

## **Institutionalizing citizens' assemblies in Belgium**

To be published in *Handbook of Participatory Democracy*, Edward Elgar Handbooks, edited  
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All over the world, initiatives to institutionalize deliberative democracy, particularly in the form of citizens' assemblies, are springing up, driven by a multitude of promises. Faced with the many perils that threaten them, some are rapidly dying out, while others are gaining in scope and scale. Belgium, a small country in the heart of Europe, provides a perfect illustration of the process of institutionalizing citizens' assemblies. In this country, four parliaments have institutionalized permanent citizens' assemblies in different formats that this article briefly describes.

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All over the world, initiatives to institutionalize deliberative democracy, particularly in the form of citizens' assemblies, are springing up (Reuchamps et al., 2023). Belgium, a small country in the heart of Europe, is probably one of the leading laboratories of this institutionalization process with several permanent citizens' assemblies (Vrydagh et al., 2022). It is a story in three acts that this paper will briefly tell: the first act was marked by setting *The first stones*, which laid down the foundations, in the second act, for *The ground floor*, and the third and final act saw the building of *The whole house*. The metaphor *Building a house* that structures this paper reflects the metaphor which is often used in thinking through the design of a citizens' assembly in Belgium with its sponsor, architect and entrepreneur: institutionalizing deliberative democracy is like building a house.

Before diving into this (re)construction task, we need to define what we are talking about. The critical and interdisciplinary dictionary of participation, democracy and citizenship (*DicoPart*) offers a definition: "A permanent assembly is a participatory mechanism that involves one or more citizens' assemblies in political decision-making on a continuous or repeated basis. The aim of these assemblies is to formulate recommendations on one or more public issues following an informed and reasoned exchange between citizens" (Niessen and Reuchamps, 2022a).

### ***Act I: The first stones***

Belgium was not originally destined to be a fertile ground for participatory and deliberative democracy (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2014). Yet, the exact opposite could have been argued. Because of its internal divisions, from its very beginning (Witte et al., 2009), and the complex socio-political institutional design that was progressively set in place to cope with these divisions (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2020), there was room for citizens' participation

and even more such participation could be seen as a potential solution, offering a more straight forward way to go around the complex socio-political institutional design. But, in Belgium, for a long time, citizens were not seen as a solution but rather as a problem. To understand this, one needs to go back in time, when Belgium became a state.

Built in the 1830s on a national union (that did not last long, however) against the pro-Protestant and pro-Dutch policies of the sovereign of the Netherlands, to which the southern provinces – forming the future Belgium – had been attached following the Congress of Vienna in 1815, Belgium was crisscrossed from the outset by divisions that were almost consubstantial with its existence (Deschouwer, 2012): church-state and center-periphery, to which a capital-labor cleavage was added in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As in other divided societies, a consociational political system was established, based on the segmentation of society into three pillars – Catholic, Socialist and, to a lesser extent, Liberal – with contacts between pillars only through the elites (Lijphart, 1981). In a consociational society, the participation of the population in decision-making was anything but sought after, as there was a strong distrust of internal divisions within society. In fact, in the words of the renown Flemish sociologist, Luc Huyse, the passivity of the Belgians was key to the stability of Belgium (Huyse, 1970).

Although from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, society gradually ‘depolarized’, power did not return to the hands of the population but remained in those of the political parties and to a lesser extent to the organized civil society (Niessen, 2019). Indeed, Belgium was and still is a partitocracy (De Winter and Van Wynsberghe, 2015). The latter can be defined as a political system in which power is – to an excessive degree – in the hands of political parties (Baudewyns et al., 2022). To explain why political parties are such powerful actors in Belgium, the Constitution offers a paradoxical response: on the one hand, political

parties are only mentioned once in the fundamental law (in the quite recent article 77, referring to the law organizing their financing) but, on the other hand, the Constitution establishes an electoral representative regime that excludes direct involvement of the citizens in the decision-making process (Eerola and Reuchamps, 2016, Gaudin et al., 2018). Hence, elected representatives are the sole decision-makers in Belgium and, since political parties play a chief role in selecting candidates (Vandeleene et al., 2019), parties hold a tight control of the whole Belgian political system (De Winter and Dumont, 2006).

Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that the first stones of participatory and deliberative democracy in Belgium, during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, were laid not by parliaments or civil society, but by members of the executive branch, a powerful institution only indirectly controlled by parties. Civil society and parliaments will play an active role, in the following decade, leading to the second act: founding the ground floor. But in this first act, the initiative comes from the executive in response to the NIMBY (not in my backyard) phenomenon, which sees more and more citizen opposition to collective projects to prevent them from being developed 'in their backyard' (Van Damme et al., 2017). Thus, in the wake of the participatory and deliberative movement that marked the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the first citizens' panels were organized in Belgium by foundations at the request of ministers and governors (Vrydagh et al., 2022). The aim of these citizens' panels is to enable people who are usually excluded from decision-making processes to contribute to making better decisions, in the face of increasingly complex and resistant issues (Claisse et al., 2013). It is a form of user expertise that comes to the fore, complementing scientific, administrative and political expertise, in an 'executive' approach to participatory and deliberative democracy.

### ***Act II: The ground floor***

The end of the decade of the 2000s was marked by strong political tensions, around so-called community issues (Perrez and Reuchamps, 2012, Dassargues et al., 2014), that is conflicts around self-rule and shared-rule within the Belgian federal state between the two main language communities (De Winter and Baudewyns, 2009, Reuchamps et al., 2014): Dutch-speakers/Flemings (who account for 60% of the population) and French-speakers/Francophones (who account for 40% of the population). These tensions led to the longest period without a full government (541 days) following the 2010 federal parliamentary elections (Deschouwer and Reuchamps, 2013). During this long period of political instability, an increasing distance between citizens and their representatives emerged (Dodeigne et al., 2016, Reuchamps et al., 2017b). In fact, surveys revealed that Dutch-speaking citizens and French-speaking citizens hold more similar preferences than their respective representatives (Reuchamps, 2011, Sinardet et al., 2018). This discrepancy explains a growing resentment towards the political parties in general and their failure to reach an agreement in particular (Reuchamps et al., 2021).

It was in this political vacuum that the G1000 initiative was born (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2012). Echoing the G8 or the G20, a group of about two-dozen citizens from all walks of the Belgian society sought to set in place a G1000 that is a citizens' summit to peacefully discuss the future of Belgium, in a context when political representatives were unable to do so. While this citizen-driven initiative was bottom-up and not top-down from the political parties or the public institutions that were *de facto* in a stalemate at the time, it was not coming from the organized civil society either (Reuchamps et al., 2017a). The so-called social partners and more largely the organized civil society is a key political in Belgium as it is a neo-corporatist system (Schmitter, 1974): it means that in quite a few sectors (notably around social and labor policies), the interest groups (such as the trade unions and the federations of employers) are

recognized by the state to collectively define policies in their respective sector. Yet, and even if probably in a lesser extent than the representative democratic system, this neo-corporatist system faces challenges of legitimacy and the trust in organized interest groups is also declining.

The fragile positions of both political parties and interest groups explains why the G1000 was initiated by citizens outside of this twofold system (and why these actors felt somewhat bypassed by the G1000), and above all its rapid success. In fact, the G1000 manifesto quickly received over ten thousand signatures and the whole enterprise was crowdfunded, that is funded by private donors (individuals but also groups, companies and organizations) and not public institutions (Jacquet and Reuchamps, 2018). The manifesto offered the road map of what has become known as the G1000 itself: not the group of initiators but the participatory and deliberative process organized by this group. This process started with a broad online consultation to define the agenda for a citizens' summit which, on November 11, 2011, brought together 704 randomly selected citizens from across Belgium to deliberate on three important themes: social security, the distribution of wealth in times of crisis and immigration. This initiative demonstrates that organizing a large-scale citizens' assembly is possible, even in a society as divided as Belgium (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2018). The G1000 marks the turning point towards the institutionalization of citizens' assemblies.

Indeed, while the G1000 demonstrated the potential of a citizens' assembly, this initiative reveals the importance of gradual institutionalization of citizens' assemblies to ensure the long-term viability of participatory and deliberative democracy. In the wake of the G1000, voices from all parties, on both sides of the language border (that has been so divisive in the past), are calling for more frequent use of citizens' assemblies (Jacquet et al., 2016). These calls took shape on the ground, and in particular in the country's various parliaments, each of

which, in its own way and on a variety of themes, organized a citizens' assembly (in the Belgian jargon of the time, a 'citizens' panel'). From an 'executive' approach to participatory and deliberative democracy in the 2000s, we are witnessing a 'legislative' approach in the 2010s (Vrydagh et al., 2023, Devillers et al., 2021).

In parallel with the organization of these 'one-shot' citizens' panels by parliaments and gradually by other authorities at all levels of power, from local to European, ever louder voices are being heard in favor of institutionalizing permanent citizens' assemblies (Schiffino et al., 2019). In 2016, for example, some parliamentarians found the idea, inspired by the Irish Constitutional Convention, of mixing parliamentarians with citizens chosen by lot within existing parliamentary committees, a promising one (Reuchamps and Sautter, 2022). Proposals for legislation and amendments to parliamentary rules of procedure were tabled. However, these proposals went unheeded during the 2014-2019 legislature, except in the country's smallest federated entity (but with legislative power), the German-speaking Community (Niessen, 2021, Bouhon et al., 2015).

### ***Act III: The whole house***

In February 2019, the German-speaking Community, also known as East Belgium (*Ostbelgien*), was the first to institutionalize a Permanent Citizens' Dialogue, with participants drawn by lot from all residents aged 16 or over (Niessen and Reuchamps, 2022b). The choice was made to favor participation based exclusively on sortition. The permanent citizens' dialogue is based on a 24-member Citizens' Council (*Bürgererrat*). Its members are randomly selected amongst those who have previously sat on a Citizens' Assembly that the Council has the power to initiate. The Citizens' Council is the permanent body of the scheme. It has two missions. The first is to organize regular citizens' assemblies (*Bürgerversammlungen*). To this end, the Council invites suggestions for topics from the public and, where appropriate, from political

institutions. On the basis of these suggestions, it formulates the theme that will be the focus of the citizens' assembly and initiates the process for its implementation. The Citizens' Assemblies are made up of members drawn by lot, the number of which is also determined by the Citizens' Council, as is the duration of the work. At the end of each assembly, a document of recommendations is drawn up on the issue, which is then presented to the parliamentary committee and the relevant ministers (Gebauer et al., 2024).

While the Parliament of the German-speaking Community is the first Belgian substate to adopt a permanent citizens' assembly system, other substates, as well as the Federal Authority, followed after the general elections in May 2019. These elections have indeed changed the landscape. The results show a significant increase in the number of green parties' representatives, who will join the new government coalitions in Brussels and Wallonia, as well as at federal level. Belgium's regions are key political institutions, with legislative power over territorial development and housing, the environment, water and nature conservation, the economy and employment policy, transport, public works, energy policy, local authorities, external relations and scientific research. As a member of the government coalition in two of Belgium's three regions, the ecologists are putting democratic reforms on the agenda, notably the idea of mixed parliamentary committees, i.e., a citizens' assembly not only made by citizens drawn by lot but also parliamentarians. These mixed parliamentary committees are renamed into deliberative committees, as to incorporate a remark by the Council of State raising the potentially problematic nature of the notion 'mixed', in that it would put elected parliamentarians and citizens chosen by lot on an equal footing, which is constitutionally impossible under current Belgian law (Reuchamps, 2020).

In Brussels, the coalition government decided to move quickly in this direction and, in autumn 2019, the ecologists were invited to put forward a concrete proposal, garnering the support

not only of the coalition partners, but also of as many opposition parties as possible (Vrydagh et al., 2021). On December 13, 2019, the Parliament of the Brussels-Capital Region (PRB) and the Assembly of the Joint Community Commission (COCOM) both adopt an amendment to their internal rules to introduce the option of setting up deliberative committees made up of parliamentarians and inviting citizens chosen by lot to take part in their work. Following a similar logic, on December 20, 2019, the Brussels French-speaking Parliament (PFB) – which is officially called the Assembly of the French-speaking Community Commission (COCOF) – votes to set up an almost identical mechanism. The COCOF is the regulatory body for the French-speaking Community in the Brussels-Capital Region. In concrete terms, it supervises and finances the French-speaking institutions in Brussels responsible for culture, education, healthcare, sport and personal assistance.

The two Brussels Parliaments are therefore responsible for important competencies, which can now be discussed in deliberative committees. Each of these assemblies can organize such a committee, made up of 15 (at the PRB) and 12 (at the PFB) members of parliament accompanied by 45 (at the PRB) and 36 (at the PFB) citizens chosen by lot to draft recommendations on a given issue. Participants are thus selected by two different methods. On the one hand, participating parliamentarians are the members of the parliamentary standing committee responsible for the subject under discussion. At the PRB, each standing committee is made up of 15 members (including Dutch and French speakers) and at the PFB, each standing committee is made up of 12 members (French speakers only), which explains the number of elected members on a deliberative committee. On the other hand, participating citizens are drawn by lot among all residents of the Brussels-Capital Region aged 16 and over, so that every inhabitant has the same chance of being invited via a formal letter of invitation from the Parliament. From among all those who respond positively to this invitation, a second

draw is made 'using a sampling method that establishes in advance the criteria for ensuring a diverse and representative selection, at least in terms of gender, age, geographical distribution and level of education', as stated in the rules governing the deliberative committees. Such two-steps procedure ensures maximal diversity among non-elected participants, despite their limited number (36 or 45) in absolute terms.

During the 2019-2024 legislature, six deliberative committees were organized in Brussels. Organized by the PRB, the first was devoted to "5G in Brussels" and met in spring 2021. The second, also organized by PRB, met in early summer 2021 on the subject of "Homelessness in Brussels". The first deliberative committee initiated by the PFB, the third met in autumn 2021 and deliberated on "The role of Brussels citizens in times of crisis". Meeting in spring 2022, the fourth, entitled "Biodiversity in the city, taking into account the different functions of a city", is part of the work of the PRB, while the fifth, initiated by the PFB, met in early summer 2022 and discussed "Work-linked training in Brussels". The sixth, "Noise in the urban environment", was organized by the PRB in spring 2023.

Wallonia, Belgium's second-largest region after Flanders in terms of population, has also introduced deliberative committees, similar to the Brussels model. In October 2020, the Walloon Parliament introduced the possibility of organizing deliberative committees into its internal regulations. As a result, the Parliament is now authorized to convene mixed committees, in addition to exclusively parliamentary committees, on its own initiative or at the initiative of citizens, to deliberate on specific issues within the Walloon Region's sphere of competence. These committees are made up of 30 citizens and 10 members of parliament. Citizens are selected by sortition from the National Register, provided they meet the voting requirements for the Walloon Parliament, which therefore covers Belgian citizens resident in Wallonia who have reached the age of 18. In these three respects, Wallonia's deliberative

commissions differ from those in Brussels (Sautter and Reuchamps, 2023). This threefold difference is justified by the distinct demographic reality between Wallonia and Brussels, which has a non-Belgian (and therefore non-voting in regional elections) and younger population. A first deliberative committee met from October 2023 to February 2024 to discuss the question, which arose from a citizen's suggestion: "How can Wallonia's citizens be involved in decision-making, in a deliberative and permanent way, inspired in particular by the permanent citizen dialogue that exists in the German-speaking Community, which is based on sortition?"

At the same time, the federal coalition government – made up of the Dutch- and French-speaking Socialists, Liberals and Ecologists, as well as the Dutch-speaking Christian Democrats – announced in its government agreement at the end of September 2020: "We will experiment with new forms of citizen participation, such as citizens' cabinets or mixed panels in the Chamber bringing together parliamentarians and citizens chosen by lot. These will make recommendations to the legislative power". On 2 March 2023, the House of Representatives adopted the "Act establishing the principles of sortition for individuals for mixed committees and citizens' panels organized on the initiative of the House of Representatives". The assembly modified its rules of procedure to allow the organization of such mixed committees and citizens' panels. In April 2024, the upper House, the Senate that has much less power than the House of Representatives (Dandoy et al., 2015), also adopted a law in the same perspective. It is a worldwide premiere that two 'national' parliaments enact such place for citizen participation within their parliament. However, the two mechanisms (mixed committees and citizens' panels) themselves are much inspired from the regional parliaments. In fact, a mixed committee is composed by 13 to 17 members of the House of Representatives (the exact number is to be defined by the Senate where the standing committees are made of 24

members; at the House of Representatives, it is 17 members) and a minimum of 39 and a maximum of 51 citizens (60 for the Senate) drawn by lot. The House and the Senate can also set citizens' panels that are composed of 50 to 75 randomly selected citizens. During the 2019-2024 legislature, neither of these two mechanisms (mixed committees and citizens' panels) have been implemented, but given the laws were passed in 2023 and in 2024 and that general elections were to be held on 9 June 2024, there was actually little time to organize such deliberative process. Nevertheless, the mere existence of these laws themselves is another important milestone in the institutionalization of citizens' assemblies in Belgium.

### ***The next acts: starting the renovation and enlarging the house***

Since the first citizens' panels organized in Belgium in the years 2000s by members of the executive branch, only two-decades have gone by. The institutionalizing of citizens' assemblies has taken less than twenty years. Two decades to build the "whole house" is both very quick and very long in the same time. If we consider as the date of the institutionalization the year of the first legal framework (2019 with the decree of the Parliament of the German-speaking Community), it is even a shorter time frame. Yet, since then, no fewer than six cycles of deliberative committees have been organized in Brussels, one in Wallonia, and five cycles of citizens' assemblies in Ostbelgien. Which lessons can be drawn from the institutionalized citizens' assemblies so far? Three, at least.

First, while these citizens' assemblies are presented as *permanent*, it does not mean that they are *static*, quite the contrary. The law (the decree in the correct legal Belgian jargon) that organizes the *Ostbelgien* permanent citizen dialogue has been amended, based on its first five years of existence (Velghe et al., 2025). For instance, the threshold of 100 signatures for a topic proposed by the public to be considered eligible (to set the agenda of a citizens' assembly) has been removed, as it was rarely met anyhow. From now on, any subject

proposed by the public can be eligible. Another change related to the topic choice is that at least one of the issues to be discussed by a citizens' assembly, during a legislature, must be proposed by the bureau of the parliament, where the leader of each parliamentary group is present. This change follows the parliament's request to communicate more with citizens and to seek their views directly on the issues that will be a political priority in the coming months. It can be considered as a positive development if it allows for greater involvement of citizens in the policy-making process. Yet, the extent to which parliamentarians will exercise – too much – control over the agenda-setting, thanks to this change in the decree, needs to be closely monitored in the future, and in particular by the citizen council, which officially keeps the agenda-setting function as one of its two main functions. The second one, monitoring the follow-up of the recommendations, remains unchanged but to ease this potentially heavy task, the decree was amended to provide for five assemblies in each legislature, i.e., approximately one per year. Initially, the intention was to organize one to three citizens' assemblies per year, but because of the heavy workload for staff and the citizens' council of following up the recommendations of different citizens' assemblies at the same time, it was decided to organize one per year. This underscores the attention that is paid by the parliament to the possible implementation of the recommendations, which is often seen as the blind spot of non-permanent citizens' assemblies. In short, the permanent citizen dialogue in *Ostbelgien* has gone through a first renovation.

Second, general elections have occurred on 9 June 2024. Belgium is a highly federalized country but the 9 June 2024 elections were exceptional as voters went to the voting for European, federal (i.e. Belgium-wide), and regional (i.e. Brussels, Flanders, Ostbelgien, Wallonia) elections on the same day. All parliaments have a new composition for the legislature 2024-2029, and new majorities have been formed on this basis. Whereas the

Ecologists and the Socialists were in governing coalitions during the legislature 2019-2024, they have decided, due to a decline in their respective vote shares, to go into opposition in Brussels and in Wallonia. It means that the deliberative committees have lost their strongest supporters, especially the Ecologists, and the future of this mechanism will depend of the will of the new majorities composed of the Liberals and the Centrists. In *Ostbelgien*, while the leading party remained in power in coalition with the Liberals as third partner, the governing coalition changed regarding the second partner, with the Socialists being replaced by the Christian-Democrats. However, given the fact that all parties voted the adoption of the first decree back in 2019 and again for the revised decree in 2024, this change in the governing coalition does not *a priori* impact the permanent citizen dialogue. Also, the citizen council's dual function of setting the agenda and following up recommendations is essential, and these two functions give citizens control over the process. What's more, the fact that the system is anchored in a legislative text making its organization compulsory guarantees its existence beyond election cycles, which does not necessarily seem to be the case in other institutionalized citizens' assemblies in Belgium, such as in Brussels or Wallonia.

Third, and related to the previous lesson, the governing of – permanent – citizens' assemblies and the role of parliamentarians is the chief question. It differs from the permanent citizen dialogue to the deliberative committees. In the former, citizens via the citizens' council hold more governing power with their twofold missions of agenda-setting and monitoring of the follow-up. In the latter, there is no such citizens' council. But the presence of parliamentarians from the beginning of the deliberation could enhance the power of the deliberative committee in the parliamentary system since the participating parliamentarians are the one who are the members of the standing parliamentary committee. It could indeed be posited

that participating parliamentarians will ensure the follow-up of the recommendations of the deliberative committee, hence indirectly reinforcing the power of the deliberative committee. The first deliberative committee in Wallonia has perhaps found a middle way between the two existing models. In response to the question: “How can Wallonia’s citizens be involved in decision-making, in a deliberative and permanent way, inspired in particular by the permanent citizen dialogue that exists in the German-speaking Community, which is based on sortition?”, the deliberative committee proposed on 25 February 2024 a model based on both citizen deliberation and mixed deliberation. It proposed to set up a mixed permanent council made of 30 randomly selected citizens and 10 parliamentarians, with a mission of agenda-setting and with the right to set in motion three forms of citizen participation and deliberation: first, citizens’ assemblies made of 50 to 75 randomly selected citizens for one year; second, mixed assemblies (the new name for deliberative committees, for the sake of clarity) made of 30 randomly selected citizens and 10 parliamentarians; third, and possibly based on the work of both types of assemblies, the mixed permanent council can decide to bring the issues into a regional popular consultation (i.e. non-binding referendums since referendums are not allowed by the Constitution for the aforementioned reasons).

### ***Conclusion***

In two decades, Belgium has experienced with citizens’ assemblies at a comparatively very high level. Several parliaments of this country have even institutionalized different mechanisms of citizen participation and deliberation, be them with or without parliamentarians, which is also a democratic innovation in itself. These first five years have shown that institutionalized forms of citizens’ assemblies are still in their infancy and that more attention needs to be paid to their experimental and evolving nature. There is always a desire to formalize these processes, particularly when they are integrated into formal

institutions. However, this can have a negative impact on the actions of citizens, who feel that they must remain strictly within certain predetermined limits. One of the major lessons to be learned from these five years of institutionalization in Belgium is that there must always be enough space and time for flexibility, learning and adaptation (Velghe et al., 2025). This benefits not only randomly selected citizens but also elected citizens who have to find ways of managing changing norms in a changing society. Despite this ever-increasing complexity, democracy means that they all have to live in the same house.

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