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Building Trust in Politics through Deliberative Democracy: Assessing the Spillover Effects of Mini-Publics on the Broader Public

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Why Should You Read This Research?

In an era of democratic backsliding, where political polarisation, declining public trust, and civic disengagement are on the rise, understanding how to rebuild public trust has never been more urgent. The necessary reforms for a green transition and an ageing population demand shared sacrifices, which are only possible if people trust that policymakers can make the right compromises across generations.

In this regard, this research tackles one of the most pressing questions in democratic theory and practice: can deliberative democratic initiatives like citizens' assemblies or mini-publics strengthen public trust, not just among their participants but across the broader public?

This thesis offers an original contribution by providing a comparative, cross-European quantitative analysis of deliberative initiatives' potential spillover effects on non-participants. While much of the existing literature focuses on micro-level outcomes among participants, this research broadens the perspective to examine whether these benefits extend to the broader public, particularly concerning trust in politicians, political parties, and national parliaments.

Grounded in an innovative theoretical framework that distinguishes between deliberative democracy as a theory, deliberative initiatives, and deliberative systems, this thesis navigates from normative ideals to empirical realities. Leveraging different sources and datasets, including the European Social Survey (ESS) and the OECD Deliberative Democracy Database, the study uses quasi-panel data to analyse the complex relationship between the spread of mini-publics and trends of political trust at the regional level.

By integrating theoretical insights from the deliberative literature since the 1980s during the so-called Deliberative Turn, along with historical precedents and rigorous quantitative methods, the thesis moves beyond abstract debates to provide practical implications and recommendations for researchers and other policymakers. Its findings not only strengthen the transformative potential of Deliberative Democracy but also shed light on the conditions (e.g., which mini-public design increases the most trust?) under which this potential can be fully realised.

In conclusion, this research is essential reading for anyone interested in democratic renewal, evidence-based policy design, and the future of political trust and legitimacy in Europe and beyond.

Acknowledgement

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Political institutions across many established democracies face significant challenges: declining public trust, rising polarisation, and decreasing voter turnout. Against this backdrop, deliberative democracy has gained prominence as a potential solution, emphasising structured, informed discussions among citizens as a means to enhance legitimacy and rebuild trust. Despite its growing theoretical and practical appeal, a key unresolved issue remains whether deliberative initiatives, particularly mini-publics such as citizens' assemblies, can positively affect trust among the broader public, beyond the limited group of direct participants.

This thesis investigates precisely this question, seeking to determine whether deliberative democratic initiatives produce observable 'spillover' effects on public trust among wider populations. The motivation stems from a critical need to address widespread democratic disillusionment, highlighting the potential for deliberative democracy to bridge the gap between citizens and their representatives. The central research question guiding this thesis is: *To what extent do deliberative democratic initiatives, specifically mini-publics, influence political trust among the broader public in European democracies?*

Utilising quantitative methods, the study analyses cross-national data from sources including the OECD Deliberative Democracy Database, the MINICOM database, and the European Social Survey, covering European countries from 2010 to 2023. The analysis examines trust in politicians, political parties, and national parliaments, incorporating control variables to isolate the specific impacts of deliberative processes at the regional level. The thesis makes an original contribution by shifting the empirical focus from micro-level outcomes (participant-focused) to macro-level societal impacts, providing one of the first comparative, cross-European evaluations of deliberative democracy's spillover effects on public trust beyond participants.

Key findings reveal that European regions that have implemented more deliberative initiatives positively correlate with higher levels of political trust. Moreover, the causal analysis implies that deliberative initiatives lead to moderate but significant improvements in trust in political parties among the broader public. Consequently, the research suggests policy implications emphasising the systematic integration of deliberative methods into democratic governance and transparent communication strategies.

Ultimately, the following chapters underscore that deliberative democracy holds significant potential not only as a normative ideal but also as a practical pathway toward democratic revitalisation. In the end, recommendations for future research and policy-makers represent a tangible output of this thesis.

1.1 Why deliberative democracy?

In an era of rising political polarisation and declining trust in institutions, democratic systems face growing challenges in fostering informed public discourse and consensus-building to implement necessary policies. Deliberative democracy has emerged as a central concept in contemporary political theory, emphasising the role of discussion, argumentation, and collective reasoning in democratic decision-making (Böker & Elstub, 2015; Bachtiger et al., 2018). Many modern scholars argue that this theory offers a framework to counter these issues by prioritising structured dialogues, citizen engagement, and informed decision-making (Gastil et al., 2012; Della Porta, 2013; Elstub et al., 2016; Boulianne, 2019). At its core lies the notion of deliberation, which is generally defined as the process of carefully considering or discussing something. Within democratic theory, deliberation is intended as the process by which individuals sincerely weigh the merits of competing arguments in their discussions on public issues (Fishkin, 2009). Theorists of deliberative democracy assert that meaningful discourse followed by consensus-based deliberation strengthens trust in public institutions (Gastil et al., 2012), democratic legitimacy (Grönlund et al., 2010), and political efficacy (Nabatchi, 2010). Moreover, democratic deliberation is necessary when there is disagreement and polarisation among citizens about what public policies should be selected or how they should be designed and enforced (Cunningham, 2002).

To gain a deeper understanding, deliberative democracy is based on the idea that legitimate decisions arise from an exchange of reasonable arguments among equal individuals (Crespy, 2014). This definition emphasises key principles of deliberation. At its core, deliberative democracy prioritises decision-making through open discussion, where arguments and collective reasoning guide outcomes rather than simply relying on a voting majority. Furthermore, all participants must be treated as equals during the deliberation process, as any form of inequality could hinder the emergence of the most compelling argument. In other words, deliberative democracy requires that all participants in public decision-making be treated as equals and engage in structured discussion based on the strongest argument.

Although deliberative democracy as a formalised branch of democratic theory has developed only recently, its foundations are far from modern (Fishkin, 2009; Ercan & Dryzek, 2015). From the early forms of deliberative assemblies in Ancient Greece to the use of random sampling in medieval councils, deliberative principles have historically played a role in public governance. Yet, their integration into modern democratic institutions remains inconsistent (OECD, 2020; OECD, 2021). Moreover, the evolution of the academic field surrounding deliberative democracy has been neither linear nor uniform. It cannot be reduced to a few influential thinkers' systematic construction of a doctrinal framework. Instead, it has emerged through a complex process in which various conceptual elements have been gradually developed, modified, and reinterpreted over time by different generations of theorists (Floridia, 2018).

In the contemporary landscape, Ercan and Dryzek (2015) wisely define it as a normative theory that describes how politics ought to be conducted, rather than an explanatory theory about existing politics, and as a transformative project since it aims to change the way politics works. Therefore, this research will consider deliberative democracy as a normative theory of

democratic governance. According to this theory, legitimate public decisions should emerge from the exchange of reasoned arguments among equal individuals. The core principles of deliberative democracy include deliberation, inclusiveness, equal participation, and prioritising the best argument. Additionally, deliberative democracy seeks to "transform" political processes and institutions by fostering informed public discourse and building shared consensus through deliberation.

Steiner (2018, p. 1) provides a clear and concise summary:

"*In a nutshell, deliberation means that all participants can express freely their view, that arguments are well justified, […] that the meaning of the common good is debated, that arguments of others are respected, and that the force of the better argument prevails*"

The most popular practical examples of deliberative democracy are mini-publics: institutions where a diverse group of citizens is randomly selected to reason together about an issue of public concern (Goodin & Dryzek, 2006; Smith & Setala, 2018). A notable example is the 2016 Irish Citizens' Assembly, in which 100 randomly selected citizens addressed polarising issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion, ultimately contributing to landmark referendums and constitutional change. Additionally, it is essential to highlight that modern deliberation can occur both at the political level (among politicians and decision-makers) and the societal level (among ordinary citizens) (OECD, 2021). Ideally, these interactions create a positive feedback loop between the two spheres.

1.2 Deliberative, participatory and representative democracy

The modern development of this theory has been influenced by the two other main models of democracy: representative and participatory democracy (Vitale, 2006; Della Porta, 2013). The first, which is the most common conception of contemporary democracy, is understood as a political model that combines direct rule by the people with delegated representation, where elected officials act on behalf of the citizens through a free mandate. This ensures responsiveness via electoral mechanisms and upholds political equality through universal suffrage (Urbinati, 2011). This model is widely recognised as being in crisis due to structural and technological changes, globalisation, and shifting perceptions of power and sovereignty (Tormey, 2014; Curato et al., 2022). Key indicators of this decline include falling voter turnout, declining political party membership, decreasing trust in politicians and institutions, and waning public interest in politics (OECD, 2024).

Conversely, advocates of participatory democracy emphasise "the direct involvement of citizens in the governance of key societal institutions, particularly within the realms of work and community life" (Elstub, 2018, p. 4). This model foregrounds inclusive and wide-ranging political engagement of citizens, distinguishing it from deliberative democracy, which prioritises structured dialogue and consensus-building. In short, participatory democracy argues that citizens should govern as much as possible, while deliberative democracy contends that decisions should be made through deliberation (idem). From a deliberative perspective, mere

consent to democratic processes and voting is insufficient, as it may stem from various motives, including passive compliance or self-serving calculation. Instead, democratic processes are legitimate when they enable and promote reasoned deliberation, not only on specific issues but also on the rules governing discourse and how they are implemented (Cunningham, 2002).

While representative democracy is typically linked to existing political systems, participatory and deliberative democracy have largely remained more theoretical than practical, and their concepts are partially intertwined (Elstub, 2018). Although often confused with one another, these two models share several overlapping features (Floridia, 2014) and pursue similar goals in addressing the crisis of political legitimacy. Both approaches offer normative critiques of representative democracy, advocate for democratic reforms, emphasise citizen capacity, and prioritise inclusion along with the expansion of meaningful participation (della Porta, 2013; Elstub, 2018; Steiner, 2018). Nevertheless, deliberative democracy can be seen as a theory that enriches and redefines participatory democracy by making civic deliberation its central focus (Gonthier et al., 2024). Finally, integrating deliberation and participation can enhance democratic processes, fostering inclusion and legitimacy in decision-making (Vitale, 2006).

Table 1 provides a summary of the key differences among the three models for clearer comparison:

Dimension	**Representative Democracy**	**Participatory Democracy**	**Deliberative Democracy**
Decision-Makers	Elected representatives	Citizens directly	Can be either citizens or representatives
Mode of Decision-Making	Aggregation of preferences (voting)	Direct engagement in decision-making with emphasis on frequent participation	Public reasoning, reciprocal justification, and deliberation before decision-making
Citizen Role	Choose representatives during elections	Actively participate in various decision-making arenas	Engage in reasoned and structured debate to influence decisions
Key Values	Governability, accountability, and representation	Citizens' empowerment, equality, and participation	Rationality, mutual respect, deliberation and consensus
View on Participation	Limited (mainly electoral)	Extensive and varied across political, social, and economic spheres	Participation is essential when it enhances deliberative quality; otherwise may be selective (e.g., mini-publics)
View on Public Deliberation	Not required; decisions based on mandate and aggregation	Optional; can include deliberation, but is often vague about methods	Central and essential; legitimacy stems from reasoned argument and inclusion of all affected
Critique of Other Models	May be seen as elitist or insufficiently participatory	May be vague or unrealistic about scale and complexity	May be technocratic or elitist if limited to experts or mini-publics
Strengths	Stable governance, institutionalised accountability	Democratic empowerment, addresses inequality, educative effects	Increases legitimacy, fosters mutual understanding, and better decision quality
Challenges	Voter apathy, legitimacy deficits, elite capture	Coordination and applicability in large-scale societies,	Inclusion vs. deliberative quality trade-offs; potential elitism in practice

		ensuring meaningful impact	
Example instruments	Parliaments, political parties, and elections	Referendums, local councils, and participatory budgeting	Citizens' assemblies, deliberative polls, consensus conferences

TABLE 1: Differences and main concepts of deliberative, participatory and representative democracy. Elaborated by the author

In conclusion, although the deliberative model of democracy emerged later than its participatory and representative counterparts, its academic prominence has grown substantially since the end of the 20th century. Figure 1 illustrates the frequency with which the terms "Deliberative Democracy," "Participatory Democracy," and "Representative Democracy" have appeared in English-language books published since 1975. While "Deliberative Democracy" first appeared in 1980, references to it surged during the 1990s and continued to rise in the following decades. This trend coincides with what has been described as the "deliberative turn" in democratic theory (Dryzek, 2002).

Importantly, the data suggest not only an increase in usage but also a possible conceptual consolidation. The frequent co-occurrence of the terms "deliberative" and "democracy", more so than the pairings of "democracy" with either "participatory" or "representative", may indicate the emergence of a doctrinal interpretation rather than only a shift in popularity. In this light, the rising salience of deliberative democracy could reflect its establishment as a distinctive and influential paradigm within democratic theory.

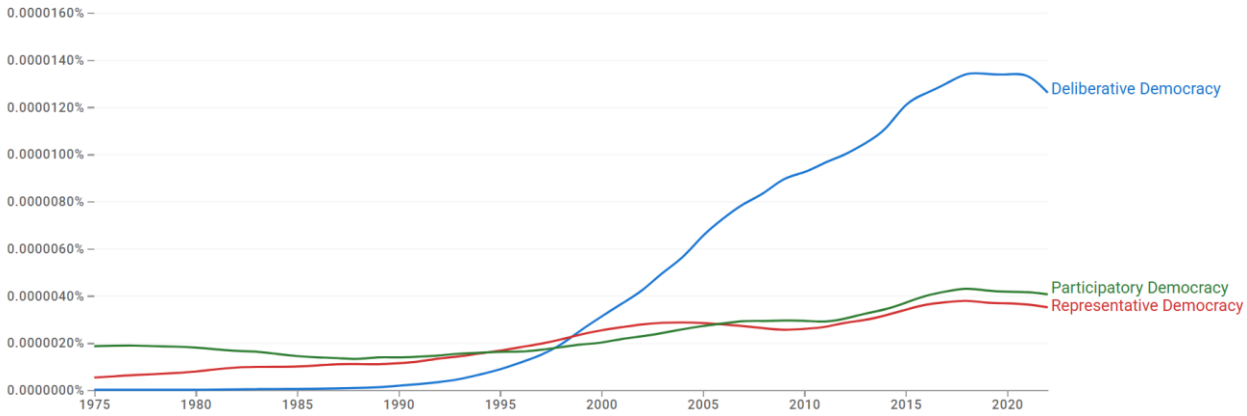

Figure 1: Google Books Ngram Viewer. Search "Deliberative democracy, Participatory Democracy, Representative Democracy" 1975-2022, publications in English. The Y-axis represents the percentage of bigrams (pairs of consecutive words) relative to the total number of bigrams found in a sample of books written in English and published in the United States.

1.2 Embedding deliberation into the political system

Despite its increasing academic influence, how prevalent is the term in everyday discourse? Translating complex theoretical concepts from academia to public understanding and practical settings has always posed a challenge. If many people struggle to define democracy, how likely can they grasp deliberative democracy? Ask your parents, friends, or colleagues, "How would you define deliberative and participatory democracy?" The responses might highlight the gap between scholarly discourse and public awareness. While deliberative democracy has partly shaped institutional frameworks and policy discussions in recent years, its practical implications remain primarily confined to experimental settings and academic circles (Gastil, 2018; Alnemr et al., 2024). Bridging this divide requires scholarly debate and efforts to embed deliberative ideals into everyday political culture, media discourses, and civic education. Only then can deliberation become a lived democratic experience rather than an abstract theoretical construct, allowing society to benefit from its positive effects.

Moreover, actual deliberative outcomes are rarely binding in policymaking (OECD, 2021). Most initiatives serve as consultation tools rather than actual decision-making mechanisms. This creates a fundamental tension: while it has been observed that deliberative democracy strengthens legitimacy and trust (Goodin & Dryzek, 2006; Grönlund et al., 2010; Landwehr & Schäfer, 2023), it often lacks direct political influence. There is a tension between deliberative groups and policymakers, as the latter often prioritise party agendas, elite advice, and political accountability over deliberative outcomes (Pálsdóttir et al., 2023). How can democratic institutions move beyond tokenistic deliberation and ensure citizen input leads to tangible policy changes? Embedding deliberation into policymaking depends on how institutions engage and integrate deliberative processes and the degree to which the political system promotes and values deliberation.

Finally, linking deliberative theory to the needs of democratic societies requires expanding the scope of action. Micro-level deliberative initiatives have informed experts about best practices for deliberative settings, as well as their effects and limitations. However, to fully realise its potential to enhance democratic institutions, deliberative democracy must be understood systematically, with local, regional, and national institutions embedding these practices to strengthen their legitimacy, effectiveness, and democratic quality.

Thus, the key challenge is not just understanding deliberative democracy as an academic concept but exploring how (and if) it can function in real-world governance. How can deliberative democracy be systematically integrated into local, regional, and national institutions? How deliberative is an institution, and what does this imply for its operations? More importantly, can deliberative democracy strengthen public trust in democratic institutions beyond one-off experiments? These are the questions that will guide the discussion ahead.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1 Brief historical background: *How democracy's past can guide its future?*

As noted earlier, deliberative practices have existed long before the 21st century. Various forms of consensus-based decision-making, similar to deliberative practices, have appeared throughout history (Fishkin, 2009). A short overview of what historical examples were implemented may help understand how deliberation and participation have participated in the evolution of democracy over history. From ancient assemblies to medieval councils, deliberation has played a key role in shaping political processes and citizens' modes of participation. However, historical implementations of deliberation varied significantly in terms of inclusivity (Which parts of the population are included?), institutional design (How is deliberation embedded in public institutions?), and the extent to which decisions were binding, offering valuable lessons for modern democratic innovations. One of the enduring deliberative challenges throughout history has been the aspiration to ensure that institutional bodies reflect the diverse perspectives of the broader population. As will be discussed, while self-selection often leads to homogeneous groups (Ryfe, 2005), in contrast, random sampling promotes diversity and representativeness (Fourniau, 2019). However, it remains costly and difficult to implement and can lead to a trade-off between deliberative quality and inclusion.

In the 4th century BC, following the reforms of Cleisthenes, regarded as "the father of Athenian democracy" (Marchettoni, 2018), Athenians implemented participatory bodies and lottery-based sortition[1] to select citizens to participate in important public decisions. They set up an early form of deliberative democracy through institutions and practices encouraging public discussion and collective decision-making (Fishkin, 2009). The Athenian Assembly, "*Ekklesia*", composed of thousands of citizens, played a central role by debating and voting on laws, the *poleis'* administration, and foreign affairs. Although not all citizens actively engaged in speaking and many were excluded (e.g., women, slaves), the assembly functioned as a large-scale participative body where different perspectives were openly debated as everyone had the right to speak (Marchettoni, 2018).

Another great innovation was the establishment of an institutional body, the Council of 500 "Boule, " whose members were selected by sortition. The council prepared issues for assembly discussion through its agenda-setting power, ensuring structured debates (idem). In addition, courts embedded deliberative features, with large panels of citizen-jurors chosen by sortition making legal decisions (Cammack, 2021). The Kleroterion, an ancient stone mechanism, was utilised for random selection, demonstrating early knowledge of random sampling (Hansen, 1999). Despite its limitations in inclusivity and representativeness, the Athenian model serves as an early prototype of democracy with features of structured deliberation, where ordinary citizens, not just elites, engaged in shaping policy. This principle supports contemporary efforts to incorporate deliberation into policymaking through randomly selected citizen panels and

[1] Lottery-based sortition is the random selection of citizens to participate in democratic initiatives or even hold public office in order to obtain a representative sample.

other forms of participative bodies to prevent policy capture by interest groups. These dynamics were similar in Ancient Greece, where randomisation and the frequent rotation of public offices aimed to preserve democratic principles against oligarchic tendencies.

Another notable example is the Republic of Florence in the 14th and 15th centuries. In the middle of the Italian Renaissance, an early form of deliberative democracy was locally implemented through a random selection system for public office holders, ensuring broad citizen participation and reducing corruption. In this context, Boutier et al. (2014) argue that public deliberation became increasingly important from the late 14th century. However, it primarily occurred in quasi-informal assemblies, such as the *consulte e pratiche*, which dealt with pertinent issues almost daily, rather than in legislative councils, which would later become the "natural" setting for such discussions in subsequent centuries.

Most Florentine officials, including the executive body, were selected through a multi-step lottery process, with short office terms to prevent power concentration among the city's strong elites. Some municipal councils, also chosen by lot, could approve or reject laws but could not propose them, while advisory bodies allowed elite deliberation without formal decision-making power (Sintomer, 2010). Although political discussions occurred in institutional arenas, guilds, and public spaces, formal deliberation remained limited and controlled, reflecting a mixed republican model rather than a democratic system as we understand it today. These transformations arose from the considerable power of Florentine families, which led to social tensions.

These two political settings have been widely regarded as a flourishing period for political innovation. Ancient Athens is considered the earliest known example of a democratic society. Its historical development represented a significant democratic experiment, shaping many traditions within democratic theory, including deliberative democracy (Fishkin, 2009). Conversely, the Florence of the Renaissance is often discussed in political philosophy because of the innovative ideas of many of its thinkers, such as Machiavelli and Lorenzo de' Medici. In the chapter "Institutionalising Ambitious Expression", Holman (2018) explores how Machiavelli's thought ultimately supports the idea that political institutions should provide structured spaces for deliberation. Machiavelli argues that the people's political will must be expressed through institutions that filter and refine public desires into articulate, self-conscious deliberative forces. This notion directly aligns with contemporary theories on deliberative democracy, which emphasise the role of structured dialogue in shaping informed public opinion and policy legitimacy.

In conclusion, these historical examples illustrate that deliberation is not a novel idea but a recurring feature of democratic experimentation across different cultural and temporal contexts. Recognising this historical background helps contextualise the rise of deliberative democracy as a contemporary framework while also revealing the persistent tensions between elite control, popular participation, and the institutionalisation of deliberative processes. By studying how past societies balanced inclusivity, legitimacy, and decision-making efficiency, modern democracies can draw lessons for embedding deliberative principles into governance structures that are both representative and effective. The modern proliferation of mini-publics as emblematic instruments of a more deliberative democracy relies on the method of participants' sortition, which, as aforementioned, can be traced back to Ancient Greece.

Although random selection is not a necessary condition for many, some scholars, such as James Fishkin (2009), the creator of Deliberative Polls[2], have consistently advocated for random selection as the benchmark for a deliberative microcosm and a defining characteristic of deliberative democracy. Nevertheless, most definitions of deliberative democracy do not explicitly incorporate this concept. As will be explained later, differentiating between deliberative democracy as a theory and its practical applications is helpful for addressing these types of definition issues.

2.2 The deliberative turn and forerunners of deliberative democracy

The origins of modern deliberative democracy are rooted in a multidisciplinary approach that combines philosophical insights with empirical analysis to understand how deliberation functions in both institutional and non-institutional contexts (Bachtiger et al., 2018). This model gained prominence during the "deliberative turn" of democratic theory, a significant shift that emerged between the 1980s and early 1990s (Dryzek, 2002). Its rise is closely linked to the decline of participatory democracy, which flourished in the 1960s and 1970s through broad-based social movements, such as student, civil rights, and anti-war activism, that mobilised citizens using participatory strategies and ideals, exemplified by the 1962 Port Huron Statement (Floridia, 2014; Bherer et al., 2016). Supported by scholars like Robert Dahl, participatory democracy was seen as a viable alternative to representative liberal democracy (Floridia, 2018).

However, by the late 1970s, the influence of participatory democracy began to fade due to scalability issues, the shift toward fragmented and issue-specific activism (Pateman, 2012), and the rise of market-oriented governance driven by the neoliberal era, which prioritised managerial efficiency. These developments gradually eroded participatory practices throughout the 1980s (Hilmer, 2010), creating the conditions for deliberative democracy to emerge as a new dominant paradigm in democratic theory (Chambers, 2000; Della Porta, 2013). Indeed, this decline in momentum created an opportunity for scholars to explore new perspectives, drawing on the shortcomings and limitations of both representative and participatory models. Rather than being simply a direct consequence of these models, the deliberative turn should be understood as an approach that emerged within the field of democratic theory, driven by the search for new avenues and solutions to democratic innovation.

In this context, the book "Beyond Adversary Democracy" by Jane Mansbridge (1980) is particularly emblematic of this transition period. The author critically analysed participatory initiatives, examining their limitations, and suggested new frameworks emphasising the need to embed more rationality and mutual respect. Mansbridge explored the decline of participatory democracy through an in-depth empirical study of two small American towns that were implementing participatory practices, analysing their procedural dynamics and internal tensions. In one town, decisions were made through traditional town meetings. At the same

[2] Developed at Stanford University, Deliberative Polling is a method of gauging public opinion by first polling a random, representative sample, then engaging participants in structured discussions with experts and leaders, followed by a second poll to measure informed opinion shifts.

time, in the other, a grassroots urban organisation functioned as a workplace democracy, relying on consensus-based discussions rather than majority rule. Her analysis introduced the theoretical distinction between unitary and adversary democracy, moving beyond traditional dichotomies like participation vs representation (Beerbohm, 2015). Rather than opposing models, these categories represent different (democratic) decision-making processes.

The key distinction lies in the nature of interests involved: adversary democracy is based on the idea that individuals and groups have conflicting interests that require negotiation and competition. Typically applied to larger-scale democracies, this model assumes that political decisions result from bargaining and power struggles rather than consensus. In this model, democratic legitimacy stems from equal power distribution, typically through mechanisms like voting, which ensures fair aggregation of competing preferences. In contrast, unitary democracy emphasises dialogue and consensus based on shared interests, assuming that citizens can work together toward a common good rather than competing for individual or group interests. Here, legitimacy arises not from power balancing but from equal respect, mutual understanding, and a shared commitment to the common good.

Although the applicability of such concepts to real-world contexts remains unclear, as the author does not address how or why it could be effectively implemented (Fellman, 1982), this second category (unitary democracy) establishes the original groundwork of deliberative theory (Beerbohm, 2015; Floridia, 2018). Given the shortcomings of participatory democracy, Mansbridge highlighted the need to prioritise mutual understanding and public deliberation over simply maximising participation through voting in participatory settings.

2.3 Creating the Deliberative Democracy Theory

In the same year, the expression "deliberative democracy" entered scholarly and constitutional discourse in 1980, when the American scholar, Joseph M. Bessette, published the article *"Deliberative Democracy: The Majority Principle in Republican Government"* in the volume "*How Democratic is the Constitution?"*, edited by Robert A. Goldwin and William Schambra. Although deliberative democracy was not Bessette's primary research focus, he is widely credited with coining the term (Tulis, 2003; Mansbridge et al., 2017; Floridia, 2018). His work marked the introduction of the term into legal and political theory, particularly within the context of American democratic thought.

Nonetheless, it was only by the late 1980s that deliberative democracy began to take shape as a distinct theoretical framework. Foundational contributions by Jon Elster (1986), Bernard Manin (1987), and Joshua Cohen (1989) were instrumental in establishing its conceptual foundations, distinguishing it from other democratic traditions, and setting the stage for future scholarship. On the other hand, philosophical contributions by Habermas and Rawls helped shape its values and ideals.

In his essay *"The Market and the Forum: Three Varieties of Political Theory"*, Jon Elster (1986) examined competing models of political interaction (Market-based, Forum, and

Technical), with a particular emphasis on the "Forum" model, in which individuals engage in deliberation, not just voting, with the possibility of changing preferences through discussion. He argued that democratic legitimacy should not derive solely from the aggregation of individual preferences, as in market-based models, but should emerge through public deliberation. Citizens, he contended, should engage in reasoned dialogue, present arguments, and justify their positions with the aim of reaching decisions that reflect the common good.

Similarly, Bernard Manin (1987) critiqued traditional conceptions of legitimacy based solely on procedural or aggregative democracy and proposed a shift towards deliberation as a core principle of legitimacy in democratic systems. According to Manin, legitimate political decisions must emerge from discussions in which participants engage in open debate, consider multiple viewpoints, and publicly justify their decisions. In his opinion, deliberation requires free and equal participation, where everyone can speak and be heard; reciprocity, where participants are open to revising their views; and publicity, ensuring the process is transparent and accessible to all.

Joshua Cohen (1989), a student of John Rawls, further developed these ideas into a formal theory of deliberative democracy. In his influential article *"Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy"*, Cohen articulated a normative model in which political legitimacy arises from the public deliberation of free and equal citizens. His framework rests on several key principles. First, freedom is understood as the absence of external constraints, allowing participants to propose and discuss any position. Equality ensures that all individuals can contribute to the discourse on equal footing, free from hierarchical dominance. Reasoned justification requires that participants ground their arguments in reasons that are accessible and acceptable to others, fostering a rational and inclusive dialogue. Finally, the deliberative process is oriented toward consensus, seeking to arrive at decisions based on mutual understanding and agreement, which Cohen describes as a "rationally motivated consensus" (Cohen, 1989, p. 23). Finally, Cohen encapsulated his vision by stating:

"*The notion of a deliberative democracy is rooted in the intuitive ideal of a democratic association in which the justification of the terms and conditions of association proceeds through public argument and reasoning among equal citizens*" (Cohen, 1989, p. 72).

The development of deliberative democratic theory was also significantly influenced by the philosophical works of Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls. Their contributions shaped early deliberative models and sparked ongoing debate about the theory's scope and implementation in later years (Rostboll, 2008).

John Rawls' influence is most evident in his concepts of *reasonable pluralism* and *public reason*, which are central to his later work, *Political Liberalism* (1993). In his view, reasonable pluralism is an inherent feature of democratic public culture, reflecting deep-rooted disagreements about conceptions of the good life and the principles that justify the norms shaping collective life. Unlike a temporary deficiency to be resolved, this fundamental divergence is understood as an enduring societal feature and not something citizens should attempt to overcome (Rostboll, 2008). Rawls identifies the central dilemma of modern society as the need to reconcile citizens with divergent worldviews.

Given these premises, Rawls argued that in a pluralistic society, political decisions must be justified by public reasons that all citizens can reasonably accept. Like deliberative theorists, Rawls envisioned politics not as a mere aggregation of preferences or bargaining among interest groups, but as a forum for citizens to justify political principles to one another in ways that respect their status as free and equal, offering reasons that others could accept. Acknowledging an unbridgeable more profound disagreement (reasonable pluralism) and a logical space in which all citizens can understand public reason is closely linked to the ideas of deliberative democracy.

Nonetheless, the relationship between Rawls and deliberative democracy remains a subject of ongoing scholarly debate. While some have praised Rawls for providing a normative account of democratic legitimacy grounded in public justification, others argue that Rawls's conception of public reason is more restrictive than many deliberative models (Saward, 2002).

On the other hand, Jürgen Habermas developed a vision of deliberative democracy grounded in the critical theory tradition of the Frankfurt School, emphasising emancipation through rational discourse and the transformative aim of deliberative democracy. Central to his theory is the *public sphere*, a space where individuals engage in open debate, relying on the force of the better argument rather than coercion or strategic interests, which serves as a normative basis for deliberative democracy (Lubenow, 2012). Habermas conceives democracy not merely as a system of voting and representation but as a continuous, inclusive process of public deliberation, where legitimacy arises from the forceless force of the better argument.

Habermas advanced the concept of communicative action, where mutual understanding and democratic legitimacy are achieved through inclusive, reasoned dialogue. His *Discourse Ethics* posit that moral and political norms are valid only if they emerge from free, equal, and rational discussion among all affected parties. In *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas applied these ideas to democratic governance, advocating for procedural legitimacy based on rational discourse rather than instrumental or strategic considerations (Cunningham, 2002; Rostboll, 2008). In his view, communication is not merely a feature of democracy but its very foundation: a necessary condition for its legitimacy and vitality.

These differing emphases gave rise to a lasting division in the literature. Rawlsian-influenced theorists tend to focus on deliberation through public reason within formal institutions, such as legislatures and courts, aiming to safeguard procedural fairness and political stability. Conversely, Habermasian scholars emphasise the broader public sphere, which goes beyond institutional arenas, and the importance of communication within civil society in fostering democratic discourse (Ercan & Dryzek, 2015).

This intellectual divide continues to shape contemporary deliberative democracy theory. Ongoing debates explore how to institutionalise deliberative practices while promoting wide-ranging civic participation. Striking a balance between formal mechanisms and inclusive, dynamic engagement remains central to realising an authentic and effective deliberative democracy. Finally, their philosophical background helped to create the normative basis for political science to act and evaluate which public spaces are the correct settings for deliberation within a pluralistic society, how to create the right conditions to foster public reasoning, and to recognise the crucial role of communicative action in deliberative democracy.

2.4 Bridging theory to practice

Once the theoretical basis was set, the theory continued to evolve in the early 1990s, with scholars like James Fishkin and John Dryzek expanding its application to empirical research and institutional design. For example, Fishkin (1991), an American political scientist at Stanford University, introduced the innovative idea of "*Deliberative Polling*". This practical application involves gathering between 100 and 200 randomly selected citizens for a weekend, and it aims to enhance the quality of public opinion by equipping participants with balanced information, fostering meaningful discussions, and exposing them to diverse perspectives before they express their views. It typically begins with random sampling, where a representative group of citizens is selected to ensure political equality. Participants first take part in initial polling to express their opinions on key policy issues. They then engage in deliberation, which includes moderated small-group discussions, plenary sessions with experts, and consideration of multiple viewpoints. Finally, a final polling phase assesses how participants' views have evolved after deliberation (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005).

This growing research area extensively engaged with already existing participatory initiatives and the use of random selection to select participants. Moreover, their work fueled a growing research on the role of "mini-publics" and their potential to enhance deliberative democracy (Elstub et al., 2016), which grew extensively in the mid-1990s (Jacquet & van der Does, 2021). Beyond their commitment to embedding deliberation in real-world political contexts through these new forms of initiatives, these new-wave scholars also focused on developing methods for studying and evaluating deliberative processes, aiming to identify the necessary conditions for effective implementation. In this context, James Fishkin (2009) advocated for the use of random selection in mini-publics as the cornerstone of "a deliberative microcosm" and a defining characteristic of deliberative democracy.

To better understand, mini-publics are generally defined as institutions where a diverse body of citizens is randomly selected to reason together about an issue of public concern (Smith & Setala, 2018). They play a crucial role in enhancing deliberative democracy by providing structured environments where lay citizens can engage in informed discussions on public issues. These forums encourage informed decision-making by offering balanced briefing materials and moderated discussions, thereby reducing misinformation and fostering thoughtful public opinion. They broaden democratic participation by including diverse voices, thus countering elite policymaking dominance and generating representative insights through random selection (Goodin & Dryzek, 2006). By strengthening public deliberation, mini-publics create spaces for in-depth discussions that go beyond superficial engagement, while also countering political apathy and misinformation by encouraging active civic involvement (Ackerman & Fishkin, 2003).

Building on such insights and together with the aforementioned deliberative polls, a range of deliberative mini-public formats have been developed over time to institutionalise similar processes in various democratic contexts:

- *Citizens' Juries*: one of the earliest forms of deliberative initiatives was first developed in the 1970s by Ned Crosby in the United States (Smith & Wales, 2000). These juries consist of small groups of randomly selected citizens who briefly deliberate on specific policy issues, guided by facilitators, before providing well-informed recommendations.
- *Citizens' Forums*: These are organised public deliberation spaces where diverse groups of citizens engage in structured dialogue on various policy issues. They are broader, often open public deliberation events that aim to foster inclusive debate and generate informed public input into decision-making.
- *Citizens' Assemblies*: These assemblies were first implemented in the early 2000s, with notable examples such as the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform (2004). These assemblies bring together large, randomly selected groups to deliberate on broader issues, including constitutional or electoral reforms, often resulting in binding or strongly influential recommendations.
- *Consensus Conferences*: Developed in Denmark in 1987, these initiatives foster structured dialogue between experts and citizens. They focus on complex scientific and technological issues, enabling lay citizens to deliberate, question experts, and formulate collective recommendations.

In the following years, scholars focused more and more on the design and impact of deliberative initiatives at the micro-level. For example, the UK undertook a period of widespread public deliberation experimentation between the early 1990s and the 2000s (Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019). The mini-publics allowed researchers to conduct experiments on the deliberation process, translating the theoretical benchmark of the previous generation into empirical actions to study these concepts. Some scholars have defined this period as the "empirical turn" in deliberative democracy, given the growing body of empirical studies on specific deliberative settings, such as citizens' forums and legislatures. These studies contributed to the study participants' behaviour, preference shifts, and the quality of their deliberations (Bachtiger & Hangartner, 2010).

Anticipating challenges that have become increasingly pressing in contemporary democratic discourse, Niemeyer (2011) finds that mini-public deliberation addresses distortions in public perception caused by symbolic politics and media-driven rhetoric. Using the Q Methodology to analyse discourses and subjective reasoning before and after deliberation, the author studies the Bloomfield Track Citizens' Jury, a four-day deliberation on the future of a controversial road in Queensland, Australia, and the Fremantle Bridge Deliberative Survey, a one-day deliberation on the future of a deteriorating traffic bridge in Western Australia. The findings show that deliberation had an emancipatory effect, allowing participants to escape the influence of symbolic rhetoric.

Indeed, before those initiatives, participants' preferences were often shaped by emotionally charged symbolic arguments, but deliberation reconnected their choices with their underlying values. The study also shows that deliberation reduces the influence of symbolic politics, as seen in the Bloomfield Track case, where exaggerated environmental concerns lost dominance once participants engaged in critical reasoning. Additionally, deliberation enhances *intersubjective consistency* (the degree to which different individuals can independently interpret something and reach a similar conclusion) and *meta consensus* (shared understandings regarding the structure, legitimacy, or boundaries of differing perspectives), allowing

participants to develop a shared framework for reasoning, even without complete agreement on policy outcomes. Finally, the findings suggest that deliberation does not fundamentally change individual subjectivity but helps align diverse preferences with deeper reasoning, making deliberative democracy potentially scalable beyond mini-publics.

Although a systematic overview of the empirical findings of mini-publics is well beyond the scope of this research, Jacquet and Van Der Does (2021) have built an open-access database, MINICOM[3], gathering all the academic publications that deal specifically with mini-publics' consequences. Interestingly, the authors also constructed a typology to study the impact of these initiatives (see Table 2)

	Individual	Policy-making
Proximate	Changes in participants' opinions and knowledge	Consideration of recommendations in the media or the legislature Congruence of recommendations and policy decisions
Distant	Changes in skills and behaviour Effects on non-participants	Structural transformation of the policy-making process

Table 2: Typical examples of proximate and distant consequences of mini-publics. Source: Jacquet and Van Der Does (2021)

In conclusion, the trajectory from theoretical frameworks to real-world applications has significantly shaped the evolution of deliberative democracy. As early theoretical constructs matured, their translation into practical formats such as mini-publics revealed the transformative power of deliberation in addressing democratic deficits. These innovations allowed researchers to test deliberative principles empirically and helped reimagine democratic engagement by centring informed, inclusive, and reasoned public input. Nowadays, mini-publics continue to play a vital role in enhancing participation, public reasoning and deliberation across countries (OECD, 2020).

2.5 The fourth generation: a systemic approach to Deliberation

At the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, modern scholars, or the "fourth generation", named by Elstub et al. (2016), shifted towards a systemic approach to deliberative democracy. Unlike earlier generations that focused on structured forums or micro-level deliberative spaces, this generation views deliberation as an interconnected system that spans

[3] Van der Does, R., & Jacquet, V. (2023). The Consequences of Deliberative Mini-publics (MINICON). Retrieved from https://osf.io/qn5sm (accessed: 07/04/2025)

multiple institutions and actors. Influenced by scholars representing previous deliberative waves, such as Jane Mansbridge and John Dryzek, academia became critical of the notion of structured deliberation in isolated mini-publics, which was perceived as disconnected from mass politics (Chambers, 2009; Boswell & Corbett, 2017). The need to integrate the lessons learned from the broader political system created an impetus for new research to enhance and understand democracy on a larger scale.

In this new context, deliberation should be viewed as a system-wide process that involves diverse institutions, informal discussions, media, advocacy groups, and government bodies (Owen & Smith, 2015). Therefore, adopting a systemic approach means shifting the focus from studying individual deliberative forums to understanding how different elements of democracy (legislatures, media, social movements, etc.) interact to shape deliberation at a societal level (Mansbridge et al., 2012).

A key characteristic of this approach is the "division of labour" within the deliberative system (idem). Rather than expecting every part of the system to meet the highest standards of deliberation, this perspective allows for different institutions and actors to play their specific roles. Some parts of the system, such as expert panels or legislative debates, may engage in more structured deliberation, while others, such as protests or media discussions, contribute indirectly by raising awareness or setting the agenda on issues. This "specialisation", which can be broken down into the different stages of the policy cycle (agenda setting, policy formulation…), ensures that deliberation is distributed across various levels rather than confined to a few specific spaces. However, some have suggested that without mechanisms to ensure genuine deliberation and follow-through, this specialised, distributed model could devolve into symbolic politics, where actions appear democratic but lack substantive policy change (Boussaguet, 2016).

The systemic turn also highlights the importance of interconnections between different deliberative arenas. Instead of viewing deliberative spaces in isolation, new scholars have emphasised how arguments, perspectives, and decisions flow between various sites of deliberation. This ensures that discussions in institutional settings, such as parliaments or courts, are influenced by broader public discourse and vice versa. The ability of a deliberative system to facilitate meaningful transmission of ideas across different spaces is a crucial criterion for its effectiveness (Mansbridge et al., 2012; Kuyper, 2015).

Another prominent feature of the modern generation is its more inclusive and flexible definition of deliberation. As explained earlier, previous generations often emphasised rational discourse and consensus-building as the hallmarks of deliberation. In contrast, the systemic approach acknowledges a broader range of communicative forms, including storytelling, rhetoric, and activism, as legitimate means of participation. This shift aims to accommodate the diversity and complexity of contemporary democracies, recognising that deliberation takes multiple forms and is not limited to structured, face-to-face discussions (Elstub et al., 2016).

While the broader definition of the systemic approach offers significant advantages, it also presents challenges. One primary concern is the risk of 'concept stretching', where the definition of deliberation becomes so broad that it loses its analytical clarity. Steiner (2008) argues that deliberation has become a blurred term, often misused to describe any form of

communication. This overuse risks making deliberation synonymous with mere talk. Moreover, broader definitions create problems for operationalisation. As recognised by Boswell and Corbett (2017), the conceptual ambiguity poses challenges in defining variables that measure systemic deliberative democracy, in contrast with the strictness of other Democracy Indexes (e.g., Freedom House, Democracy IV), which principally refer to Dahl's strict 'proceduralism'. Finally, the emphasis on systemic interactions may raise questions about democratic equality, particularly concerning the balance of whose voices are heard and how power is distributed within the system.

New concepts emerge within a systemic perspective that broaden the understanding of deliberative democracy. First, the notion of 'deliberativeness' captures the degree to which public decision-making across an entire political system is marked by inclusive, reasoned, and reflective dialogue. It highlights how institutions, public spheres, and communication channels enable open debate, articulating diverse viewpoints and the rational justification of policies (Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019; Fleuß & Helbig, 2021).

Second, the concept of 'spillover' addresses how implementing mini-publics influences citizens' political attitudes and behaviours beyond the deliberative setting. This includes examining whether the impact of deliberation persists as participants return to their everyday lives, a consideration that gains importance in light of proposals advocating for the widespread institutionalisation of such initiatives, ensuring that all citizens might eventually have the opportunity to participate (Niemeyer, 2014). Furthermore, some scholars argue that mini-publics' influence may extend beyond direct participants, shaping the civic dispositions and engagement of the broader public (Goodin & Dryzek, 2006).

The spillover effects of mini-publics on those not participating in the process (non-participants) occur mainly through two mechanisms: *cultivation* and *contagion*. Cultivation occurs when non-participants encounter mini-publics via media coverage, official documents, or public broadcasts, which can influence their political views, enhance their knowledge of issues, and build trust in deliberative practices, particularly when the mini-public is viewed as credible and representative (Gastil et al., 2018; van der Does & Jacquet, 2023). In contrast, contagion involves interpersonal sharing, where participants relay their experiences to their social circles, potentially igniting political discussions and increasing civic awareness among peers (idem). Although these mechanisms tend to be modest and context-based, they imply that mini-publics can quietly broaden their democratic influence beyond just the immediate participants.

In conclusion, concerns about the ability of forums and discussions to scale effectively have driven a more comprehensive approach to deliberation, focusing on how macro-level institutions can reflect or encourage deliberative practices (Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012). A systemic approach to deliberative democracy addresses the scale problem by acknowledging that deliberation occurs across multiple spaces and levels, from local initiatives to national governments. Additionally, this approach considers interdependence within the system, as deliberative deficiencies in one area can be counterbalanced by strengths in another, ensuring a more robust and effective democratic process. Finally, deliberativeness and spillover emerge as new central concepts for future research, aiming to measure the impact on the broader public.

CHAPTER 3: CONTEMPORARY DEFINITIONS AND EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

3.1 Contemporary definitions of deliberative democracy: theory, practices and systems

The previously outlined theoretical evolution illustrates how scholars of deliberative democracy have progressively refined their analytical lenses over time. Initially rooted in philosophical definitions and normative concepts, their focus shifted toward empirical investigations of micro-level initiatives, examining deliberative practices in specific contexts. Over time, this evolution culminated in a more systematic and comprehensive approach integrating theoretical insights and empirical findings to better understand deliberation in practice. To define deliberative democracy in accordance with the times, several considerations must be made.

Ontologically, deliberative democracy is understood as a framework that integrates various communicative practices and institutions aimed at facilitating public reasoning. It is not merely a collection of individual deliberations; rather, in light of the systemic turn, it constitutes a complex system where different components interact to promote democratic discourse and reach consensus-based decisions (Bevir & Chan, 2023). From an epistemological standpoint, deliberative democracy is valued for its potential to enhance the quality of collective decision-making. The deliberation process allows for the pooling of diverse perspectives, leading to more well-reasoned outcomes (Bohman, 2006). In this sense, deliberative democracy should also impact the broader system and enhance the democratic quality of public institutions.

To be specific and to avoid definitional problems, this research proposes a distinction between deliberative democracy, deliberative practices (or initiatives), and the deliberative system. This distinction mirrors the evolution of deliberative democracy theory within academia. The initial impetus, primarily represented by Mansbridge, Habermas, Rawls, Colin, Elster, and Manin, established the theoretical benchmark and differentiated this form of democracy from others. The empirical turn, centred on figures like Fishkin and Dryzek, focused on deliberative initiatives and empirical studies, laying the groundwork to understand mini-publics' impact. Finally, the contemporary systemic approach introduced a broader perspective that culminated in the concept of the deliberative system.

By making these distinctions, two key operations emerge. First, separating theoretical ideals from their practical applications may help clarify how abstract values are translated into real-world practices. For example, following the empirical turn, a problem arises when defining what constitutes "good" and "bad" reasoning. Although these definitions can be based on available evidence, logic, consistency, and support, a degree of subjectivity inevitably emerges at some point. Distinguishing between normative theory and practical applications can help contextualise and operationalise theoretical concepts with a degree of flexibility. Moreover, other definition problems can be solved. Random selection is widely recognised as a defining characteristic of deliberative initiatives, but, at the same time, it is not usually included in definitions of deliberative democracy.

Moreover, this differentiation may also help consider the nuances of a country's or region's norms and values. This approach may prevent the adoption of an exclusively Western-centric vision of deliberative democracy by distinguishing between the theory, context-dependent deliberative initiatives, and how deliberative a State or region is systematically. Although different philosophies and traditions of deliberative practices are beyond the scope of this research, several references to non-Western countries can be found in the literature, and similar models have emerged outside Europe and North America[4]. For example, Fishkin et al. (2019) implemented a deliberative poll in China. Despite the authoritarian context, the process led to informed, representative, and public-spirited decisions, showing measurable attitude change, increased knowledge, and limited elite dominance. The paper suggests that, even in non-democratic settings, structured public deliberation can meaningfully influence policy-making.

A clear demarcation also enables policymakers to design interventions more effectively. Using the theory as a benchmark, they can focus on improving single deliberative practices while remaining aware of their broader impact on the overall political system. By ensuring that enhancements at the micro-level contribute to a more resilient and coherent democratic framework, experts can design policies that impact different arenas of deliberation, actors or institutional processes. The following sections outline three interrelated yet distinct concepts—deliberative democracy (DD), deliberative initiatives (DP), and the deliberative system (DS)—each representing a key dimension of how deliberation is theorised, practised, and institutionalised today.

Deliberative Democracy (DD)

Deliberative democracy is a normative theory grounded in democratic theory (Curato et al., 2017), which encompasses a transformative project (Ercan & Dryzek, 2015). It seeks to establish principles, values, or ideals that should guide political practice rather than merely analysing existing political systems empirically. In this model, the legitimacy of decisions arises from the exchange of reasoned arguments between free and equal individuals. Rather than relying solely on voting or aggregating individual preferences, this approach emphasises open discussion, mutual justification, collective reasoning, and the exchange of diverse perspectives among citizens and decision-makers. The idea is that through inclusive, reflective debate, policies and outcomes can be better justified and more broadly accepted (Fishkin, 2009), leading to positive effects on the public.

Deliberative initiatives (or mini-publics) (DP)

Deliberative initiatives refer to the concrete methods and activities through which the deliberative democracy transformative project is put into action. Farrell et al. (2019) identify two key characteristics of mini-publics: first, they must be deliberative, enabling participants to reach decisions through informed and well-reasoned discussions; second, they should represent a randomly selected, representative cross-section of the broader population. Therefore, following Fishkin (2009) and OECD (2020), deliberative initiatives are characterised by the random selection of participants. These include structured dialogues,

[4] For more information about non-Western deliberative initiatives see: *Part VI: Deliberative Democracy Around the World* in *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy* (Bächtiger et al., 2018) and *Decolonizing deliberative democracy: Perspectives from below* (Banerjee, 2022).

citizen assemblies, public forums, deliberative polling, and other mini-public formats designed to foster informed, respectful debate among participants. Such practices aim to implement deliberative democracy in the real world and create an environment where diverse viewpoints are considered and collective reasoning helps shape policy decisions.

Similarly, the OECD (2020) defines them as processes in which a randomly selected, representative group of citizens dedicates significant time to learning about relevant issues and engaging in facilitated deliberation, ultimately collaborating to form collective recommendations for policymakers. In its 2020 report "Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions", the OECD compiled an extensive database of such initiatives from around the world, enabling the development of a typology of their most common forms (see TABLE 3).

Category	Model Name	Short description
Informed Citizen Recommendations on Policy Questions	**Citizens' Assembly**	A large, randomly selected group of citizens that deliberates over policy issues and produces recommendations.
	Citizens' Jury/Panel	A smaller group of randomly selected citizens who engage in structured deliberation on policy issues.
	Consensus Conference	A deliberative process where a panel of citizens questions experts and deliberates on scientific and technological issues.
	Planning Cell	A process in which multiple small groups deliberate simultaneously on a policy issue and produce collective recommendations.
Citizen Opinion on Policy Questions	**G1000**	A large-scale deliberative event where citizens discuss broad policy issues and vote on proposals.
	Citizens' Council	A small, randomly selected group that meets periodically to discuss and provide input on policy matters.
	Citizens' Dialogues	Public meetings or forums where citizens engage in discussions on policy issues.
	Deliberative Poll/Survey	A method where a randomly selected group participates in a survey before and after deliberation to measure opinion shifts.
	WWViews (World Wide Views)	A global deliberative process where citizens discuss global policy issues and provide input to policymakers.
Informed Citizen Evaluation of Ballot Measures	**Citizens' Initiative Review**	A panel of citizens evaluates ballot measures, discusses pros and cons, and produces an impartial statement for voters.

Permanent Deliberative Bodies	**The Ostbelgien Model**	A permanent citizen council that sets deliberative agendas and oversees citizen panels on various policy topics.
	City Observatory	A continuous citizen-based body that monitors and advises on urban policy issues.

Table 3: Types of deliberative initiatives. Source: OECD (2020)

Deliberative System (DS)

Using a systemic lens, the concept of a deliberative system frames deliberation as a communicative activity that unfolds across multiple, diverse, yet partially overlapping public spaces, emphasising the necessity of interconnection among them. This approach envisions deliberation on a mass scale, fostering broad democratic engagement. Additionally, it highlights the importance of a division of labour within the system, recognising that different actors and institutions contribute in distinct yet complementary ways. Finally, it seeks to establish criteria for 'deliberation' across the vast array of institutions and processes that characterise contemporary polities (Elstub et al., 2016).

As described by Parkinson and Mansbridge (2012), a well-functioning deliberative system integrates three key functions: epistemic, ethical, and democratic. The epistemic function ensures decisions are informed, fact-based, and reasoned by incorporating diverse perspectives and expertise. The ethical function fosters mutual respect, recognising all participants as valid contributors to the discussion, and preventing exclusion based on bias or partisanship. The democratic function guarantees inclusive participation, ensuring marginalised voices are heard, and deliberation reflects the full diversity of society. These functions create a legitimate, balanced, and effective deliberative system that enhances democratic decision-making.

3.2 Narrowing down the Empirical Literature of Deliberative Initiatives

Building on the theoretical distinctions and conceptual clarifications presented thus far, this chapter now turns to contemporary understandings of deliberative democracy as they are operationalised in both scholarly discourse and real-world practice. While earlier sections established the deliberative paradigm's normative ideals and academic evolution, the focus now shifts to how these ideas are applied to and impact today's complex political environments. This includes examining how deliberative democracy is defined not merely as a theoretical model, but also as a set of practices and systemic arrangements that span various levels of governance. By exploring the nuances of deliberative democracy (DD), deliberative initiatives (DI), and the deliberative system (DS), this chapter aims to provide a multi-dimensional framework that reflects both the empirical richness and conceptual precision necessary for contemporary democratic analysis.

As stated before, the theoretical benchmark of deliberative democracy has laid the groundwork for its empirical tests. Indeed, various forms of deliberative initiatives (e.g., Deliberative Polls, Citizens' assemblies, and Citizens' panels) have occurred worldwide since the 1980s. Starting with experimental settings, scholars have sought to understand the impact of such practices on participants' behaviour, shifts in their preferences, and the perception of public institutions and leaders. Existing research tends to agree that ordinary citizens can better discuss complex political issues once they participate in mini-publics (Curato et al., 2017). Other factors such as trust, political efficacy, and legitimacy remain subject to debate. Moreover, the broader impact of these innovations beyond the deliberation room remains uncertain.

Rather than reviewing all the empirical literature findings, the MINICOM database will serve as a tool to guide the selection of studies for this review. The following paragraphs will focus on research examining the impact of deliberative democracy on some of the most pressing issues of modern times: public trust and related factors such as political efficacy and the legitimacy of public institutions. This empirical review will first consider the impact on participants and then shift to a broader, systemic perspective. The MINICOM database classifies papers and publications according to these categories, facilitating the identification of relevant scholars. This selection will also be supplemented with some of the most recent works. Additionally, an overview of how the literature has conceptualised deliberativeness through a systemic lens, including the (deliberative) spillover effect, will be provided.

3.3 Effects on Participants: Trust and Perceived Legitimacy

The most common way researchers have assessed the impact of deliberative mini-publics is by examining their effects on participants (Jacket et al., 2023). Empirical studies consistently show that such initiatives can influence participants' trust in, and perceptions of the legitimacy of, political leaders and institutions. In this context, political trust itself has been defined as a multidimensional concept: diverse drivers impact how individuals may differ in their trust levels for specific political actors (e.g., politicians, police) compared to political institutions (e.g., parliaments, governments) (OECD, 2024). Moreover, trust can also differ across various levels and branches of government (e.g., local vs. regional government) (idem). The OECD has developed a comprehensive framework (Brezzi et al., 2021) that outlines public trust's key dimensions and drivers, as summarised in Table 4. While the first two dimensions, "competence" and "values", are conceptually relevant for understanding cognitive patterns, they can be challenging to capture empirically. In contrast, the remaining dimensions offer more tangible variables for empirical analysis. Notably, the Institutional Role dimension underscores the distinction between trust in individual politicians and trust in political institutions such as parliaments. Furthermore, socio-political factors (including individuals' income and education levels) also play a pivotal role in shaping public trust. Lastly, temporal dynamics and the impact of crises are essential considerations in any trust analysis.

Dimension	Public Trust Driver	Description	Relevance to Politicians, Parties and Political Institutions
Competence	Responsiveness	Ability to listen and respond to public needs and crises effectively	Reflects how well politicians and parties respond to constituents' concerns and crises
	Reliability	Consistency and dependability in delivering on promises and public services	Influences trust in parliamentary stability and legislative follow-through
Values	Integrity	Adherence to ethical standards, avoiding corruption and nepotism	Central to trust in individual politicians and political parties' credibility
	Openness	Transparency in processes, communication, and decision-making	Enhances parliamentary legitimacy and reduces skepticism toward political institutions
	Fairness	Equal treatment of citizens and groups in decision-making and policy implementation	Key to mitigating distrust stemming from perceived bias or exclusion
Institutional Role	Role Differentiation	Distinctions in public trust levels across institutions (multi-level trust)	Trust may be higher in parliament than local government, or vice versa, depending on performance
Sociopolitical Context	Demographic Sensitivity	Variations in trust levels across age, income, education, gender, and geography	Helps explain trust gaps in politicians and parties among different voter groups
Temporal Dynamics	Crisis Responsiveness	Performance in times of crisis shapes long-term perceptions of trustworthiness	COVID-19 highlighted how parties and parliament must earn trust through timely action

Table 4: Drivers of Public Trust (Brezzi et al., 2021)

Turning more specifically to mini-publics, the literature generally agrees that participation in public deliberation is expected to strengthen trust in political institutions and leaders (Font & Blanco, 2007; Cutler et al., 2008; Nabatchi, 2010; Grönlund et al., 2010; Gastil et al., 2012; Gonthier et al., 2024). However, it is important to acknowledge that empirical evidence does not always support this expectation (McLaverty, 2009; Strandberg et al., 2021). These mixed findings are often linked to the diversity of deliberative settings and the ways in which they are designed, factors that significantly shape both the outcomes of deliberative initiatives and the conclusions drawn from their study and evaluation (Gastil, 2018).

In this regard, Munno and Nabatchi (2014) investigate the effects of public deliberation and co-production in the political and electoral arena by studying a Citizens' Jury. The research evaluates the "Reclaim November Ohio" initiative, where randomly selected citizens (n = 54) developed and drafted a "Statement to the Candidates" and a "Voters Guide" for a U.S. Congressional race, ultimately released to the public and distributed through various media. The study aimed to assess whether deliberative methods improve political trust, efficacy, issue knowledge, and perceptions of government among participants. The research design included two Citizens' Juries (Jury 1 and 2) participating in three deliberative events over multiple weekends. Participants engaged in expert-led discussions, candidate interviews, and structured policy deliberation, followed by pre- and post-surveys measuring changes in trust in government, perceptions and political efficacy.

The results indicate that trust in government increased significantly for both juries after deliberation. In Jury 1, the mean trust level (on a scale of 1 to 4) rose from 1.73 to 1.91 ($p = .05$). At the same time, Jury 2 showed a more significant increase, rising from 2.05 to 2.41 ($p = .05$), indicating that deliberation slightly improved perceptions of governmental trustworthiness. Internal political efficacy (belief in one's ability to understand politics) showed mixed effects: while Jury 1 saw no significant improvements, Jury 2 exhibited an increase in perceived competence (from 3.23 to 3.86, $p < .01$). External efficacy (belief in government responsiveness) also improved, with participants more likely to believe that their input could influence political outcomes ($p < .05$). This research design, which combines deliberation with pre- and post-surveys, aligns with the methodological approach commonly adopted in studies examining the impact of public participation on political attitudes.

In addition, deliberative processes can enhance political knowledge and acceptance of policy decisions. Studying an experimental citizen deliberation event held in Finland in 2006 on nuclear issues, Grönlund et al. (2010) demonstrated how, by gaining insight into arguments supporting perspectives different from their own, participants in a deliberative initiative might perceive decisions they oppose as more legitimate than they would otherwise. This study employed two deliberative treatments to examine the effects of democratic deliberation on civic virtues. In the “Vote Treatment”, participants engaged in group discussions and then decided via a secret ballot, allowing for private voting without direct group influence. In contrast, the “Common Statement Treatment” required participants to deliberate and collaboratively formulate a collective written statement, encouraging a consensus-building process. The comparison of these treatments revealed that the common statement approach led to greater knowledge gains, increased political trust, and a higher willingness for collective action.

Participants completed surveys at five time points (T1–T5), measuring changes in knowledge, political attitudes, trust, and behavioural intentions through Likert-type scales. Knowledge of energy issues significantly increased across the whole sample. The average number of correct responses on energy-related quiz items from the information material rose from 2.86 to 4.10 (mean change = +1.24, $p < .001$). For energy items not included in the written materials, scores rose from 2.06 to 2.45 (mean change = +0.39, $p < .001$), indicating learning occurred through deliberation itself. Importantly, the common statement group showed more substantial gains. For non-material-based items, their mean increase was +0.54 ($p < .001$) compared to +0.24 in the vote group (not statistically significant).

Trust in public institutions increased slightly, particularly among participants in the common statement group. Across all participants, trust in parliament rose from 2.76 to 2.86 ($p < .05$), and trust in politicians increased from 2.25 to 2.35 ($p < .05$). In the common statement group, trust in politicians showed a more marked rise. Finally, participants’ willingness to engage in non-partisan collective action, such as electricity saving, grew significantly. The belief that most Finns would save electricity if asked rose from 3.08 to 3.40 ($p < .001$). Personal willingness increased from 3.53 to 3.67 ($p < .05$). These effects were more substantial and statistically significant in the common statement group ($p = .03$ for between-group difference at T4).

A recent study by Wappenhans et al. (2024) investigates whether participation in citizens’ assemblies can strengthen democratic attitudes, particularly political trust. Using a field

experiment across six German electoral districts, the authors randomly assigned 435 citizens to participate in day-long deliberative events alongside members of parliament, while comparing them to a control group of 2,675 citizens. The assemblies focused on national political issues and included facilitated small-group discussions and direct interactions with elected representatives. Participants were surveyed before, immediately after, and four months following the assemblies to assess effects. Political trust was measured through an index combining trust in parliament, political parties, and politicians.

The findings indicate that participation in citizens' assemblies significantly increases political trust, with an effect size of +0.327 standard deviations. This increase is particularly pronounced when assemblies include elected politicians from multiple political parties, suggesting that cross-party engagement fosters stronger perceptions of fairness and inclusiveness. In contrast, events with only one party representative did not significantly enhance trust levels. The results support theoretical claims that direct, inclusive deliberation with elected officials can demystify political processes and humanise institutions, ultimately boosting public trust. These effects highlight citizens' assemblies as a promising tool to counteract democratic erosion and rebuild institutional legitimacy.

Finally, two additional trust-related factors that have been commonly examined are how the design of the mini-publics (e.g., Citizens' Assembly or Jury) may influence behavioural changes (Gastil, 2018) and the duration of those changes (short-term vs. long-term). Generally, while participating in a deliberative event may boost trust in government institutions in the short term, its long-term effect likely hinges on how decision-makers respond to the participants' input (Boulianne, 2019). If legislative bodies effectively consider or discuss recommendations from a deliberative initiative, they are expected to have a more prolonged and more substantial effect on political trust. In contrast, when the government ignores the recommendations of a mini-public, it may result in greater dissatisfaction than if it had never sought their advice at all.

Van Dijk and Lefevere (2022) examine the public's reaction to deliberative minipublics based on whether the government adopts their policy suggestions. Through a pre-registered, online survey experiment in Flanders (Belgium) involving 3,102 participants, they presented respondents with a hypothetical news article about a minipublic focused on mobility issues. Participants were randomly assigned to one of five scenarios: three featuring minipublics with different levels of policy adoption (full, partial, or none) and two placebo scenarios representing standard representative decision-making (with or without prior consultation). The study assessed four aspects of political support: overall trust in government, trust specific to mobility, perceived procedural fairness, and willingness to accept the outcomes. To analyse variations in public support, the authors included an outcome favourability variable that measured the alignment of respondents' personal policy preferences with the adopted decisions.

This study reveals that fully implementing recommendations from minipublics results in significantly greater political support than partial or no implementation. When compared with the low-consultation placebo group, full implementation raised domain-specific trust in government by +0.20 points (on a 7-point scale), procedural fairness by +0.64, and decision acceptance by +0.45. Conversely, failure to adopt the minipublic's recommendations led to reduced general trust in government by −0.24, domain-specific trust by −0.26, perceptions of

fairness by −0.64, and acceptance by −0.53. Partial adoption yielded a weaker and mixed response. These effects largely remained independent of whether the policies aligned with respondents' preferences, underscoring the importance of procedural justice. Overall, the results indicate that mini-publics can either enhance or undermine public support, mainly depending on whether governments heed their recommendations.

In conclusion, the literature points out that participants in a deliberative process are generally expected to enhance their trust in public institutions. By gaining more knowledge on a policy issue and perceiving that their engagement may influence political decisions, citizens tend to report greater political efficacy and trust. However, these effects are not uniform and depend significantly on the quality of the deliberative design and the responsiveness of institutional actors. When political authorities visibly integrate mini-publics' outcomes into formal decision-making processes, the positive effects of deliberation tend to be more sustained. Conversely, when participants' input is disregarded, trust may erode further, potentially undermining the very goals deliberation seeks to achieve.

Having examined the micro-level effects of deliberative initiatives on individual participants, the following section shifts the focus to a broader scale. It explores how deliberative democracy can be evaluated beyond the immediate context of mini-publics, considering its systemic impact and the conceptual challenges involved in measuring deliberativeness across multi-level political systems.

3.4 Measuring systemic impact: looking towards deliberativeness

Recently, scholars have explored how deliberative democracy can be scaled up by linking the benefits of small-scale deliberation to larger processes of opinion formation and decision-making (Curato et al., 2022). Although this part of the literature is still flawed and more challenging to grasp empirically (Boswell & Corbett, 2017), this expanded focus, associated with the systemic turn in deliberative democracy, provides insights into the conditions necessary for effective large-scale deliberative settings. However, it has also raised new questions about defining the boundaries of a deliberative system and the methods for studying such systems. A key challenge in this area is developing effective ways to measure deliberativeness at the systems level (Ercan et al., 2017) and assess the impact of deliberative initiatives at the local, regional, or national level.

Two of the most advanced contemporary measures of democracy fail to capture democratic deliberation adequately at the macro level. Fleuss and Helbig (2021) identify significant shortcomings in the 'Democracy Barometer' (DB) (Engler et al., 2020) and 'V-Dem' dataset (Coppedge et al., 2021) regarding their ability to measure deliberative democracy and its impact. One of the most striking issues is that DB does not explicitly conceptualise or measure deliberation as a distinct dimension of democratic quality. Although deliberation is acknowledged as a component of democratic participation, it is not systematically integrated into the measurement framework. The authors highlight that deliberative elements, such as public debate, grassroots movements, and deliberative forums, are scattered across different

parts of DB's conceptual tree but are not aggregated into a coherent deliberative index. This omission makes it difficult to meaningfully assess a deliberative quality at a larger scale.

Additionally, the indicators selected by DB do not comprehensively reflect deliberative quality. Even if more generic aspects such as press freedom and NGO participation are included, little emphasis is placed on the pillars of deliberative democracy, such as public engagement in political discussions, the presence of structured deliberative mechanisms, and the impact of public discourse on policy-making. This approach results in an incomplete and potentially misleading assessment of deliberativeness. Engler et al. (2020) argue that these limitations stem from DB's overarching conceptual structure to describe democracy, which does not fully integrate deliberative democratic theory into its measurement model. In other words, even though the DB includes some indicators that might seem relevant, it does not systematically or explicitly include the core features of deliberative democracy.

Unlike the Democracy Barometer, the V-Dem Dataset aims to measure deliberative democracy through an explicit variable (Deliberative democracy index - v2x_delibdem), which is a significant step forward in assessing the deliberative quality of democratic systems. However, Fleuss and Helbig (2021) identify several conceptual and methodological flaws in V-Dem's Deliberative Component Index, particularly in operationalising and aggregating deliberation. At the same time, Boswell and Corbett (2021) argue that V-Dem measures deliberative democracy using rigid indicators (e.g., level of consultation, respect for counterarguments, use of reasoned justification), therefore missing other dynamics that are better captured by qualitative studies, which are well-suited for context-dependent factors.

Another main issue is that V-Dem's measurement focuses unduly on "elite deliberation", neglecting deliberative processes at other societal levels. The core indicators, such as reasoned justification, common-good orientation, and respect for counterarguments, are applied primarily to elite political discussions, such as parliamentary debates and executive decision-making, rather than public discourse or grassroots deliberation. The core variables that are aggregated into the index, and their theoretical questions, are the following (Coppedge et al., 2021):

- Reasoned justification (v2dlreason). When important policy changes are being considered, to what extent do *political elites* give public and reasoned justifications for their positions?
- Common good (v2dlcommon). When important policy changes are being considered, to what extent do *political elites* justify their positions in terms of the common good?
- Respect counterarguments (v2dlcountr). When important policy changes are being considered, to what extent do *political elites* acknowledge and respect counterarguments?
- Range of consultation (v2dlconslt). When important policy changes are being considered, how wide is the range of consultation at *elite levels*?
- Engaged society (v2dlengage). When important policy changes are being considered, how wide and how independent are public deliberations?

This elite-centred approach contradicts the very essence of deliberative democracy, which emphasises inclusive, public-centred discussions. While the V-Dem Dataset includes indicators for public engagement, such as the extent of public deliberation and consultation with non-elite

actors, these are not assessed for deliberative quality. Instead, they measure whether deliberation occurs without evaluating how well it aligns with deliberative democratic principles. This creates a disconnection between the concept of deliberation and the actual measurement of deliberative quality. Boswell and Corbett (2021) argue that for deliberative democracy to be fully assessed, indicators must distinguish between different deliberative spaces (e.g., parliaments, media, civil society forums) and account for their unique roles and communicative styles.

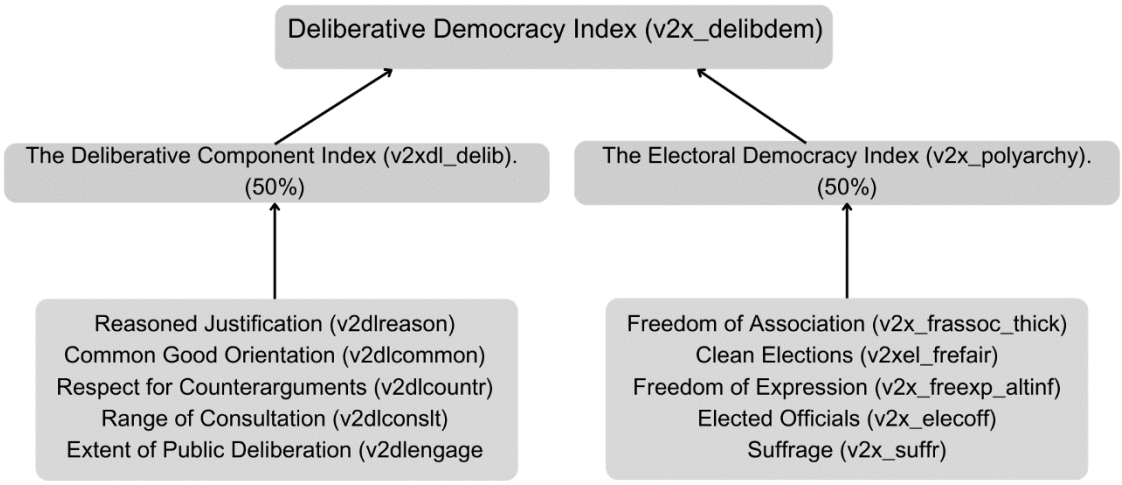

Image 1: Aggregation of V-Dem's Deliberative Democracy Index

Another methodological flaw in V-Dem's measurement is its reliance on expert assessments, which, even though they are widely used in political science, introduce potential bias and inconsistency. The indicators are based on ordinal rankings provided by country experts, who evaluate deliberative quality based on predefined categories. Many scholars critique this approach as highly abstract and subject to subjectivity, as experts must judge complex political discourses using broad, pre-determined categories (Curini, 2010). Moreover, common mistakes in expert surveys occur when assuming that aggregated scores represent reality and ignoring the variation in expert judgments (Lindstädt et al., 2020). Furthermore, cross-country comparability is weakened because deliberative practices vary significantly between democratic systems. For example, a highly deliberative public sphere in one country might be evaluated differently than a deliberative parliamentary debate in another, leading to inconsistencies in measurement.

To improve the measurement and understanding of democracy, Boswell and Corbett (2021) suggest that V-Dem should engage more deeply with normative theory. Instead of treating democracy as a fixed concept, the project should collaborate with democratic theorists to periodically revise and adapt its conceptual models to reflect their evolving nature. Additionally, incorporating rich area studies and context-based qualitative research would provide the necessary context to complement numerical indicators, ensuring that historical and cultural nuances are not overlooked. To further enhance accuracy, indicators such as the one in V-Dem should integrate qualitative meta-analysis by combining quantitative indicators with narrative-driven country studies, allowing for a more holistic representation of democratic evolution.

In previous research, Boswell and Corbett (2017) examined the challenges of comparing deliberative democratic systems and proposed two methods to address these difficulties. Existing approaches, such as systematic comparison and thick descriptive area studies, have significant limitations when applied to the study of deliberative democracy. Systematic comparisons tend to oversimplify the complexities of deliberative systems by focusing rigidly on institutional structures, while thick descriptive studies often remain too context-specific, making broader comparisons difficult.

To overcome these challenges, the two authors propose two alternative comparative methodologies. The first is the *family resemblances approach*, which categorises deliberative systems based on recurring traits rather than strict institutional similarities. This method allows researchers to identify common patterns across different systems while remaining sensitive to their contextual differences. The second is the *eclectic affinities approach*, which focuses on drawing unexpected but meaningful parallels between different deliberative systems, helping to uncover broader insights that might otherwise go unnoticed.

While debates on capturing deliberativeness at the systemic level remain unresolved, a parallel line of research has taken a more concrete route, examining the tangible effects that deliberative practices, particularly mini-publics, can have on the system or broader public sphere. Instead of solely focusing on abstract measurement, this body of work explores how deliberative innovations can influence public opinion, civic attitudes, and institutional legitimacy beyond the immediate participants.

3.5 Impact on larger publics: spillover effects of mini-publics

A limited but growing body of experimental research explores how deliberative bodies can impact broader publics. In this sense, mini-publics aim to inform policymakers or influence public opinion. Van der Does and Jacquet (2021) wrote a systematic review of the publications studying the "spillover effect" (an extension[5] of the MINICOM database) into the context of deliberative democracy, referring to the broader effects that participation in a mini-public can have on individuals' lives and engagement as citizens within the broader political system. Moreover, they also consider that mini-publics' effects may also spill over to other citizens who do not participate in a mini-public, affecting the political system.

Being remarkably forward-thinking, Goodin and Dryzek (2006) categorised many years ago the main ways in which a mini-public can influence the broader political system:

[5] Van der Does, R., & Jacquet, V. (2023). The Consequences of Deliberative Mini-publics (MINICON). MINICON_SpilloverExtension. Retrieved from https://osf.io/8hfbc (accessed: 09/04/2025)

Mode of Mini-publics Influence	Description
Actually making policy	Mini-publics are formally empowered as part of a decision-making process (e.g., British Columbia Citizens' Assembly).
Taken up in the policy process	Recommendations from mini-publics are used in the policy process without formal guarantees (e.g., Danish Consensus Conferences).
Informing public debates	Mini-publics influence public debates through media and public discourse (e.g., Australian GM food consensus conference).
Shaping policy by market testing	Used to test the viability of policies with informed publics before official rollout (e.g., AmericaSpeaks Listening to the City).
Legitimating policy	Mini-publics confer legitimacy to policies by reflecting informed public opinion (e.g., Leicester hospital restructuring).
Confidence-building/constituency-building	Increases citizens' political confidence and helps mobilise new constituencies (e.g., Reconnecting Communities in SC).
Popular oversight	Mini-publics provide oversight of authorities and public services, encouraging transparency (e.g., Chicago community policing).
Resisting co-option	Discursive and unpredictable nature of deliberation can prevent co-option by powerful actors (e.g., Clayoquot Sound Scientific Panel).

Table 5: How might mini-publics affect political decision-making? Goodin and Dryzek (2006)

Considering the literature that followed, mini-publics have been shown to positively impact both participants and non-participants through various democratic outcomes. They have been found to increase feelings of political efficacy among the general public by fostering perceptions of fairness and competence in the deliberative process (Gastil et al., 2018). Moreover, mini-publics can enhance issue knowledge, as participants gain a deeper understanding through balanced information and structured deliberation, thereby contributing to legitimacy and internal political efficacy (Ingham & Levin, 2018). These processes also lead

to meaningful opinion changes; when exposed to the informed outputs of mini-publics, the wider public may shift their views to align more closely with the considered judgments of the deliberators, sometimes seen as an informational shortcut (idem; Warren & Gastil, 2015). Finally, deliberative forums such as the Oregon Citizens' Initiative Review have been shown to affect voting behaviour by providing accessible, trusted information that voters utilise at the ballot box (Gastil et al., 2018).

The most important study in this regard is that of Gastil et al. (2018), which examines the link between micro-level deliberation and macro-level institutions. In 2009, the state governor signed a House Bill authorising Citizens' Initiative Review panels for the general election. In the summer of 2010, two stratified random samples of 24 Oregon citizens each deliberated on two statewide ballot measures over five days. At the end of each week, CIR panellists drafted a written Citizens' Statement, which the Secretary of State included in the Voters' Pamphlet sent to all registered voters. This official state voter guide is a widely used resource with the potential to influence a significant portion of the electorate.

The authors sought to determine whether this institutional deliberative mechanism influences the behaviour of a large electorate. A distinctive feature of CIR is its "cross-level deliberation," where small-scale discussions are intentionally designed to impact the process and outcomes of a large-scale election. Moreover, the two panels deliberated on highly salient and widely debated state-wide issues: (1) imposing a minimum 25-year sentence for certain felony sex crimes and increasing penalties for repeat driving under the influence offences, and (2) establishing medical marijuana dispensaries.

The paper hypothesises that exposure to the CIR Statement would influence vote choice, knowledge, and value prioritisation. The authors used two complementary approaches: an online survey experiment and a cross-sectional phone survey that reached almost 1000 citizens. Participants were randomly assigned to four groups: a control group that received no exposure to voter information; a modified control group that was shown a generic letter from the Secretary of State; a summary and fiscal statement group that was provided with official ballot information; and a CIR statement group that was directly exposed to the Citizens' Initiative Review statement.

Results showed that the exposure to the CIR Statement significantly reduced support for the first measure (sentence and penalties), dropping support by about 25 percentage points among those who read it in the online experiment and making voters three times less likely to support the measure in the phone survey. The regression models showed that the distribution of responses on the 7-point scale varied significantly across the four experimental groups, controlling for demographic and cognitive variables, ensuring that other factors did not confound the observed effects of CIR.

This research is crucial as it demonstrates how integrating small-scale deliberation into institutional processes can significantly influence public behaviour. The same results on the CIR deliberative initiative are reached by Knobloch et al. (2020), who demonstrate that political efficacy (both internal and external) alters only when non-participants become aware of a mini-public and incorporate its deliberative outcomes into their decision-making during an election.

Werner and Marien (2018) examine the impact of citizen involvement in political decision-making on the broader public's perceptions of fairness and democratic legitimacy. It focuses on whether knowledge of citizen involvement processes (e.g., citizen forums) can enhance fairness perceptions among those not directly involved in these processes. The authors conducted three survey experiments in the Netherlands with about 700 participants per experiment, manipulating the involvement of citizens and the outcomes of the decisions (favourable vs. unfavourable). The results reveal that simply knowing about citizen involvement boosts perceptions of fairness, even in cases of unfavourable outcomes and highly contentious issues, supporting the hypothesis that procedural fairness can foster legitimacy beyond the participants.

The methodology involved vignette experiments where participants watched short videos depicting decision-making processes in their communities. Their findings show that even decision losers (those who did not favour the outcome) appreciated the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process, especially when they were informed about the process, regardless of the outcome. These results suggest that the mere signal of citizen inclusion by authorities can improve perceptions of legitimacy, thus supporting the broader role of citizen involvement in enhancing democratic legitimacy.

From the viewpoint expressed by the authors:

"*The effects of citizen involvement processes are much larger than generally assumed. In particular, we argue that the effects of citizen involvement processes can run well beyond the participants in these processes. Allowing citizens to participate in decision-making processes signals to all members of the collective that their authority is interested in their views and experiences, takes them seriously and values them as members of the collective*" (Werner & Marien, 2018, p. 2)

Partly in contrast with the abovementioned research and focusing on legitimacy, Jacobs and Kaufmann (2021) find that including a deliberative mini-public in decision-making increases perceived legitimacy; however, they also show that allowing individuals to self-select into participation can be seen as equally legitimate. This suggests that mini-publics can enhance legitimacy but are not necessarily better than other participation methods. The authors hypothesise that in their scenario, the benefits of better representation through mini-publics may be offset by the downside of excluding interested individuals.

On the other hand, Boulianne (2018) completed a very interesting analysis on public opinion, political trust, and efficacy. The author used two survey-based experiments, conducted in 2013 and 2014, with 400 respondents each randomly assigned to either be informed or uninformed about mini-publics. The hypothesis was that informing citizens about mini-publics would influence their policy preferences, political trust, and sense of political efficacy.

The results showed that being informed about the mini-publics did affect some policy preferences. In the 2013 study, participants who were informed about the mini-public's recommendations showed higher support for policies promoting energy-efficient buildings, renewable energy, and greening the provincial electricity grid. For instance, 98.35% of those informed supported energy-efficient buildings compared to 93.65% of those not informed. However, other policy areas showed minimal differences between the two groups. Support for

mini-publics' influence was more evident in the first study, particularly for climate change policies, whereas the 2014 study showed less impact on policy preferences.

A consistent finding across both studies was increased political efficacy among those informed about the mini-publics. Participants felt more capable of influencing government decisions and that politicians were more likely to care about public opinion. Political trust was also higher in the first experiment among those who were informed about the mini-public, but this effect was weaker in the second experiment, which may be attributed to differences in the sponsorship and size of the mini-publics. Finally, Boulianne (2018) found that deliberative initiatives have stronger effects in more educated populations, particularly in enhancing trust and efficacy. Similarly, the aforementioned work by Grönlund et al. (2010) observed that participants with higher education levels exhibited greater knowledge gains and increased political trust following deliberative events. These findings suggest that education influences how individuals process and respond to deliberative experiences, justifying its inclusion as a control variable.

In a similar vein, the study by Germann et al. (2024) investigates how deliberative mini-publics influence legitimacy perceptions among the broader public, not just among participants. Using a large survey experiment in Ireland, the authors found that mini-publics only increase public perceptions of fairness and acceptance of political decisions when their policy recommendations are honoured. In such cases, even citizens whose own preferences are not reflected in the final decision view the process more positively, indicating that honouring mini-public outcomes helps confer broader democratic legitimacy.

However, when mini-public recommendations are ignored, these positive effects largely disappear, and perceptions of legitimacy among the general public do not improve. Interestingly, this holds true whether the final decision is made by parliament or through a referendum. The study also shows that these effects are particularly pronounced among citizens with low political trust, highlighting the potential of deliberative initiatives to engage disengaged segments of society. Overall, the findings suggest that to impact the broader public positively, mini-publics must be visibly integrated into actual decision-making processes.

In conclusion, research increasingly indicates that mini-publics not only affect participants but also shape the wider public's political trust and views on fairness, legitimacy, and political efficacy, especially when their recommendations are embraced. These spillover effects underscore the potential for deliberative processes to enhance democratic engagement throughout the system. Nevertheless, these advantages rely on visible actions from political institutions; neglecting them could diminish trust in mini-publics. Although these results are encouraging, additional evidence from various contexts is necessary to comprehensively understand and generalise mini-publics' systemic influence.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Research question, expectations and data collection

In the previous chapters, this research has explored why deliberative democracy could serve as a vital pillar for the future of our societies. It has examined historical precedents where similar participatory forms were employed and traced how academic literature has conceptualised and evolved the theory over time, highlighting its transformative potential. Building on these foundations, the following analysis assesses whether deliberative initiatives have a measurable impact on trust in politicians, political parties and parliament among the broader public across different European countries. To date, no available research appears to offer a similar and comparable cross-European analysis focusing specifically on the relationships between mini-publics and political trust, making this research an original contribution to the literature.

More specifically, the following quantitative analysis investigates whether deliberative democratic initiatives, such as citizens' assemblies or mini-publics, produce spillover effects on institutional trust among the broader public. Although these deliberative processes involve only a limited number of randomly selected citizens, existing empirical evidence suggests that their influence may extend beyond direct participants, impacting public trust, political efficacy, and perceptions of democratic legitimacy (Gastil et al., 2018; Van der Does & Jacquet, 2021; Germann et al., 2024). Given the lack of available and complete data, several choices have to be made for this analysis.

Research question: *Can deliberative democratic initiatives positively influence institutional trust in politicians, political parties, and parliaments among the broader public, despite involving only a limited number of direct participants?*

Looking at trust indicators, an outstanding dataset available online is the ESS, European Social Survey (2023). Established in 2001, it is an academically led cross-national study. It has been conducted in 40 countries, gathering data that accurately reflects the composition of each country's population on the attitudes, beliefs, and behavioural patterns of European populations. The ESS provides data on public trust across various geographical levels in Europe, based on the NUTS (Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics) classification system. This system divides the European territory into three hierarchical regional levels: NUTS 1, 2, and 3, ranging from larger to smaller areas; a visual example for the French territory is provided in Image 2. Above NUTS 1 lies the national level, corresponding to the individual Member States. Although some information is missing at different NUTS levels, it remains the most complete dataset for this analysis. Key variables for this analysis are covered in most of the countries for every round from 2002 to 2023: questions regarding "Media use and Trust", "Politics", "Well-being, exclusion, religion, discrimination, identity", "Personal and household characteristics", "Socio-demographics", and "Human values" are kept almost the same for every round and are available.

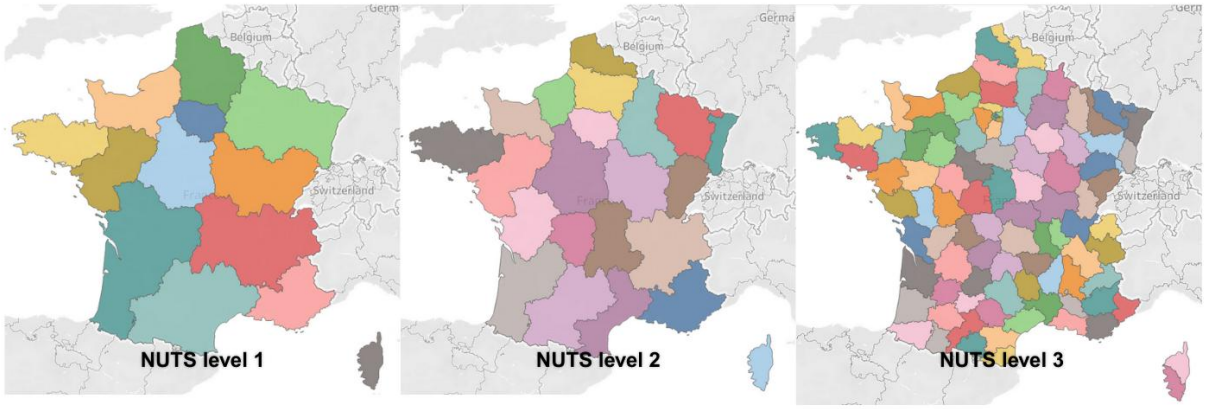

Image 2: Different NUTS-levels for France displayed in Tableau. Elaborated by the author

Recent studies exploring the impact of deliberative democracy on public trust and legitimacy have also drawn upon this dataset (Pilet et al., 2023; Van Dijk et al., 2023). A viable alternative is the Eurobarometer of the European Commission, which also includes variables related to trust. However, it poses different questions across its various waves and offers more limited data at the regional level. This analysis will utilise ESS datasets due to their completeness and granularity of data; moreover, the fact that it poses the same questions over different rounds may allow for the study of regions using cross-sectional and pseudo-panel data.

On the other hand, when examining mini-public implementation and diffusion, Participedia.net stands out as a database with over 2,000 participatory processes and is widely recognised as a key resource for studying participatory and deliberative democracy (Gastil et al., 2017). The platform crowdsources cases of democratic innovations from around the world and aggregates them into a publicly accessible database that is continuously updated through user contributions. However, while this open-platform model aligns with principles of transparency and participation, it also presents significant limitations and challenges for an analysis. Issues of data completeness, verification, and consistency emerge when analysing the dataset. Several fields (such as “end_date”, “formal_evaluation”, and “number_of_participants”) contain substantial amounts of missing or null data, making comparative or statistical analysis difficult. In addition, location data (city and province) is missing in over 1,000 entries each (Participedia, 2024).

Additionally, because the data is user-submitted, it is exposed to subjectivity, bias, and variation in quality. Entries often reflect the perspectives and knowledge of contributors, rather than adhering to standardised criteria. A major critique of Participedia is its limited peer review process (Smith et al., 2015; Landry & von Lieres, 2022). Although the platform operates on a wiki-enabled model designed to encourage broad participation, this openness can come at the expense of data reliability. The absence of systematic review procedures leads to wide variation in the quality and detail of entries, which may limit their utility for robust comparative research. Notably, even well-established academics involved in the project have expressed surprise at the appearance of unknown or poorly documented cases. This underscores the need for more

consistent oversight and editorial standards to enhance the validity and credibility of the database as a trusted resource in the study of democratic innovations.

On the other hand, the OECD Deliberative Democracy Database (2023) constitutes a comprehensive collection of over 700 representative deliberative processes and institutions from around the world, covering the years 1979 to 2023. It includes a wide range of deliberative mini-publics, such as citizens' assemblies, juries, and panels, launched by public authorities to engage randomly selected citizens in policy discussions. Each case in the database is verified and categorised by features such as the level of government involved, the policy area, the duration of the process, and the degree of institutionalisation. In this dataset, missing data are rare, and information about the locations and timing of the mini-publics is consistently documented. Therefore, due to concerns about data quality, completeness, and consistency in Participedia, this study will draw upon the OECD Deliberative Democracy Database. Its rigorous verification process, made by OECD researchers, standardised categorisation, and comprehensive documentation of over 700 cases provide a more reliable foundation for systematic analysis. The dataset's clarity in recording key variables, such as time, location, level of government, and degree of institutionalisation, ensures high comparability across cases. This makes it particularly well-suited for studying patterns and trends in implementing deliberative mini-publics over time and across different political contexts.

4.2 Descriptive overview of the data

First of all, it is essential to present the available data and provide an overview of the distribution of deliberative initiatives and trust levels across Europe. As aforementioned, while the European Social Survey (ESS) remains one of Europe's most comprehensive sources of public opinion data, it does not come without limitations. In particular, some data are missing across countries and in survey rounds. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic made it challenging to conduct in-person interviews in some countries. As illustrated in Table 6, only a subset of countries (highlighted in light green) is consistently covered for the period between 2010 and 2023, which inevitably narrows the scope of the analysis and may affect the comparability of findings across regions and over time. This timeframe has been taken into account due to limitations with regional data in Round 4 and earlier rounds. In addition, focusing on the period post-2010 may help mitigate distortions linked to the immediate aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, which triggered significant trust shocks in many European countries and could otherwise bias long-term trend analyses.

		ESS Rounds						
		5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Country	AL	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
	AT	1	1	1	1	1	0	1
	BE	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	BG	1	1	0	0	1	1	0
	CH	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	CY	1	1	0	0	1	0	1
	CZ	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
	DE	1	1	1	1	1	0	1
	DK	1	1	1	0	1	0	0
	EE	1	1	1	1	1	1	0
	ES	1	1	1	1	1	0	1
	FI	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	FR	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	GB	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	GR	1	0	0	0	0	1	1
	HR	1	0	0	0	1	1	1
	HU	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	IE	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	IL	1	1	1	1	0	0	0
	IS	0	1	0	1	1	1	1
	IT	0	1	0	1	1	1	1
	LT	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	LV	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
	ME	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
	MK	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
	NL	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	NO	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	PL	1	1	1	1	1	0	1
	PT	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	RS	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
	RU	1	1	0	1	0	0	0
	SE	1	1	1	1	1	0	1
	SI	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	SK	1	1	0	0	1	1	1
	UA	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
	XK	0	1	0	0	0	0	0

Table 6: Available countries and ‘rounds’ in the ESS dataset

In addition to temporal limitations, the dataset also varies in terms of geographical granularity. The abovementioned NUTS (Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics) classification system is structured across three levels—NUTS 1 to NUTS 3. Since the impact of a deliberative initiative is expected to be localised as the majority of initiatives are implemented at the regional or local level (OECD, 2021), a valid analysis requires access to data at least at the regional level. Table 7 displays the availability of NUTS data within the ESS for the countries selected in the analysis. As shown, most country-level data are available at the NUTS 2 level. Although NUTS 3 would offer greater precision in assessing the impact of deliberative democracy, many

mini-publics in Europe are conducted at the regional level (idem), making NUTS 2 an appropriate unit of analysis, as will be further discussed in the next section.

		Availability of regional data		
		NUTS level 1	NUTS level 2	NUTS level 3
Country	**AT**	0	**1**	0
	BE	0	**1**	0
	CH	0	**1**	0
	CZ	0	0	**1**
	DE	**1**	0	0
	EE	0	0	**1**
	ES	0	**1**	0
	FI	0	0	**1**
	FR	0	**1**	0
	GB	**1**	0	0
	HU	0	0	**1**
	IE	0	0	**1**
	NL	0	**1**	0
	NO	0	**1**	0
	PL	0	**1**	0
	PT	0	**1**	0
	SE	0	**1**	**1**
	SI	0	0	**1**

Table 7: Availability of ESS files and availability of diverse NUTS-level data for the selected countries

Given these constraints, the most robust and coherent analytical sample available consists of ten countries (AT: Austria, BE: Belgium, CH: Switzerland, ES: Spain, FR: France, NL: The Netherlands, NO: Norway, PO: Poland, PT: Portugal, and SE: Sweden) where NUTS 2 data are consistently reported. However, from these nations, Norway and Sweden do not have any regions where an initiative has been implemented at the regional or local level between 2010 and 2023, and they will be removed from the analysis. These two exclusions are acceptable because the core objective of this research is to assess the differentiated impact of deliberative initiatives at the subnational level (comparing trust in regions with and without such initiatives) rather than evaluating national-level effects. Lastly, the selected eight countries are subdivided into a total of 105 NUTS 2 regions, guaranteeing full territorial coverage and a consistent basis for assessing how deliberative initiatives shape institutional trust at the regional and local level. Image 3 gives a very simple visual overview of the differences in trust in political parties across the selected regions over time. It is evident that this dimension of political trust is unevenly distributed geographically, highlighting a strong qualitative positive correlation with countries' GDP.

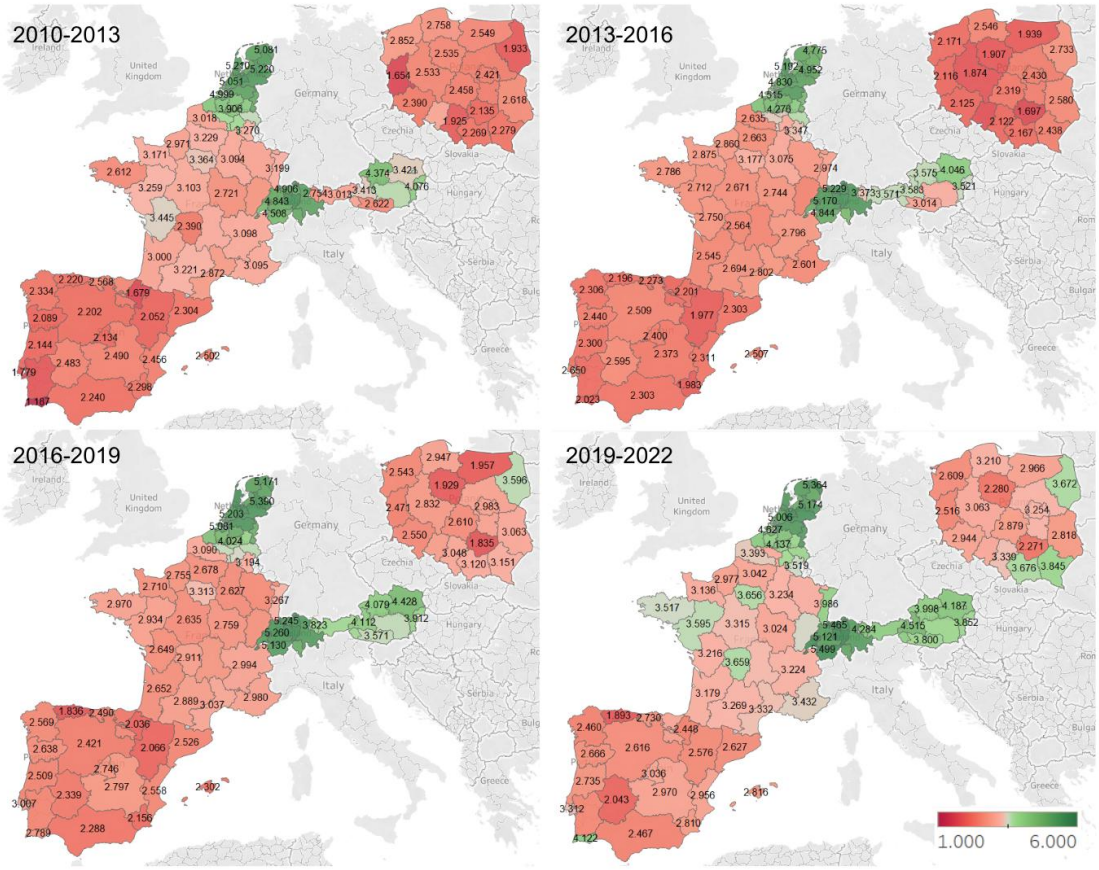

Image 3: Average Trust in Political Party by ESS. Source ESS dataset (rounds 5-11). Elaborated by the author.

Switching to the dissemination of mini-publics, a filtering process was applied to align the deliberative initiatives recorded in the OECD Deliberative Democracy Database with the European Social Survey (ESS) data, ensuring consistency and analytical relevance. As illustrated in Image 4, the starting point includes all 733 initiatives listed in the OECD database. From these, 400 were identified as being located in Europe. The sample was then further narrowed down to 185 initiatives implemented in countries where ESS data are available at the NUTS-2 regional level. To maintain the subnational focus of this study, only those initiatives carried out at the local or regional government level were retained, resulting in a subset of 142. Finally, to ensure temporal comparability and avoid distortions linked to earlier trust shocks, only initiatives implemented after 2010 were included in the final analytical sample, yielding 120 cases. All cases were manually linked to their respective NUTS-2 codes, using locations in the OECD dataset.

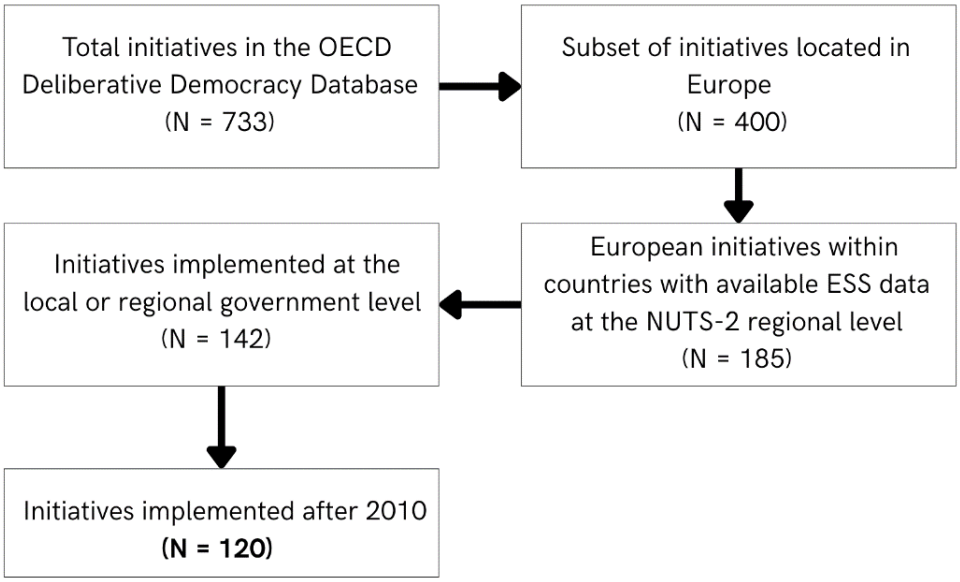

Image 4: Filtering Process Of The OECD Database. Elaborated By The Author

Table 8 illustrates the temporal and geographical distribution of mini-publics across selected European countries from 2010 to 2023. Austria (33 cases) and France (24 cases) lead in terms of overall implementation, followed by the Netherlands (21) and Belgium (13). Notably, 2021 stands out as the most active year, with 16 recorded initiatives, surpassing any other year in the dataset. This peak may indicate growing institutionalisation or renewed interest in deliberative mechanisms in response to political or societal challenges stemming from COVID-19.

The data reveals a clear trend in diffusion over time: most countries began implementing deliberative initiatives more frequently after 2017, with Southern European countries like Portugal and Spain showing first signs of activity only in more recent years. This points to a broader European tendency toward expanding and normalising deliberative democratic practices at the institutional level (OECD, 2021; European Commission, 2021). In contrast, 2020 shows a significant drop in the number of initiatives, with only 8 cases, which is well below the period average. This sharp decline is likely attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted public life and delayed or cancelled in-person participatory processes across Europe.

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Grand Total
Austria	1	6	6	6	1	3	3	1	1	2		1	1	1	33
Belgium					3	3		3		1	1	1	1		13
France		3		1			2	2		1	3	6	4	2	24
Netherlands					1		7	4	1	1		1	2	4	21
Poland							1	1	2		2	2		1	9
Portugal								1			1		1		3
Spain										2		1	2	3	8
Switzerland										1		4	3	1	9
Grand Total	1	9	6	7	5	6	13	12	4	8	7	16	14	12	120

Table 8: Number of deliberative initiatives by countries (2010-2023). Source: OECD Deliberative Democracy Database. Elaborated by the author

To better understand the geographical dimension of this analysis, Image 5 maps the NUTS-2 regions that hosted at least one deliberative process (in light green) during the period 2010–2023. The map reveals an uneven territorial distribution of initiatives across Europe. Notably, France stands out once again as the country with the widest regional coverage, followed closely by the Netherlands, where nearly all regions appear to have been involved in at least one mini-public. Other countries such as Poland, Austria, and Belgium also show a significant number of active regions, although their coverage is more fragmented. By contrast, countries like Portugal and Spain display much more selective regional engagement, with only a few NUTS-2 units showing evidence of deliberative activity.

This spatial distribution suggests that the adoption of deliberative processes is specific to each country, with regional and political will to experiment with participatory innovations at the subnational level. Future research should further analyse how different types of concentrated administrations or positions, reflecting varying degrees of institutional support and administrative capacity on the political spectrum, influence the adoption and outcomes of deliberative initiatives. While, in theory, society as a whole stands to gain from these initiatives, certain political factions may face setbacks and even suffer electoral losses. For instance, studies have shown that economic crises coupled with low levels of public trust can create favourable conditions for the rise of populist parties (Algan et al., 2017). Therefore, it becomes crucial to understand the supporters and opponents of democratic innovations.

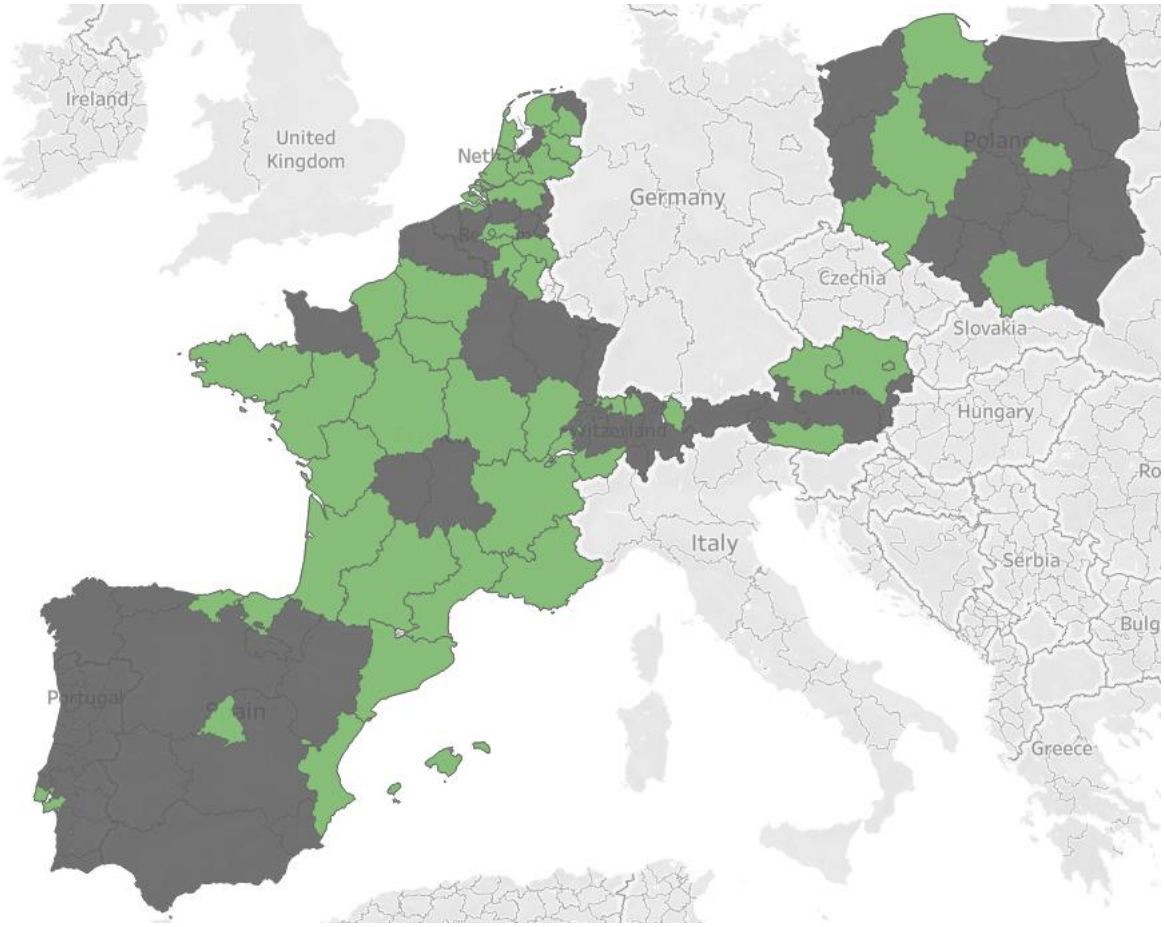

Image 5: Geographical distribution of deliberative initiatives in Europe at the NUTS-2 level. In light green, those countries where a deliberative initiative was implemented between 2010 and 2023. Source: OECD Deliberative Democracy Database. Elaborated by the author.

On the other hand, to further explore how deliberative practices are set up across Europe, Table 9 displays the distribution of deliberative models implemented in each country, as categorised by the OECD. The data reveal notable differences in the types of mini-publics (see typology in Table 3 above) adopted by various countries, suggesting diverse traditions and preferences in deliberative democratic design.

For example, Austria stands out for its overwhelming reliance on Citizens' Councils, with 33 cases, indicating a clear national preference for this model, which is likely rooted in regional governance practices and long-standing democratic innovation (Zubizarreta et al., 2020). In contrast, France shows a consistent inclination toward Citizens' Dialogues, while the Netherlands widely prefers the G1000 model, reflecting its bottom-up, civil society–driven deliberative culture.

Other models, such as the Citizens' Assembly and Juries, are more evenly distributed, appearing in Belgium, France, Switzerland, Spain and Poland. Interestingly, some innovative or less conventional models, namely the Ostbelgien Model, the Consensus Conference, and the City Observatory, were each implemented only once during the entire period observed. All three

cases occurred between 2017 and 2019, a time marked by a broader rise in the number of deliberative initiatives. This temporal clustering may indicate a phase of experimentation, where countries tested new institutional formats to expand or deepen deliberative democracy.

The diversity of deliberative formats across countries underscores the adaptability of deliberative democracy to varied institutional and cultural settings. In France, for instance, the widespread use of Citizens' Dialogues and the Citizens' Jury model may reflect a strong national support for informed public input. On the other hand, the Netherlands has pioneered innovations with the G1000 model, illustrating a commitment to institutionalising citizen deliberation with a larger number of participants. Finally, the clustering of specific formats within each country highlights how national political culture, administrative capacity, and existing participatory infrastructure can shape how deliberation is implemented.

	Citizens' Council	Citizens' Jury	G1000	Citizens' Dialogues	Citizens' Assembly	CIR	Ostbelgien Model	Consensus Conference	City Observatory
Austria	33								
Belgium	1	6		1	3		1	1	
France		4		17	3				
Netherlands			19	1	1				
Poland		7			2				
Portugal		3							
Switzerland		4			2	3			
Spain		4	1		2				1
Grand Total	34	28	20	19	13	3	1	1	1

Table 9: Types of deliberative initiatives, OECD (2021) framework, by countries (2010-2023). Source: OECD Deliberative Democracy Database. Elaborated by the author

In conclusion, one region emerges as particularly remarkable in the landscape of European deliberative democracy: Vorarlberg, in Austria. This region stands out for its exceptionally high number of deliberative initiatives between 2010 and 2023. According to OECD data, Vorarlberg hosted 25 deliberative processes during this period, five times more than any other region in the database. The following highest-ranking regions—Utrecht (Netherlands), Île-de-France (France), Région lémanique (Switzerland), and the Brussels-Capital Region (Belgium)—each recorded only five cases.

Vorarlberg is a pioneer in democratic innovation through its innovative use of Citizens' Councils. Introduced in 2006 and institutionalised by constitutional amendment in 2013, these councils engage randomly selected citizens (representing diverse demographics) in a multi-

stage deliberative process using the "Dynamic Facilitation" method[6], in which, over one and a half days, participants identify public issues, propose solutions, and present their recommendations in a public forum known as the "Bürgercafé". A follow-up group ensures dialogue with authorities and tracks implementation. Finally, Vorarlberg's geographical proximity to Switzerland, combined with its distinct tradition of regionalism and bottom-up governance, makes it a particularly compelling case for future research on the diffusion and institutionalisation of deliberative democratic practices at the subnational level.

Image 6 visually captures the trends in the level of trust in politicians (represented by the red line) and the number of deliberative initiatives (represented by the blue line) in the region of Vorarlberg. The graph, with two distinct axes, presents a comparative view of how both variables have evolved over time. While the analysis remains qualitative and does not establish causality, a clear pattern emerges: as the number of deliberative initiatives increases, so too does the public's trust in politicians. This simple observation provides a foundation for the upcoming quantitative analysis, which will delve deeper into understanding the potential relationship between these two variables.

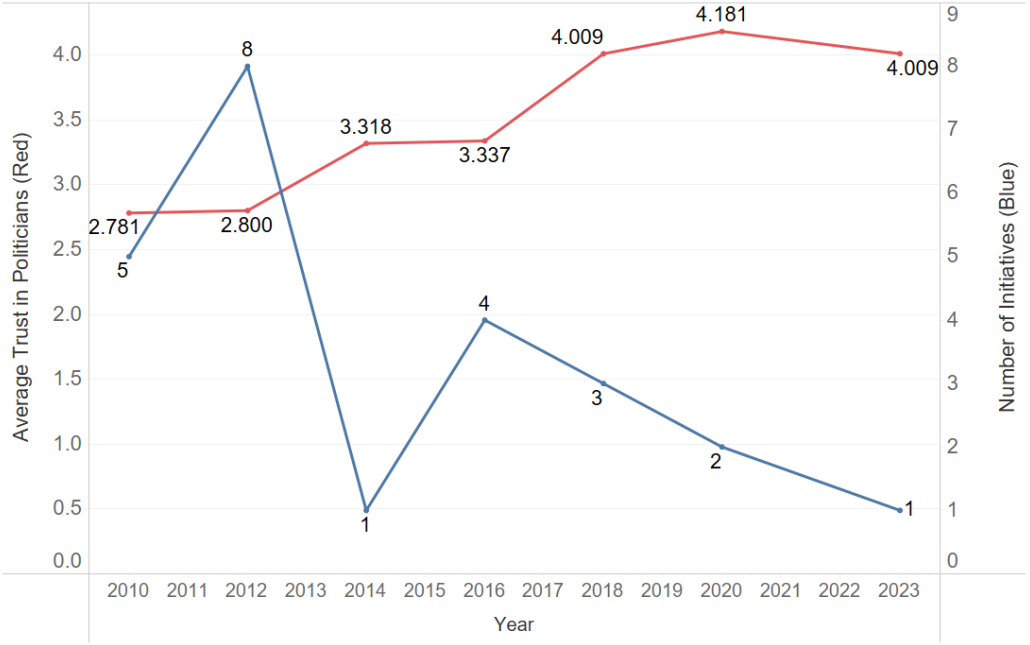

Image 6: Number of deliberative initiatives (in blue, right axis) and average trust in Politicians (in red, left axis) in the Vorarlberg region, Austria (2010-2023). Sources: ESS and OECD Deliberative Democracy Database. Elaborated by the author.

3.3 Research Design, Hypotheses and Methodological Framework

[6] Dynamic Facilitation is a participatory method designed to foster creative breakthroughs in group discussions, particularly for complex or contentious issues. Unlike traditional facilitation, it avoids rigid agendas, instead following the group's energy to encourage authentic dialogue, mutual understanding, and unanimous outcomes. The facilitator documents emerging ideas (solutions, concerns, data) on flip charts, enabling collective 'choice-creating'—a collaborative thinking process that often leads to shifts in perspective or new problem definitions. Developed by Jim Rough in the 1980s, it underpins innovative practices like the Wisdom Council, which promotes large-scale democratic engagement. For details, see https://partizipation.at/english-info/

This analysis adopts a quantitative research design to assess the potential spillover effects of deliberative democratic initiatives on public trust in political institutions. Specifically, it investigates whether the implementation of mini-publics at the regional or local level is associated with increased levels of political trust among the broader population (Nuts-2 level of analysis) in Europe. The analysis is grounded in secondary data drawn from the abovementioned primary sources: The European Social Survey (ESS) and the OECD Deliberative Democracy Database.

Previous studies have demonstrated that public awareness of deliberative democratic processes, such as citizens' assemblies or initiative reviews, can positively influence perceptions of public trust and institutional legitimacy, even among individuals who do not directly participate in these processes (Werner & Marien, 2018; Boulianne, 2018). The spillover effects of mini-publics on non-participants occur through two main mechanisms: *cultivation* and *contagion*. Cultivation happens when non-participants are exposed to mini-publics through media, official documents, or public broadcasts, potentially shaping their political views and increasing trust in deliberative practices. Contagion occurs when participants share their experiences with others, sparking political discussions and raising civic awareness (Gastil et al., 2018; van der Does & Jacquet, 2023). While these effects are often modest and context-dependent, they suggest that mini-publics can extend their democratic influence beyond immediate participants.

Therefore, supposing that the implementation of mini-publics may induce a small but observable effect on political trust in the broader public, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Regions where deliberative mini-publics have been implemented are expected to report significantly higher average levels of political trust compared to regions without such initiatives, reflecting a positive association between the exposure to deliberative processes and increased institutional trust.

H2: In regions where a deliberative initiative has taken place, a significant increase in average political trust is anticipated, highlighting the potential for deliberative practices to foster trust in political institutions.

Trust Variables and Structure

The primary data source is the ESS, from which survey rounds 5 to 11 (2010–2023) are used. These rounds (which are composed of two years, for example, round 5 includes 2010 and 2011) include harmonised questions on a wide range of political and socio-economic attitudes. The dependent variables measure trust in political institutions through ESS data, including variables for trust in politicians ("trstplt"), political parties ("trstprt"), and national parliament ("trstprl"), each on a scale from 0 (*no trust at all*) to 10 (*complete trust*). The ESS data is aggregated at the NUTS-2 regional level ("region") for each ESS round, allowing for subnational comparison and for aligning with the typical scale at which deliberative processes are implemented. Each observation corresponds to a specific region and ESS round, forming a quasi-panel structure that enables longitudinal analysis of regional dynamics over time. A more specific explanation of data processing is available in Appendix 1.1

Individual-level covariates from the ESS include years of education ("eduyrs", measured in years), household income ("hinctnta", measured in deciles), left–right political orientation ("lrscale", measured on a scale 0 to 10), and satisfaction with the health system ("stfhlth", measured on a scale 0 to 10). These variables help control for demographic and attitudinal factors that may influence institutional trust, which is in line with the OECD framework of public trust (Brezzi et al., 2021). Moreover, according to the recent OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions (2024), a significant majority of individuals who are satisfied with public services such as health, education, and administrative services also exhibit higher levels of trust in these institutions.

Moreover, the regional gross domestic product, measured as PPS per inhabitant in % of the EU27, is included using Eurostat data[7], together with the regional unemployment rates ("unemp"), which are retrieved from the EPSON Database[8]. Including GDP and unemployment rates in the analysis is crucial because they account for macroeconomic factors that can influence political trust. Economic conditions, such as higher GDP and lower unemployment, are typically associated with increased trust in political institutions, while the opposite can erode trust (Algan et al., 2017; OECD, 2024). By controlling for these factors, the analysis improves, as any observed effects of deliberative initiatives on political trust are less likely to be confounded by economic fluctuations, improving the robustness and accuracy of the results.

Deliberative Initiatives Variables

To capture the presence of deliberative processes, the study draws on the OECD Deliberative Democracy Database. Based on this dataset, three key variables are constructed:

- A binary variable ("exp") indicating whether at least one deliberative initiative was implemented in a given region during a specific year (0 = no initiative, 1 = at least one initiative).

- A lagged variable of "exp" ("lagexp"), equal to 1 if an initiative occurred in the previous ESS round. This allows for testing whether the effects of deliberative processes emerge with a time delay. This is also highly important as the ESS has two-year rounds.

- A count variable ("ln_exptot") indicating the natural logarithm of the total number of deliberative initiatives implemented in a region during a given year. This transformation captures the intensity of deliberative activity while addressing skewness in the count data distribution. It is crucial to highlight that multiple initiatives may occur in the same region in the same year.

- A lagged version of "ln_exptot", ("lag_ln_exptot"), indicating the log-transformed total number of deliberative initiatives in the preceding ESS round. This variable

[7] Eurostat Data retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tgs00006/default/table?lang=en
[8] EPSON data retrieved from: https://database.espon.eu/indicator/340/#metadata-download

enables the examination of the temporal spillover effects or delayed impacts of deliberative activity.

Considering the lagged impact of the variables "exp" and “ln_exptot” is necessary in this analysis because the European Social Survey (ESS) rounds are based on two-year periods, and the exact timing of when a deliberative initiative is implemented is not always known. By including lagged variables, the analysis can capture the delayed effects of mini-publics on political trust. It allows for the examination of whether trust levels change in the period following an initiative, acknowledging that the impacts of deliberative processes on public attitudes may take time to materialise and spread among non-participants through media, public announcements and informal networks. This approach helps ensure the temporal dynamics of the relationship are properly accounted for and prevents the misleading interpretation of immediate effects that might not truly reflect the long-term influence of the initiatives.

4.4 Empirical Strategy and Results

As an initial, non-causal test of Hypothesis 1 (H1), which posits that regions implementing deliberative mini-publics exhibit higher average levels of trust in political institutions, a two-sample *t*-tests were conducted. These tests compare institutional trust levels between regions that hosted at least one deliberative initiative (exp = 1) and those that did not (exp = 0) over the period 2010–2023. Three key indicators of institutional trust from the European Social Survey were analysed: trust in politicians (*trstplt*), trust in political parties (*trstprt*), and trust in national parliaments (*trstprl*).

Results in Table 10 reveal statistically significant differences across all indicators. Regions exposed to deliberative processes consistently report higher average trust scores:

- Trust in politicians: 3.87 vs. 3.42 ($p < 0.001$)
- Trust in political parties: 3.8 vs. 3.34 ($p < 0.001$)
- Trust in national parliaments: 4.77 vs. 4.35 ($p < 0.001$)

Trust Variable	Group	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean difference	t-value	p-value
Trust in Politicians (trstplt)	No initiative (0)	606	3.42	1.11	**-0.457**	-3.51	0.0005***
	Initiative (1)	80	3.87	0.93			
Trust in Political Parties (trstprt)	No initiative (0)	606	3.34	1.09	**-0.461**	-3.62	0.0003***
	Initiative (1)	80	3.8	0.96			
Trust in Parliament (trstprl)	No initiative (0)	606	4.35	1	**-0.423**	-3.64	0.0003***
	Initiative (1)	80	4.77	0.78			

Table 10: T-test between groups of regions with at least a deliberative initiative (1) and those without (0) in the period 2010-2023.

These differences range from 0.38 to 0.43 points on a 0–10 scale and are significant at the 0.1% level (see Table 10). While it is crucial to highlight that these findings do not establish causality (regions with more trust could implement more deliberative initiatives because of a stronger administration or culture of democratic innovations), they provide preliminary support for H1 by indicating a robust, positive correlation between the presence of deliberative initiatives and higher institutional trust at the regional level, even among the broader public who did not directly participate. This may reflect the spillover effects of mini-publics on non-participants, where media coverage, 'word of mouth', or the perceived legitimacy of deliberative processes can influence broader public attitudes.

Moreover, to address the potential issue of unequal variances and unbalanced group sizes (606 vs 80), a *Welch's t-test* was conducted. The results confirm a statistically significant difference in average trust in politicians between regions that implemented at least one deliberative mini-public ($M = 3.84$) and those that did not ($M = 3.40$), with a mean difference of 0.44 (134.09) = -4.13, $p < 0.001$).

These descriptive results serve as a foundation for the subsequent, more complex empirical models, which aim to account for potential confounding variables and assess the temporal dimension of deliberative effects (H2) using fixed-effects and lagged exposure specifications.

Testing H2: Looking at the impact

To evaluate the impact of deliberative democracy initiatives on political trust, this research uses a panel data approach that leverages the cross-regional and temporal variation in the implementation of deliberative events. The analysis combines micro-level data from the

European Social Survey (ESS), Waves 5 to 11, which are aggregated at Nuts-2 Level, with region-level information from the OECD Deliberative Democracy Database.

The ESS provides repeated cross-sectional survey data across multiple European countries. To approximate a panel structure, individual-level responses are aggregated at the NUTS-2 regional level (region) for each ESS wave (essround), enabling the construction of quasi-panel data. As before, the dependent variables include: trstplt (trust in politicians); trstprt (trust in political parties); trstprl (trust in the national parliament).

All these variables are measured on a 0–10 scale. Control variables include socioeconomic characteristics (education, income decile), political orientation (lrscale), satisfaction with health systems (stfhlth) and regional-level indicators such as regional unemployment rate (unemp) and regional gross domestic product (PPS per inhabitant in % of the EU27) (gdp).

The key independent variable is the lagged version of a binary indicator (exp) derived from the OECD Deliberative Democracy Dataset, which equals one if a deliberative initiative took place in a given region during a particular ESS wave, and zero otherwise. Indeed, to capture potential lagged effects, this analysis constructs "lagexp", a lagged version of the treatment dummy, and alternative specifications using log-transformed (lag_ln_exptot) versions of the total number of initiatives (exptot) held in the previous period in a specific region.

The empirical strategy relies on a fixed effects (FE) estimator to control for unobserved time-invariant regional heterogeneity. For example, historical political culture, institutional quality, regional traditions of civic engagement, or longstanding political dynamics in a region may all shape public trust in political institutions. These factors remain constant over time but can still confound the relationship between deliberative initiatives and political trust if not controlled for. By using fixed effects, we account for these persistent regional differences and isolate the effect of deliberative initiatives.

Moreover, the inclusion of time-fixed effects strengthens this model: they help account for common shocks or trends that affect all regions in a given ESS wave, and they control for systematic time-related variations. These could include broad national or international events, such as economic crises, elections, or policy changes, that might simultaneously influence political trust across all regions. By including time-fixed effects, the model ensures that any observed changes in political trust are not attributed to these external time-varying factors.

Specifically, here are the following baseline models estimated:

$$Y_{rt} = \alpha + \beta \cdot LagExp_{rt} + \gamma \mathrm{X}_{rt} + \delta_t + \mu_r + \varepsilon_{rt}$$

$$Y_{rt} = \alpha + \beta \cdot \ln(LagExptot_{rt} + 1) + \gamma \mathrm{X}_{rt} + \delta_t + \mu_r + \varepsilon_{rt}$$

Where:

- Y_{rt} is the average level of political trust (in politicians, political parties or parliament) in region r and ESS wave t;

- $LagExp_{rt}$ is the lagged binary indicator of deliberative democratic events;
- $LagExptot_{rt}$ is the sum of deliberative democratic events in a specific region r in a given time t;
- γX_{rt} is a vector of time-varying controls;
- δ_t are ESS waves dummies to account for common time shocks (time-fixed effects);
- μ_r are region fixed effects;
- ε_{rt} is the error term.

All standard errors are clustered at the regional level to account for potential serial correlation within regions. The models are estimated using Stata's "xtreg, fe" command. The analysis reports six specifications: models (1) to (3) use a lagged binary treatment indicator, while models (4) to (6) rely on the log-transformed total number of prior initiatives to capture dosage effects. The outcome variables in each case correspond to the three main political trust dimensions: politicians, parties, and parliament.

With these controls in place, we can now proceed to examine the regression results.

Models	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*
	trstplt	trstprt	trstprl	trstplt	trstprt	trstprl
Lagexp	0.079	**0.094***	0.003			
	(0.143)	***(0.060)***	*(0.961)*			
lag_ln_exptot				0.080	**0.101***	0.018
				(0.152)	***(0.069)***	*(0.791)*
unemp	-0.012	**-0.020***	-0.016	-0.012	**-0.020***	**-0.018***
	(0.218)	***(0.061)***	*(0.129)*	*(0.22)*	***(0.066)***	***(0.095)***
gdp	0.003	**0.006***	**0.006***	0.002	**0.006***	0.005
	(0.378)	***(0.072)***	***(0.083)***	*(0.585)*	***(0.061)***	*(0.143)*
eduyrs	0.041	0.032	**0.071****	**0.067*****	0.032	**0.099*****
	(0.122)	*(0.296)*	***(0.038)***	***(0.003)***	*(0.299)*	***(0.001)***
lrscale	**0.157****	**0.172*****	0.072	**0.168****	**0.174*****	0.085
	(0.021)	***(0.005)***	*(0.275)*	***(0.010)***	***(0.005)***	*(0.174)*
hinctnta	**0.083****	0.033	**0.090****	**0.084****	0.034	**0.089***
	(0.035)	*(0.387)*	***(0.033)***	***(0.033)***	*0.379*	**(0.033)**
stfhlth	0.067	**0.115****	**0.246*****	0.074	**0.115****	**0.254*****
	(0.136)	***(0.027)***	***(0.00)***	*(0.101)*	***(0.028)***	***(0.00)***
Constant	1.001	0.661	0.543	**1.120***	0.622	0.687
	(0.122)	*(0.376)*	*(0.43)*	***(0.087)***	*(0.404)*	*(0.338)*
Observations	586	586	586	586	586	586
R^2 *(within)*	0.418	0.371	0.392	0.418	0.370	0.393

Table 11: Regression result table of the six models studying the impact of deliberative initiatives on political trust. P-value in parentheses (* 0.10 ** 0.05 *** 0.01). Variables: *trstplt*: Trust in politicians; *trstprt*: Trust in political parties; *trstprl*: Trust in the national parliament; *eduyrs*: Years of education;

hinctnta: Household income; *lrscale*: Political orientation; *stfhlth*: Satisfaction with health systems; *unemp*: Regional unemployment rate; *gdp*: Regional GDP per capita; *lagexp*: Lagged version of the treatment dummy (indicates if an initiative occurred in the previous ESS wave); *lag_ln_exptot*: Lagged version of the log-transformed total number of initiatives from the previous period. Elaborated by the author.

Trust in Politicians

In model (1), the coefficient for the lagged treatment dummy (lagexp) is positive (0.079) but not statistically significant (p = 0.143), suggesting a potentially positive yet inconclusive association between past deliberative experiences and trust in politicians. Similarly, in model (4), which replaces the binary variable with a log-transformed count of initiatives (lag_ln_exptot), the coefficient remains positive (0.083) but does not reach statistical significance at conventional levels (p = 0.131). Although both specifications point in the expected direction, the evidence is insufficient to confirm a robust impact.

Trust in Political Parties

The results are stronger when trust in political parties is considered. In model (2), lagexp has a positive and significant effect at 10% (0.094, p = 0.060), suggesting that prior exposure to deliberative initiatives may foster greater trust in political parties. Therefore, regions that had experienced at least one deliberative initiative in the previous ESS wave report, on average, have 0.094 points higher trust in political parties (on a 0–10 scale) compared to regions without such initiatives. While the effect is modest, it is consistent with the expectation that exposure to deliberative processes can enhance institutional trust, even among those who did not directly participate.

The effect becomes stronger in model (5), where the coefficient on lag_ln_exptot (that accounts for the intensity of multiple deliberative initiatives) is 0.101 and statistically significant at the 10% level (p = 0.069) as well. In other words, a one-unit increase in the log-transformed count of past initiatives is associated with a 0.101-point increase in average trust in political parties. This suggests that not only the presence but also the frequency or scale of deliberative initiatives may matter for shaping public attitudes toward political parties.

These findings confirm a modest but consistent relationship between deliberative engagement and trust in political parties. Although these increases may seem small on a 0–10 scale, they are statistically meaningful in a political trust context, where attitudes tend to shift slowly and are influenced by long-term institutional factors. The Stata output tables corresponding to these regressions are presented in Appendix 2.

Trust in Parliament

In contrast, the models examining trust in parliament show no evidence of a significant effect. In both specifications (models 3 and 6), the coefficients for the deliberative variables are close to zero (0.003 and 0.018), with p-values of 0.961 and 0.747, indicating a lack of statistical significance. This suggests that deliberative initiatives may have a limited or negligible short-

term impact on trust in national parliamentary institutions. This outcome was somewhat expected, given that the analysis focuses on regional and local initiatives, which are likely to have a smaller effect on national parliamentary trust. However, the similarity in results between this variable and the other two trust variables (politicians and political parties) also serves as an additional test of the robustness of the findings.

Control Variables and Model Fit

Across all models, several control variables behave as expected. Education (eduyrs) is significantly associated with trust in parliament in both models (3 and 6), and health system satisfaction (stfhlth) emerges as a strong and consistent predictor of political trust, particularly in models (3) and (6), where the coefficients are large and highly significant. Unemployment at the regional level is negatively associated, while GDP shows a weak, yet partially significant, effect on political trust. For instance, political orientation (lrscale) shows a positive and significant association with trust across most outcomes, indicating that right-leaning individuals may report higher levels of trust in political institutions.

3.3 Robustness Checks, Limitations and Methodological Reflections

To address concerns about reverse causality, that is, the possibility that higher political trust may increase the likelihood of implementing deliberative initiatives, this analysis has used several robustness checks. Beside from correlation and control variables, a placebo test introduces a lead variable (placebo_exp) to assess whether future deliberative exposure predicts current trust levels. The coefficients on the lead term are statistically insignificant, suggesting no anticipatory effects (see Table 12).

	trstplt	trstprt	trstprl	trstplt	trstprt	trstprl
placebo_exp	-0.096	-0.054	-0.049			
	(0.241)	**(0.377)**	**(0.467)**			
placebo_ln_exptot				-0.142	-0.091	-0.085
				(0.126)	**(0.171)**	**(0.208)**
unemp	0.01	-0.001	-0.001	0.01	-0.001	-0.001
	(0.408)	(0.959)	(0.927)	(0.433)	(0.925)	(0.907)
gdp	0.005	0.007**	0.009***	0.004	0.007**	0.009**
	(0.179)	(0.044)	(0.008)	(0.314)	(0.041)	(0.01)
eduyrs	0.061**	0.05	0.093**	0.084***	0.051	0.103***
	(0.05)	(0.17)	(0.01)	(0.002)	(0.162)	(0.002)
lrscale	0.192**	0.202***	0.173**	0.213***	0.204***	0.183***
	(0.015)	(0.007)	(0.012)	(0.004)	(0.006)	(0.005)
hinctnta	0.075	0.027	0.032		0.026	
	(0.129)	(0.558)	(0.445)		(0.577)	
stfhlth	-0.005	0.047	0.161***	0.102	0.046	0.163***
	(0.93)	(0.383)	(0.008)	(0.995)	(0.393)	(0.007)
Constant	0.433	0.269	0.023	0.519	0.269	0.056
	(0.534)	(0.734)	(0.973)	(0.46)	(0.731)	(0.937)

Table 12: Regression result table of the placebo test; “placebo_exp” and “placebo_ln_exptot” are lead variables used for the test. P-value in parentheses (* 0.10 ** 0.05 *** 0.01). Variables: *trstplt*: Trust in politicians; *trstprt*: Trust in political parties; *trstprl*: Trust in the national parliament; *eduyrs*: Years of education; *hinctnta*: Household income; *lrscale*: Political orientation; *stfhlth*: Satisfaction with health systems; *unemp*: Regional unemployment rate; *gdp*: Regional GDP per capita; *lagexp*: Lagged version of the treatment dummy (indicates if an initiative occurred in the previous ESS wave); *lag_ln_exptot*: Lagged version of the log-transformed total number of initiatives from the previous period.

To ensure the reliability of the regression estimates, multicollinearity was assessed using Variance Inflation Factors (VIF), illustrated in Table 13. The VIF values for all independent variables included in the fixed-effects models were well below the commonly accepted thresholds of 5 (moderate concern), indicating no problematic levels of multicollinearity. The mean VIF of 1.82 further confirms the absence of harmful multicollinearity among the explanatory variables. This reinforces the robustness of the coefficient estimates and ensures that no variable's influence is unduly distorted by high linear association with other predictors.

VARIABLE	VIF	1/VIF
lag_ln_exptot	1.1	0.907
unemp	1.81	0.553
gdp	2.33	0.43
eduyrs	1.72	0.582
lrscale	1.36	0.734
hinctnta	2.12	0.472
stfhlth	2.29	0.437
MEAN VIF	**1.82**	

Table 13: Result table of the VIF test. Variables: *trstplt*: Trust in politicians; *trstprt*: Trust in political parties; *trstprl*: Trust in the national parliament; *eduyrs*: Years of education; *hinctnta*: Household income; *lrscale*: Political orientation; *stfhlth*: Satisfaction with health systems; *unemp*: Regional unemployment rate; *gdp*: Regional GDP per capita; *lagexp*: Lagged version of the treatment dummy (indicates if an initiative occurred in the previous ESS wave); *lag_ln_exptot*: Lagged version of the log-transformed total number of initiatives from the previous period. Elaborated by the author.

In sum, these diagnostics validate the appropriateness of the model specification and support the internal consistency of the estimation strategy. The fixed-effects regressions, therefore, provide a stable and interpretable basis for assessing the relationship between deliberative democratic practices and institutional trust.

Justification for Methodological Choices

The analytical strategy adopted in this study is guided by the need to assess the causal plausibility of the relationship between deliberative democratic initiatives and political trust, while accounting for spatial and temporal variation across European regions. The use of region-level fixed-effects modelling is particularly appropriate in this context, as it controls for time-invariant unobserved heterogeneity across regions (such as historical political culture, long-standing institutional configurations, or persistent socio-economic structures) that could

confound the relationship of interest (Wooldridge, 2010). By focusing on within-region variation over time, the fixed-effects approach improves internal validity by eliminating bias from omitted variables that do not change across survey waves (idem).

The decision to aggregate individual-level ESS data to the NUTS-2 regional level reflects the fact that the majority of deliberative democratic initiatives are conducted at the subnational level, particularly by regional and municipal governments (OECD, 2020; Smith, 2009). Using this level of aggregation ensures alignment between the unit of treatment (exposure to deliberative processes) and the unit of analysis (public opinion outcomes). The NUTS-2 scale is also commonly employed in comparative European research for its balance between territorial granularity and data availability. Nonetheless, the use of NUTS-3 data could have highlighted further details, and it is suggested for future research.

Importantly, the study incorporates both a binary variable to indicate the presence of a deliberative initiative and a count variable capturing the total number of initiatives implemented in each region and year. This allows the analysis to distinguish between the existence of participatory opportunities and their frequency or intensity, which may yield different effects on public perceptions of political legitimacy. This approach follows recent recommendations in democratic innovation studies to move beyond binary categorisations and account for the depth and scale of deliberative engagement (Nabatchi, 2012; Elstub et al., 2021).

The inclusion of lagged treatment variables reflects a theoretical and empirical expectation that the effects of deliberative practices on public attitudes may not be immediate but may materialise over time. Several studies have shown that citizens' awareness of deliberative events and the associated shifts in trust, legitimacy, or efficacy often occur after the process concludes and its outcomes are disseminated (Boulianne, 2018; Werner & Marien, 2018; Gastil et al., 2017). Introducing lags also helps address potential concerns about reverse causality by ensuring that the measured outcomes follow, rather than precede, the intervention.

Overall, this research design offers a valid framework to explore the hypothesised relationship between democratic innovation and public trust, while carefully accounting for the spatial and temporal dynamics inherent in the data and the underlying social processes.

Limitations

At the same time, despite this study's strengths, several limitations must be acknowledged, particularly in relation to data quality, methodological constraints, and the broader generalizability of findings.

First, although the fixed-effects estimator effectively controls for unobserved time-invariant heterogeneity across regions, the non-random adoption of deliberative initiatives poses a potential source of bias. Regions implementing such processes may already exhibit higher levels of civic engagement, participatory traditions, or trust in institutions. This self-selection may limit causal inference. Future research, which may benefit from additional and more complete data, could address this by employing other methods (e.g., propensity score matching

or dynamic differences-in-differences) to improve balance on observed covariates or by identifying suitable instrumental variables to strengthen causal claims.

Second, measurement limitations persist regarding the exposure to deliberative processes. The study uses binary and log-transformed count variables to approximate the presence and intensity of deliberative activity. However, these proxies fail to capture critical qualitative aspects of each initiative (such as its scale, inclusivity, transparency, and public visibility) that are likely to influence its systemic impact. Moreover, not all mini-publics are equally publicised or institutionally impactful, and the effects on trust may depend on how the process is perceived by (and communicated to) the broader population. The consideration of a mini-public's recommendation by politicians or public institutions is crucial in determining the initiatives' impact on participants and the broader public (Germann et al., 2024).

Third, the analysis is constrained by data availability and granularity. While the European Social Survey (ESS) provides rich longitudinal data on public attitudes, geographic coverage is uneven across countries and waves. Some missing values in some rounds, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, limit the temporal scope and potentially bias regional comparisons. Furthermore, although NUTS-2 is an appropriate compromise between data availability and territorial precision, more detailed data (NUTS-3) could offer deeper insights into the hyper-local effects of deliberative practices. Moreover, the two-year ESS rounds reduce the precision of time-related effects.

In terms of the deliberative data itself, while the OECD Deliberative Democracy Database offers a verified and structured collection of initiatives, it may underreport smaller or non-institutional processes. Alternative databases, such as Participedia.Net, contain a larger number of entries but suffer from reliability, completeness, and standardisation issues. These trade-offs inevitably shape the comprehensiveness of the dataset and may result in an underestimation of the overall diffusion and impact of deliberative innovations.

Finally, the lack of direct measures of public awareness or media exposure to deliberative processes represents a significant gap in the analysis. One potential solution would be to incorporate media data from databases like Factiva, LexisNexis, and ProQuest to capture the extent of media coverage of these initiatives. As previous research suggests, the effects of deliberative processes on political trust are likely influenced by citizens' awareness and perceptions of these initiatives. Future studies should consider including survey questions or experimental modules that assess the public's awareness of, and perceived legitimacy of, deliberative processes.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Discussion

This analysis has explored the potential systemic effects of deliberative democratic initiatives on political trust across European regions. Building upon a growing body of theoretical and empirical literature, the analysis contributes to an emerging research agenda that seeks to understand the impact of deliberation on participants and its broader influence on democratic legitimacy and public attitudes toward the general public. The findings offer partial support for the proposed hypotheses, suggesting that deliberative democratic initiatives are associated with modest but meaningful increases in public trust in political institutions at the regional level.

Hypothesis 1, which suggested that regions with deliberative mini-publics report higher political trust, receives strong descriptive support. Statistically significant differences in institutional trust were observed between treated and untreated regions, concerning trust in politicians, parties, and parliaments. While these results cannot establish causality, they underscore a robust correlation worthy of further investigation. Hypothesis 2, concerning the delayed impact of deliberative initiatives, is partially confirmed. The panel regression models, controlling for time-invariant regional characteristics and time-specific shocks, suggest a small but statistically significant lagged effect on trust in political parties. Generally, this finding aligns with some prior studies (e.g., Boulianne 2018; Werner & Marien, 2018), which indicate that even non-participants may be positively influenced by deliberative initiatives, particularly when these are widely disseminated or institutionally integrated.

However, no significant delayed effect was found for trust in politicians or parliaments. Several explanations are possible. First, the nature of deliberative processes may more directly impact perceptions of political parties, often viewed as gatekeepers of democratic responsiveness, than individual politicians or parliamentary bodies, which may be perceived as more distant or less responsive. Second, institutional trust is shaped by a wide range of factors, including economic conditions, media narratives, and elite behaviour, which may dilute or mask the influence of deliberative interventions, especially for individuals (such as politicians) or institutions (like national parliament) that are highly exposed to media attention. Third, while politicians and parliaments are normally thought of nationally, political parties are normally more rooted in the territory (Swenden & Maddens, 2009). Regional branches of statewide parties might take independent stances on territorial issues, like autonomy or regional identity. This underlines that while national political parties often present themselves as unitary entities, regional branches or local political forces may have distinct priorities tied to local interests, making them more "rooted" in their specific territories and more sensitive to variations in trust related to deliberative initiatives.

These findings highlight the importance of examining not just whether deliberation occurs, but how it is designed, implemented, and communicated. The quality of facilitation, the transparency of outcomes, and the degree of institutional follow-up likely play crucial roles in determining whether public trust is meaningfully affected. In this light, the modest effects

observed may reflect a combination of limited public awareness, uneven institutionalisation, and variability in deliberative quality.

In conclusion, the transformative potential of deliberative democracy can only be fully realised if deliberative initiatives extend their impact beyond the immediate participants and influence the broader public. This systemic influence is crucial for reshaping deliberative systems in meaningful and enduring ways. Therefore, studying how mini-publics affect the wider public represents a pivotal turning point for deliberative theory, one that can demonstrate its capacity to foster democratic renewal beyond small, randomly selected groups. In this regard, some recommendations for future research and policy-makers have been written in the following paragraph.

5.2 Recommendations for future research on deliberative democracy

1. *Incorporate mini-publics' media exposure and awareness metrics*

Future studies investigating mini-publics' impact shall integrate media exposure and public awareness measures into their research designs. This can be easily achieved through content analysis of media databases like Factiva, LexisNexis, and ProQuest, as well as by incorporating survey questions or experimental modules to measure the public's awareness of and engagement with deliberative practices.

2. *Gather more granular and complete data on mini-publics and public trust*

While this study relied on NUTS-2-level data, future research could benefit from using NUTS-3-level data to explore the impact of deliberative initiatives at a more localised level. Such granular data could help identify the specific dynamics within smaller administrative units, offering more precise insights into how deliberative initiatives affect local political trust.

3. *Implement more precise longitudinal and causal studies*

Given the limitations of cross-sectional data, future work shall adopt longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs that can better isolate the causal effects of deliberative practices on broader publics. Improved settings with alternative methods, such as propensity score matching or dynamic differences-in-differences, could enhance causal inference and improve the understanding of the temporal effects of deliberation on political trust.

4. *Explore the role of political parties in enhancing public trust*

Further investigation is needed into the differential effects of deliberation on political parties versus other political institutions, such as parliaments or individual politicians. Since political parties are often more directly rooted in regional and local politics, understanding how deliberative initiatives affect their perceived legitimacy could be crucial for understanding broader democratic dynamics and confirming these research findings.

5. *Continue to use and investigate systemic approaches to deliberation*

Following the recent shift toward systemic approaches to deliberative democracy, future studies shall continue exploring how deliberative practices function not in isolation but as part of broader democratic systems. This could involve examining the impact of deliberative democracy and measuring the deliberativeness of a region.

5.3 Policy recommendations

1. *Expand the use of mini-publics across European regions*

Governments and the EU shall consider expanding mini-publics and other deliberative processes beyond urban centres to more diverse and rural regions. This would allow for a broader cross-section of society to participate, fostering trust and engagement in the democratic process at the local level. Specific agencies or governmental departments for designing, implementing and evaluating deliberative initiatives shall be set up to reach these objectives and those in the following recommendations.

2. *Enhance transparency and publicity of deliberative processes*

For mini-publics to effectively foster political trust, their outcomes must be transparently communicated to the public. Governments shall ensure that the results of deliberative initiatives are widely publicised and accessible through media outlets, online platforms, and public discussions. Transparency in the process, from selecting participants to implementing recommendations, can foster the consideration of recommendations by elected politicians, thus enhancing public trust and legitimacy.

3. *Support the institutionalisation of deliberative practices*

Policymakers shall work toward institutionalising deliberative democracy by embedding it into existing political frameworks. This could involve creating permanent institutions or councils that facilitate ongoing citizen engagement, ensuring that mini-publics are not one-off events but part of a continuous and regular process of democratic participation. Following the OECD (2021) framework, institutionalising these practices can help ensure their effectiveness in enhancing public trust in political institutions over the long term.

4. *Encourage deliberative innovations in policy-making*

Governments shall consider integrating the recommendations of mini-publics into policy-making processes. More formal mechanisms should be established to ensure that deliberative process outcomes are considered when making decisions, particularly on complex or contentious issues that polarise the electorate. This could include requiring policymakers at all

levels of government to respond to mini-publics' recommendations, thereby creating a direct link between citizen deliberation and actual policy outcomes.

5. *Invest in media and public awareness campaigns*

Given the importance of media exposure in shaping public trust through deliberative initiatives, governments and the EU shall invest in media campaigns that raise awareness of the existence, processes, and outcomes of mini-publics. These campaigns could include educational initiatives, interactive platforms for public engagement, and media coverage of deliberative events. Informing the public about deliberative democracy can foster greater civic engagement and understanding, increasing political trust overall.

APPENDIX

1. Data processing: ESS dataset preparation

This research compiled a harmonised dataset using the European Social Survey (ESS) rounds 5 to 11, with the following steps:

1. Data merging:

Appended ESS rounds 5–11 into a single dataset.

Included separate Austrian files for rounds 5 and 6 due to regional data issues, manually assigning region codes and ESS round identifiers.

2. Country selection:

Restricted the dataset to 8 European countries: Austria, Belgium, France, Switzerland, Spain, the Netherlands, Poland, and Portugal.

3. Regional harmonisation:

Converted older NUTS-2 region codes for France and Poland to the 2016 classification for consistency across rounds.

Dropped regions with insufficient observations to ensure data quality.

4. Variable selection and aggregation:

Kept only key individual-level variables (e.g., trust, satisfaction with democracy…), education, income, ideology, etc.).

Collapsed the data to the region-ESS round level, computing the mean for all variables.

5. Synthetic observations for round 10 (for Austria, Spain, and Poland):

Constructed synthetic values for round 10 in countries where data was missing.

Used first differences from round 9 to round 10 in similar countries to impute changes.

Merged these synthetic observations back into the dataset.

Stata do-file:

```
use "C:\Users\Desktop\ESS\ESS5.dta"
append using "C:\Users\Desktop\ESS\ESS6.dta", force
append using "C:\Users\Desktop\ESS\ESS7.dta", force
append using "C:\Users\Desktop\ESS\ESS8.dta", force
append using "C:\Users\Desktop\ESS\ESS9.dta", force
append using "C:\Users\Desktop\ESS\ESS10.dta", force
append using "C:\Users\Desktop\ESS\ESS11.dta", force
*austria6round
append using "C:\Users\Desktop\ESS\ESS5ATe1_1 (6).dta", force
replace essround = 6.0e+00 if name == "ESS5ATe1_1"
*austria5round
append using "C:\Users\Desktop\ESS\ESS4AT (5)+.dta", force
replace region = "AT11" if regionat == 1
```

```
replace region = "AT21" if regionat == 2
replace region = "AT12" if regionat == 3
replace region = "AT31" if regionat == 4
replace region = "AT32" if regionat == 5
replace region = "AT22" if regionat == 6
replace region = "AT33" if regionat == 7
replace region = "AT34" if regionat == 8
replace region = "AT13" if regionat == 9
replace regunit = 2 if inlist(regionat, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9)
replace essround = 5.0e+00 if name == "ESS4ATe01_3"

keep if inlist(cntry, "AT", "BE", "FR", "CH", "ES","NL", "PL", "PT")

*nuts conversion 2016 for France and Poland
replace region = "FRB0" if region == "FR24"
replace region = "FRC1" if region == "FR26"
replace region = "FRC2" if region == "FR43"
replace region = "FRD1" if region == "FR25"
replace region = "FRD2" if region == "FR23"
replace region = "FRE1" if region == "FR30"
replace region = "FRE2" if region == "FR22"
replace region = "FRF1" if region == "FR42"
replace region = "FRF2" if region == "FR21"
replace region = "FRF3" if region == "FR41"
replace region = "FRG0" if region == "FR51"
replace region = "FRH0" if region == "FR52"
replace region = "FRI1" if region == "FR61"
replace region = "FRI2" if region == "FR63"
replace region = "FRI3" if region == "FR53"
replace region = "FRJ1" if region == "FR81"
replace region = "FRJ2" if region == "FR62"
replace region = "FRK1" if region == "FR72"
replace region = "FRK2" if region == "FR71"
replace region = "FRL0" if region == "FR82"
replace region = "FRM0" if region == "FR83"
replace region = "FRY1" if region == "FRA1"
replace region = "FRY2" if region == "FRA2"
replace region = "FRY3" if region == "FRA3"
replace region = "FRY4" if region == "FRA4"
replace region = "FRY5" if region == "FRA5"
replace region = "PL71" if region == "PL11"
replace region = "PL72" if region == "PL33"
replace region = "PL81" if region == "PL31"
replace region = "PL82" if region == "PL32"
replace region = "PL84" if region == "PL34"
replace region = "PL91" if region == "PL12"

*drop regions nuts2 that have too few cases
drop if region == "PL92"
drop if region == "ES63"
drop if region == "ES64"
drop if region == "99999"

keep essround region regunit cntry trstplt trstprt trstprl stfdem polintr agea eduyrs hinctnta lrscale gndr emplrel
prtdgcl stfgov stfhlth domicil
collapse (mean) trstplt trstprt trstprl stfdem polintr agea eduyrs hinctnta lrscale gndr emplrel prtdgcl stfgov
stfhlth domicil, by(essround region regunit cntry)

encode region, gen(nregion)
```

```
preserve
    keep if !inlist(cntry, "AT", "ES", "PL") & inlist(essround, 9, 10)
    gen id = cntry + "_" + region
    sort id essround
    foreach var in trstplt trstprt trstprl stfdem polintr agea eduyrs hinctnta lrscale gndr emplrel prtdgcl stfgov
stfhlth domicil {
        by id: gen d_var' = .
        by id (essround): replace d_var' = var' - var'[_n-1] if essround == 10
    }
    keep if essround == 10
    collapse (mean) d_*
    gen merge_key = 1
    tempfile delta_means
    save delta_means'
restore

preserve
    keep if inlist(cntry, "AT", "ES", "PL") & essround == 9
    gen synthetic = 1
    replace essround = 10
    gen merge_key = 1
    tempfile synth_base
    save synth_base'
    use synth_base', clear
    merge m:1 merge_key using delta_means'
    foreach var in trstplt trstprt trstprl stfdem polintr agea eduyrs hinctnta lrscale gndr emplrel prtdgcl stfgov
stfhlth domicil {
        replace var' = var' + d_var'
        drop d_var'
    }
    tempfile synthetic_obs
    save synthetic_obs'
restore

append using synthetic_obs'
sort cntry region essround
save "C:\Users\Desktop\Final Data\dataset", replace
```

2 Stata output tables (only significant regressions for trust in political parties)

Model 2 (Dependent variable: trust in political parties; main independent: lagexp)

```
. eststo reg2: xtreg trstprt lagexp unemp gdp eduyrs lrscale hinctnta stfhlth i.essround, fe cluster(region_id)

Fixed-effects (within) regression               Number of obs     =       586
Group variable: region_id                       Number of groups  =        98

R-squared:                                      Obs per group:
     Within  = 0.3706                                         min =         5
     Between = 0.7653                                         avg =       6.0
     Overall = 0.6839                                         max =         6

                                                F(12, 97)         =     12.85
corr(u_i, Xb) = 0.5489                          Prob > F          =    0.0000

                              (Std. err. adjusted for 98 clusters in region_id)
------------------------------------------------------------------------------
             |               Robust
     trstprt |  Coefficient  std. err.      t    P>|t|     [95% conf. interval]
-------------+----------------------------------------------------------------
      lagexp |    .0940412   .0494208     1.90   0.060    -.0040454    .1921279
       unemp |   -.0202581   .0106952    -1.89   0.061    -.0414852    .0009689
         gdp |    .0059341    .003268     1.82   0.072     -.000552    .0124202
      eduyrs |    .0323947   .0308282     1.05   0.296    -.0287906    .0935801
     lrscale |    .1724216   .0597853     2.88   0.005     .0537644    .2910789
    hinctnta |    .0331072    .038111     0.87   0.387    -.0425326    .1087469
     stfhlth |    .1146391   .0511581     2.24   0.027     .0131044    .2161738
             |
    essround |
           7 |   -.0767837   .0437682    -1.75   0.083    -.1636515     .010084
           8 |    .0076442   .0475521     0.16   0.873    -.0867335    .1020219
           9 |    .2418902   .0753502     3.21   0.002      .092341    .3914394
          10 |    .3002405   .0826932     3.63   0.000     .1361175    .4643636
          11 |    .2558398   .0868317     2.95   0.004     .0835028    .4281768
             |
       _cons |    .6605462   .7421124     0.89   0.376    -.8123415    2.133434
-------------+----------------------------------------------------------------
     sigma_u |   .62042777
     sigma_e |   .36197354
         rho |   .74605396   (fraction of variance due to u_i)
------------------------------------------------------------------------------
```

Model 5 (Dependent variable: trust in political parties; main independent: lag_ln_exptot)

```
. eststo reg5: xtreg trstprt lag_ln_exptot unemp gdp eduyrs hinctnta lrscale stfhlth i.essround, fe cluster(region_id)

Fixed-effects (within) regression               Number of obs     =       586
Group variable: region_id                       Number of groups  =        98

R-squared:                                      Obs per group:
     Within  = 0.3702                                         min =         5
     Between = 0.7618                                         avg =       6.0
     Overall = 0.6835                                         max =         6

                                                F(12, 97)         =     12.53
corr(u_i, Xb) = 0.5360                          Prob > F          =    0.0000

                              (Std. err. adjusted for 98 clusters in region_id)
------------------------------------------------------------------------------
             |               Robust
     trstprt |  Coefficient  std. err.      t    P>|t|     [95% conf. interval]
-------------+----------------------------------------------------------------
lag_ln_exptot|    .0998372   .0543862     1.84   0.069    -.0081044    .2077788
       unemp |   -.0198695   .0107041    -1.86   0.066    -.0411141    .0013752
         gdp |    .0061643   .0032553     1.89   0.061    -.0002966    .0126253
      eduyrs |    .0321855   .0308156     1.04   0.299    -.0289749    .0933459
    hinctnta |    .0337724   .0381887     0.88   0.379    -.0420216    .1095663
     lrscale |    .1738495   .0600101     2.90   0.005     .0547461     .292953
     stfhlth |    .1145942   .0512747     2.23   0.028      .012828    .2163603
             |
    essround |
           7 |   -.0768275   .0438201    -1.75   0.083    -.1637982    .0101432
           8 |    .0109958   .0480586     0.23   0.820    -.0843873    .1063788
           9 |    .2458412   .0756785     3.25   0.002     .0956402    .3960421
          10 |    .3045043   .0829979     3.67   0.000     .1397763    .4692322
          11 |    .2629162    .087262     3.01   0.003     .0897253    .4361072
             |
       _cons |    .6220876   .7423697     0.84   0.404    -.8513108    2.095486
-------------+----------------------------------------------------------------
     sigma_u |   .61472076
     sigma_e |   .36209227
         rho |   .74241108   (fraction of variance due to u_i)
------------------------------------------------------------------------------
```

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Building Trust in Politics through Deliberative Democracy: Assessing the Spillover Effects of Mini-Publics on the Broader Public

Giacomo Innocenti

Abstract

In an era marked by democratic backsliding, rising political polarisation, and declining public trust, the question of how to restore confidence in democratic institutions has gained renewed urgency. This research investigates whether deliberative democratic initiatives (specifically citizens' assemblies and mini-publics) can positively impact political trust among participants and, more interestingly, across the broader public. While prior research has primarily concentrated on micro-level effects of those initiatives, this study offers an original contribution through a comparative, cross-European quantitative analysis of potential spillover effects on non-participants. It examines whether the regional proliferation of mini-publics correlates with higher levels of trust in politicians, political parties, and parliaments, and if implementing deliberative initiatives leads to higher trust levels. Grounded in an innovative theoretical framework that distinguishes between deliberative democracy as a normative theory, a set of practices, and a systemic approach, the research draws on data from the European Social Survey (ESS) and the OECD Deliberative Democracy Database. Using quasi-panel data, it analyses the relationship between deliberative practices and political trust at the regional level in the period between 2010 and 2023. The findings demonstrate that deliberative initiatives can contribute meaningfully to enhancing political trust, particularly associated with political parties. Finally, the discussion highlights that mini-publics can contribute to a democratic renewal when designed and implemented under the right conditions. By bridging normative theory and empirical analysis, this research advances scholarly understanding of deliberative democracy's broader impacts, offering research and policy recommendations for fostering trust and legitimacy in democratic systems across Europe.

Key words

Deliberative Democracy, Mini-Publics, Political Trust, Spillover Effect, Cross-European Analysis, European Social Survey