Institutionalising participatory and deliberative procedures: The origins of the first permanent citizens' assembly

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Abstract. In the context of public disaffection towards representative democracies, political leaders are increasingly establishing citizens' assemblies to foster participatory governance. These deliberative fora composed of randomly selected citizens have attracted much scholarly attention regarding their theoretical foundations and internal functioning. Nevertheless, we lack research that scrutinizes the reasons why political leaders create such new institutions. This article fills this gap by analysing a specific case: the first permanent randomly selected citizens' assembly that will work in collaboration with a parliament in the long-term (Ostbelgien, Belgium). This case is analysed through a framework that pays close attention to the context in which it developed, the profiles of political elites that supported its creation, as well as the multiple objectives it was vested with. The findings reveal that initiators of citizens' assemblies fundamentally conceive them as a way to strengthen a polity's identity, to save the electoral model of democracy, and to restore the legitimacy of traditional political leaders. Our analysis of this particular conception lead us to argue for the need of developing context-sentive approaches to participatory and deliberative procedures, as well as to discuss whether we should consider the latter as mere elites' legitimation tools.

Keywords: citizens' assemblies; participatory and deliberative procedures; democratic innovations; participatory governance; political leaders

Introduction

Representative democracies face many challenges, such as massive distrust towards their elites and institutions, unequal levels of participation and the complexity of public action (Dalton, 2017; Papadopoulos, 2013). Against this backdrop, participatory and deliberative procedures[1] have been advocated and implemented in order to involve citizens in public affairs (Dryzek et al., 2019; Smith, 2009). While a growing body of literature has already analysed the theoretical foundations and internal functioning of such procedures (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Elstub & Escobar, 2019), little is actually known about political leaders' attitudes towards public involvement in the political system (Hendriks & Lees-Marshment, 2019). At first glance, it might be puzzling to imagine those in power developing procedures that give lay citizens a more direct say in decision making. This is particularly intriguing when deliberative and participatory procedures are institutionalised and made permanent.

This article helps to fill this gap by analysing one case study, the *Permanenter Bürgerdialog* (PBD), set up by the German-speaking Community of Belgium. For the first time, this federal entity has institutionalised a permanent citizens' assembly composed of randomly selected citizens (Niessen & Reuchamps, 2020). Participants deliberate political issues, make recommendations and work with Parliament on getting them turned into public policy. It is therefore a particularly interesting case because it goes beyond the several ad hoc citizens' assemblies that have been

organised in representative democracies (Elstub, 2014; Grönlund et al., 2014). Through an interpretive research design based on original interviews, we seek to answer the following question: Why did political leaders in the German-speaking Community establish a permanent randomly selected assembly?

Our analysis suggests three main sets of factors to understand the creation of the PBD. First, its creation must be put in context: the German-speaking Community appears to be a particularly fertile ground for setting up citizens' assemblies. Second, the PBD is the result of particular political dynamics involving multiple actors that shaped the format of the citizens' assembly while allowing a unanimous vote in favour of its creation. Third, the PBD was vested with three main objectives. Political leaders expect that the citizens' assembly will contribute (1) to make better decisions, (2) heal electoral democracy by showing that political leaders are close to people and responsive to their demands and (3) foster the identity of the German-speaking Community. We therefore argue that participatory and deliberative procedures are vested with different meanings that go beyond merely opening up the decision-making process.

The first section of this article reviews the literature on the relationship between political leaders and citizens' assemblies. The following section presents the method used to conduct and analyse the in-depth interviews. Then, we briefly present our case. The findings are presented in three main sections: the first highlights the importance of the specific context in which the PBD was created, the second addresses the negotiating process that led to the creation of PBD and the third focuses on its expected benefits. We engage in a discussion around two main points: the specific nature of our case and the question of whether we should conceive citizens' assemblies as mere tools of legitimation for the elite. Finally, we come back to the main lessons of this article in the conclusion.

State of the art: Political leaders and citizens' assemblies

In order to address the challenges faced by representative democracies, different procedures have been discussed and implemented such as popular votes, participatory budgeting and online platforms (Smith, 2009). Among such innovations, mini-publics and citizens' assemblies[2] have attracted lots of attention (Jacquet & van der Does, 2021). Two main features distinguish them from other forms of public participation (Grönlund et al., 2014). First, participants are randomly selected from the broader population. This recruitment procedure aims to gather a more diverse pool of participants than the small circle of activists that usually turns up at participatory fora and relies only on self-selection. Second, mini-publics are deliberative fora. Participants exchange views and arguments with the help of trained facilitators who seek to provide a respectful atmosphere of listening and cooperation.

In the 1980s, the first deliberative fora composed of randomly selected citizens emerged at the fringes of the political system (Setälä & Smith, 2018). They were set up by activists, academics and local authorities to show that lay citizens could participate in such deliberative processes and make meaningful recommendations. From the 2000s onwards, mini-publics have gained more attention from public authorities. Regional and national authorities have implemented ad-hoc procedures on specific issues, such as the Canadian assemblies on electoral reforms (Fournier et al., 2011) and the three Irish assemblies on constitutional issues (Farrell et al., 2021). More recently, some activists and even some political leaders have called for the institutionalisation of citizens' assemblies. The idea is to give these fora a more central role in the decision-making process and to avoid public leaders' tendency to cherry-pick issues and recommendations (Landemore,

2020). Some proposals even suggest creating a new parliamentary chamber composed of randomly selected citizens (Gastil & Wright, 2018). Their advocates usually insist on the failures of the electoral model of democracy, such as the overrepresentation of more advantaged citizens, party discipline and a lack of long-term perspective. They believe that deliberative assemblies composed of randomly selected people could counteract these tendencies (Fishkin, 2018; Zakaras, 2010). More generally, many supporters of participatory and deliberative procedures see such practices as a way to transform how contemporary representative systems work and involve citizens in governing the polity (Landemore, 2020). For a review of theoretical arguments for and against such proposals, see Setälä and Smith (2018).

Empirical research has extensively scrutinised these micro-deliberative fora (Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019). This scholarship has mainly focused on the quality of deliberation and the impact of such interactions on those who agree to participate, including their policy preferences, political efficacy, skills and trust in the political system (Jacquet & van der Does, 2021). Despite variations in the findings, the conclusions of this research are usually quite optimistic, claiming that ordinary citizens are capable of high-quality deliberation (Dryzek et al., 2019). This predominant focus on internal dynamics tends to sideline an important dimension: political leaders' attitudes towards citizens' assemblies. These attitudes may appear puzzling. On the one hand, public officials are one of the main initiators of citizens' assemblies. They initiate them at various levels of government to tackle different kinds of problems (Grönlund et al., 2014; Mazeaud & Nonjon, 2018). On the other hand, political leaders could have good reason to avoid them (Hendriks & Lees-Marshment, 2019). The involvement of lay citizens in decision-making processes can potentially restrict political leaders' autonomy by forcing them to make certain decisions or explain why they do not do so. The introduction of new assemblies based on random selection can also challenge and undermine their legitimacy based on election (Beswick & Elstub, 2019; Vandamme et al., 2018). In this context, why do political leaders establish citizens' assemblies and what do they expect from them? Four categories of studies offer potential responses.

First, some studies pay attention to the discrepancies among political elites. Some favour participatory and deliberative procedures, while others do not. The studies show that these attitudes depend on political leaders' profiles. For instance, participatory budgeting processes are mainly created by left-wing local coalitions (Sintomer et al., 2016). The same ideological pattern also appears in support for the principle of a randomly selected legislative assembly (Jacquet et al., 2020) as well as mini-publics (Rangoni et al., 2021). In the same vein, in a large survey with local European councillors, Heinelt (2012) found that left-wing and female councillors are more in favour of participatory reforms than the others. Participating in the governing majority may also play a role in shaping leaders' preferences. Legislators affiliated with the majority are less supportive of direct democracy than those belonging to the opposition (Bowler et al., 2002).

Second, some studies explore what political leaders expect from public participation in very general terms (Beswick & Elstub, 2019; Hendriks & Lees-Marshment, 2019; Rangoni et al., 2021). Hendriks and Lees-Marshment (2019) found that political leaders value the principle of public participation to collect information, connect with real people, check the feasibility of new policies and aid policy implementation. They show that political leaders prefer informal channels over formal participatory devices to achieve these objectives. The same pattern is observed in a survey in Finland that indicates that political elites support new opportunities for participation as long as they remain purely advisory (Koskimaa & Rapeli, 2020). This suggests that elites' positive appraisal of public participation does not mean that they want to share power with ordinary people (though

there are exceptions; Rangoni et al., 2021). Indeed, their many connections with citizens in the field (stakeholders, activists, lay citizens) place them in a privileged position and strengthen their role as the central decisionmakers (Schiffino et al., 2019). In a study on the Select Committees in the UK Parliament, Beswick and Elstub (2019) show that political leaders are open to introducing citizens' assemblies for the instrumental purpose of gathering more diversified information, but only in particular circumstances. The studies shed partial light on what political leaders expect from public participation in broad terms when they support the creation of participatory and deliberative procedures, thereby emphasising the importance of the expected benefits of such procedures.

Third, other studies show the importance of the context in which citizens' assemblies are set up (Mazeaud & Nonjon, 2018). Drawing on cases studies in French regions, Gourgues (2013) shows that political leaders can pursue different objectives when they establish participatory mechanisms: framing a problem in a particular way, gaining visibility and defending a particular solution. These different approaches depend on dynamics among actors involved in policy, in which such mechanisms are integrated. Other studies indicate that citizens' assemblies are perceived as more or less legitimate depending on the context in which they appear (Hendriks, 2005). Comparative studies show that the dominant conception of democracy in a given context is an important factor of acceptability for such processes (Dryzek & Tucker, 2008; Nielsen et al., 2007). Elites from countries with a centralising and exclusive style of policy making (e.g., France) tend to disregard citizens' assemblies, whereas elites from countries with a tradition of major policy consultation (e.g., Denmark) view them more positively.

Finally, some case descriptions suggest potential reasons that could explain the decision to establish citizens' assemblies. In British Columbia, some groups and parties in opposition criticised the dysfunctionality of the electoral system due to the distortion between the vote share and seat allocation (Warren & Pearse, 2008). When one of these parties (the liberals) won the election, they commissioned a citizens' assembly to propose reforms. In the Netherlands, the creation of the *Burgerforum* on electoral change was one party's (the D66) condition for participating in the coalition. For both cases, Fournier et al. (2011) believe that setting up the citizens' assemblies was one way for these parties to portray themselves as more 'democratic' and progressive than their contenders. In Ireland, the establishment of three constitutional conventions addressing sensitive issues for the country, including same-sex marriage and abortion, are related to different factors. Suiter et al. (2016) note that the first convention took place during the economic crisis that exacerbated the strained relationship between elites and citizens. In this context of tension, the Irish government was inspired by the examples of assemblies in Canada and the Netherlands and by the prospect of being a pilot experiment launched by academics. During the second convention, a reason to set up citizens' assemblies was that abortion was then a very sensitive topic on the political agenda and that a citizens' assembly was conceived by political leaders as a way to steer clear of it (Farrell et al., 2019). This explains why this second assembly was exclusively composed of randomly selected citizens, as the first had included elected MPs. The Irish government has continued in this direction by organising a third assembly on gender equality in 2020 and announcing that other assemblies will follow (Farrell et al., 2021).

These previous studies offer insights into the relationship between citizens' assemblies and political leaders. The first three groups of studies highlight how support for public participation and deliberation varies across characteristics of political leaders and political contexts, as well as how politicians conceive the benefits of public participation in very general terms. However, they do not help us to understand why politicians decide to establish citizens' assemblies, what their

expectations are and what process led to this decision. The last set of studies gives some hints about these matters, but they do not rely on a systematic empirical inquiry. This article fills this gap by examining a particular case: the first permanent citizens' assembly that will interact with public authorities over a long period. To do so, this article connects the different dimensions indicated by the literature described in this section.

Method

In order to grasp what motivates public authorities to set up permanent citizens' assemblies, this article takes an interpretive qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews. One year and a half after the creation of the PBD, we met all the actors involved in getting it started. After we made several calls, they all agreed to meet us. Specifically, we interviewed the leaders of the six parliamentary groups, as well as the current and former President of Parliament. These MPs have negotiated the law that establishes the citizens' assembly. In addition, we interviewed the Minister-President of the German-speaking Community because of his key role in setting the project's agenda. These political leaders were asked about their own perceptions of the PBD and the process that led to its creation. We also interviewed four members of the Parliament's bureaucracy because they prepared the preliminary drafts of the law or were associated with the institutionalisation of the PBD. These interviews gave us a better understanding of the political dynamics at play in the institutions throughout the process. We finally conducted one interview with members of G1000, the advocacy group that pushed for the institutionalisation of deliberative democracy in the German-speaking Community.[3] The list of interviewees is available in the online Appendix I.

At the beginning of every meeting, we ensured the interviewees that their anonymity would be preserved. Following the usual practice of in-depth interviews, we attempted to show understanding and empathy (Johnson, 2002). We prepared a list of questions to cover (see online Appendix II), but our most important effort consisted of probing and exploring all responses. The order of the topics was constantly adapted to ensure fluid conversation and many follow-up questions were used to obtain a deeper and fuller understanding of the interviewees' meanings (Legard et al., 2003). Meetings took place face-to-face.[4] They lasted between 40 and 90 minutes and were tape-recorded.

The interviews were fully transcribed and analysed with Nvivo software. The two of us conducted an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We first read one interview separately and proposed a list of initial themes (or codes). A theme is a meaningful segment that can be a single sentence or group of sentences. We then compared our themes and created an initial coding scheme. We subsequently adapted this scheme during meetings and throughout the reading of new interviews. Themes were rearranged in a hierarchical coding scheme. Within the latter, lower themes are more semantic and close to what interviewees say, whereas upper themes are more latent and derived from our conceptual interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each extract attached to one code was analysed and discussed collectively to ensure the internal and external homogeneity of each theme (Miles & Huberman, 1994). At the end of the process, we coded all the interviews following the final scheme. The latter is available in online Appendix III.

Presentation of the case: The *Permanenter Bürgerdialog*

The PBD has been established by the German-speaking Community, a federal entity of Belgium. With 77,185 inhabitants living on 846.1 km^2, it is one of the smallest federal entities in the world.

The German-speaking Community has its own Government and Parliament with far-reaching areas of legislative competence, such as education, health care and employment (Niessen, 2021).

The PBD was established by means of a law[5] on 25 February 2019. It is made up of two bodies: a permanent citizens' council and ad-hoc citizens' assemblies. The latter are composed of randomly selected citizens among the adult population, while the former consists of former members of the ad-hoc assemblies (for a detailed presentation of the institution see Niessen & Reuchamps, 2020). Members of the citizens' council initiate and choose the subject of the citizens' assemblies. Suggestions may be made in advance either by an MP, the government, at least 100 citizens from the entity or two members of the council. Once created, ad-hoc citizens' assemblies engage in deliberations and formulate recommendations to decisionmakers. These recommendations are then discussed between the members of the assembly, the elected members of the dedicated parliamentary commission and the minister-in-charge. Elected representatives and the minister-in-charge need to indicate whether and how the recommendations will be implemented. If they reject the recommendations, they should provide justification for it. Nevertheless, in different public speeches, the Minister-President (the prime minister of the Community) announced that his majority would turn each recommendation into specific measures. The council has the power to monitor recommendations over the longer term (Niessen & Reuchamps, 2020).

Since the PBD is permanent, created through a law and directly attached to Parliament, with the politicians' commitment to turn its recommendations into measures, it allows us to analyse a world premiere in terms of institutionalised public deliberation.

As our analysis suggests, the creation of the PBD resulted from three main sets of factors: its fertile ground, the political dynamics that put its establishment on the agenda and the particular objectives that political leaders expected to be fulfilled by the creation of such an assembly. The following three sections detail these factors.

The German-speaking Community as fertile ground

In the minds of its political leaders, the German-speaking Community provided a particularly fertile ground for setting up participatory and deliberative institutions. This relates to factors connected to both physical properties (i.e., size) and the political system of the Community.

First, a key aspect of the German-speaking Community is its small size. It is the smallest federal entity of Belgium and one of the smallest in the world (Niessen, 2021). Its total population is smaller than most of Belgium's main cities. During our interviews, many political leaders stressed its small size, making the Community a place where it is easier than elsewhere to know almost everyone. According to all the political actors we interviewed, the Community's public leaders are really close to the population, which already supports a sort of 'permanent' dialogue between citizens and their representatives, as the following quote by an MP of the majority suggests:

> We have always lived here in a small Community (…) we are very close to the people, we are close to the teachers when there is a problem in education (…) This is the context where I stand and that has left its mark, notably when I saw politics done so close to the citizen, with competences comparable to those of a major region of the country. With the same competences we are so much closer to the citizen, so we have some "citizens' dialogue" almost daily, if you will (June 2020).

As this quote suggests, the feeling of being 'close to the citizen', of having 'some "citizens' dialogue" almost daily' leaves a mark in the mind of political leaders. It tends to make them develop positive attitudes towards public participation in general.

Second, the fact that there are almost no professional politicians is an important feature of the Community's political system. With the exception of the President of Parliament and the four ministers, being a politician in the German-speaking Community is a part-time job. According to elected representatives, it makes them closer to the citizens than in most other polities. This blurs the boundaries between politicians and citizens, as one opposition MP explains:

> [The idea of making lay citizens participate in political life] is something that must be in the habits of each politician nowadays. We are no longer the 25 elected people who have to decide on everything in Parliament. There are themes that we might regard differently than the citizens, but it must be said that we are still citizens with jobs, you see. (…) Almost 92 or 93% of the politicians have another job apart from Parliament, I think, so we are not distant… We always hear that politicians are moving away from citizens because they have nothing else but politics, but we still have our professional experience (…) so, if we do not dare to undertake this experiment in a small region like ours, where else? (June 2020).

As the previous quote suggests, this second characteristic also makes the Community a region particularly likely to foster such initiatives. Indeed, the German-speaking Community's history with participatory and deliberative initiatives seems to go back a long way. Almost all the interviewees told us about past experiences involving citizens in public debates and decision making. Some of these experiences concerned municipalities, while others involved the whole Community. As a result, politicians consider the PBD to be a new effort to systematise what they already do. A top leader of the Community told us:

> I am frequently asked: "Why do you foster citizen participation in the German-speaking Community?" (…) I always say: it is because over several decades, we have already seen experiences with citizen participation. These have not been like what we are doing now, but for example to initiate a legislative project, we have always had contacts with the concerned field (…) So, we have quite well-prepared ground to foster citizen participation. And we have also had experiences. For example, when we opened the commissions here at Parliament, we had discussions about CETA and we gave citizens the opportunity to come to the commissions and discuss with MPs and ministers (June 2020).

The PBD must therefore be contextualised as the latest development in this history, which it contributes to prolong. It is part of a tradition of setting up participatory and deliberative initiatives in a Community where political leaders tend to conceive these initiatives positively.

Political dynamics

The political process that led to the creation of the PBD was mainly elite-driven (Niessen & Reuchamps, 2020). Indeed, we cannot observe any tangible demand from the population or organised civil society groups to establish such an institution prior to its creation.

The first concrete advancements towards setting up the PBD happened in 2014, when the two politicians that would share the presidency of Parliament during the 2014–2019 legislature (one liberal, the other socialist) decided to put public participation on the political agenda of

Parliament during their terms.[6] At that time, the leaders of Parliament wanted to create an ambitious participatory procedure, but they had no precise idea about what it would look like. They launched a study phase for MPs to get better informed about the subject and be able to draw inspiration from foreign examples. In this regard, they arranged a study trip in 2016 with visits to Switzerland, Austria and Germany to observe different participatory and deliberative procedures. As suggested by the following quote, this trip was conceived as an exploratory phase for the development of something new in the Community:

> And so during the first phase, we organised a study trip (…) to draw inspiration from what happens in other regions, other countries. So 2016 was the preparatory phase, not only to persuade one or two colleagues, but also to prepare the ground to do something concrete a few months or a few years afterwards (June 2020).

The trip raised awareness of the potential benefits of public participation in deliberative assemblies among the MPs, both in the majority and the opposition. The political leaders decided to take a first step towards setting up a new procedure by organising a pilot project in 2017. It consisted of a three-day-long deliberative process involving 20 citizens on the subject of early childhood (Kern & Werner, 2018). Despite some problems,[7] the project was well-evaluated overall and served as a basis for setting up something more deeply institutionalised.

In the aftermath of this first ad-hoc citizens' assembly, Minister-President Oliver Paasch (Pro-DG, regionalist party) gave fresh impetus to the project. In 2017, he met with an influential advocate of deliberative democracy in Belgium, David Van Reybrouck. The latter is the founder of the G1000, an advocacy group[8] calling for the creation of a permanent assembly composed of randomly selected citizens. Following the first meeting, David Van Reybrouck and the G1000 team agreed to cooperate with the institutions of the German-speaking Community to create a new procedure. They convened a workshop of national and international scholars to make a specific citizens' assembly proposal (Niessen & Reuchamps, 2020), which was subsequently transmitted to the leaders of the six groups in Parliament. The G1000 and the experts advocated for the new body to be made permanent as well as for the random selection of participants to recruit a diversified panel of the population – the two main features that differentiate the PBD from more usual participatory and deliberative devices. The role of the G1000 team was therefore crucial. To put it simply, they gave a practical form to the strong but abstract willingness to foster public participation in the German-speaking Community. As one member of the opposition recalls, they also helped a lot in ensuring an 'independent' conception of the permanent citizens' assembly project:

> So, how did the meetings with the experts go? This was absolutely perfect, actually, because the discussions and meetings with the committee allowed a consensus to be found within the *bureau*.[9] In other words, without their support, it would not have worked, I think. (…) The experts elaborated the concept, in the end, and they have put numbers on it, on the finances. They have therefore created the possibility that it could be approved here. This has to be made crystal clear (…) because within all the parties, there was an initial moment of scepticism. And I have the feeling that it was during the meetings with the experts that this scepticism has been lowered (June 2020).

Based on the proposal made by the experts, the negotiating process ran through a whole year. The leaders of the six parliamentary groups discussed the details of the creation of the assembly including its composition, its cost and its practical organization (for further details, see Niessen & Reuchamps, 2020). Through these discussions, conflictual views on the PBD emerged amongst parties.

The three parliamentary groups of the majority (the regionalists, the socialists and the liberals) were directly supportive of an assembly. It is not very surprising since it was initiated by their leaders: two Presidents of Parliament and the Minister-President.

Regarding the opposition (the christian democrats, the greens and an anti-establishment party), scepticism remained during the first phases of the negotiations. All three groups supported the principle of a randomly selected assembly, but they were particularly afraid that the majority could use the PBD as a marketing tool during the following electoral campaign. During the discussions, the main leaders of the majority therefore had to commit not to discuss the PBD as an electoral argument supporting their action during the legislature.

Politicians also had different opinions about the binding nature of the recommendations issued by the PBD. On the one hand, some leaders, like those of the christian democrats, feared a potential transfer of formal legislative power from Parliament to the new citizens' assembly. This issue was relatively quickly resolved because such a transfer of power is not allowed under the Belgian Constitution (Niessen & Reuchamps, 2020). One the other hand, Vivant, an anti-establishment party, took exactly the opposite position and wanted to give authoritative power to the PBD. They advocated for this during the different rounds of discussion, but other parties replied that the Parliament of the German-speaking Community has no jurisdiction to change the Constitution. Facing the impossibility of enforcing binding recommendations, the party rallied to support the creation of the PBD.

Despite these different fears and criticism expressed during the negotiating process, the law that establishes the PBD was voted on 25 February 2019. One salient aspect of this vote is that it was unanimous: all six parties of the Community have endorsed this reform that institutionalises a randomly selected assembly for the first time.[10]

So far, we have seen that this unanimity can be understood by looking at the specific dynamics that led to the creation of the PBD, as well as politicians' positive views of participatory and deliberative initiatives developed in the particular context of the German-speaking Community. In the next section, we present a final set of factors that help us to understand the unanimous vote for creating the PBD.

Expected benefits

This section explores the expected benefits that political leaders associate with the creation of the PBD. These benefits include the enrichment of the decision-making processes, the healing of electoral democracy and the identity-building efforts of the German-speaking Community.

Enriching the decision

The first set of expectations, expressed by all the political actors we met, entails the potential improvement of public decision making. Participants' random selection in the PBD is supposed

to bring perspectives that are neglected by traditional decision-making processes in representative democracy, as well as by participatory devices that only rely on participants' self-selection.

Citizens are depicted as having different kinds of experiences and expertise useful for decision making. For instance, here is how the leader of a parliamentary group explains that citizens can enrich the debate with specific professional backgrounds that are complementary to its own background:

> Teaching, retirement homes, employment, tourism, sport, etc., these are competences held by the German-speaking Community. (…) The citizen who has a relative in a retirement home may give information that I, as an entrepreneur, wouldn't have obtained or thought about otherwise. The same goes when we speak of childcare: there are practical things we do not think about. It might be the smallest things that trigger the big moves (June 2020).

The diversity of points of view and the fact that they are gathered through a deliberative procedure is expected to increase the quality of decision making.

Healing electoral democracy

The second set of expectations concerns how representative democracy works in the German-speaking Community. It was evoked by all the political leaders we interviewed, who indicated that setting up the PBD would help to restore the broken link between them and the citizens. Even if this gap is perceived as less severe than in other contexts, interviewees believe that the distrust towards political leaders and traditional institutions (not only towards their institution) is a major challenge that must be addressed, as illustrated by the following quote by an MP of the majority:

> Elected representatives have well understood that the world is not only about them and that the gap between them and the population exists. Whoever cannot see this must be more than blind—he does not understand a thing about what's happening at the moment (June 2020).

Political leaders hope that the PBD will boost the legitimacy of the political system in two ways. First, they conceive the PBD as offering a way to collect aspirations and ideas from different parts of the population. As suggested by one MP, once participants have drafted their recommendations, political leaders think they will be able to show that they take them into account and, more generally, that the institutions of the Community are responsive to the population's demands.

> The syntheses that the *Bürgerdialog* gives us must be debated. Citizens must feel that it means something and that politicians listen to them. It is also important that the government acts accordingly (June 2020).

Second, the PBD is also conceived as a means to develop citizens' political knowledge and to cultivate their civic virtues (Grönlund et al., 2010). Through deliberation with their peers, as well as with stakeholders and decisionmakers, participants will acquire knowledge about the topic of discussion, but also about how the political system functions. According to interviewees, a key point consists of understanding the complexity of the decision-making process at large. The underlying narrative is that citizens tend to distrust politicians because they do not grasp how difficult their work can be. Political leaders expect that the PBD will make this complexity apparent and accordingly convince citizens of the quality of their efforts, as illustrated by one MP of the majority:

Mutual comprehension and thinking "it isn't that easy to make political choices after all", because people quickly understand that there is not enough money in the budget etc., that one has to make choices in decision-making processes (June 2020).

This effect is supposed to be multiplied when many citizens' assemblies are organised and when participants discuss their experience of deliberation with their own network (families, friends, colleagues), as the following political leader explains:

We also lost interest in politics, because everyone thinks "yes, yes, yes, they do what they want in the end, it's lovely that people can discuss, but in the end, they do want they want". And we also think that, with the *Bürgerdialog*, we can give fresh impetus to this political interest. (…) People must talk about this beautiful experience they had for a few months (June 2020).

In the same vein, the creation of the PBD is conceived as a means to fight against 'extremist and populist' parties. As illustrated in the following quote by a top leader of the Community, interviewees argue that citizens' assemblies can foster trust in traditional parties and undermine the success of more radical parties that criticise them:

If we succeed in brokering a certain peace between citizens and politicians, if we succeed in making our representative democratic system more credible, then we take that from the populist parties, and it costs them votes because they benefit from the failure of our system, of our democracy. This is their market, where they get all their votes from. And so they do not want us to reform, because we might of course reduce a little bit of the people's frustration that they benefit from on a daily basis (July 2020).

At this point, one could wonder whether this desire to restore trust in representative institutions is not contradictory, since we noted above that the political leaders of the German-speaking Community tend to consider themselves rather close to the people. However, it is precisely the combination of this perceived closeness and hints of distrust in the population that motivates political leaders to address this distrust before it grows. One of the earliest supporters of the PBD tells us that:

I think everyone realises that we have a problem. That is why the vote is unanimous. In any case, I think that everyone here agrees that politicians, the system of politicians, the system of representation, of representative democracy, has a profound problem and we must try to solve it, and if we don't find a solution like the PBD, like deliberative democracy, then we're going straight to the wall. The German-speaking Community is a small community where everyone knows everyone else and we already feel this distrust. If you feel it here, it must be more serious elsewhere. We know most of the inhabitants personally, but in spite of everything, people tell us: "Ah, the politicians always keep to themselves, they are not close to the people, they don't listen to the people, they don't know what the people are going through when we are really very, very close" (July 2020).

This last quote leads us to consider a last set of expected benefits, directly linked to the German-speaking Community as a polity to be built by establishing the PBD.

Building the German-speaking Community

The last set of expectations is mentioned by interviewees belonging to three different parties – two in the majority and one in the opposition. It relates to the 'world premiere' aspect of the PBD and its impact on political identity-building for the German-speaking Community. Creating the first citizens' assembly as deeply institutionalised as the PBD allowed the Community to give itself a brand image, portray itself as innovative and build a place for itself on the world map. As one MP recalls:

> Yes, [the unanimous vote] was exceptional, because [the creation of the PBD] was an experience. And an experience, for me, is always something that one has to have, that one has to initiate, because it is always better to be the one who files a patent than the one who copies it (June 2020).

But the PBD also allowed the German-speaking Community to build an identity within its own borders. As the smallest of Belgium's federal entities, with a population that has been ruled by different countries throughout history (Niessen, 2021),[11] political leaders seek to strengthen the Community by promoting its population's attachment to representative institutions. As a member of the administrative staff of the Parliament explains:

> For the German-speaking Community to survive, it is essential that citizens can identify with their institutions, because otherwise they will say "We might as well belong to Wallonia" (laughs). And so, this aspect of identification is crucial for a minority, for its survival, for its autonomy. And the elected representatives are generally interested in boosting the credibility of their political efforts by working with [the public] (June 2020).

As this last quote suggests, the PBD was therefore vested with important interests in strengthening the identity and cohesion of the German-speaking Community both on the Belgian and international scenes.

Discussion

Our qualitative analysis has explored why political leaders of the German-speaking Community established the first permanent randomly selected body coupled with a Parliament. We analysed different dimensions that might be grouped under three broad categories: contextual dimensions, political dynamics that led to the establishment of the PBD and actors' representations of how they, or the German-speaking Community, might benefit from setting up this citizens' assembly. These three dimensions are not isolated one from another and we need to consider their interactions to understand how the PBD was set up. The context indeed plays a role in influencing actors' attitudes towards participatory and deliberative procedures. This reflects a wide array of research on political sociology and human geography that has stressed how contextual dimensions influence political attitudes and behaviours (Agnew, 1996; Wusten & Mamadouh, 2014). In our case, the German-speaking Community, with its geographical and socio-political dimensions, was a particularly productive place for political leaders to develop positive attitudes towards citizens' assemblies. Yet the Community also turned into more than a mere background place. These insights show how contexts and expected benefits are closely interrelated.

In this discussion, we want to further consider two main points. The first is related to the specificity of our case and how it can inform broader analyses of citizens' assemblies in other contexts. The second relates to normative debates and tackles the transformative potential of citizens' assemblies.

Situating the PBD among other citizens assemblies

The PBD is a world premiere in terms of the institutionalisation of a permanent randomly selected citizens' assembly. This makes this case exceptional compared to previous examples of citizens' assemblies. Based on the four bodies of literature identified in the state of the art section, we can discuss the unique nature of the PBD with regard to the development of other deliberative and participatory procedures.

The first dimension concerns the characteristics of political leaders that established the PBD. This institution has been supported by all the parties of the German-speaking Community, regardless of their ideology. The PBD was first conceived and advocated by the three parties of the majority: socialist, liberal and regionalist. After a series of negotiations, parties of the opposition (Greens, Christian Democrats and anti-establishment) also joined the majority and voted in favour of creating the PBD. The fact that the concrete proposal came from the G1000 and their international expert group helped a great deal in securing the support of those who feared that the majority could use it strategically. And yet it is striking to note that all the parties endorsed the creation of the new institution. This broad support contrasts with conventional profiles of political leaders who tend to foster public participation within a political system, namely left-wing parties, women and members of the opposition (Bowler et al., 2002; Heinelt, 2012; Jacquet et al., 2020).

The second dimension concerns the benefits that politicians expect from setting up citizens' assemblies. The willingness to gather diversified sources of input to enrich the decision-making process is common to many participatory and deliberative procedures (Sintomer et al., 2016). The idea is to design better policies based on a great variety of expertise, beyond the traditional kind (Stirling, 2008). This justification largely echoes the epistemic conception of deliberative democracy (Estlund & Landemore, 2018). The second expectation (healing electoral democracy) shed new light on the way that politicians view the contribution of citizens' assemblies. Previous studies have shown that some public leaders present such procedures as an antidote to the malaise experienced by representative democracy, rather than as a substitute (Koskimaa & Rapeli, 2020; Schiffino et al., 2019). Our study of the PBD shows the same pattern. Our qualitative inquiry grasps how leaders perceive the relationship between public participation and electoral institutions. The interviewees hope that exchanges in the assemblies will convince the participants and the broader public of the complexity of every public action and of the good quality of the work done by public officials. This, in turn, is supposed to restore trust in political parties and to show that solutions offered by populist parties are too simplistic. We discuss the consequence of this particular approach to democratic innovation in the next section.

Regarding the last set of expectations, we have indicated that a citizens' assembly such as the PBD can be associated with a process of political identity-building of a territory, both within and beyond its own borders. This finding echoes in studies on French regional politics that show that the establishment of various participatory procedures can be a way to strengthen the visibility of a territory (Mazeaud & Nonjon, 2018). Political leaders are in search of something new, eager to

portray themselves as democratically innovative in the eyes of their population and the rest of the world.

As argued above, all these dynamics and expectations should be interpreted in light of the particular context in which they unfold. Nevertheless, this does not mean that such an assembly could not emerge elsewhere. Rather, our argument is an invitation to seriously consider a context-sensitive approach to the establishment of citizens' assemblies as a productive analytical lens for scrutinising where and why a given citizens' assembly is created.

Citizens' assemblies as tools of legitimation for the elite?

The second point of discussion concerns the normative debate about the transformative character of participatory and deliberative procedures (Cohen & Fung, 2004). As shown through our analysis, political leaders hope that the PBD will help to boost the legitimacy of the current political institutions of the German-speaking Community. Moreover, the establishment of this new procedure is a top-down process. Its creation indeed results from interaction among the leaders of the different political parties and a handful of external actors, namely the G1000 and international experts. As public participation procedures (Gourgues, 2013), the establishment of the PBD does not respond to a demand made by the population or civil society groups. All these elements might lead to the following question: Are such democratic innovations merely a tool of legitimation to be used by political leaders?

Among democratic theorists, some proponents of citizens' assemblies stress the failures of the electoral model of democracy and how bodies composed of randomly selected citizens could address these limitations (Gastil & Wright, 2018). They conceive participatory and deliberative innovations as ingredients of a broad and deep democratic renewal that change the nature of the political system to give the public a more central role (Curato & Böker, 2016; Landemore, 2020). However, our research indicates that the founders of the PBD do not think that it undermines electoral democracy. On the contrary, they view it as a way to heal and legitimise current electoral institutions. Participatory and deliberative democrats might be disappointed that the founders of assemblies like the PBD do not view them as a first step towards the radical entrenchment of democracy. This feeling can be strengthened by the fact that a democratic reform initiative like the PBD does not transfer formal authoritative power to the randomly selected citizens. Indeed, elected representatives are not formally required to implement the public's recommendations. From this perspective, citizens' assemblies might seem distorted and even instrumentalised. They complement electoral institutions, but the way the political system works at its core remains unchanged.

However, our findings may also nuance this rather pessimistic view. The fact that citizens' assemblies are created as long as they do not dispute the power held by traditional representative institutions does not necessarily mean that they are simply a window dressing strategy devised by political leaders, who only pretend to give citizens a voice while keeping a firm hand on power. Their willingness to restore the public's trust could also constrain them. When talking with interviewees about their views on what would become of the PBD's recommendations, a crucial point was a shared fear that it would exacerbate citizens' frustration. Accordingly, political leaders have an incentive to take the output of citizens' assemblies seriously to prevent further distrust towards electoral institutions and actors, otherwise the political system might be even more undermined. This echoes the idea that the virtues of deliberative institutions do not depend on

actors' motivations, but depend on the constraints and incentives they put on actors and behaviours (Warren, 2007). The transformative character of the PBD will depend on the new dynamics induced by how politicians respond to recommendations emerging from citizens' assemblies. Moreover, the top-down origin and advisory nature of the PBD do not imply that the German-speaking Community population will remain passive regarding the output of the PBD. Thanks to its permanent character, the content and fate of the recommendations might also produce new exchanges and mobilisation, thereby fostering deliberation and participation at the macro level (Lafont, 2017).

Conclusion

This paper seeks to understand why political leaders established a permanent citizens' assembly in the German-speaking Community of Belgium. Our analysis has presented the creation of the PBD as stemming from three main factors. First, it is the latest development in a long history of experimenting with participatory and deliberative initiatives in the German-speaking Community. Moreover, we showed that this history has been shaped by a particularly fertile breeding ground, leading political leaders to view public participation positively. Second, we showed that international models, the strong advocacy of the G1000 group and the leadership of a few figures put the creation of a citizens' assembly on the political agenda and led to a unanimous vote in favour of it. Third, we identified the benefits that political leaders expected from it. They indicate that political leaders have different motivations for setting up such assemblies that are not always linked to a radical opening up of democracy. On the contrary, the interviewees think that the PBD could help to save the current electoral model of democracy from various threats, including declining political trust, disinformation and the rise of populist parties. Its founders hope that the permanent citizens' assembly will bolster the legitimacy of elected representatives, showing that unlike what citizens may think, they are already responsive to its aspirations. Political leaders also expect the PBD to encourage the population's attachment to the institutions of this small federal entity and its visibility beyond its borders. The present case study accordingly shows that to understand why political leaders establish participatory and deliberative procedures, we need to pay attention to how these reforms are connected to different political agendas embedded in wider political contexts.

Acknowledgments

Online Appendix

Additional supporting information may be found in the Online Appendix section at the end of the article:

Appendix I. List of interviewees
Appendix II. List of preliminary questions
Appendix III. Coding Scheme
Supporting material

Notes

1. As suggested by Cohen and Fung (2004), participation and deliberation are two connected but different ideals that address distinct failures of the electoral model of democracy. 'Participatory and deliberative procedures' are practical arrangements that seek to strike a balance between these two ideals. They are participative in the sense that they open up decision-making processes to people who are not elected representatives and deliberative as decision making unfolds through a deliberative process (Papadopoulos & Warin, 2007).
2. The term 'mini-public' refers to deliberative fora composed of randomly selected lay citizens who discuss public issues. Throughout this paper, we use the term 'citizens' assembly' to refer to our case. Inspired by Setälä and Smith (2018), we consider citizens' assemblies to be a particular kind of mini-public where randomly selected lay citizens discuss public issues through a series of weekends to make recommendations to political leaders.
3. The interviews were conducted in French. All the interviewees agreed to speak in this language because they are fully bilingual, like many members of the Community. Only one interviewee expressed the willingness to speak in German. We were accompanied by a native speaker in this case and his/her interviews have been fully translated.
4. With the exception of two respondents who preferred to conduct the interviews online because of the COVID19 situation.
5. In the Belgian federal system, the exact term for regional law is 'decree'.
6. Karl Heinz-Lambertz served as President of Parliament during the first half of the legislature (from June 2014 to September 2016), while Alexander Miesen occupied the post during the second half (from September 2016 to June 2019).
7. These problems concerned the sorting procedure, which led to a low response rate, and to the launch of a governmental Master Plan on Early Childhood in the middle of the deliberative process.
8. The G1000 is a large grassroots citizens' assembly that attracted lots of national and international attention. This assembly successfully put the notion of democratic innovation and deliberative democracy on the Belgian agenda.
9. The *bureau* is a small group composed of top-level MPs, including the President of Parliament and the leaders of each party, the Clerk the Parliament and the Minister-President of the Community. This group was in charge of negotiating the creation of the PBD.
10. These forms of opposition between political leaders are the only ones we heard of through our fieldwork. No apparent opposition from other groups (e.g., business leaders or civil society organisations) was noted by the actors we met or voiced publicly. However, whether this means that there was effectively no such opposition is beyond the scope of this publication and will require further research.
11. The latest ones being Germany and Belgium, in the first part of the twentieth century.

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