More than a side-

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<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, some of the participants did not find it immediately clear what the picture of deliberation represented (e.g. Zoe (YfC2): "What was number 2?") or only offered a brief description (e.g. Raphael (YfC2), in response to Zoe: "That's a group discussion.").

result of our study, it confirms important statements in political theory about the possibility of political equality and how to realize it in such discursive settings (Rancière, 2012).

Nonetheless, we admit that the picture task sometimes got stuck at the first level of simply ‘playing the game.’ We see three potential explanations for this, paying specific attention to participants’ reactions to the picture of deliberation. First, deliberation for some was *the easy answer*. Especially participants that seemed less at ease with the setting or the language of the focus group tended to pick up the picture and show it around the table to highlight their sense of situational identification. Second, participants may have experienced it as *socially desirable* to support deliberation, requiring little further justification. Together with the picture of community action, most participants seem to have perceived deliberation as a practice that cannot be harmful and, therefore, as something that participants can safely bet most others will agree on.<sup>6</sup> Paradoxically, then, deliberation was sometimes one of the practices that called for the least discussion among participants. Finally, participants *often lacked personal experiences with deliberation*. Personal experiences that participants drew on mostly related to the other political practices part of the task. This derived from both direct (e.g. voting, volunteering) and indirect experiences (e.g. being stuck in traffic because of a demonstration). The consequent familiarity with the other practices helped them to formulate their views on deliberation by contrasting it with what they like and dislike about other practices. Yet, the lack of experience with deliberation in specific may have held back their discussion of this political practice.

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<sup>6</sup> Compare this to protests, for example: “I will stay with my first choice: my image number two [i.e. deliberation]. [Smiling] Because this, it’s useless [he shows the image of the protest]. If I go to work, they’ll block me from going to work. My day will not be paid. [Laughing] I’m the loser in that case!” (Adil, Molenbeek3).

These limitations notwithstanding, we believe that our focus group methodology helped to provide a more detailed understanding of how citizens think about deliberation, especially those that are in socio-economically precarious situations. The method called for an open discussion and allowed people to engage at different levels, enabling them to find their own way of making sense of deliberation. Furthermore, the use of pictures provided a low threshold for citizens to participate at least minimally in the focus group discussions -something that seems crucial when we seek to comprehend citizens' views of deliberation in an inclusive manner.

### **SM3. Details on data collection, availability, and analysis**

The focus groups formed part of an inter-university research project on political representation (*RepResent*).<sup>7</sup> The researchers were members of the team that jointly carried out the recruitment of the participants and the facilitation of the focus groups. For more information on the project, see <https://represent-project.be/>. All participants provided written consent before the start of the focus groups<sup>8</sup> and were offered gift vouchers (€48) for their participation at the end of the focus group. All data have been anonymized.

Researchers who wish to make use of (parts of) the focus group data should get in touch with the relevant researcher(s) indicated in Table SM2. This will ensure: (1) that the opportunity for feedback to focus group participants is guaranteed; and (2) that further contextual elements can be communicated (e.g. more specific information about focus groups participants, or the existence of other relevant data).

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<sup>7</sup> The relevant work package of the RepResent project received ethical approval from the Ethics Commission in Humane Sciences at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

<sup>8</sup> Participants under 18 signed a parental approval form.

**Table SM2. Researchers to contact for focus group materials**

| <b>Focus group</b>  | <b>Researcher</b>                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Yellow Vests        | Ramon van der Does ( <a href="mailto:ramon.vanderdoes@uclouvain.be">ramon.vanderdoes@uclouvain.be</a> )<br>Guillaume Petit ( <a href="mailto:gllmpetit@gmail.com">gllmpetit@gmail.com</a> )        |
| Youth for Climate 1 | Louise Knops ( <a href="mailto:louise.knops@vub.be">louise.knops@vub.be</a> )                                                                                                                      |
| Youth for Climate 2 | Louise Knops ( <a href="mailto:louise.knops@vub.be">louise.knops@vub.be</a> )                                                                                                                      |
| Molenbeek 1         | François Randour ( <a href="mailto:francois.randour@unamur.be">francois.randour@unamur.be</a> )<br>Guillaume Petit ( <a href="mailto:gllmpetit@gmail.com">gllmpetit@gmail.com</a> )                |
| Molenbeek 2         | Guillaume Petit ( <a href="mailto:gllmpetit@gmail.com">gllmpetit@gmail.com</a> )<br>Kenza Amara Hammou ( <a href="mailto:Kenza.amara.hammou@vub.be">Kenza.amara.hammou@vub.be</a> )                |
| Molenbeek 3         | François Randour ( <a href="mailto:francois.randour@unamur.be">francois.randour@unamur.be</a> )<br>Kenza Amara Hammou ( <a href="mailto:Kenza.amara.hammou@vub.be">Kenza.amara.hammou@vub.be</a> ) |
| Molenbeek 4         | Guillaume Petit ( <a href="mailto:gllmpetit@gmail.com">gllmpetit@gmail.com</a> )<br>Soetkin Verhaegen ( <a href="mailto:soetkin.verhaegen@uclouvain.be">soetkin.verhaegen@uclouvain.be</a> )       |
| Homeless 1          | Guillaume Petit ( <a href="mailto:gllmpetit@gmail.com">gllmpetit@gmail.com</a> )<br>Kenza Amara Hammou ( <a href="mailto:Kenza.amara.hammou@vub.be">Kenza.amara.hammou@vub.be</a> )                |
| Homeless 2          | Guillaume Petit ( <a href="mailto:gllmpetit@gmail.com">gllmpetit@gmail.com</a> )<br>Kenza Amara Hammou ( <a href="mailto:Kenza.amara.hammou@vub.be">Kenza.amara.hammou@vub.be</a> )                |
| EU 1                | Soetkin Verhaegen ( <a href="mailto:soetkin.verhaegen@uclouvain.be">soetkin.verhaegen@uclouvain.be</a> )<br>Louise Knops ( <a href="mailto:louise.knops@vub.be">louise.knops@vub.be</a> )          |
| EU 2                | Guillaume Petit ( <a href="mailto:gllmpetit@gmail.com">gllmpetit@gmail.com</a> )<br>François Randour ( <a href="mailto:francois.randour@unamur.be">francois.randour@unamur.be</a> )                |

### *Recruitment*

As described in the paper, the team used different strategies for the recruitment of participants for the focus groups that we used in our study. What these strategies had in common was that they resulted in focus groups in which some of the participants already knew each other. Sometimes they knew each other as acquaintances, in other instances they came as a couple or knew each other via an organization or movement to which they belonged. We view these existing social ties as a strength of the design: it allows participants to draw on shared experiences as well as to have reason to “challenge each other on contradictions between what they are professing to believe in the group and what they might have said or done outside the group” (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 191).

What some might consider more problematic is that we invited people to participate in an organized discussion (i.e. a focus group) and then studied how they talked about organized policy

discussions (i.e. deliberation). The finding that most of the participants were positive about deliberation might in that regard be at least partly the result of the self-selection that occurred when citizens were invited to participate in our own kind of organized discussion. Nevertheless, as we note in the paper and in SM5, some participants did not fully support deliberation or, in fact, wholly opposed it. More importantly, our argument is based on the link between how participants make sense of deliberation, on the one hand, and their evaluations of it, on the other hand. We try to understand the basis of citizens' evaluations of deliberation -whether positive or negative- and do not attempt to map the degree of support among these groups of citizens. Still, as we acknowledge in the conclusion of the paper, it is true that it remains an empirical question whether our exact findings would travel to other citizens; but the main point is that it seems very plausible that the identified link between sense-making and evaluations regarding deliberation is likely to hold, also in view of wider research on sense-making and political behavior (Fitzgerald, 2013; Morey & Eveland, 2016).

### *Transcription and facilitation*

All focus groups were recorded with a video camera and audio device. The video footage allowed us to verify which pictures the participants were talking about when they pointed at a picture or held it in their hands. All of the pictures also were assigned a number (i.e. 1 – 6) so that the participants and the moderator could refer to the number of the picture. This was meant to facilitate the discussion as well as the subsequent transcription and analyses. Arabic texts in the transcripts were translated to French where necessary (see Table 1; translation done by Kenza Amara Hammou, member of the RepResent research team).

Each focus group was moderated by one of the researchers part of the research consortium and had an average duration of two hours and a half.<sup>9</sup> Moderation was kept to a minimum to facilitate discussions among the participants. The only aspect that was more strictly directive was the transition from one round of questions to the next. After an introduction round, the focus groups started with a 40-minute discussion of what participants consider the most pressing social problems today. We intentionally did not focus on ‘politics’ as such in an attempt to not steer participants towards thinking only about politics in the form of formal, representative institutions and actors, such as parliament, politicians, and so forth. To illustrate, we asked people about ‘social’ rather than ‘political’ problems and sought to avoid narrower terms such as ‘democracy’ and ‘political system.’ After a fifteen-minute break, participants discussed for around 15 minutes how they thought these problems should be addressed and whom they considered responsible for those problems. After this, we introduced the picture task. Box SM2 displays the full topic guide.

In general, the facilitators described the deliberation picture as ‘citizens coming together to discuss.’ In two groups (Molenbeek 2 and 4), the facilitator described the deliberation picture as an instance of citizens coming together, representing a ‘participatory’ form of democracy. Yet, we think this is unlikely to have led to an interpretation of the political practice as one excluding its key discursive element. In fact, in one group (Molenbeek 3), the facilitator did not describe the picture at all but participants, nevertheless, spontaneously interpreted it as dealing with discussions. When the facilitator asked “And so would the solution be image number 2 [i.e. deliberation]?” one participant responded, “For me, that’s staying at the table and discussing the issues.”

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<sup>9</sup> The authors directly participated in 8 of the 11 groups.

## Box SM2. Topic guide

### 1. Welcoming – 5 min

Introduction by facilitator:

- Presentation of the research project and the researchers: who we are, what we do, what we are interested in, what we will do tonight.
- Permanent watch for newcomers by assistant researcher
- Information on confidentiality and informed consent (incl. consent form)

### 2. Introduction – Round Table discussion: to get to know each other – 10 min

Round-table discussion:

- What is your name/pseudo?
- A short question in link with focus group's segmentation.
  - *What does it mean for you to be [group label] ?*
  - Variants :
    - *When did you take part in [political activity] for the first time?*
    - *When did you join [political organization] ?*
    - *How long have you been living in [place] ?*
    - ...

### 3. Block 1 – Societal challenges – 40 min

**Opening question:** In your opinion, what are the most important societal challenges that Belgium is facing today?

Use 3 or 4 post-it to write your own answers. One answer = One post-it.

*Inner deliberation:* Each participant writes his/her answers on post-its (5 min)

*Tour de table:* Each participant shares his/her answers (10 min)

*Collective discussion:* Reactions and discussion (10 min)

**Follow-ups:** (15 min)

**Possible follow-up:** Have there been any moments, or important changes, or evolutions that stood out for you? Who is to blame?

### Break – 15 min

### 4. Block 2 – Societal challenges and political solutions – 40 min

**Opening question:** How should these societal challenges be resolved?

**Follow-up:** Who is responsible? Who should take care of those issues?

*Collective discussion:* Reactions and discussion (10 min)

**Stimuli (pictures):** Here are some examples of ways in which people try to solve / address these problems. What comes to mind when you see these pictures? What do you think about that? How do they relate to our discussion so far?



**Box SM2. (continued)**

Note to facilitator: Please let the participants freely associate first, and pick the pictures they want to talk about. The follow-ups below for each picture (in case something like that does not come up spontaneously) can also be a way to explain what's on the picture if this question is posed to the facilitator. In any case, let participants first explain what they associate with the general description. If they ask about specific topics (e.g. what are they protesting against?), we can let them come up with the possibilities too.

## Description of pictures

1. Voting [+ elections; referendum]
2. Citizens coming together to talk about the issues [+ citizens coming together to talk about the problems and potential solutions; citizen summit that gives *advice* to the government; citizen summit that can *make decisions* for the community]
3. Demonstrate
4. Helping people that are having a hard time
5. Experts getting together to make decisions [+ experts = scientists; professionals in their field; *experts du vécu*]
6. Violent protest

*Collective discussion:* Reactions and discussion (20 min)

**Follow-up on governance levels:** In the discussions, you mentioned the mayor/Belgian government/EU, Brussels/Flanders/Wallonia a few times, but there are also other places where decisions and laws are being made, like local/federal/Belgium/EU/Brussels/Flanders/Wallonia. What do you think about these levels? What are the problems or good things about this? (up to 15 min, if people have something to say)

Note to facilitator: all levels are mentioned above, it should of course be adapted to what has (not) been mentioned already.

**5. Block 3 – ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ – where do we stand? 20 min**

**Opening question:** In all of this, what about the [label of the group]? What are your ways to be represented?

**Follow-ups:**

What does it mean for you to feel represented?

Who should take care of that?

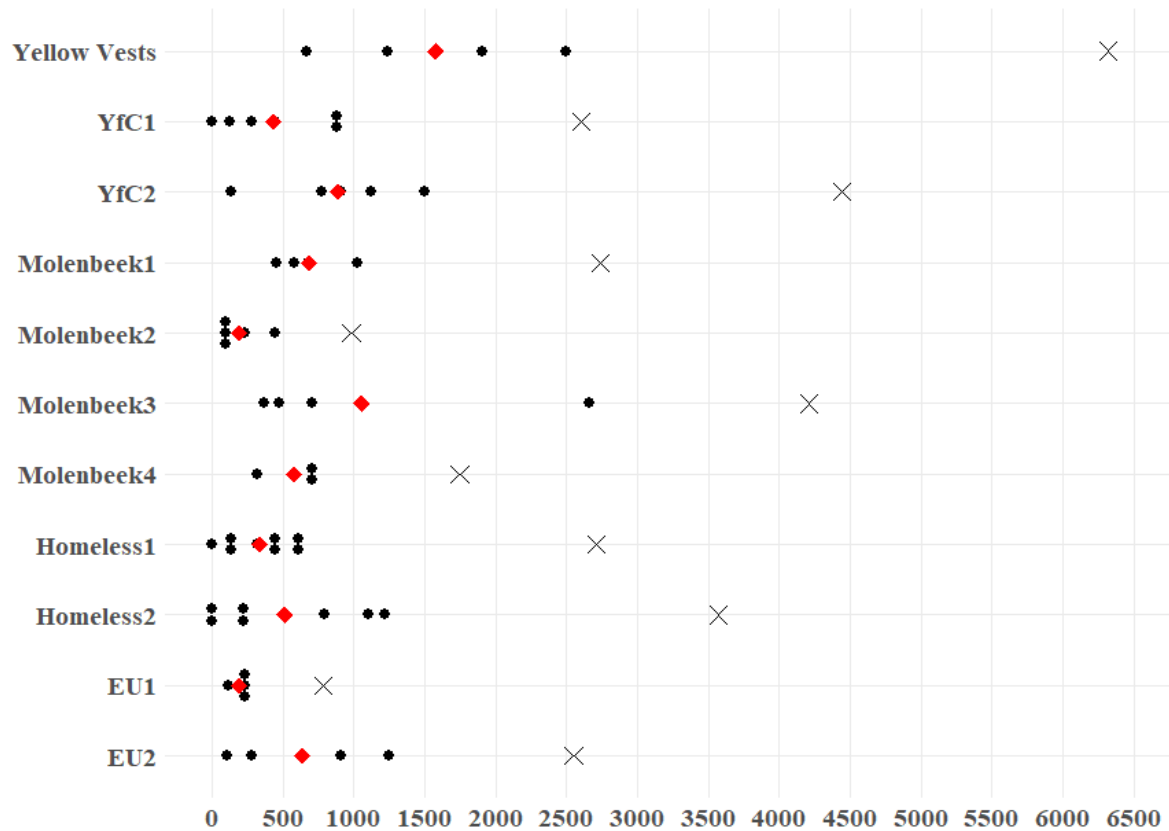
**6. End of focus group – Thanking participants, background questionnaire and remuneration**

## *Analyses*

As described in the paper, for the analyses, we relied on three research questions: (Q1) how participants make sense of the picture of deliberation, (Q2) how they evaluate deliberation, and (Q3) how they connect it to other political practices. These served related, although analytically different, purposes. The first question was about getting at how participants constructed the “object of thought” (Bergman, 1998, p. 84), that is, “what it is [i.e. deliberation], and what it is for” (Ryfe, 2007, p. 2). The second, in turn, sought to tap into participants’ affective appraisals of deliberation as the object of evaluation, that is, what participants found (non-)desirable about deliberation itself. We took note of their general evaluation of the political practice and kept track of the conditions (if any) the participants mentioned for their support of and/or opposition towards it. The final question served the purpose of trying to understand how participants’ views on deliberation related to their understanding and appraisals of alternative practices (as displayed in the other pictures or proposed by the participants themselves).

### **SM4. Overview of the focus group data**

Figure SM1 displays word frequencies across the focus groups and participants. It makes clear that the number of words spent on the pictures varied considerably across the focus groups ( $M = 2,969$ ,  $SD = 1,611$ ). Similarly, participants were often not equally vocal about the picture prompts ( $M = 605$ ,  $SD = 578$ ). Three out of the 54 participants did not speak at all during the picture task. Importantly, while most words were spent on the pictures in one of the activist groups (6,317 in the Yellow Vests focus group), the transcripts of the focus groups among politically disadvantaged citizens were not by default shorter than those of the groups conducted among the non-partisan activists (Figure SM1).



**Figure SM1. Number of words spoken in focus groups.** Shows per focus groups the number of words spoken by participants during the picture task (excluding facilitators). Black dots indicate the number of words spoken by each participant. Red diamonds and crosses indicate their mean and sum, respectively.

## SM5. Additional results: Deliberation and other political practices

In all groups, we find participants that (also) considered other political practices necessary to address public problems alongside deliberation. Several participants put deliberation on a par with the other practices in the pictures. For example, when asked by the moderator which practice they found most useful, Otto in the Yellow Vests group responded: “No, all six [are] equally useful. (...) All six [are] equally useful. Ah yes... not one opposed to the other, not one opposed to the other.” Similarly, Félix in YfC2 put forward the same perspective: “So it’s really all those things that

shouldn't be hierarchized, for me it's doing it together.” (Such reflexivity also illustrates what we labeled as the third level of engagement with the picture task, that is, ‘questioning the game’).

In the non-activist groups, we also find the view that these various political practices are complementary. In Homeless1, Jean, for instance, stressed that “all means that are proposed via the photos can be useful,” and in EU2 Bilal noted that “one cannot say ‘no that one is good, that one is good, that one is good.’ No. Each, each moment has its... moment that is right... Once one leaves one context, one passes to the next. And that doesn't work anymore, we pass to the next.” Similarly, in Homeless2, Jean clarified “all the means that are proposed in the pictures can have their use, but it has to do with where a particular discussion is going on a particular issue.” Sometimes participants were more explicit that deliberation cannot solve all problems by itself. For example, Nathalie (EU1) stated that she viewed peaceful protests as “more demonstrative of general dissatisfaction. But it's true that one [of the displayed practices] without the other is nothing, right. The elementary basis is nonetheless dialogue.” Mehmet (Molenbeek3) equally emphasized the limits of deliberation: “we shouldn't put too much trust in that [deliberation], but it's a start, right. We can say ‘okay, they're at the table, they are talking, that's already good, right.’”

Besides the need for the other practices displayed in the pictures, participants also introduced other practices that they considered important next to deliberation, such as contacting politicians to hold them accountable, starting a referendum (Otto, Yellow Vests), boycotts (Léonard, YfC2), starting one's own party (Gregory, YfC2), lobbying, awareness-raising (Sophie, Homeless2), and a meeting with politicians who reflect society's diversity (Molenbeek 3). While several participants viewed deliberation as a panacea, this spontaneous introduction of additional practices and the emphasis on the need for other forms of political action to complement deliberation make clear that most participants did not view deliberation as a sufficient means to address societal problems.

## **SM6: Alternative findings**

Recall that our main argument is that citizens that associate deliberation with informal communicative interactions tend to be positive about it, whereas citizens that associate it with formal, structured interactions tend to be more negative. While the findings reported in the paper cover the main tendencies identified in the focus group materials, our analyses sometimes suggested a lack of evidence for our main argument among some of the participants as well as contradictory evidence.

### *Contradictory findings*

The contradictory evidence comes from two of the eleven focus groups. In YFC1, Mélodie contrasted deliberation with day-to-day conversations. She seems to suggest that deliberation as a more organized kind of discussion could help to overcome issues she associates with informal political talk:

I think that 2 [i.e. the deliberation picture] is super interesting because one has to give people the opportunity to talk too, to be able to exchange. Right now, at school it's a bit more complicated, but I ask myself, at the office, who is going to start talking politics with their colleague?

The other piece of contradictory evidence comes from EU2, in which the participants joked about deliberation, distancing themselves from “the little old people” in the picture (Nicolas, EU2). Later on, it became clear that they supported only expert decision-making and disliked citizen deliberation. Here, then, the evaluation seems unrelated to the formality or structure of the discussions -it is the people at the table that mattered to them. Note, however, that for one of the few other examples of an exclusively negative evaluation of the practice we did find evidence again

for our main argument.<sup>10</sup> Ilyan (Homeless1), who, based on his experience, associated deliberation with formal neighborhood meetings, viewed it as a futile exercise because such discussions do not have tangible effects:

For example, there was another meeting [of a neighborhood association], a general gathering of inhabitants where people of the organization came, nobody from us went there, for example, because the times we have gone [there] it hasn't led to anything. And even when they made promises, they wrote that they would do it, they didn't do it. So they say 'But what's the point of going there?'

### *Lack of evidence*

At times it was difficult to understand how participants made sense of deliberation. Positive appreciations of deliberation sometimes remained general and lacked a clear account of participants' understanding of deliberation. Participants simply described it as the basis of democracy (Nathalie, EU1), or as one of the political practices that could "help [people] on the long term" (Raphael, YfC2). This also applied to some participants that offered more conditional support for deliberation in very general terms: "okay ... That can work, it's effective, one is listened to, maybe not" (Peter, Homeless1).

For other participants, it was not entirely clear whether they linked deliberation to formal, structured discussions or rather to looser, informal conversations. In Homeless1, Youssef reached a similar conclusion as Ilyan (see above), but was much less clear about his definition of deliberation:

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<sup>10</sup> We identified *exclusively* negative evaluations only in EU2 and Homeless1.

“...here we have, for example, in this picture [i.e. deliberation], we have ideas, we have various ideas, but those ideas are lost and one cannot count on them. You see? (...) The best way is to protest peacefully. There you have a grouping of ideas, all one, that is to say, the people are united, and that there is the fear of the government or of people in politics.

The same can be observed for some of the participants in the activist groups. In YfC2, for instance, Félix at first viewed deliberation as superfluous: “that doesn’t work, discussion groups etc., because we have hundreds of solutions for the climate.” Later, he stated that all six political practices are required, as violent protests alone cannot offer solutions and “that’s also a bit stupid.” However, it remains unclear what those “discussion groups” looked like according to him. Similarly, in the Yellow Vests group, Daan agreed with the others’ positive evaluation of deliberation when they discussed it in terms of allowing for dialogue with non-like-minded people within the movement. However, when the picture of offering community help came up, he forcefully emphasized the need for action as opposed to talk: “...and why do I wear that yellow vest? Why? Because I don’t blablabla... because I want to *do* something.” While the former seems to be in line with our line of explanation, the latter leaves open what Daan associated with deliberation exactly.

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