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Connecting minipublics with direct democracy: Switzerland and beyond

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Abstract

This chapter explores the links between deliberative democracy (minipublics) and direct democracy (referendums, citizens' initiatives) in the context of their embeddedness in a democratic system based mostly on the institutions of representative democracy. It shows how democratic innovations can enhance participation both as a corrective and as boosters of citizen empowerment. While presenting and making use of novel empirical data from Switzerland, it goes beyond the Swiss case and proposes models of reform that may be of interest to various political systems debating the need to use democratic innovations to improve democracy.

Keywords: deliberative democracy; direct democracy; minipublics; Switzerland

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1 Introduction

What both deliberative democracy (via minipublics) and direct democracy (via referendums and citizens' initiatives) have in common is that they strongly and fundamentally challenge the elitist, Schumpeterian conception of democracy, according to which the role of citizens is to periodically elect parties and/or candidates who will “represent” them and govern (or act from the opposition) until the next election. But

how can these main alternative approaches to the elitist conception of (representative) democracy be linked and combined in a mutually supportive way?

This chapter examines how minipublics can play different roles within a political system that uses tools of direct democracy such as referendums and citizens' initiatives. These tools complement representative institutions by fulfilling specific functions centred on the concept of citizen empowerment (see also the chapter by Bacqué and Biewener in this volume). Deliberative minipublics can be seen as tools to improve the quality of citizens' decision-making by mitigating democratic pathologies such as rational ignorance and polarisation, or directly empowering their claim-making function by producing proposals that are not affected by such pathologies.

However, it is well known that minipublics serve multiple functions for different actors. For institutional actors, such as the government, parliament and public administration, minipublics can provide valuable insights into public opinion, thereby improving governance by incorporating citizens' perspectives into the legislative process. Intermediary actors, including political parties and interest groups, can use minipublics to gauge public support for initiatives and refine their strategies accordingly. Citizens themselves benefit directly, as minipublics increase their participation, provide balanced information and facilitate informed decision-making.

However, in relation to citizens and focusing on the functions of minipublics, we distinguish two specific normative roles of minipublics: as correctives and as boosters of citizen empowerment.

As correctives, minipublics address specific pathologies within the democratic system. By providing balanced and comprehensive information, they aim to reduce rational ignorance and polarisation, for example by introducing low-cost sources of information into the public sphere (e.g. Warren and Gastil 2015). This corrective function indirectly empowers citizens by strengthening the public sphere and improving their decision-making capacity, enabling them to make informed choices free from propaganda and manipulative influences.

As boosters, minipublics actively increase citizen participation and engagement. This implies a more robust integration of minipublics into the political system, transforming them into instruments of direct empowerment. Rather than merely mitigating problems, minipublics in this role proactively shape policy and legislative processes, significantly increasing citizens' influence and involvement in democratic decision-making. In this capacity, they can contribute to decisions that inherently increase accurate reasoning and decrease motivated reasoning, thereby counteracting some of the pathologies that afflict democracy, as Már and Gastil (2020) have shown.

Deliberative democracy is key, and it is not just speculation, but a science that can help address the crisis of democracy (Dryzek et al. 2019). Therefore, in this chapter we discuss these processes with empirical evidence. Data from Swiss minipublics, in particular the Citizens' Initiative Review (CIR) processes in Bellinzona and the canton of Aargau, will illustrate how minipublics act as corrective agents. These case studies provide valuable insights into how minipublics can address democratic pathologies and foster a more informed and less polarised electorate.

In the second part of the chapter, we then explore two hypothetical models in which minipublics can serve as direct boosters of empowerment. These models envisage a transformative role for minipublics, enhancing their integration into the political system and maximising their potential to boost civic engagement and democratic participation.

2 Functions and actors

What *functions* deliberative minipublics can/should have in a political system in which the instruments of direct democracy such as referendums and citizens' initiatives are used to complement the institutions of representative democracy? The answer will depend mostly on the *kind of political actors* who are the recipients of the minipublic's outcome. We can broadly distinguish between three types of actors: (a) institutional actors (government/parliament/public administration); (b) intermediary actors (e.g. political parties or interest groups who launch the collection of signatures for a referendum or for a citizens' initiative); (c) citizens at large.

In our previous work we have presented a conceptual roadmap showing how the minipublic can be employed in the various phases of the political process (pre-parliamentary, parliamentary post-parliamentary) and meaningfully support these three types of political actors in their decision-making (Stojanović 2023). In particular, we have pointed out that for the actors of the first (a) category, a minipublic can be useful to gain an idea of "what the people thinks" on a given issue. Hence a minipublic may provide an answer to a cognitive demand and perform functions that are similar to opinion surveys (see also "deliberative polling"; Fishkin 2009). In Ireland, for example, any modification of the constitution must be approved by a majority of voters and therefore it is "*rational* to consult a representative sample of the population before any referendum" (Courant 2021: 6; our italics). For (b) the intermediary actors, for example for a NGO advocating of a reform on a given topic, a minipublic can be useful for similar reasons. For example, before launching a citizens' initiative demanding a reform, that NGO might wish to

know which among the various options is the most promising in terms of being likely to receive the support of a majority of voters.

In this chapter we focus on the third (c) type of actors: ordinary citizens. Indeed, minipublic, connected with the use of direct democracy, can perform a number of interesting, democracy-enhancing benefits from the point of view of citizens' participation. While these deliberative benefits are indisputable, as also supported by new empirical evidence reported in this chapter, their function will largely depend on the position of the minipublic in the political system. Minipublics can become curative if their deliberative effects are directed towards the people before their decision-making action through the vote. Alternatively, they can serve a boosting function if their placement in the governance process is between the public sphere and the empowered sphere. In the next section (§3) we will discuss some of these benefits. We will then (§4) present related empirical evidence from two Swiss minipublics demonstrating their pathological corrective potential. Following that, we will (§5) advance a boosting understanding, aiming to capitalize on the benefits that such minipublics produce once integrated into a top-down decision-making process.

3 Mitigating democratic pathologies

To set the stage, let us first highlight that in a direct democracy, political elites have strong incentives to develop a dialog with the various stakeholders in order to avoid a referendum or an initiative – or at least to make it more difficult that a people's vote could refuse the proposed policy. However, once the referendum or the citizens' initiative leads to a vote, their outcomes force political elites and citizens into adopting starkly contrasting 'yes' or 'no' stances. Political elites, whether supporting or opposing referendums, tend to organize propaganda solely to convince voters of their choices (Paul and Brown, 2001). Voters, on the other hand, often use party political information as a shortcut to make decisions on what to express on the ballot (Lupia, 1994). In such contexts, elites typically use manipulative rhetoric to sway public opinion toward their favored positions (Redlawsk et al., 2022). Simultaneously, propaganda creates ideal conditions in which citizens struggle to access unbiased information or selectively expose themselves to information that confirms their existing beliefs (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008).

From this perspective, direct democratic systems can function as echo chambers of existing political pathologies of electoral democracy, such as *rational ignorance* and *directional motivated*

reasoning. *Rational ignorance* (Downs, 1957) refers to the decision by individuals not to become informed about politics because the cost of doing so exceeds the expected benefits. *Directional motivated reasoning* (Kunda, 1990) is the tendency for individuals to process information in a way that aligns with their pre-existing attitudes and beliefs, leading to confirmation bias.

Both rational ignorance and motivated reasoning have pathological effects on the democratic system. One evident side effect is that citizens' preferences can be directionally misinformed. Scholars have argued that citizens often express their preferences not after thorough and intelligible information gathering but by using shortcuts (Lupia, 1994). Yet, it is also known that the more salient the referendum issue, the more political campaigns intensify divisions. These divisions stem from the specific salience of the issue, significantly impacting polarisation. Various studies support this. Druckman et al. (2013) highlight that political parties play a crucial role in shaping divisions by influencing how citizens process information through specific cues and narratives. Trein and Vagionaki (2022) demonstrate that high-salience issues can lead to polarized learning behaviours in policymaking. Hernandez et al. (2021) note increased affective polarisation around elections when political issues gain heightened salience. Han (2023) highlights how the salience of cultural issues intensifies affective polarisation among voters, emphasizing the role of deeply embedded values in widening divisions.

In the light of this scenario, from a citizen's perspective, referendum campaign can create a chaotic information environment, making it difficult to identify what is trustworthy and factual. This complexity is exacerbated by the tendency of citizens political judgments are not solely based on the objective evaluation of policy content but are significantly affected by their partisan affiliations (e.g., Colombo and Kriesi 2017).

How can this issue be mitigated? The straightforward response is to better inform citizens and allow them to access balanced and accurate information that provides an overview of the reasons supporting both the 'yes' and 'no' positions on a referendum. This can be achieved through deliberation, a discourse-centric mode of decision-making that fosters informed and respectful dialogue among citizens and identifies reasons relevant to making a decision. In other words, incorporating deliberation into the direct democratic system would presumably reduce the existing pathologies of rational ignorance and directional motivated reasoning.

There are several options to achieve this. One notable option is the Citizens' Initiative Review (CIR) (e.g., Knobloch et al. 2013) – also known as the "Oregon model" – an innovative process that allows a group of stratified randomly selected ordinary citizens to evaluate ballot measures and provide voters with clear, balanced, and trustworthy information. This process is probably the best known among the deliberative tools.

This chapter delves into the role of deliberative tools in enhancing direct democratic systems. It will first highlight how CIR can tackle specific potential pathologies, such as rational ignorance and directional motivated reasoning, using original data from the Swiss experience of the Demoscan project, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. It will then zoom out to provide a broader understanding of how such deliberative instruments can accompany and improve the direct democratic process. Yet, while the CIR model directly tackles public sphere pathologies, other forms of deliberative minipublics can play additional systemic roles. These include an anticipatory role in producing reasonable propositions aimed at depolarizing political elites, or exploring new policy options in case a referendum imposes a veto on parliamentary propositions.

4 Evidence from Switzerland

CIR is a robust instrument for enhancing deliberation at the systemic level. Since its initial experimentation in Oregon in 2009 (Knobloch et al., 2013), its use has expanded to other states in the US, such as Massachusetts and Colorado (Gastil et al., 2016), as well as internationally in Finland (Christensen et al., 2017), Ireland (Suiter et al. 2020) and Switzerland (Stojanovic, 2023). While CIR was originally designed to accompany popularly initiated referendums, called citizens' initiatives, the Swiss case has demonstrated its application in both popularly initiated and non-popularly initiated referendums, as seen in the examples of the Canton of Aargau and the town of Bellinzona. The Swiss case is particularly interesting because this country is the one which has most institutionalized direct democracy; because its political system is less vitiated by money than the US politics; and because there is a rising interest in various cantons and at federal level to couple deliberative and direct democracy.

In Bellinzona, a CIR was held in April 2023 as part of the demoscan project. Twenty randomly selected panelists were tasked with writing a CIR-style report on the upcoming Swiss federal referendum on Climate Transition, scheduled for June 18, 2023. This referendum, launched by

the right-wing Swiss People's Party (SVP), proposed to abrogate a law passed by the Swiss parliament in September 2022, which mandated that Switzerland achieve net-zero emissions by 2050.

Similarly, the CIR in Aargau convened in the spring of 2023 to discuss a cantonal popular initiative set for a vote on June 18, 2023 (Heimann et al. 2024). Twenty-one randomly selected panelists were tasked with writing a report on the Aargau Cantonal climate initiative, supported by the Green Party and other environmental groups. This initiative proposed several measures at the cantonal level, such as replacing oil and gas heating systems in buildings by 2030 and increasing subsidies for voluntary energy renovations for building owners.

In both CIR initiatives, panelists were tasked with creating a report that included an information sheet for citizens. This report summarized the referendum topic in an approachable and comprehensible manner. Additionally, it listed three arguments supporting and three arguments opposing the referendum, along with a summary of the main positions. These reports were distributed to the citizens of Bellinzona and two municipalities in Canton Aargau, providing an accessible information sheet alongside the official voting booklet. In contrast to the brevity and accessibility of the reports, the booklet contained a detailed technical description of the law, including the text of the law amendment, arguments proposed by the referendum committee, and discussions from parliament and government.

Critics of the CIR model might point out that the reasons presented in the report should not necessarily be numerically balanced, especially in light of crucial topics such as climate change policy, as highlighted in our case. While human-caused climate change is a scientific fact, a referendum opposing energy transition—as in our case study—should not include arguments that deny climate change or induce climate skepticism. This is a critical point that can be addressed by considering the report's nature as a product of a deliberative process. As result of deliberation, the underlying mechanism that drive the report content is meta-consensus or that a consensus on which reasons are relevant to consider when making a decision. By employing meta-consensus framework, one could argue that some reasons are inherently “better” or carry more weight in terms of their relevance and impact on individuals and society. For example, in the context of climate protection in Bellinzona, the CIR statement "*We must act immediately to prevent the worsening of climate change*" is unquestionably more pertinent than any economic arguments against the law, as it addresses an existential threat that potentially affects everyone,

and soon. This also refers to the realisation of epistemic value as discussed by Elstund and Landemore (2018). Thus, while reasons should not necessarily be symmetrically balanced, there is an underlying argument that the epistemic value—or the most substantively important reasons—holds greater relevance in the decision-making process.

A second point raised by skeptics of deliberative minipublics concerns the number of participants, which they argue is too small for large and complex problems. However, there are two implicit laws in deliberation: one that suggests a tension between the quality of deliberation and the quantity of participants, and another that posits fewer participants equate to less representation. Yet, as Spada and Peixoto (forthcoming) recently pointed out, statistical representativeness is hardly achievable with minipublics due to challenges like sampling error, high non-response rates, and self-selection participation bias. Hence, the real question is rather to find the right number that can sufficiently represent diverse discourses by using proxies such as political preferences and, when the topic is known, proxies on opinions.

A third critique focuses on the outcome dimension. One might argue that similar results — such as an informed and balanced report — can be achieved by a group of experts. Again, the CIR report is an instrument that helps citizens make decisions by considering what citizens themselves deem relevant considerations. Therefore, it places less focus on factual-based criteria (as experts would probably do) and more on relevant reasons that should come into play to make an informed voting choice.

4.1 Effects on rational ignorance

By focusing on the first part of the report, the panelists were tasked to provide an accurate and accessible overview of the law contents. Normatively, this part of the report specifically aims to address and fix the issue of rational ignorance. As per Downs (1957) rational ignorance is a rationalistic cost-benefit evaluation that citizens' make in front of the complexity of the task of voting. Yet, due to cost-benefit calculations, citizens often avoid acquiring knowledge about a particular issue because the cost of obtaining the information exceeds the expected benefits. In other words, voters do not invest much time and resources to become fully informed about the content of the referendum. Since the probability that a single vote will alter the outcome is extremely low, the effort to acquire information for an informed vote is not justified by the negligible impact of their vote. Essentially, according to rational ignorance model, the lack of

information is a question of not having good and comprehensible information sources at cheap cost.

On the other hand, CIR report exactly tackle this issue, by providing, throughout the accurate and short description of the referendum content within the CIR report, a cheap effort that improve voter knowledge and confidence, by reducing the influence of misleading information, and enhance the overall quality of public discourse (Warren & Pearse, 2008, Geisler 2022). This mechanism is well documented in relation to the CIR. Mar and Gastil (2019), along with Gastil et al. (2023), have highlighted the impact of CIR minipublics on boosting citizens' motivation for accuracy and their overall knowledge. Their research indicates that engaging with CIR reports significantly reduces the influence of partisan biases. The studies show that participants who reviewed CIR reports demonstrated increased factual understanding, even after controlling for factors such as party affiliation, pre-existing attitudes, political awareness, and scientific literacy. Specifically, Gastil et al. (2023) found that exposure to minipublic reports significantly improved factual understanding among participants. Those who accessed the CIR guide exhibited a 23% increase in correct responses and a 27% reduction in incorrect answers compared to the control group, highlighting the effectiveness of the CIR in enhancing informed decision-making among the public.

This was well observed within the Swiss context. In the Canton Aargau CIR case, a striking increase in knowledge was observed among readers of the CIR report compared to non-readers (Heimann et al., 2024). Those who read the CIR flyer demonstrated a substantial understanding of the initiative, with a statistically significant increase in knowledge compared to those who did not read the flyer (Heimann et al., 2024). The robustness of these results was cross-examined with the knowledge levels of a second, unrelated referendum, the ‘Law on the Ombudsman’, which did not receive extra voting information (Heimann et al., 2024). The differences in understanding between the cantonal climate initiative and comparison municipalities were minimal for this second referendum, underscoring the specific effectiveness of the CIR report in the context of the climate protection initiative. As highlighted by Heimann et al. (2024), reading the CIR report significantly contributed to balancing ideologically driven knowledge. In municipalities where the CIR report was distributed, political orientation did not significantly affect the understanding of the initiative. This contrasts with the control municipalities, where the left-wing electorate had a better understanding of the proposed bill. This disparity is attributed to the fact that the initiative was introduced by left-leaning parties, leading to less motivation

among right-leaning individuals to engage deeply with the content, as they were predisposed to oppose it.

4.2 Effects on motivated reasoning

As seen in knowledge gain, CIR's report enhances individual knowledge. Mar and Gastil (2020) argue that this ultimately enhances accuracy reasoning and directly contrasts motivated reasoning. As individuals become more knowledgeable, they seek to form correct or accurate beliefs and make decisions based on a careful and unbiased evaluation of available evidence rather than cherry-picking information based on their partisan biases (e.g., Kunda 1990). However, correctness of the information, while necessary to develop accuracy in reasoning, does not necessarily induce voters to consider other arguments. Referendums are particularly interesting for democratic reasoning because political parties during referendum campaigns often favor symbolic confrontations over well-reasoned debates (Wyler, 2017). This approach promotes mechanisms that induce individuals to embrace motivated reasoning and, above all, become polarized under either the yes or no vote. To enhance reasoning, CIR reports integrate relevant justifications that support both the 'yes' and 'no' positions on the referendum vote. This section of the report is central, embodying the core principle of deliberative democracy, which is grounded in the idea of meta-consensus (Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2006), and therefore, prioritizing a process that is centred on discourse and diverse reasoning.

In CIR panels, participants present various reasons for supporting or opposing the referendum. Through this process, they select propositions by triaging relevant reasons, excluding those that do not fit within the shared mutual discursive framework, as described by Niemeyer and Dryzek (2007). Reflecting on diverse viewpoints stimulates deliberative reasoning (Niemeyer et al., 2024, Veri, 2024), allowing participants to meta-consensually recognize the legitimacy and integrity of others' arguments. This process ultimately helps in gradually eliminating propositions that are not collectively relevant and integrating into the report the reasons and justifications that are essential for forming a reasoned opinion.

A reasoned opinion, consequently, becomes depolarized because it integrates (or accounts for) other relevant reasons in forming a decision. This is the opposite mechanism to political propaganda, which exerts partisan cues to push individuals to self-select their sources of information (Leeper and Slothuus, 2014). While political propaganda enhances ideological polarisation by encouraging individuals to seek information that aligns with their party allegiance (Bolsen et al., 2014) and engage in disconfirmation bias by aggressively discounting contrary

arguments (Kruglanski and Weber, 1996), deliberation encourages individuals to listen and reflect on other viewpoints respectfully.

In essence, the CIR panel aims to provide the wider electorate with access to a micro-deliberative treatment by exposing the readers of the CIR report to the results of what is considered meta-consensually relevant for making a reasoned decision on the ballot. This process not only facilitates informed decision-making by presenting balanced and justified arguments, but ultimately should be source of ideological depolarisation, as voters are induced to navigate beyond partisan influences and consider the broader implications of the referendum.

To test this, we adopted an experimental survey with two groups. A treatment group of randomly selected citizens was exposed to the CIR report and asked to agree or disagree on eight propaganda statements supporting and opposing the referendum. A control group responded to the same statements survey without reading the CIR report. By using using item-polarisation approached based on the Euclidean distance between the group mean and the respondent (e.g., Poole 1981) we calculate single statement items polarisation levels. Pairwise Euclidean distance allows us to directly measure the spatial proximity between each individual opinions and the group mean. This approach provides a clear and straightforward depiction of how far an individual's view is from the average viewpoint within the group (Table 1).

Table 1: Propaganda statement polarisation levels

	Question	Control	Treatment	Δ	p-value
Distribution (Euclidean distance)	Q1	1.57	1.64	0.07	1
	Q2	1.93	1.49	-0.44	<0.001***
	Q3	1.75	1.77	0.03	0.94
	Q4	1.32	1.11	-0.21	<0.001***
	Q5	1.85	1.73	-0.12	<0.001***
	Q6	1.81	1.74	-0.06	<0.001***
	Q7	1.77	1.63	-0.14	0.001**
	Q8	1.60	1.49	-0.11	<0.001***
Mean Euclidean distance		1.70	1.58	-0.12	
N		189	174		

Source: authors' elaboration.

The mean change (Δ) in Euclidean distance across all questions was -0.12, indicating a general reduction in polarisation due to the treatment. Despite a minority of questions where polarisation levels remained substantially unchanged, the results demonstrate that the treatment significantly

impacted reducing political polarisation for the majority of propaganda statements, as evidenced by the highly significant p-values.

These findings suggest that the treatment intervention was effective in decreasing political polarisation across multiple fronts, although not universally across all questions. The statistically significant reductions in polarisation for the majority of the questions underscore the potential of the treatment in fostering less polarised attitudes. This highlights the value of such initiatives in not only educating voters but also creating a context where political reasoning is less impacted by polarisation. By reducing polarisation, these interventions can contribute to a more informed and less divided electorate.

4.3 Indirect effects

In general, both knowledge gain and reasoning stimulation are fundamental to promoting citizens' deliberative capacity, which ultimately strengthens their civic skills. Other than the direct effects on CIR treatment, there are a series of indirect effects.

Arguably, knowledge gain and reasoning make individuals better citizens, by triggering possible causal mechanisms that perform on *civic skills* building**.** There are three aspects that we want to highlight. First, knowledge plays a crucial role in enhancing an individual's ability to discern information effectively. By increasing knowledge, individuals can improve their *epistemic vigilance* (e.g., Sperber et al. 2010) which allows them to critically evaluate, understand, and verify the information they encounter. This heightened vigilance helps people filter and prioritize information, avoiding distortions caused by partisan cues.

Second, reflecting on other reasons further aids epistemic vigilance process by encouraging individuals to engage in deeper cognitive processing, thoughtfully considering diverse perspectives, question their biases, and contemplate the broader implications of their decisions. Reflexivity enables individuals to critically evaluate other reasons, *identify and reject misinformation*, reducing the likelihood of being influenced by false or misleading narratives.

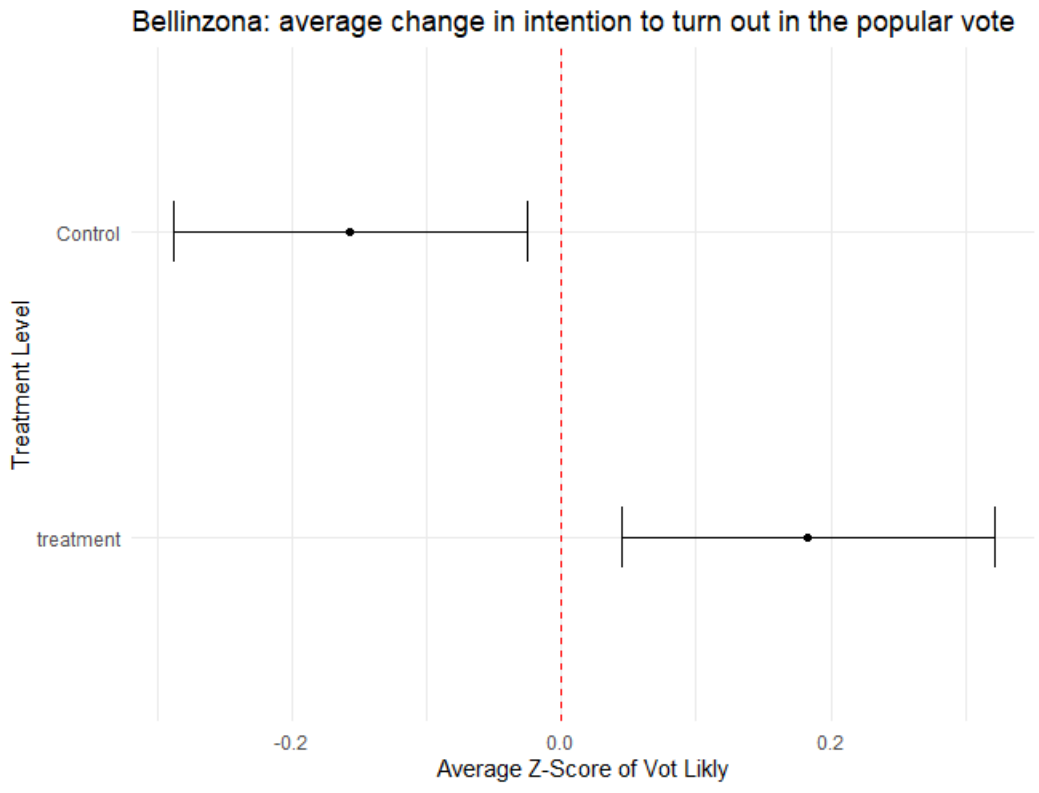
Third, engaging with a variety of reasons through deliberative processes is particularly effective in promoting understanding and *empathy* for others' experiences and opinions. Exposure to diverse perspectives through deliberation not only reduces polarisation, but also fosters a more *inclusive and empathetic society* (Suiter et al., 2020). Deliberative processes bring people together to discuss and debate political issues, allowing them to encounter and understand differing viewpoints. This engagement helps individuals become more open-minded and less

likely to view political opponents as adversaries, leading to a more collaborative and less divided society.

Critical thinking, improved epistemic vigilance, and empathy foster *civic skills* and promote *active participation* in democracy. Knowledge empowers them to navigate political landscapes and understand policy implications. Reasoning skills help voters critically evaluate political information and propaganda, reducing apathy towards the electoral process (Galston, 2001).

Empirical evidence from the Bellinzona CIR experiment supports the argument that deliberative processes can enhance political participation. Using an experimental survey setting in which respondents were randomly assigned to either a treatment group (reading the CIR statement) or a control group (not reading it), we observed that participants who engaged in reading the CIR report demonstrated a significantly higher intention to vote compared to the control group (figure 1).

Figure 1: Treatment vs control group



Source: authors' elaboration based on data from the CIR Bellinzona.

This finding highlights the effectiveness of deliberative engagement in motivating citizens to participate more actively in elections, thereby strengthening democratic processes.

In summary, the indirect effects of the CIR treatment through knowledge gain and enhanced reasoning are substantial. They not only reduce polarisation and foster a more inclusive society but also presumably stimulate civic skills and increase political participation. This comprehensive approach to voter engagement underscores the transformative potential of informed and deliberative democratic practices.

5 Towards a strong use of minipublics in representative and direct democracy?

The CIR model can be considered as a successful example to upscale deliberative minipublics to the systemic level and, overall, become a complementary tool to address direct democratic pathologies as rational ignorance and partisan motivated reasoning. Hendriks and Wagenaar (2023) refer to CIR's *scrutinizing function*, highlighting its focus on providing clear, balanced information and offering recommendations to the public. Actually, the CIR's impact extends far beyond mere scrutiny. It actively promotes *citizen empowerment* by boosting citizens' deliberative capacity. Through the process of engaging with diverse perspectives and critically evaluating evidence, participants not only gain a deeper understanding of referendum issues but also develop essential civic skills. These skills, including critical thinking, improved epistemic vigilance, and empathy, foster a more informed, reasoned and active electorate.

Yet we believe that the time has come to think beyond the CIR model when discussing the potential benefits of deliberative minipublics in the political systems where the (top-down, elitist) institutions of representative democracy are complemented by more bottom-up institutions of direct democracy. After all, the CIR stands for a relatively week use of the minipublic in a democratic system (see Table 2). We think that an institutionalized minipublic can have a much stronger, even more democracy-enhancing function and even more significantly improve the level of citizen empowerment. In the following sections (§5.1 and §5.2) we would like to propose two models that, in our view, would offer a far stronger way to connect deliberative, direct and representative democracy.

Table 2: Overview of possible uses of minipublics

Use of the minipublic	**Powers of the minipublic**	**Examples / Sources**
Very strong / radical	Decision-making	The whole legislature selected by lot (Landemore 2020)]. In Switzerland, see www.genomi.ch The second chamber of parliament selected by lot. (Gastil & Wright 2018).
Strong	Reform-vetoing or reform-proposing, deferring the final decision to the people	The minipublic referendum (see §5.1) The minipublic initiative. (see §5.2)
Moderate	Agenda-setting, triggering ad hoc mini-publics	See the Ostbelgien model (Macq & Jacquet 2022)
Weak	Advising and/or informing	Vertical model: the minipublic elaborates recommendations for the government/parliament/public administration (e.g. French or UK Climate Assembly) Horizontal model: the minipublic informs the broader public (e.g. CIR).

Source: authors' elaboration

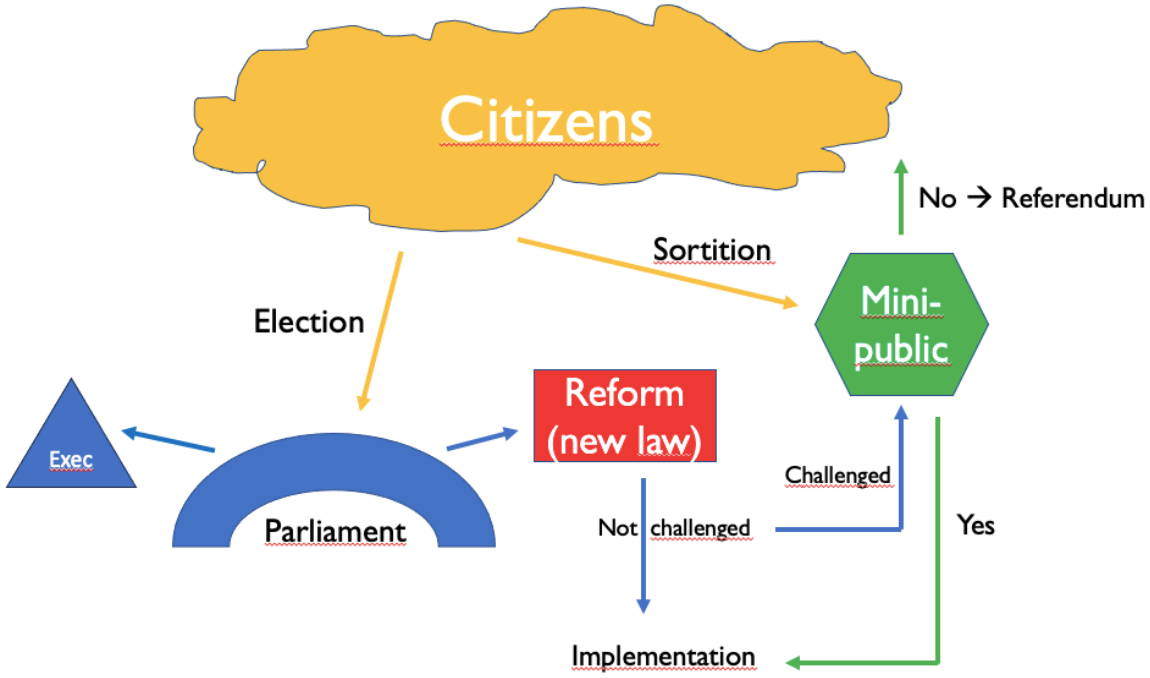
5.1 The minipublic referendum

In our previous work (Stojanović 2023) we have argued that in the parliamentary phase an *ad hoc* minipublic can be set up towards the end of the process, in order to check to what extent a new law has the potential to convince a majority of voters in the case that, eventually, a successful referendum is launched against it. For example, there could be a mechanism setting

up a threshold of MPs – one-third, for example – who can file a request for a minipublic on certain (presumably the most disputed) topics. The threshold should not be too high in order to allow opposition parties to trigger the mechanism.

In this chapter we would like to propose a more ambitious and more citizen-empowering reform. A permanent minipublic – e.g. in the form of an additional chamber of parliament – could have the power to challenge laws voted by parliament and trigger a referendum so that in a popular vote all enfranchised citizens can have the opportunity to accept or refuse the new law. Compared to the first proposal, this would certainly take the power from elected politicians to randomly selected ordinary citizens and, therefore, further reduce the elitist bias.

Figure 2: The minipublic referendum



Source: authors' elaboration.

Of course, a number of important details need to be settled. Should the minipublic have the power to challenge *any* new law or only a certain number of them (e.g. maximum two per year)? Or perhaps its domain of action should be limited to certain *kinds* of laws (e.g. the laws with a very long term impact on future generations)? Should the minipublic decide by simple majority, qualified majority (e.g. two-thirds) or unanimity? What measures should be taken to protect members of the minipublics from being unduly influenced or even corrupted by organised

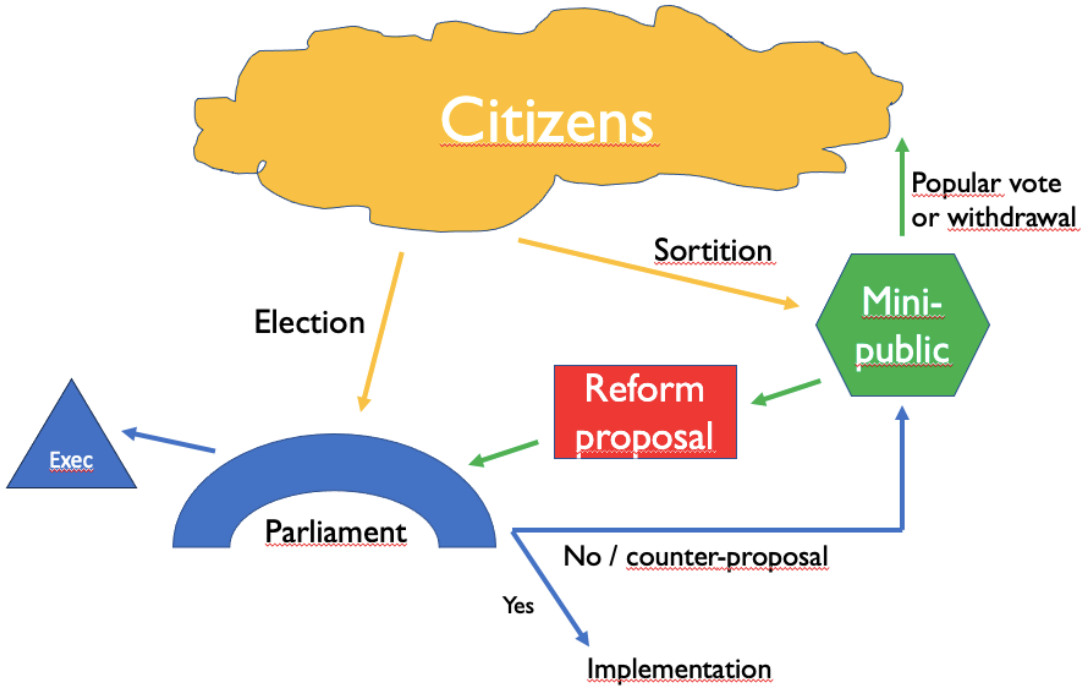
interests (e.g. an organisation that opposes the new law but prefers to invest its limited financial resources in the referendum campaign rather than in collecting signatures to trigger the referendum). These are important questions, and we do believe that the proposal needs such qualifications, but they should not distract the reader from reflecting on the main rationale of the proposal.

5.2 The minipublic initiative

Regarding citizens' initiatives, in the previous work (Stojanović 2023) we have pointed out that the parliamentary phase is typically focused on the question of whether or not parliament should elaborate a counter-proposal. Indeed, the Swiss experience shows that it is rare for parliament to accept what a citizens' initiative proposes. This refusal has structural grounds: initiatives are typically launched by *minority* groups whose ideas, in the past, have failed to convince a majority of parliament (Vatter 2000). Ia counterproposal emerges in the parliamentary phase, parliament can decide to set up a minipublic. Probably even more interesting would be for the initiative committee to have a minipublic deliberate on the counterproposal as well as on the main proposal, eventually taking into account the conclusions of the minipublic in order to decide whether or not to withdraw the citizens' initiative if the counterproposal is considered a sufficiently acceptable compromise.

In this chapter we would like to elaborate a stronger proposal: the minipublic initiative. According to the proposal, a permanent minipublic would have the power to elaborate a reform proposal. Once adopted by the minipublic – we think that a qualified majority would be necessary and that the number of proposals per year should be limited to one or two – the reform proposal should follow a similar procedure as proposals coming from popular initiatives. Both government and parliament would have the possibility to express their opinion on the proposal. If it is accepted by parliament, it goes into the implementation phase. A more probable scenario is that it will be rejected or that parliament elaborates a counter-proposal. Either way, the decision will be conveyed back to the minipublic which can either withdraw its proposal or demand that a popular vote be organised so that all enfranchised citizens have the possibility to express their preference. If a majority of citizens says no, the proposal is rejected. If a majority endorse it, it goes into the implementation phase. In other words, in this regard the minipublic would have the same competences – to withdraw the proposal or to insist that it should be put to a popular vote – as the initiative committees in the Swiss system.

Figure 3: The minipublic initiative



Source: authors' elaboration.

Indeed, a similar proposal has already been discussed in Switzerland. In September 2020 the Greens filed a parliamentary initiative demanding the creation of a "climate council"; essentially a citizens' assembly of 200 members randomly selected for a period of six years from all Swiss residents (Swiss and foreign nationals alike) aged 16 and above. Its task would be "to develop measures to protect the climate and achieve greater climate justice", noting that "these measures must be capable of gaining majority support". Its powers would be analogous to the prerogatives and the legal standing of a committee that has successfully launched a citizens' initiative.

In other words, if the climate council was to make a proposal in the form of a constitutional amendment – requiring in such a case the support of a two-thirds majority within the council – it would be sent to parliament as if it were a citizens' initiative that had succeeded in gathering the necessary number of signatures (i.e. 100,000). Hence, the government and parliament would be obliged to take a stance and decide whether to accept or disapprove the proposal or make a counterproposal. In any event the council would be free to decide to withdraw the proposal, in the light of the conclusions reached by parliament, or to let citizens decide in a popular vote. As

in the case of a citizens' initiative, any proposal had to gather a double majority, of both citizens and cantons, in order to pass. If successful, it would enter the constitution and would thus have a binding character.

6 Conclusions

Democracy, both representative and direct, undoubtedly suffers from a series of pathologies. Like a sick patient, it needs to be cured to resolve these ailments. But recovery doesn't rely solely on the cure; it also requires time and effort, often making recovery an integral part of the cure itself. Democracy, therefore, needs boosting by enhancing citizens' civic potential. Boosting the potential of citizens does not necessarily mean more participation but rather better participation—qualitatively more reasoned, inclusive, and engaged, especially during the law formation phase. While the curative approach aims to correct the behaviour of citizens as passive decision-makers during referendums, the enhancing role focuses on building their capacity to become active protagonists in the democratic process.

Democracy, both representative and direct, undoubtedly suffers from a number of pathologies. Like a sick patient, it needs to be cured in order to address these ailments. But recovery doesn't depend on the cure alone; it also requires time and effort, often making recovery an integral part of the cure itself. Democracy therefore needs to be boosted by strengthening the civic potential of citizens. Boosting citizens' potential does not necessarily mean more participation, but rather better participation – more reasoned, inclusive and engaged participation, especially in the law-making phase. While the curative approach aims at correcting the behaviour of citizens as passive decision-makers during referendums, the enhancing role focuses on building their capacity to become active protagonists in the democratic process.

This chapter has explored how minipublics can serve as both a cure and a boost for our ailing democracies. As a corrective, minipublics address democratic pathologies such as rational ignorance and polarisation. By providing balanced and comprehensive information, minipublics indirectly empower citizens to make informed choices, free from the manipulations of propaganda. This corrective function is crucial, as it not only corrects democratic deficits, but also reconfigures how citizens engage with their democracy.

But a mere correction is not enough. Democracy needs a booster to fully recover and flourish. In their role as boosters, minipublics actively enhance citizen participation and engagement. This involves transforming passive voters into active shapers of policy and legislative processes. Rather than simply mitigating problems, minipublics in this role foster a more inclusive and deliberative public discourse, significantly increasing citizens' influence and involvement in democratic decision-making.

The Swiss case studies underscore the corrective function of minipublics, demonstrating their ability to reduce polarisation and increase voter knowledge. But the real reform lies in the booster model. Here, minipublics can fundamentally reshape the democratic landscape by empowering citizens to participate in a more informed and reasoned way.

In sum, the integration of minipublics into both direct and representative democratic frameworks is not merely an enhancement. This dual capacity challenges the very foundations of our current democratic systems and offers a vision of democracy that is more informed, more participatory and radically more robust. The pressing question is no longer whether we can afford to integrate minipublics into our democratic processes, but whether we can afford not to.

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