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## 24 How do elected officials perceive deliberative citizens' assemblies?

**Abstract:** Despite their increasing use, citizens' assemblies are far from being unanimously supported by elected officials. While citizens' assemblies offer the opportunity to increase the quality and acceptance of decision-making, they may also require to give away power and engage with alternative legitimacies. In light of this ambiguity, the objective of this chapter is to explore how elected officials perceive CAs, i.e. when they support and when they oppose them? The question is addressed from two angles. First, the theoretical bases of why elected officials may (dis)like CAs are considered. Secondly, the results of existing empirical research on the matter are reviewed. These findings are then discussed vis-à-vis their theoretical relevance and the main lessons for the prospects of CAs as a democratic reform proposal are derived.

**Keywords:** deliberative democracy, democratic innovation, elite attitudes, deliberative wave, citizen deliberation

### 24.1 Introduction

To regain popular trust after decades of its decline, or to receive diversified and reasoned public feedback on problems of governance that are increasingly complex, there are more and more elected officials around the world associating citizens with decision-making through deliberative citizens' assemblies (CAs) (Česnulaitytė 2020: 69).<sup>1</sup> CAs are gatherings of ordinary citizens that meet to deliberate on a political issue and, after expert hearing and collective discussions, formulate recommendations on how it should be addressed (Ryan and Smith 2014). CAs vary in size and form but should be large enough to realize a certain descriptive representation of society – usually achieved through random selection – and small enough to allow for high quality deliberations (Goodin and Dryzek 2006). While they are usually used for a specific policy problem on an ad hoc basis, some countries have started to use them repeatedly or even institutionalized their use (Farrell, Suiter and Harris 2019; Niessen and Reuchamps 2022).

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1 Between 1986 and 2019, the OECD counted 282 representative deliberative processes in its member countries. On average, there was 1 every year between 1986 and 1990, 2 between 1991 and 1995, 7 between 1996 and 2000, 5 between 2001 and 2005, 6 between 2006 and 2010, 16 between 2011 and 2015, and 25 between 2016 and 2019.

Despite this increasing trend, CAs are far from being unanimously supported by decision-makers. One reason for this is that decision-makers need to give away a part of their power when initiating a CA. They may indeed like some of the recommendations of CAs but not others – be it for ideological or strategic reasons. Yet, decision-makers need at least to engage with CAs' recommendations, i.e. explain which of them are implemented (or not) and why, and may sometimes even feel obliged to implement them, depending on the expectations raised by citizens (Jacquet 2019). Another reason is that CAs rely on a fundamentally different rationale of composition (descriptive rather than electoral) and decision-making (deliberative rather than adversarial) that can compete with elected officials' own legitimacy (Mansbridge 1983; Vandamme 2018). Notwithstanding these challenges, CAs offer decision-makers the opportunity to increase both the legitimacy and quality of political decisions because they have been inspired by the reasoned exchange of a diverse and independent group of citizens (Bohman 2006; Parkinson 2006).

In light of this ambiguity, one may wonder *how elected officials perceive CAs*, i.e. when they support and when they oppose them?<sup>2</sup> This question is not only of theoretical interest but also touches upon the relevance of CAs as a proposal for democratic reform. Put differently, since elected officials are those who eventually decide on the reform of existing political institutions, their attitude towards CAs and its determinants provide us with further insights into the likelihood and direction of democratic reform processes.

To answer this question, I explore in this chapter the theoretical bases of why elected officials may (dis)like CAs (Section 1) and review the results of existing empirical research on the matter (Section 2). After discussing the findings vis-à-vis their theoretical relevance, I conclude with their main lessons for the prospect of CAs as a democratic reform proposal (Section 3).

## 24.2 A conceptual framework for understanding elite attitudes towards deliberative citizens' assemblies

As illustrated above, there are good reasons for elected officials to both support and oppose CAs. But how best to understand their preferences? In this section, I develop a conceptual framework with which to categorize elected officials' attitudes towards CAs and review the factors that could influence their position.

At first, one should note that beyond the basic premises of support and opposition, there is a broad continuum of positions that elected officials can adopt vis-à-vis CAs. On

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<sup>2</sup> Which is not to be confused with the question of when elected officials implement mini-publics' recommendations (e.g. Jacquet and Van der Does 2021).

this continuum, *four ideal-typical positions* seem particularly distinctive to me, as summarized in the header of Table 24.1. First, there is the simple negative view. Elected officials who take this position do not want CAs to influence decision-making and prefer decisions to be taken by elected politicians only, with or without consulting stakeholders, and not by lay citizens in any case (Umbers 2021). Secondly, there is the positive view that sees CAs as a complement to traditional representative institutions – but on a consultative level alone. Elected officials supporting this position may support occasional CAs on an *ad hoc* basis, or even go as far as to systematize if not institutionalize CAs. But the main premise is that CAs and elected officials co-exist and complement each other; and that elected officials are those who take the final decision (Rummens 2016). Thirdly, there are those who have an equally positive and complementary view of CAs, but who want to go further and entrust CAs with co-decision-making power – be it through a form of bicameralism (Gastil and Wright 2019) or a mixed setting with both elected and sortitioned members (Suiter, Farrell and Clodagh 2016). Fourthly, there exists the positive view that wants CAs to disrupt and replace traditional representative institutions. Elected officials backing this position aim to replace themselves and build a new political system based on sortition and deliberation – at least for some political functions (Bouricius 2018).

The factors that influence the position of elected officials on this continuum are diverse and have been approached in different ways in the past (Thompson 2019). Drawing on Hall's (1997) seminal framework – prominent in political economy and policy sciences but also used by existing empirical research on elite preferences towards electoral institutions (Bowler, Donovan and Karp 2006) and democratic innovations (Junius et al. 2020) – it seems useful to me to group and understand potential explanatory factors around the three main concepts of *interests*, *ideas* and *institutions*. Each of these “three is” corresponds to a grand theory – rational-choice, interpretivism, and institutionalism – providing different perspectives on why elected officials might support or oppose CAs to different extents. While presented as distinct in the remainder of this section, the factors of these theoretical strands should be seen as complementary and interacting when influencing the position of elected officials. Table 24.1 gives a summary.

A first set of potential factors accounting for elected officials' position towards CAs relates to officials' strategic interest. In terms of political power, the possibility of using a CA to make better policy decisions and increase popular acceptance because they have been inspired by a diverse group of independent citizens can constitute a strong incentive for reform and lead officials to a complementary view of CAs – consultative or co-decisive (Boix 1999). The same can be said about the potential for officials to increase their popularity and votes. However, as said, this comes at the price of accepting some external influence into the decision-making, which may temper officials' enthusiasm and lead them to negative views. The latter might be especially true if they (expect to) disagree with the outcome of a CA, i.e. with the recommendations formulated by citizens (Esaïasson et al. 2019). If, on the contrary, they (expect to) agree with them, giving away power comes at a lower cost and can be expected to lead to positive views.

**Table 24.1.** Potential factors influencing elected officials' perception of CAs

View	Negative		Positive	
			Complementary	Disruptive
Decision-making power	None		Consultative/ Co-decisive	Solely decisive
<i>Factors:</i>				
Interests	Power	Losing power	Gaining popularity/votes Better decisions/ acceptance	
	Outcome	Disagreeing	Agreeing	
Ideas	Representative legitimacy	Electoral representation Electoral accountability	Both legitimacies	Descriptive representation Justification and rotation
	Capacity	Through selection, professionalizat. and adversarial exchange	Both forms of capacity	Through epistemic diversity, independence and deliberation
	Complementarity	Non-complementary	Complementary	Non-complementary
	Ideology	Conservative	Progressive	
Institutions	Socialization	Long political career	Short/no political career	
	Experience with elected institutions	Positive	Problematic	Negative
	Experience with citizen deliberation	Negative	Positive	

The expectation of (always) agreeing with citizens' recommendations seems to me like the only interest-based factor that could explain why an elected official would adopt a disruptive view of CAs. When accounting solely for its power, an official would indeed never want to give it away altogether.

Another set of factors potentially explaining the extent to which elected officials support or oppose CAs relates to their political ideas. We can distinguish four ideational factors in particular. First, there is the officials' view of representative legitimacy. While that of elected officials relies on electoral representation and accountability, that of CAs relies on descriptive representation, justification to the macro-public, and rotation (Parkinson 2006). Secondly, there is the officials' view of political capacity. That of elected officials comes with the idea of selecting the best, who then professionalize and compete in adversarial majority vs. opposition dynamics, while that of CAs relies on epistemic diversity, independence, and deliberation (Thompson 2008). Depending on

how elected officials envision representative legitimacy and political capacity, supporting only one of the two or both, they may be more or less in favour of CAs. Thirdly, and related to the former, there is the extent to which elected officials see the respective virtues and the functioning of electoral institutions and CAs as complementary or not – regardless of whether they support them (Vandamme et al. 2018). If they do not see them as complementary, they may be more inclined to a negative or a disruptive view of CAs – depending on which legitimacies and capacities they see as superior. Fourthly, there is the elected officials' political ideology. While conservative positions can be expected to be associated with negative views of CAs, progressive ones should lead to positive views – complementary or disruptive (Sintomer, Röcke and Herzberg 2016). Beyond individual officials' ideology, it has furthermore been argued that the general political culture in a country could influence officials' openness towards integrating (deliberative) citizen participation into decision-making (Dryzek 2012: 170–175).

A third and final set of potential factors accounting for elected officials' position towards CAs are of an institutional nature. The amount of time elected officials have spent working in electoral institutions and the amount of time they still want to may influence them (Weber 1919) – leading to a negative or at most complementary view. Conversely, political newcomers or those who do not want to make a career living from electoral institutions might be more open for reforming them – be it to complement or disrupt them. The exact line between the two, i.e. when career lengths lead to a consultative or a co-decisive view is difficult to draw theoretically. Moreover, officials' actual experience with both elected institutions and citizen deliberation might equally influence their opinions. Those who are disenchanted with the functioning of electoral institutions should be more inclined towards reforming them – a little, if officials see that only a few problems could be solved by complementing existing institutions with CAs; a lot, if they see them as inherently flawed (Niessen et al. 2018). Similarly, a positive past experience with CAs can be expected to open elected officials to their use, while a negative past experience should do the opposite.

### **24.3 How elected officials perceive deliberative citizens' assemblies: Review of existing research**

Now, beyond the theoretical soundness of all these factors, which of them have actually been proven to influence elected officials' positions towards CAs? The objective of this section is to answer this question by reviewing existing empirical research. While the literature on elite preferences towards all kinds of democratic innovations as well as towards the reform of electoral institutions in general is quite broad (e.g. Bowler, Donovan and Karp 2002, 2006; Hendriks and Lees-Marshment 2019), I limit my review to

studies that focus on the attitude of elected officials (legislative or executive) towards CAs.<sup>3</sup>

### 24.3.1 Quantitative studies

To my knowledge, there are as of today four studies surveying elected officials' opinions on CAs and analysing them quantitatively. In their survey of Finnish national members of parliament (MPs), ministers, and party officials in 2018 (n=124), Koskimaa and Rapeli (2020) found that these were quite sceptical of deliberative citizen forums. On a 5-point trust scale (none-little-some-a lot-full), 576% had at least some trust in them advising decision-makers on "which problems should be given priority". But only 376% had some trust in them advising decision-makers on "how they should make decisions about particular political issues", and trusted them even less to "oblige elected officials to vote in a certain way on specific political issues" (9.8%). The authors did not inquire if certain types of officials were more positive than others, but found much higher approval scores among citizens, which leads us to expect a relationship with the political function.

Similar opinions were found among regional and national Belgian MPs in 2017 (n=124) by Jacquet et al. (2022). While 48.2% of them were rather or fully in favour of the use of "a participatory citizen panel [composed] by random selection" (10.7% remained neutral), only 73% rather or fully supported the "institution of a legislative chamber that is composed of randomly selected citizens" (6.6% remained neutral). The "institution of a mixed legislative chamber that is composed of both elected and randomly selected citizens" collected 26.9% of rather or full approval rates (6.4% remained neutral). Like their Finnish colleagues, the authors found much higher approval rates among citizens, pointing *a priori* to a relationship with politicians' profession. However, approval rates did not differ when related to the length of MPs' political careers or their degree of disaffection with electoral institutions. In turn, they did find MPs from leftist parties to be more in favour of sortitioned citizen panels and a mixed chamber.

Besides these two single-country studies, a cross-national survey was conducted from 2009 to 2012 among MPs in 15 European countries by the *PartiRep* consortium (Deschouwer and Depauw 2014). It asked how desirable it was for them to "increase the number of deliberative events, where groups of ordinary citizens debate and decide on particular issues". In her analysis of national MPs from 14 of these countries (n=836–927), Close (2020) found an overall approval rate of 68.6%, which can be deemed high – certainly if one considers that the question comprised the conferral

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<sup>3</sup> Within this limit, I have tried to be as exhaustive as possible and include all studies I could find. However, considering the abundance and steady increase of work on CAs – also beyond the English, French, and German literature I am able to read – I cannot guarantee full exhaustivity.

of some decision-making power. In particular, she found MPs from opposition parties, leftist parties, and identifying as a woman to be more in favour of such deliberative events than others. This was also the case for those who saw citizens as politically competent and with “clear preferences”.

The same dataset was analysed by Junius et al. (2020) for both national and regional MPs from all 15 countries (n=1770–2064). In addition to their colleague’s findings, they showed that higher approval rates also existed both among MPs who thought that “politicians are out of touch with people’s concerns” and among what they call “delegates” (i.e. MPs who thought they “should vote according to the opinion of his/her voters”, as opposed to “according to his/her own opinion”). In turn, they did not find significant differences across electoral systems (proportional vs. non-proportional) and political levels (regional vs. national) or based on MPs’ “electoral vulnerability” (their perceived re-election chances), age and seniority.

### 24.3.2 Qualitative studies

In my review of qualitative research looking into elected officials’ perceptions of CAs, I came across ten studies. While five of them looked for typical discourses on CAs among officials and their determinants, five tried to retrace the factors leading officials to implement CAs.

In their interviews with 41 chairs and staff of the United Kingdom House of Commons select committees between 2018 and 2019, Beswick and Elstub (2019) found deliberative mini-publics were appreciated for their capacity to test ideas on citizens, to legitimize the committee and increase its power vis-à-vis the government and to give citizens a better understanding of the functioning of parliament. However, their interviewees also saw deliberative mini-publics as potential competitors and a threat to parliament’s own legitimacy; considering electoral representation to be of superior democratic legitimacy, which did not require the contribution of other forms of legitimacy.

Similar statements were collected by Hendriks (2016) between 2012 and 2015 in her interviews with six members of the Public Accounts Committee of the New South Wales Parliament in Australia, as well as by Bottin and Schiffino (2022) in their interviews with nine municipal councillors and advisors on a local deliberative mini-public in Belgium. In particular, Hendriks (2016) showed that a deliberative mini-public can attract more attention and appreciation from MPs when they are “coupled”, i.e. when the latter are integrated into the mini-public process. This points to the importance of actual experience with CAs for the opinions of officials. Bottin and Schiffino (2022), in turn, found more positive statements about CAs among female, young, and leftist officials.

Two existing qualitative studies have tried to typologize elite opinions on CAs. In their analysis of interviews with 91 regional and national MPs in Belgium in 2018, Rangoni et al. (2021) identified three ideal-typical discourses on CAs: an elitist discourse, reserving decision-making to elected officials only; a consultative discourse, supporting

the complementary and consultative use of CAs; and a power-sharing discourse, which envisions CAs with co-decision-making power. They showed that these discourses are related to MPs' vision of representation and of ordinary citizens' political capacity. In 2016, I found similar views among 28 politicians, associations, and companies on a local mini-public in Belgium (Niessen 2019). As a fourth additional typical position, I identified an expert position requiring public consultation to rely on experts and stakeholders but not on lay citizens. Furthermore, I showed that supportive discourses on CAs came from leftist politicians and those agreeing with the outcome – both of which may potentially be correlated when considering the progressive stances often taken by deliberative mini-publics.

A further strand of qualitative research has shown how the experiments of constitutional or electoral system reform through deliberative mini-publics came about in British Columbia, the Netherlands, Ontario (Fournier et al. 2011), Iceland (Landemore 2015) and Ireland (Farrell et al. 2021). They share the common background of having originated in a climate of political crisis – be it the aftermath of the 2008–2009 bank crisis for the Icelandic and Irish experiences, or the visible lack of fairness and proportionality in existing electoral systems in British Columbia, the Netherlands, and Ontario. Against this backdrop, electoral commitments (in British Columbia, Ontario, and Ireland), the particular motivation of individual politicians (in British Columbia and the Netherlands), as well as the inspiration of one case for others (British Columbia for the Netherlands and Ontario) were found by the respective authors to be triggering factors. The bad experience with a referendum (in the Netherlands) or the fear of its polarizing potential (in Ireland) were also signalled as having contributed to the choice of deliberative approaches. To prevent the processes from immediate politicization, which could have made them fail, the preparation by an all-party committee (in Ontario), by external independent designers (in British Columbia), or an external independent chair (in Ireland) and multi-party compromises (in Iceland) were pointed out as key.

The slightly different experience in East-Belgium, of a CA that has for the first time been associated permanently as an advisory body to a legislative assembly, has attracted equal scholarly attention (Macq and Jacquet 2023; Niessen and Reuchamps 2022). It was also shown to have originated in a climate where elected officials perceived a certain democratic fatigue, leading them to a first test of citizen deliberation, which was successful. Particular to these officials was that the majority of them were not full-time politicians. The possibility to be the first to go further and institute something permanent, presenting themselves as a kind of model, was seen as an additional incentive. Just as with the preceding experiences of electoral and constitutional reform, the avoidance of politicization was key during preparation: through an all-party steering in parliament rather than government, through the neutral facilitation by a group of experienced deliberation academics and activists, and through the joint agreement between parties not to campaign on the project in the upcoming elections.



## 24.4 A deliberative wave, but a shallow one as yet?

From this review of the literature, it follows that despite the steady increase of deliberative citizens' assemblies (CAs) around the world, they are still received with a certain caution by many elected officials. Approval rates for consultative uses vary, from 30% to 70% depending on the country, with uses envisioning (co-)decision-making power scoring much lower. These rates are reflected in the main political discourses collected as of today, seeing CAs very often as a tool for consultation and information, and often preserving a strong vision of traditional electoral representative democracy.

When going back to our conceptual framework, expecting elected officials' attitudes to vary depending on their interests, ideas, and institutions, we see that the relevance of each of the "three Is" is confirmed by the existing literature. Although not always easy to prove, evidence of interests and power considerations among officials was found in their discourses, portraying CAs amongst others as a means to collect public support. Vote-seeking strategies and majority vs. opposition dynamics were identified by both case studies and quantitative research. Although only partly explored by one qualitative study as of today, officials' opinions on CAs' outcome also seems to influence their opinions.

Elected officials' ideas – be it considerations about representative legitimacy or citizens' political capacity – were omnipresent in their discourses. While it remains difficult to disentangle whether those ideas influence their opinions or whether their opinions (determined by something else – interests, for example) influence their ideas, both seem intimately related. Some of these considerations also touch upon the question of complementarity. Elected officials' political ideology is found in different quantitative and qualitative studies to influence their attitude towards CAs, with greater openness coming on average from leftist politicians. Case studies show, however, that politicians from all types of parties can support CAs if the cross-party context is consensual, even if their degree of enthusiasm varies.

Surprisingly, the investigation of institutional factors did not find supporting evidence of elected officials' attitudes being related to the length of their political career. This means either that other factors, be it rational or ideological ones, outweigh it, or that institutional socialization is very quick and leads politicians swiftly to defend electoral institutions over CAs. Not the length but the way elected officials experienced electoral institutions, however, was shown to matter in most quantitative<sup>4</sup> and case studies – with negative experiences leading to higher support for CAs. The same can be said of their actual experience with CAs, which was shown by qualitative research to be a positive factor.

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<sup>4</sup> In Jacquet et al.'s (2022) study where electoral disenchantment did not appear to make a difference, the number of observations was much lower than in the one by Junius et al. (2020) where it did make a difference.

Despite these very interesting insights, many avenues remain to be explored. Three seem particularly promising to me. First, although explored qualitatively, there is at this stage little quantitative research on the impact that elites' knowledge and experience of CAs has on their opinions. This is understandable, given the recent nature of the phenomenon. But as a potentially strong factor, it should be taken up by future research. Secondly, since the relevance of both interests and ideas for elected officials' opinions on CAs has been proven, it would be interesting to investigate when and what happens when their interests and ideas conflict. Although CAs seem to be more supported by progressive officials, and although they also often come to rather progressive conclusions, it is possible that they come to conclusions that are not shared by all officials who supported the institution. It would be very interesting to explore when this happens and what kind of political dynamics follow. Thirdly, it would be interesting to trace elected officials over the longer term and see if and when some of them become more supportive of or, on the contrary, more opposed to CAs.

Finally, we are left with the question of what these results tell us about the prospects of CAs as a democratic reform proposal? As it stands, the "deliberative wave" we are seeing in the increasing number of CAs around the world (Česnulaitytė 2020) seems steady but rather shallow if we judge it by the actual transformation it brings to elected officials' conceptions of democracy. Many of them see CAs as a device for public consultation but largely stick to traditional conceptions of electoral representative democracy. A more radical reform of decision-making that reconsiders democratic legitimacies and redistributes decision-making power, as envisioned by political theorists and aimed for by activists (Mansbridge et al. 2012; Van Reybrouck 2016), has not yet reached or convinced large numbers of elected officials. Based on the determinants of their opinions found relevant in the present review of existing research, the support for more radical deliberative reforms can be expected to come especially from left and female officials. It can be expected to obtain greater political support in moments of political crisis and when initiated and steered in a non-politicized way. When considering officials' low support rates for more compelling uses of deliberation, certainly when compared to citizens, it may be more likely that radical reform proposals, if they succeed, will emerge bottom-up rather than top-down.

Despite this rather sceptical appraisal of the prospects of CAs as a profound democratic reform proposal, as of today, the "deliberative wave", even if it is shallow as yet, might still have a significant deliberative impact on the broader political system. Through their increasing use, even if it remains consultative, CAs prompt elected officials and the broader public to think not only about the legitimacy of citizen deliberation and the place it should take in the political system, but also about the legitimacy of existing institutions. This already has the potential to contribute now to a deliberative (re)consideration of how political decisions should be taken.

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