



Democratization Studies

THE LEGITIMACY OF CITIZEN-LED DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

THE G1000 IN BELGIUM

Didier Caluwaerts and Min Reuchamps



The Legitimacy of Citizen-led Deliberative Democracy

For deliberative democrats, the strength of any democracy is public deliberation, the frequent and reasoned discussion between citizens on political issues.

Despite all the theoretical claims made about deliberative systems, the question remains how to empirically assess both the legitimacy and function of deliberative systems in the real world and how individual sites of deliberation interact within the larger political system. In other words, what is the legitimacy of each individual component and under which conditions can these components improve the legitimacy of the wider system? These are the central research questions for this book, looking particularly through the prism of the citizen-led mini-public G1000 in Belgium, which grew out of a feeling of deep democratic crisis. Offering empirically measurable translations of philosophical concepts, the book enhances our understanding of how political systems function, and of the viability of a deliberative democracy at a larger scale. Finally, it provokes fundamental normative questions on how we want to shape our society, especially divided ones.

This text will be of key interest to scholars, students and practitioners of deliberative democracy, and to those interested in democratic theory and more broadly political science, communication, sociology and philosophy.

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The G1000 in Belgium

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Introduction

Studying the legitimacy of citizen-led deliberative democracy

Democracy means many things to many people. For some it means that citizens have the right to express their political preferences through free elections. For deliberative democrats, the strength of any democracy is through public deliberation, i.e. the frequent and reasoned discussion between citizens on political issues. Through talking to each other, citizens identify good incentives and reject bad ones, which eventually leads to well-considered decision-making. This deliberative model started out in life as a theory of legitimacy (Cohen, 1989; Dryzek, 2001; Parkinson, 2006). By including everyone affected in the process leading to a decision, deliberation could prove capable of generating political outcomes that receive broad public support, even when there is strong disagreement on the aims and values a polity should promote. Deliberation is therefore said to be able to bridge the gap between citizens and their democratic system.

Despite these ambitious theoretical claims, the question remains how to empirically assess the way deliberative democracy works in the real world. After all, it is very appealing to assume that gathering citizens to discuss issues of public interest generates support for democracy, but few studies have hitherto analysed how deliberative forums link up with the wider political system. The central question of this book is therefore whether, how and under which conditions deliberative mini-publics initiated by citizens can actually generate legitimacy, and interact with the democratic system as a whole.

1 The G1000

In order to answer these questions, we will analyse the multi-faceted legitimacy of one particularly interesting mini-public, the Belgian G1000. The G1000 is an exceptional case for several reasons. First of all, the G1000 was a citizen-led initiative, in contrast to many of its foreign counterparts that were initiated by public institutions. Its conception, organization and above all its financing were crowdfunded, and it maintained no formal ties to the Belgian governments. Secondly, the G1000 was not simply a one-off deliberative mini-public, but a complex web of different deliberative sites that spanned the entire public sphere.

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There was one deliberative mini-public (the so-called *citizen summit* in Brussels on 11 November 2011 that brought together 704 randomly selected participants) but also several *G'Offs* (i.e. simultaneously organized mini-publics all over the country) and the *G'Home* (a software application aimed at online discussion, to which all Belgian citizens could log on). After the G1000 took place, the G32, a citizen panel made of 32 randomly selected citizens among the participants of the previous deliberations, gathered for three weekends in the Flemish, Walloon and Federal Parliaments to draft policy proposals. The G1000 thus spanned the entire public sphere by encompassing randomly selected citizens as well as many volunteers and supporters, with extensive media coverage and debates in the wider public.

This G1000 grew out of a feeling of deep democratic crisis. In the aftermath of the 2010 Belgian elections, Flemish and Francophone political parties gathered to start the process of forming a federal government. After about 400 days, the talks were completely deadlocked and the party negotiators seemed further than ever from a compromise. None of them was willing to give in, because they feared defeat at the next elections. In this climate, where regionalist sentiments and discourse skyrocketed and any compromise was explicitly labelled treacherous, Belgium witnessed the rise of a number of protest movements. The *SHAME* protest march, the *Belgian Fries* revolution and the *Not In My Name* initiative were amongst others but the only systematic initiative that truly succeeded in putting dialogue between the communities centre stage on the political agenda was the G1000 citizens' initiative, albeit not without facing strong resistance (Geenens & Tinnevelt, 2012; Van Ingelgom, 2013).

In the first months of 2011, a group of citizens, under the leadership of Flemish writer David Van Reybrouck, stood up to bring citizens back in. Many late-night discussions about the possibilities of reintroducing the demos into Belgian democracy followed and soon this citizen-led initiative became a rolling snowball of public activism. Within a couple of months, we witnessed the rise of a massive citizens' movement of more than 500 volunteers that would organize what was to be known as the G1000. The G1000 aimed to bring ordinary citizens from both sides of the linguistic divide together as a mini-public to discuss salient political and public issues. It was designed as a three-step process (G1000, 2012). First, using an Internet application, every Belgian citizen was invited to name the issues that they found most important. Then, on 11 November 2011, a large town hall meeting of 704 participants (randomly selected from all inhabitants of Belgium) was arranged in order to discuss the three issues deemed to be most salient in the Internet consultation. This second phase was followed by a third, in which 32 randomly selected individuals met for three weekends in the form of a citizen panel to deliberate on the issue of work in our society and come up with recommendations.

All this did not happen in a vacuum. The road to the G1000 was bumpy. Political tensions at that time were high, and the project faced a strong nationalist headwind and also cynicism from the media and some political actors

as well as criticism from some sectors of civil society. But the project moved on, and it was internationally heralded as a shining example of democratic innovation (see the report of the international observers in G1000, 2012, pp. 102–107).

The systemic features of the G1000 did not stop with the face-to-face and online deliberations. The organization of the G1000 sparked a heated debate in the media and in the wider public sphere. Soon public opinion-makers and leaders of social groups and of political parties voiced their cheerful support or harsh criticism towards the initiative. The debate reached a peak in the days after the citizen summit and afterwards progressively transformed itself into a less visible but ongoing societal, political (and also academic) deliberation about democratic innovations and notably the promises and pitfalls of sortition as a tool to select legislators, i.e. citizens. A comparison of the political parties' manifestos before and after the G1000 shows a significant change on this question. Whereas in the run-up to the 2010 elections hardly any references to democratic innovations had been made, the 2014 manifestos were much more likely to propose ideas about direct, participatory and deliberative democracy (Jacquet, Moskovic, Caluwaerts, & Reuchamps, 2016).

It was also in the wake of the G1000 that several institution- and citizen-led initiatives of renewed forms of democracy were born, in Belgium and abroad. There are various events, such as the G100 organized by the cultural house in Ath, K35 in Kortrijk or the local branch of the Flemish Christian Democratic party of Kuurne, which arranged a G100. These grassroots events have also inspired more traditional political actors like political parties and public and semi-public bodies. G1000 projects have been set up not just in Belgium but also elsewhere: in Amersfoort, Uden and Rotterdam in The Netherlands and in Spain. G1000-inspired initiatives are also in the making in several places. Voices at the European level have called for the organization of such deliberative processes, too (Van den Brande, 2017). All these elements can help us rethink the relation between deliberative small-scale democratic venues and democracy in the whole political system (Chambers, 2009; Goodin & Dryzek, 2006).

2 Belgium as a case

The G1000 was rooted in a polity that is also of particular interest to deliberative systems literature. Belgium is a divided society, a polity characterized by deep mutually reinforcing cleavages. Economic, cultural, social and political struggles are often reduced to a political competition between the different segments of society, and this situation is often considered detrimental to democratic stability (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2014a, 2015a). Yet, Belgium is also a polity that is often praised for its ability to settle its internal tensions and divisions peacefully. In this country, the democratic solution took the form of consociationalism (Lijphart, 1981). This type of democracy is characterized by a high level of elite politics in which ordinary citizens have no role whatsoever. This gap between mass and elites is also reinforced by

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the linguistic divide (Reuchamps, Sinardet, Dodeigne, & Caluwaerts, 2017). Belgium consists of approximately 60% Dutch speakers and 40% French speakers, with around 70,000 German speakers. As our previous research has shown, these language differences impose a serious strain on the development of a deliberative system (Caluwaerts, 2012; Caluwaerts & Deschouwer, 2014; Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2014b). After all, the existence of multiple languages hinders the development of a unified public opinion necessary for the proper functioning of a democracy.

This linguistic divide is further reinforced by two specific characteristics of the Belgian polity, namely the split in the media and party systems (Reuchamps, 2013a; Deschouwer & Reuchamps, 2013). The split of the media system means that public media are only followed in part of the system. This implies that media coverage is very one-sided, and that citizens have no idea what is going on across the language border in Belgium. This leads to enduring misperceptions (and overestimations) of political differences and to hindrances in the development of a common public sphere (Sinardet, 2013). And finally, Belgium suffers from split party political systems. In this country, parties seek votes only on their side of the linguistic divide. Under such circumstances the political elites rarely talk across national or regional boundaries, such that the information streams necessary for a vibrant deliberative system are cut off.

3 Empirical material

All of the characteristics mentioned above indicate that Belgium's political and societal structures prevent citizens from hearing the opinions of "the other side" (Reuchamps, 2013b). This makes it all the more interesting to study the G1000 from the deliberative systems perspective. The aim of this book is to contribute to the research agenda on deliberative systems by offering empirically measurable translations of philosophical concepts. It moreover enhances our understanding of how political systems function and of the viability of a deliberative democracy at a larger scale.

In order to live up to these ambitions, this book can build on a rich set of empirical data. In the last couple of years since the initiative of the G1000 was launched we have collected a massive amount of data on the quality of the deliberations and the quality of the deliberative system. First, we have data from the different deliberations (G1000 citizen summit, G'Offs and G'Home, G32) from the agenda proposals to the final reports as well as all intermediary process votes, minutes of the meetings, transcripts of deliberation, preliminary reports. Second, in addition to primary data we have surveyed the participants (before and after), the organizers, the volunteers and the crowdfunders, and also non-participants (those who declined the invitation to participate in the G1000), the wider public and politicians. On top of these big quantitative databases we have conducted qualitative interviews with people from various groups in society as well as with the organizers

of the G1000. Third, as our focus is on the larger deliberative system we have collected data on media coverage, political attention and social interaction regarding the G1000. These very rich and original datasets offer the basis to empirically answer the discussion of the multi-faceted question of legitimacy.

4 Structure of the book

The central issue this book seeks to address is the legitimacy of the deliberative system and its constituent deliberative sites. This is definitely a multi-faceted and complex issue. A new type of democracy, such as deliberative democracy, requires a new conceptualization of democratic legitimacy. After all, the theoretical premises of deliberative legitimacy have rarely been translated into operational terms (Geissel, 2011). Such an approach may fall back on the work of David Easton (1965), who demonstrated the importance of understanding any political system in terms of its input, throughput and output legitimacy, as well as in terms of their interactions. *Input* legitimacy refers to the inclusiveness and responsiveness of political processes, *throughput* legitimacy is about the transparency and procedural quality of such processes, and *output* legitimacy is the effectiveness of the – policy – outcomes.

Interestingly deliberative democracy theories share the same three legitimacy concerns (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015b, 2016). In his seminal piece on deliberative legitimacy, Joshua Cohen (1998, p. 74) contends that “outcomes are democratically legitimate if and only if they could be the object of free and reasoned argument among equals”. Cohen, as most deliberative scholars (Dryzek, 2001; Manin, 1987; Parkinson, 2006), thus emphasizes the process of linking public inputs to political outputs through a certain deliberative procedure. This means that, in order to assess the quality of the deliberative process and its legitimacy, we should rely on a conceptualization of deliberative legitimacy that can fully distinguish between, but also link, the inputs, throughputs and outputs. Following the works of Fritz Scharpf (1970, 1999), scholars working empirically on the legitimacy of deliberative democracy also stress the importance of this threefold model (Bekkers & Edwards, 2007; Edwards, 2007; Geissel, 2011): democratic decision-making procedures have to be legitimate in the input, throughput and output phases. In this book, we rely on such a conceptualization of legitimacy, designed specifically to assess deliberative systems.

The first chapter goes back in time to explain how Belgium’s political and societal context made the emergence of any deliberative event very unlikely. More specifically, the chapter discusses the unfavourable impact of the divided public sphere, polarized elites and passive citizens and the linguistic divide. Secondly, it discusses the momentum that finally triggered the emergence of the G1000, after 20 years of rejected calls for a more bottom-up approach to the democratic system. A mixture of economic and governmental crisis, added to a plummeting level of trust and connection between citizens and their representatives and a nationalist backlash, indeed offered a context

in which a citizen-led initiative could offer some concrete alternative to the ongoing crisis.

In Chapter 2, we build up on this particular political and societal context and look at how the organizers of the G1000 thought this initiative could breathe fresh air into the democratic system. In order to do so, the organizers thought of several principles (inclusiveness, diversity, deliberation, openness, transparency etc.) the G1000 had to live up to and laid them down in a Manifesto, which also explained why this citizen-led initiative could bring added value to the current representative system. These principles had then to be put in practice. The second part of the chapter thus outlines the different phases of the G1000 and how this particular design allowed the process to encompass all those principles, even up to its funding, which almost entirely came from private donations.

Relying on interviews and surveys with the participants and the non-participants (those who were invited but declined the invitation), Chapter 3 will investigate several elements to answer the “who?” question of this event. First, a special focus is given to the way the participants were selected: random selection, its way of achieving diversity and the challenges it brings. Secondly, we learn more about who actually participated in terms of socio-demographic characteristics, and also in terms of motivations, perception of politics, democratic preferences and opinion about the G1000 process. The final section of the chapter will then turn to an often-overlooked category of people in the context of deliberative processes: the non-participants, whose motives and opinions about the G1000 and politics in general are outlined.

Citizen deliberation is often claimed to be able to contribute to the quality of democracy and political decision-making. Nevertheless, in order to do so, deliberative mini-publics like the G1000 have to live up to certain democratic standards and therefore have to be evaluated according to the values they pursue: inclusiveness, effective participation, fair decision-making, openness of the agenda, neutrality and independence, and responsiveness. The G1000, as any other deliberative process, had to make trade-offs between these different values. Based on surveys and interviews of the participants, Chapter 4 analyses to what extent the G1000 lives up to each of those elements, and thanks to which specific features.

The fact that the G1000 developed in Belgium brings about an interesting multilingual dimension in the study of deliberative democracy, reinforced by the will of the organizers to bring together citizens from both sides of the linguistic border at a time when the linguistic tensions between the elites were at a historic high. Chapter 5 specifically explores the intergroup deliberation related to the issue of multilingualism and linguistic justice within the deliberation. Specific measures made of the perceived discourse quality index (PDQI) and from previous experiments help us to appraise this important issue for deliberative democracy in linguistically divided polities.

In Chapter 6 we discuss a key challenge for bottom-up deliberative democracy as in the process of the G1000: the weight of the results on the political

process itself. Since no public institutions initiated this deliberation, the political uptake was deemed to be little, if any at all. An exploration of parliamentary documents, political parties' manifestos and media coverage reveals that this support for public participation and deliberation is growing among political actors but with many differences within and between parties. An analysis of survey data and interviews with politicians after the G1000 and again in 2017 indeed shows that politicians were quite supportive of the process itself of bringing citizens into a large deliberation, even if they are not ready to endorse its results. However, if there was no "substantive" impact on the governmental agenda or decisions, there was undoubtedly a more "procedural" impact, as several institutions and individual politicians have now explored and tested the possibility of organizing deliberative events, in the wake of the G1000.

Next to the political uptake, another fundamental question is whether the larger public did or did not endorse the process and its outcomes. This issue of public endorsement is analysed in Chapter 7. Even if the G1000 aimed at gathering a large and diverse public in an – as much as possible – open and inclusive process, many people were not directly involved and therefore there is no guarantee that they would support it. In order to disentangle this key question, we surveyed a representative sample of Belgians in the weeks after the G1000 and again in 2017 and compared their views with those of the participants themselves, before and after the G1000 and in 2017. These surveys allowed us to compare the participants and the broader public not only in terms of their support for the process, outcomes and results of the G1000, but also in terms of feelings of political efficacy and democratic preferences.

Chapter 8 looks at the social consequences of the G1000, that is its social uptake, its social impact. It is therefore worth investigating the potentially long-lasting effects of the organization of such a process and the development of more and more similar events in its wake. The G1000 indeed contributed to the organization of local mini-publics all around Belgium and even more in the Netherlands and elsewhere. So doing, we need to analyse what could be called the "spin-offs" or the offspring of the G1000 which are experiments that came in the wake of the G1000. On the one hand, we review all these processes and, on the other hand, we provide in-depth case studies. This twofold endeavour enables us to assess how such deliberative processes shape the current democratic dynamics and foster the public debate about democracy.

Because of its origin, design and place in the Belgian divided polity, the G1000 offers a very fertile ground to investigate a key research question for the study of deliberative democracy: how to empirically assess how deliberative systems work in the real world. The concluding chapter brings this multifaceted analysis of a specific deliberative system to the study of deliberative systems at large and discusses further research questions such as the long-term dynamics of deliberative democracy on individuals, groups and institutions.

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Conclusion

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