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### When citizen deliberation enters real politics

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*Published in:*  
Policy Sciences

*DOI:*  
[10.1007/s11077-018-09346-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-018-09346-8)

*Publication date:*  
2019

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

#### [Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (HARVARD):*

Niessen, C 2019, 'When citizen deliberation enters real politics: how politicians and stakeholders envision the place of a deliberative mini-public in political decision-making', *Policy Sciences*, vol. 52, no. 3, pp. 481-503.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-018-09346-8>

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# When Citizen Deliberation Enters Real Politics: How Politicians and Stakeholders Envision the Place of a Deliberative Mini-public in Political Decision-making

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## Author version of the article:

Niessen, C. (2019). When Citizen Deliberation Enters Real Politics: How Politicians and Stakeholders Envision the Place of a Deliberative Mini-public in Political Decision-making. *Policy Sciences*. doi:10.1007/s11077-018-09346-8.

Available online: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11077-018-09346-8>.

## Abstract:

In the wake of the increasing use of deliberative citizen assemblies in the public sphere, this article studies how traditional policy actors receive a mini-public as ‘newcomer’ in political decision-making, despite its reliance on a fundamentally different vision of policy-making and that it substantially alters existing power distributions. Survey data collected before and after a typical mini-public case, the Citizen Climate Parliament, shows that most politicians and stakeholders welcome this ‘newcomer’ as long as it remains consultative. A typological discourse analysis of 28 semi-structured interviews with these politicians and stakeholders suggests that this attitude comes with four different views of mini-publics’ place in political decision-making: an elitist-, expert-, (re)connection- and reinvention view. Given that an important correlate of these views was the extent to which actors agreed with the recommendations of the mini-public, it shows that their views were driven both by actors’ interests in the outcome on a micro-level and by their general ideas about political decision-making on a macro-level. The findings illustrate that mini-publics may encounter opposition from both political actors and stakeholders once they aim to take a place in political decision-making that goes beyond occasional and consultative uses. At the same time, these results show that the use of mini-publics does not leave traditional representative institutions unaffected as it prompts them to think about the place that citizen deliberation should take in the political system.

*Keywords: Deliberative system, Mini-publics, Elites, Stakeholders, Discourse analysis*

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## **Introduction**

As a response to the difficulties faced by political institutions in advanced industrial democracies (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002), political decision-makers make increasing use of a particular form of democratic innovation: ‘deliberative mini-publics’. As defined in Ryan and Smith (2014: 18-19), mini-publics are lay citizen assemblies that deliberate on a particular topic and that lead, after expert hearings and in-depth discussions, to the formulation of recommendations for the issue at stake. They vary in form and size but, as Goodin and Dryzek (2008: 220) put it, mini-publics are “small enough to be genuinely deliberative, and representative enough to be genuinely democratic”. Their objective is to achieve a descriptive representation of the population that reflects societies’ different segments, usually through the use of stratified random sampling (Smith, 2009: 82-83).

Despite their proliferation, the introduction of this ‘newcomer’ in the policy process does not come without contestation from traditional decision-making actors. The aim of mini-publics is to create more inclusive, diverse, rational and egalitarian spaces of public reasoning, that lead to a fairer policy process, better outcomes and, ultimately, to greater public trust in an era of increasingly critical citizens (Bächtiger et al., 2014). However, in doing so they disrupt both the adversarial, aggregative and elitist vision of traditional politics and the distribution of power that comes with it (Dryzek, 2000). The introduction of a mini-public can thus be received in very different ways by politicians (even if one of their peers, often in an executive position, initiated it), but also by stakeholders who are usually consulted or have a vested interest in the policy outcome.

With the increasing development of mini-publics in the public sphere of many countries, sometimes even at a constitutional policy-making level (Suiter and Reuchamps, 2016), comes an equally increasing importance for studying mini-publics with regard to their interaction with their broader policy environment. On the one hand, this environment affects mini-publics’ functioning, conditions the political uptake of their recommendations and the way their public legitimacy is perceived. On the other hand, mini-publics might themselves affect existing power relations and the way in which politics are conceived.

In recent years, there has been a steady development of research that aims to situate mini-publics within their broader policy environment, as part of a broader deliberative political system (Mansbridge et al., 2012; Curato and Böker, 2016). In this line, normative studies have argued why and how deliberative mini-publics should complement existing representative institutions (Parkinson, 2006; Warren, 2008; Lang and Warren, 2012). In turn, in-depth

empirical work has been carried out to show which tensions underpin the relations between interest groups and deliberative processes (Hendriks, 2002), how existing ‘participatory storylines’ (i.e., public narratives) condition which form of public participation is deemed most appropriate in a given policy context (Hendriks, 2005), and what strategic uses interest groups can make of deliberative forums (Hendriks, 2006).

This study proposes to develop the existing empirical research further by explicitly focusing on the different types of views that politicians and stakeholders have of a mini-public. Doing so, it examines what place in political decision-making they would consequently want this ‘newcomer’ to take and why. The aim is to refine the findings of existing studies with the results of a typical mini-public case in a country where the use of deliberative forums has already somewhat matured: the *Citizen Climate Parliament* (CCP) in the Belgian Province of Luxemburg. The opinions of politicians from all policy levels and of stakeholders working on the topic were studied through pre- and post-surveys, as well as through 28 semi-structured interviews. The survey data show that, while most politicians and stakeholders had a fairly positive impression of the CCP both before and after the mini-public, only few go so far as to wish its recommendations to be binding. Based on a typological discourse analysis of the interviews, I find that this judgment comes with four different views of mini-publics’ place in political decision-making: an elitist-, an expert-, a (re)connection- and a reinvention view. These results illustrate the varying reactions that mini-publics may encounter once they enter ‘real politics’. Thereby, they draw attention to the potential strengths and vulnerabilities that come with mini-publics’ public perception, but also to the systemic deliberative contribution that mini-publics may make if they prompt traditional politics to reflect on new forms of decision-making and to reconsider existing ones.

### **Mini-publics and Traditional Political Decision-making**

The critical place of mini-publics in traditional politics arises from (1) the very different rationale of democratic decision-making they rely on and (2) their disruption of traditional power relations (Dryzek, 2000). Concerning the rationale,<sup>1</sup> mini-publics aim to achieve (a) an inclusive selection of participants and a diversified descriptive representativeness through the use of stratified random selection, (b) a deliberative process based on reasoned exchanges among equals and (c) to reach an outcome that is as consensual as possible. Traditional politics,

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the different rationales and legitimacies, and of why and how these should be complemented, cf. Parkinson (2006), Warren (2008) and Lang and Warren (2012).

in turn, aim (a) for an exclusive selection of representatives that voters have designed as best suited to exercise political power on their behalf, (b) to enact a competitive process based on the adversarial exchange of majority and opposition that may associate some interest group elites and (c) to achieve an aggregative outcome by majority voting. Concerning power relations, it is politicians who traditionally make political decisions and it is stakeholders that are consulted or may sometimes even co-decide to some extent. The introduction of mini-publics fundamentally affects this relationship in that they aim to involve the public in being (co-)consulted, if not (co-)deciding. For politicians, this means that another body might have an important say in the formulation of policies. For stakeholders, this means that another body replaces or, at least, complements them and sometimes even reduces them to a mere information provider for their own purposes.

Taken together, there is thus a competition of both ideas (1) and interests (2) between mini-publics and traditional decision-makers. Despite this competition, we see a steady introduction of mini-publics in policy processes around the world (often by politicians in executive positions) and one might wonder how this is received by traditional decision-making actors.

While existing research has long been concerned with the ideal internal design of mini-publics, instances of citizen deliberation are increasingly studied vis-à-vis their interaction with the broader policy environment and their potential ‘systemic’ deliberative contribution to it (Mansbridge et al., 2012). Most closely related to the present study is the research by Hendriks who first comprehensively illustrated how mini-publics shift the roles of stakeholders in policy processes from key-players to by-standers, and thereby create considerable tensions between both (2002). Through the study of two mini-publics in Australia, she showed how existing ‘participatory storylines’ (i.e., public narratives on who constitutes ‘the public’ that should be consulted) change the acceptance of a deliberative forum in different policy contexts (2005). Through the study of four mini-publics in Australia and Germany, she showed that interest groups are most likely to support a deliberative process if this provides them with some strategic opportunities for improving public relations, promoting trust, distributing information, selling expertise or advocating a particular cause (2006).

In the present research, these accounts are complemented through the joint study of both politicians and stakeholders, by focusing on an aspect that has not yet received explicit attention: what the different types of views that politicians and stakeholders have of a mini-public are and what place in political decision-making they would consequently want this ‘newcomer’ to take. In so doing, it is shown how mini-publics and traditional representative

institutions influence each other's functioning. This adds to the most recent discussion on the extent to which mini-publics can contribute to the deliberative capacity of the political system as a whole (Curato and Böker, 2016).

### **Surveying and Interviewing Politicians' and Stakeholders' Views of Mini-publics**

In the absence of widespread pre-existing theorization and given its focus on views and justifications, this research adopted an inductive theory-developing approach. Its objective was twofold. On the one hand, it was interested in the extent to which politicians and stakeholders support or oppose a mini-public. On the other, it wished to understand what arguments motivated this (dis)approval and which more general views these actors have on mini-publics' place in decision-making. To this end, a typical mini-public case, the *Citizen Climate Parliament* in the Belgian Province of Luxemburg, was studied with a mixed-method research design – complementing the analysis of pre- and post-surveys with that of semi-structured interviews.

#### *The Citizen Climate Parliament*

When looking for a 'typical case', this research aimed to study a case which presents the core features of the overall object of study and is "likely to replicate or extend the emergent theory" (Eisenhardt, 1989: 537). Given its reliance on a single case, the main emphasis of the study lied on theoretical development, thereby framing the debate and pathing the way for further research. Four elements were crucial when selecting a mini-public in light of the present research. It had to be (1) a sortitioned deliberative citizen assembly (2) that was set up by a public authority (3) in a policy field where issues were relevant to stakeholders (4) of whom many were aware of the process.

In fall 2015, a mini-public comprising all these elements was launched in the Belgian Province of Luxemburg: the *Citizen Climate Parliament* (CCP). After initiation by a member of the provincial executive, 33 citizens were selected through stratified random sampling from the provincial population. They came together over three weekends and had to propose, after deliberation, measures that the provincial authorities should adopt to become energetically neutral by 2050 (i.e., to cover its energy demand by renewable energy supply). The provincial legislature unanimously agreed to launch the process, whose organization was entrusted to a group of sociologists. To prepare the CCP works, a 1-day workshop was held with associative,

economic and public actors that are involved in energy or climate issues of the province.<sup>2</sup> The workshop's aim was to gather stakeholders' field experience and provide them with the opportunity to outline issues and viewpoints that they wanted the citizens to take into account. While none of the stakeholders had formulated explicit positions on long-term provincial climate policy in advance, most of them had communicated several stakes that were important to them. The CCP presented its final recommendations to the Provincial Council in November 2015. After brief discussions among politicians, the cabinet member in charge was given the task of proposing ways to integrate the CCP recommendations into the provincial policy program. She did so in June 2016 through a response document to the Provincial Council.<sup>3</sup>

The CCP offers an interesting case study. First, because it presented all features underlying the present research puzzle. Secondly, because many of the studied politicians and stakeholders had only limited knowledge of mini-publics' existence before learning about the CCP. This relative novelty was welcomed since it ensured a necessary independence of observation. At the same time, the relative maturity of mini-publics' use in Belgian policy-making was useful insofar as it conferred the necessary respectability to their organization and showed that they are not utopian one-offs but a growing practice in the country (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2018). It is worth mentioning that the Belgian Province of Luxemburg comprises a dense civil-society network where associative and economic actors are interconnected and regularly consulted by political decision-makers (Nothomb, 2015).

### *Conducting and Analyzing Surveys and Semi-structured Interviews*

To research the opinions that traditional decision-making actors had on the CCP, pre- and post-surveys and semi-structured interviews were combined. The surveys were used to assess politicians' and stakeholders' extent of awareness and support of the CCP, and to guide the selection of interviewees. The interviews were used to delve more deeply into actors' arguments and views.

When choosing the politicians and stakeholders whose opinions were to be studied, the topic addressed by the CCP was taken as a guideline. While climate change and energy neutrality are both very extensive matters, the CCP focused its final recommendations on four areas: local production and consumption, mobility, housing, as well as communal and provincial commitments. Two kinds of stakeholders were distinguished: associations and

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<sup>2</sup> 23 associations, two companies and three members of local administrations participated.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the minutes of the Council meeting of June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2016, retrieved from [www.province.luxembourg.be/servlet/Repository/p-v-du-24-06-2016.pdf?ID=59878](http://www.province.luxembourg.be/servlet/Repository/p-v-du-24-06-2016.pdf?ID=59878) (accessed on December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018), pp. 11, 212, 214.

companies. These stakeholders were selected for the analysis based on their activity in at least one of the four mentioned areas or in the renewable energy domain (as a transversal dimension). Stakeholders whose activities pursue a financial profit were classified as economic, the others as associative. A list that had been composed by the organizing team (with the help of the provincial authorities) for the aforementioned workshop was adapted and complemented with the aim of including all relevant actors while ensuring their relevance to the selection criteria (Robinson, 2014). Thereby, I identified 30 associative and 50 economic actors as stakeholders of the CCP.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, one person in each association or company had to be identified as the representative for that actor's opinion. In this study, the person with the highest organizational responsibility was addressed (e.g., the director, manager or president), unless one person in the organization had been explicitly nominated to follow the proceedings of the CCP. When considering which political actors to study, one sees that the recommendations of the CCP touch upon competences that are exercised by communal, provincial, regional and federal public authorities. Therefore, all mayors (44), provincial councilors (37), regional (5) and federal (4) parliamentarians elected in the province were included in the study. Since several politicians cumulated different mandates, the total number of selected political actors equaled 78.

In the first stage of the research, electronic questionnaires were sent to the 158 political, associative and economic actors. These comprised questions asking for (1) actors' awareness of the CCP and (2) its results, for (3) their overall impression of the assembly, (4) whether they would want its recommendations to become laws, and (5) to what extent they agreed with the different recommendations that were issued by the CCP. A short justification question followed questions 3 and 4. In addition, basic socio-demographic characteristics were recorded (*cf.* Appendix 1 for the exact wording). The surveys were conducted once before the CCP started (August-September 2015, without questions on the process and results) and once after its recommendations had been published (March-April 2016). The before-after comparison allowed potential evolutions to be tested, which turned out to be marginal however. Of the 158 actors, 70 (44%) responded to the first survey, 81 (51%) to the second, and 53 (34%) to both surveys (*cf.* Appendix 2 for respondent rates). In the absence of substantially different results before and after the process, and since it also comprised questions on the CCP's results, this

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<sup>4</sup> In the absence of an official register, this selection cannot guarantee to be exhaustive. However, given the dense civil-society network in the province and that the list that was pre-established by the provincial authorities and the university (who are both used to work with them), there are reasonable grounds to consider that the vast majority of stakeholders has been selected.

article presents only the results of the post-survey. Responses to the pre-survey were used, however, to guide the choice of interviewees as will now be explained.<sup>5</sup>

In the second stage of the research, 28 politicians and stakeholders were selected for semi-structured interviews. The selection took into account actors' knowledge and opinions of the CCP, together with the arguments they had provided when justifying their answers to questions 3 and 4. Socio-demographic criteria, the size of associations and companies, as well as party affiliation and mandate levels of political actors were considered.<sup>6</sup> Since the study's aim was to discover the different rationales behind actors' opinions, it was not statistical representativeness but a diversity of views and profiles that was sought. The precise number of interviews for each group of actors was determined by the so-called 'point of saturation' (Galletta, 2013: 33) – this is when no additional information (in the form of arguments and views) to what has already been discovered is obtained. Eventually, interviews were conducted with eight associative, eight economic and twelve political actors (*cf.* Appendix 3 for their profiles).

Interviews were conducted from March 2016 to May 2016, that is after the presentation of the CCP results but before the official announcement of the follow-up given by the provincial executive that took place in June 2016.<sup>7</sup> After a short introduction and their agreement to audio-recording, interviewees were asked questions about their knowledge and opinions on the CCP. More specifically, they were asked what they thought about the process and results, whether they would want the latter to be mandatory and what place in decision-making they envisioned for mini-publics like the CCP (*cf.* Appendix 4 for the interview guide). Given the semi-structured nature of these interviews, all questions were raised in all interviews but their structure varied depending on the way respondents approached the questions and emphasized aspects which were important to them, in order to allow them to fully explore their opinions (Galletta, 2013: 24).

The 28 interviews were transcribed verbatim and then analyzed in five steps through a typological discourse analysis.<sup>8</sup> The analysis was inductive, insofar as the textual data was analyzed without a pre-existing coding-frame. It was semantic, insofar as only explicitly verbalized statements were taken into account. The large data corpus (210,641 words) was

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<sup>5</sup> At the end of the selection process, the post-process survey was checked for yet unknown elements mentioned in the open-ended questions, but none were found.

<sup>6</sup> Although the diversification process went fairly well, one descriptive bias has to be noted. Among the contacted actors, women were not only less represented in the population but also agreed significantly less to be interviewed. Despite great solicitation efforts, only three out of the 28 interviewees were female.

<sup>7</sup> Interviews lasted between 30 and 100 minutes and took place at the interviewee's home, workplace or, rarely, in a restaurant. 23 of the interviews were conducted face to face and five via telephone or *Skype*.

<sup>8</sup> The rationale of the analysis was inspired by Ayres and Knafl (2008). Its proceeding was inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006).

managed with the qualitative data analysis software *NVivo*,<sup>9</sup> which is well suited for flexible and data driven coding, for matching codings and for structuring codings based on source related characteristics.

Starting the analysis with a familiarization step, the entire data corpus was read and notes were taken on aspects that were associated positively or negatively with the CCP. The second step consisted in identifying arguments (reasons provided by the interviewee to justify a positive or negative assessment of one or more aspects of the CCP). One *NVivo*-node was created for every argument and all text passages in the data corpus containing an argument were coded into the respective argument-node. To facilitate further analysis, all arguments were grouped based on common themes to which they referred. A third step compared which of these arguments appeared together and in which more general type of discourse they were used. After identifying overlaps through a *Matrix Coding Query* with all argument-nodes in *NVivo*, arguments were grouped accordingly and another reading and synthesis of their content and that of their context was carried out to identify to which general structure of discourse they contributed. In a fourth step, the identified structures were cross-checked to assure their internal coherence. One should note that the same argument could be used in different combinations and contexts, and therefore contribute to different structures. What was relevant for qualifying as a structure, was the repeated combination of the same arguments, not their exclusive use. Moreover, it was possible (though less frequent) for an interviewee to mobilize elements of a different argument structure at a later stage of the interview. What was relevant for qualifying as a structure, was the coherent use of the same arguments in the same context, not their exclusive use throughout the entire interview. Despite this room for variability, a predominant argument structure was identifiable in each of the interviews. In a final fifth step, the four discovered structures were defined and named. These structures correspond to the four views that politicians and stakeholders had on the place of the mini-public in political decision-making, as will be discussed later. Appendix 5 gives a comprehensive overview of the coding scheme.

### **What Politicians and Stakeholders Think of a Mini-public in Political Decision-making**

The analysis of the pre- and post-surveys shows that, while both politicians and stakeholders had a consistently positive impression of the CCP, opinions diverge much more on whether its recommendations should be transposed into law. The results of the typological analysis suggest

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<sup>9</sup> QSR International, United Kingdom.

that this comes with four different views that politicians and stakeholders can have of municipalities' place in decision-making: an elitist-, an expert-, a (re)connection- and a reinvention-view.

### *Positive Impressions, Cautious Perspectives and Diverging Opinions*

The results of the post-CCP survey, summarized in Table 1, show that more than 80% of the responding politicians and associations, and a bit less than 50% of the companies were aware of the CCP (Q1). These results can be deemed high and might be due to the organizers initial efforts to gather stakeholders' opinions to inspire the citizen debate. At the same time, only about half of those who knew about the process also knew about its results (Q2). One could wonder then whether this, on its own, is not already an indicator of limited consideration given by traditional decision-making actors. One should note, however, that among the respondents who were member of the Provincial Council, 87.5% knew the results (mayors and MPs knew much less about it). Furthermore, a lower awareness among stakeholders might be due to the absence of a predefined policy output.

The answers to Q3 show that all actors who were aware of the CCP had a modest but consistently positive overall impression of the CCP. On a scale from 0 to 1, roughly 84% of the respondents situated themselves above the neutrality point of 0.50. Similar results are obtained for actors' average (mean) support for the six recommendations formulated by the CCP (Q5). While the support is somewhat variable for political actors, it is consistently positive for associations and companies. When it comes to whether the CCP recommendations should be translated into law (Q4), however, the mean support drops among all three actors and becomes much more variable. Roughly 68% of the respondents situated themselves between 0.3 and 0.77 on the 0-1 scale, which means that it is here where opinions diverge. Very similar results to the pre-process survey indicate that respondents were divided on that question, even without knowing the results.<sup>10</sup>

When testing whether substantial differences existed between actors for their overall impressions of the CCP or for their opinion on whether its recommendations should become laws, none were found based on age, gender, organization size, partisan affiliation or majority vs. opposition.<sup>11</sup> What proved relevant, however, was the extent to which actors agreed with the recommendations of the CCP (Q5). There was a significant positive (*Pearson*) correlation

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<sup>10</sup> Politicians: 0.50 (0.23), Associations: 0.54 (0.14), Companies: 0.5 (0.32).

<sup>11</sup> With the exception of Green politicians who appeared to be consistently more supportive of the CCP and of a binding character for its recommendations. Details:

between actors' average (mean) support of the six CCP recommendations, and both their overall impression of the CCP ( $p = 0.02$ ) and the extent to which they wished recommendations to become laws ( $p = 0.01$ ).

*Table 1: Politicians' and stakeholders' awareness and opinions of the CCP (post-process)*

	(Q1)	(Q2)	(Q3)	(Q4)	(Q5)
	Awareness of the CCP	Awareness of its results	Overall impression	Recommendations should become laws	Mean support for the recommendations
	%	%	$M (s)$	$M (s)$	$M (s)$
Politicians	84.21	44.74	0.65 (0.14)	0.54 (0.23)	0.64 (0.20)
Associations	82.35	41.17	0.64 (0.16)	0.52 (0.25)	0.70 (0.13)
Companies	46.15	15.38	0.69 (0.15)	0.52 (0.22)	0.76 (0.16)

\* An affirmation for Q1 was a precondition for Q3 and Q4. An affirmation for Q2 for was a precondition for Q5. Q3 and Q4 were measured with a five-point scale. Q5 is the mean of six questions measuring actors' support for each of the CCP recommendations with a five-point scale. All have been converted into 0-1 ratios.  $M$ : mean,  $s$ : standard deviation.

What do these findings say more generally about how politicians and stakeholders envision mini-publics' place in decision-making? First, there is little difference between actors' opinions before and after the CCP process. While this could be related to some actors' lower degree of awareness of the results, about half of them knew the results and still answered in a very similar way. Secondly, there is little difference in support between politicians, associations and companies – both in terms of overall impression and opinion on whether the CCP results should become laws. This is interesting insofar as, from a theoretical point of view, they have different places in the decision-making process. Thirdly, despite political parties and stakeholders not formulating an explicit position on provincial climate policy prior to the CCP, their interests seemed to be important because the extent to which they agreed with its recommendations was significantly related to their overall support of the citizen assembly and the mandatory nature of its outcome. At the same time, actors' average support for the recommendations remains higher than their support for these recommendations to become binding, showing that there is more to it than just this association. The qualitative analysis needs to dig further into this picture.

#### *Four Views of a Mini-public's Place in Political Decision-making*

The results of the typological analysis, summarized in Table 2, suggest that politicians, associations and companies had four different views of the place of a mini-public such as the CCP in political decision-making. As explained in the methodology section, these views are based on the structural use of the same arguments in a similar context. While nine out of the 28

interviewees mobilized some elements of another view in a distinct stage of the interview, a predominant view was identifiable for each of them.

*Table 2: The four views of political, associative and economic actors on the CCP*

<i>View</i>	<i>Brief description</i>	<i>Total frequency*</i>	<i>Frequency* by</i>			<i>Support for CCP</i>	<i>Support for participation</i>
			<i>Pol.</i>	<i>Ass.</i>	<i>Eco.</i>		
Elitist	Elites should make political decisions because they are more enlightened than the CCP's ordinary citizens and more legitimate because of their election.	Less often 4 (2)	2 (0)	2 (2)	0 (0)	Low	Low
Expert	Field experts should be consulted by public authorities because they know most about the debated topic.	Sometimes 5 (1)	0 (0)	3 (0)	2 (2)	Low	Medium
(Re)connection	The CCP allowed citizens and politics to reconnect by showing citizens how complex public affairs are and bringing politicians closer to public opinion.	Very often 14 (3)	9 (2)	2 (1)	3 (0)	High	Medium
Reinvention	The CCP is one democratic innovation among others to remedy representative democracy's current shortcomings.	Less often 5 (3)	1 (1)	1 (0)	3 (2)	Medium	High

\* Number of interviews where it was the main view and, in brackets, in how many interviews some elements of another view were also mentioned. Details: elitist with some expert elements: 2; expert with some reinvention elements: 2; (re)connection with some reinvention elements: 2; (re)connection with some elitist elements: 1; reinvention with some (re)connection elements: 3.

An 'elitist' view of mini-publics like the CCP relied on a strong vision of representative democracy. Both political and associative actors developed this view and argued that it is elected politicians who should make decisions because they are more enlightened and because they have the legitimacy to do so by virtue of their electoral mandate. In turn, the ordinary citizens selected for the CCP were seen as not having the necessary capacities to participate formally in the decision-making process. According to actors with an elitist view, if an elected provincial official can be inspired by ordinary citizens' opinions, she should finally decide based on her own convictions since it would not always be suitable to do what citizens want. In the light of these arguments, stakeholders and politicians with an elitist view saw the CCP's formality of consultation as going too far. Its recommendations were envisioned as one source of inspiration for popular opinion among others, but without any binding character.

"Every x years, (...) the citizen has the opportunity to carry out an act: he votes. (...) Once these people have been elected to 'lead' a municipality, a province, a region or a country, they do their job. And starting now to create commissions just as popular consultations and all these things... I am not really in favor. Because I think that there is a tool [the vote], that is perhaps the least in democracy, but that helps at least that we agree. And if the people regularly say that it is always the same who are elected... I think that it is also always the same electors who choose the same people. So they shouldn't complain."

Mayor and Provincial Councilor (cdH – Christian-Democrat)

“The average man and woman are not capable of reading this sort of files. This is not a critique but the guy who is a good bricklayer, who perfectly builds his walls, his houses, etc. that’s not what you need to read administrative files and vice versa.”

Unit director in a large association for rural development

The ‘expert’ view was based on the conception that consulting the population is important but that this consultation should above all care about the opinions of those who are affected and have a particular expertise in the respective policy field. It were associative and economic actors who had this view and according to them, politicians should make their decisions based on what local experts from the province say rather than based on what ordinary citizens in the CCP think. Actors with an expert view saw the latter as less well informed and as having foremost a subjective opinion. Furthermore, they argued that citizen participation as in the CCP should be accompanied and even guided by actors who have better knowledge of the issues at stake and are more capable of representing society’s general interest. In this sense, stakeholders with an expert view supported the citizen approach as such but wanted the work of the CCP to be prepared, guided or finished-off by themselves.

“I think that the citizen has to have its place and has to be able to orient the field. But (...) they [citizens] do not have the professional competence to judge the pertinence of what they suggest. I’ll give an example. In the framework of European subsidies, of bottom-up approaches, we invite citizens to sessions of several days sometimes, where we ask them... where we explain to them what the issues of our territory are. (...) And with them, we try afterwards to delimit the projects that should be developed for the territory. And at one point, everything goes in all directions and you have to... we have to bias because the citizen stays... how to say? They think with regard to their personal situation and not with regard to the collective situation.”

Head of a medium-size association from the environmental sector

In the ‘(re)connection’ view, the CCP was envisioned as a participatory tool allowing to bridge citizens and politics. Two particularly characteristic variants existed within this view: a reconnection and a connection variant. Political, associative and economic actors with a reconnection variant observed an increasing distance between citizens and politicians that they want to reduce by giving citizens the possibility to have their say about public issues. Through consultations like the CCP, they want to illustrate the complexity of public decisions to citizens. According to them, this complexity requires politicians to make the decisions because they know the arcana of power better and make decisions on a less emotional basis.

“We all understand, in all parties, that our system has reached a limit. And I am not at all in favor of abolishing our representative democracy. (...) Beyond that, a process has to be found that invites people to participate in the exercise of power, also in the responsibility of power. (...) I think that consulting,

closely associating people, is a good thing to adhere closer to people's reality but also so that people understand that the decision-making process is not easy."

Regional Parliamentarian (PS – Socialist)

Political, associative and economic actors with a connection variant wanted citizens to be included in the decision-making process because they are the ones who are affected by the decisions made. The decision maker was seen as an executor of public opinion who does not necessarily have higher capacities than ordinary citizens, but who should ultimately decide because she is legitimized by virtue of her election.

"A good idea, if it is not... a bit shared and worked out together, things do not go well. (...) I do not see why the one who decides would be the only one to have good ideas. There are also good ideas in the population. (...) Hence, I am not against politicians. I am only saying that the fact... that having politicians who work more with ordinary citizens, with people who live all this, is a very good thing."

CEO of a large company of the wood and energy sector

"Politicians who are close to the people, generally, they listen to what people want and try to put it into practice. Me, in my municipality or in the province, I do not do what I want to do. Or yes I do it but I am here to represent the population. Thus basically, I try as much as I can to do what the people want me to do. That might seem schizophrenic or bizarre but that's why we are here, one should not forget about it."

(Another) Mayor and Provincial Councilor (cdH – Christian-Democrat)

Stakeholders and politicians with a (re)connection view were those with the most positive opinion of the CCP and both reconnection and connection variants within this view had a very similar discourse. From the reconnection perspective, the citizen panel was seen as an ideal method for reconnecting citizens and politics. From the connection perspective, the mini-public was envisioned as a tool to align elite decisions and citizens' opinions.

Finally, politicians and stakeholders with a 'reinvention' view described democracy as being 'ill' and needing to be renovated. Political, associative and economic actors with this view saw representative (electoral) democracy as one step in the evolution of democracy and wanted to move forward by testing new democratic procedures. They did not see the politicians of the province as more capable than the ordinary citizens of the CCP and vice versa, nor did they have an explicit preference for one democratic innovation. Stakeholders and politicians with a reinvention view had a rather positive opinion of the CCP but deplored that its political implication was not more binding. More generally speaking, it was seen as one possible democratic innovation among others.

"I think that it is high time because we are in a democratic system that is worn out and unfortunately (...) I don't know if politicians imagine... the catastrophe that is preparing at this level. (...) It is not a

trivial question to know how we will make our decisions in the best possible structures. No, that's a question of survival. (...) Hence it is really high, high time to reinvent something else."

Leader of a small association in the environment sector

"I am sorry but what elected parliamentarians work out in terms of [legislative] quality, that's a mess. Thus I am sorry but don't tell me that randomly selected citizens would work less well than elected ones. That hasn't even been demonstrated. It could even be an interesting counterweight to elected officials who are certainly elected and then, sit three times a year in a circle... I am curious about it and I would like to... I think so much that our institutions work badly, I would appreciate some fresh air."

Director of the environmental services of a large company

Several elements are interesting when thinking about these findings. First, the extent of support that actors of the same view have for the CCP does not necessarily correspond to their support for citizen participation in general. While actors with an elitist view were both against citizen participation and mini-publics like the CCP, actors with an expert view were also against the CCP but had a slightly better view of participation – as long as it involved the consultation of affected actors and those that are experienced in the policy field at hand. Actors with a reconnection view, in turn, had high support for the CCP but only medium support for citizen participation, which they want to remain consultative. For actors with a reinvention view it was the other way round, because they were highly supportive of the systematic integration of citizen participation into political decision-making. The CCP, however, was only seen as one possible democratic innovation among others, with a level of political implication that did not go as far as they would have wished.

Secondly, when returning to the question of whether politicians, associations and companies had similar opinions on the CCP, one can see that the answer is both yes and no. No, insofar as some views tended to be exclusive. The expert view, for example, was only mobilized by associations and companies but not by politicians. The elitist view, in turn, was only mobilized by politicians and by some associative actors. Yes, insofar as there were also many similarities. The (re)connection and reinvention views, for example, were mobilized by all three kinds of actors. When further comparing actors' views and their profiles, it appeared that neither age, gender nor organization size seemed to make a difference. Politicians with an elitist view tended to be affiliated with right wing parties, and those with a reinvention view with left wing parties. However, these comparisons would need larger-n inferential testing to be confirmed.

Thirdly, when formulating their arguments, the three kinds of actors were very concerned with and constantly referred to two particular characteristics of the CCP. These were the degree to which the CCP's participants were representative of public opinion and the capacity of the

participants to develop an opinion and decide on political issues. Thereby, both kinds of feature seemed not only to be a crucial criterion on which political, associative and economic actors judge a mini-public like the CCP, but also did the actors use them to directly compare randomly selected citizens and elected politicians.

Fourthly, the initial finding of politicians and stakeholders having a positive impression of the CCP but being divided on whether its results should be transposed into law can be better explained in light of the four discovered views. Actors with reinvention- and (re)connection views had rather positive impressions of the CCP. Whereas actors with elitist (and to some extent expert) views were foremost critical. The support for a legislative transposition of their recommendations, however, was low in general – actors with a reinvention view being the only ones really in favor.

Finally, when once more comparing actors' opinions on the CCP, or in this case their 'views', and their average (mean) support for its recommendations, an interesting picture appears (*cf.* Appendix 6). Actors with an elitist view had the lowest support for the recommendations, while that of actors with a (re)invention view was the highest – actors with expert and (re)connection views being in between. Beside the interesting association, one should note that the vast majority (and almost entirety) of actors situated themselves above the 0.5 point and hence rather agreed with the recommendations. This means that, while actors' interest in the outcome of a mini-public seems to be important for the view they develop, even a rather positive opinion of the outcome does not exclude that actors develop elitist or expert views and oppose the idea of a mini-public. That being said, these findings are based on a low number of observations and require further large-n testing to be confirmed. Yet, they point into an interesting direction.

### **When Citizen Deliberation Enters Real Politics**

The findings of this case study illustrate that, despite their increasing use, mini-publics place in decision-making is far from reaching unanimity among politicians and stakeholders. While most of them and especially actors with a (re)connection view, can be expected to welcome this 'newcomer' to the political decision-making process as long as it remains consultative, actors with elitist or expert views might contest this. Only actors with a reinvention view would go so far as to envision a (co-)decision-making power for mini-publics.

These considerations complement the findings of previous studies as, in addition to the importance of participatory narratives and the strategic use that stakeholders' might want to

make of citizen deliberation (Hendriks, 2005, 2006), they show which broader views condition actors' support or opposition to mini-publics, and what place in decision-making both politicians and stakeholders are willing to give to them. While actors with an elitist view have a strong vision of representative democracy, close to its initial conceptions as theorized by Hamilton et al. (1999[1788]), actors with an expert view would agree with them in rejecting citizen-based participatory reforms but remain attached to a civil-society based involvement, close to (neo)corporatist conceptions of democracy (Schmitter, 1974). Both elitist and expert views identified in this research seem to be in line with the rather skeptical positions that Jacquet et al. (2015) found parliamentarians to have on citizen participation more generally, and which Rui and Villechaise-Dupont (2005) observed for associative actors.

The (re)connection and reinvention views offer hitherto new accounts. At the first reading of actors with a (re)connection view, one could think that they are the closest to deliberative theorists who plea for the systematic introduction of consultative mini-publics in political decision-making (Parkinson, 2006). One should note, however, that some of them envisioned the 'reconnection' of citizens and politics in an instrumentalized way (Arnstein, 1969). Moreover, that they would want mini-publics to be consulted does not necessarily mean that they would want this consultation to be systematic, nor to say that they should obtain a formal place in political decision-making. The only actors in favor of the latter were those with a reinvention view. Close to narratives of the most activist advocates of sortition (Van Reybrouck, 2016), some of these reinventionist actors even went so far as to envision (co-)decision-making power for mini-publics.

The justifications used when making these arguments referred most commonly to actors' legitimacy in political decision-making and, more specifically, to their degree of representativeness of the population and their capacity to make good political decisions. Political theorists usually point to the complementarities of the different representation logics of mini-publics and traditional decision-making actors (Parkinson, 2006; Warren, 2008; Lang and Warren, 2012), or argue that the capacities of mini-public participants evolve on a learning basis (Blais et al., 2008; Fishkin, 2018: 143-147) and should be judged by standards of adequacy, not of comparative superiority (Thompson, 2008: 25). Most of the interviewed actors, however, framed their judgments in exclusive terms, i.e., in terms of either mini-publics or traditional decision-making actors being more or less representative and politically capable. Exceptions were found among reinventionist and, to some extent, (re)connection actors.

Finally, when it comes to understanding what drove actors' development of these views, it appears that those who agreed most with the CCP recommendations were also most

supportive of the project and the binding character of its outcome. This underlines the importance of interest politics surrounding mini-publics which, on a micro level, might simply annoy those who favor a different solution (or the status quo) and, in turn, help disrupters to disrupt. Yet, things were more complex than this because even the most critical actors rather agreed with its recommendations. This means that, on a macro level, their conception of who ought to decide and to be consulted in a political decision-making process is also driven by broader ideal considerations of who is representative, capable and hence legitimate. When taking both aspects together, given that not only the rationale but also the outcome of mini-publics is often rather progressive, it is ultimately not unreasonable to think that the actors who would ideally support the rationale are also those who agree most with its outcome and vice versa.

## **Conclusion**

In the wake of the increasing use of deliberative citizen assemblies in the public sphere, I studied in this article how traditional policy actors receive a mini-public as newcomer in political decision-making, despite the fact that it relies on a fundamentally different vision of policy-making and substantially alters existing power distributions. The *Citizen Climate Parliament* (CCP) in the Belgian Province of Luxembourg was chosen as a typical case study and this research combined pre- and post-process surveys with 28 semi-structured interviews to illustrate that politicians' and stakeholders' attitudes toward mini-publics can be understood through four different views: an elitist, an expert, a (re)connection and a reinvention view. Given that an important correlate of these views was the extent to which actors agreed with the recommendations of the mini-public, I showed that their views were driven both by actors' interests in the outcome on a micro-level and by their general ideas about political decision-making on a macro-level.

The objective of this article was to contribute to an important debate about how citizen deliberation is received within traditional representative institutions once it enters 'real politics', and what this means for the functioning and evolution of both deliberative forums and existing representative institutions. While further research is of course needed to consolidate the findings and test how they evolve throughout countries, contexts and time, the contribution of this article to the overall debate is twofold.

First, it shows that mini-publics may encounter opposition from both political actors and stakeholders once they aim to take a place in political decision-making that goes beyond

occasional and consultative uses. This can have important consequences for their functioning, for the public perception of their legitimacy and ultimately for their macro-political uptake. Both the ideas and interests that this article identified to have caused this competition should be kept in mind by practitioners who organize mini-publics and by political theorists who envision their combination with existing representative institutions.

Secondly, it shows that the use of mini-publics does not leave traditional representative institutions unaffected. Usually, one sees the contribution of mini-publics in providing these institutions with a deliberated policy input. However, the current illustration shows that in addition to that, mini-publics make traditional policy actors (and ideally the broader public) think about the place that citizen deliberation should take in the political system. Thereby, the confrontation of different (elitist, expert, (re)connection, reinvention) views on mini-publics not only prompts reflection about new deliberative forms of participation but also invites the reconsideration of (less visible) existing ones – leading to a kind of meta-deliberation about the democratic quality of the overall political system. If broad and successful, this meta-deliberation can even be considered to be more important than mini-publics' immediate outcomes and may be their most important deliberative contribution in systemic terms.

Taken together, while the ambiguity of mini-publics as newcomers in political decision-making can constitute an important source of vulnerability once they enter 'real politics', it might at the same time be their most important and as-yet not fully recognized strength.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my gratitude for invaluable comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this article to Min Reuchamps, Vincent Jacquet, Jérémy Dodeigne, John Pitseys, Sergiu Gherghina, Dimitri Courant, Nathalie Schiffino, Jean-Benoît Pilet, Eszter Timár, Spencer McKay and to the participants of conferences at Goethe Universität Frankfurt, Université catholique de Louvain–Mons, Université libre de Bruxelles and Université Saint-Louis–Bruxelles. Furthermore, I would like to thank the organizers of the *Citizen Climate Parliament* (CCP), the SEED Research-Unit at Université de Liège, for having allowed me to observe the CCP and for having shared numerous internal documents with me. Special thanks go to all politicians, associations and companies who responded to my surveys and who accepted to be interviewed. Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers of *Policy Sciences* for their detailed and generous comments and suggestions. Throughout the writing process, I was funded by the *Fonds pour la Recherche en Sciences Humaines* (FRESH – F.R.S.-FNRS).

## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Question wording for the surveys conducted before and after the CCP

- Q1) Have you heard about the Citizen Climate Parliament?  
[No – Yes, a bit – Yes, a lot]
- Q2) Have you read the final recommendations of the Citizen Climate Parliament?  
[No – Yes, partly – Yes, entirely]
- Q3) In general, what is your overall impression of the Citizen Climate Parliament?  
[Very negative – Rather negative – Neither negative nor positive – Rather positive – Very positive]
- Q3bis) Could you briefly explain why?  
[Open ended question]
- Q4) Would you agree that the recommendations issued by the CCP should be transposed into laws?  
[Fully disagree – Rather disagree – Neither agree nor disagree – Rather agree – Fully agree]
- Q4bis) Could you briefly explain why?  
[Open ended question]
- Q5<sub>a-f</sub>) To what extent do you agree with the following propositions? (*Six propositions with the exact formulation of the six CCP recommendations were proposed.*)  
[Fully disagree – Rather disagree – Neither agree nor disagree – Rather agree – Fully agree]

\* An affirmation to Q1 was a precondition for Q3 and Q4. An affirmation to Q2 was a precondition for Q5. Q2 and Q5 were only asked in the post-CCP survey.

### Appendix 2: Response rates to the pre- and post-process surveys

Actors	N of identified actors	Respondents before CCP	%	Respondents after CCP	%	Respondents before and after	%
Associative	30	14	46.67	17	56.67	10	33.33
Economic	50	20	40.00	26	52.00	19	38.00
Political	78	36	46.15	38	48.72	24	30.77
Total	158	70	44.30	81	51.27	53	33.54



### Appendix 3: Profiles of the 28 actors selected for semi-structured interviews

Political actors		12
Party affiliation:	Christian-Democrats*	5
	Greens	2
	Liberals	3
	Socialists	2
Mandate:	Mayors	2
	Provincial Councillors	5
	Provincial Councillors and Mayors	3
	Federal MP and Mayor	1
	Regional MP	1
Associative actors		8
Size:	Small	4
	Medium	2
	Large	2
Economic actors		8
Size:	Small	3
	Medium	2
	Large	3
Socio-demographics		28
Gender:	Men	25
	Women	3
Age:	18-35	3
	36-59	22
	60-...	3

\*Dominant party in the province.

*Appendix 4: Interview guide for the semi-structured interviews*

*Introduction*

- Brief introduction of the research and its methodology
- Could you introduce yourself (and the organization you work for)?

*Knowledge of the CCP*

- What do you know about the CCP?
- How did you learn about it?
- Did you follow the proceedings closely?

*Opinion on the CCP*

- When you first learned about the CCP, what was your spontaneous opinion?
- What do you think about it today (and why)?
  - What about the process?
  - What about the results?
- Do you think its results should be mandatory for the Provincial Council (and why)?
- What do you think more generally about consulting sortitioned citizens, like the CCP, on a public policy?
- What place should this have in political decision-making?

*Conclusion*

- Are there things we did not speak about that you consider to be important for what we have talked about so far?

*Appendix 5: Coding scheme of arguments – grouped by theme and attributed to the respective view*

Theme	Arguments	Frequency*	View			
			Elitist	Expert	(Re) con.	Reinv.
Capacity	<i>In favour:</i>	23				
	-Mini-publics can better specialize on a topic	1			●	
	-Ordinary citizens are closer to everyday life	7			●	
	-Ordinary citizens have a longer-term perspective	5			●	●
	-Ordinary citizens are more sincere	6			●	
	-Ordinary citizens are as capable as politicians	2				●
	-Election is no guarantee of competence	6			●	●
	-Politicians only think about their own interests	1			●	●
	-Politicians are bound by the participatory	8			●	●
	-Politicians are bound by thinking of re-election	7			●	●
	-Politicians are influenced by corporate interests	4				●
	<i>Against:</i>	22				
	-Politicians are better surrounded by experts	3	●	●		
	-Politicians are better at making strong decisions	3	●		●	
	-Mini-Publics lack continuity	1	●		●	
	-Random selection could select fools	6	●		●	
	-Ordinary citizens lack expertise	1	●	●	●	●
	-Ordinary citizens lack complex understanding	8	●		●	●
	-Ordinary citizens do not know how politics work	12	●		●	
	-Ordinary citizens are subjective	2	●	●		
	-Ordinary citizens are too emotive	3	●		●	
	-Ordinary citizens are easily influenced	1	●		●	
	-Ordinary citizens can lack motivation	4	●	●		
Representativeness	<i>In favour:</i>	17				
	-Random selection assures representativeness	10			●	●
	-Random selection assures diversity	8			●	●
	-Random selection mobilizes non-participators	5			●	●
	<i>Against:</i>	18				
	-Voting assures representativeness	7	●	●	●	●
	-Voting assures consent	8	●	●	●	●
	-Random selection cannot hold people responsible	10	●	●	●	●
	-Voluntary participation attracts the usual suspects	2	●	●		
	-Experts from the field should have been selected	1		●		

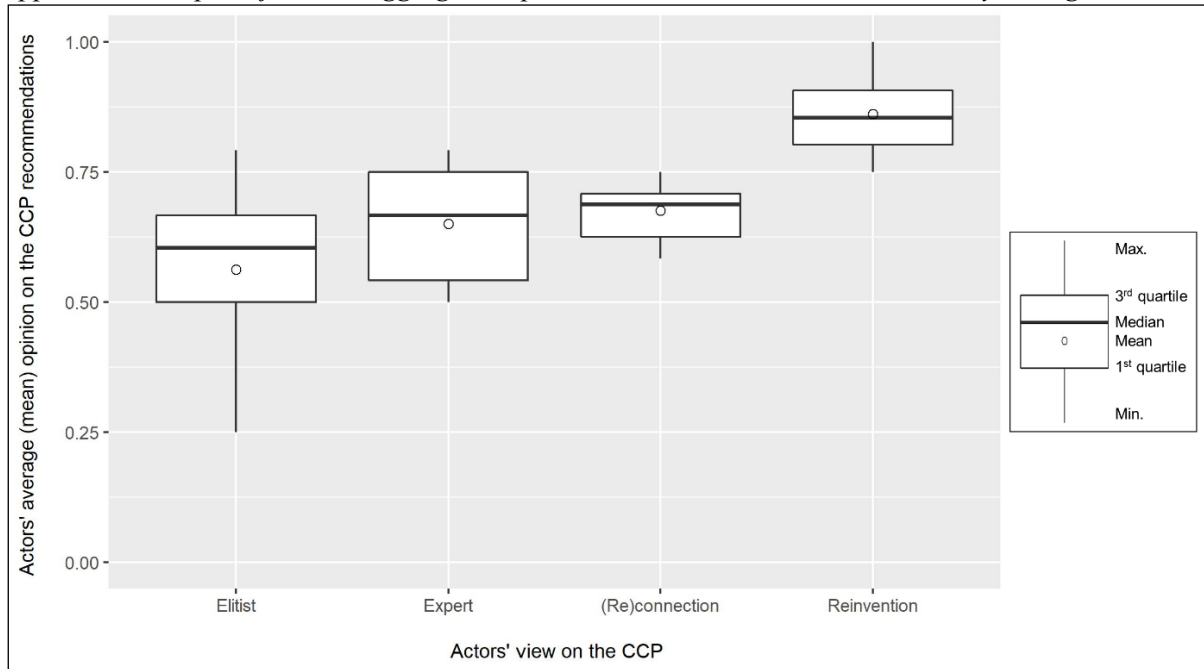
*[Table continues on the next page]*

	<i>In favour:</i>	7				
	-The methodology was well conceived	3			•	
	-It is good that experts have been heard	1			•	•
	-There was a perceivable group dynamic	4			•	
	<i>Against:</i>	14				
Process	-70 acceptances out of 2,500 sortitioned is very few	2	•	•		•
	-Strong personalities could express their view more often	1			•	
	-More and better experts should have been heard	2		•	•	•
	-Too little was communicated to the population	3		•		•
	-Participant selection should have been voluntarily	4	•			
	-Budget and number of projects should be fixed	3	•			
	<i>In favour:</i>	1				
	-It motivated the Provincial Council which is not active enough in the field	1			•	
	<i>Against:</i>	11				
Topic	-Climate is too complex for ordinary citizens	4	•	•		
	-Climate is too vast for the provincial level	8	•		•	
	-Climate should be tackled transversely	1				•
	-Decisions in this topic are self-evident	2	•			
	<i>In favour:</i>	7				
	-Propositions were real advancements	2			•	
	-Propositions were realistic	1			•	
	-Propositions were moderated	1			•	•
	-Propositions provided grounds for further work	3		•	•	•
	<i>Against:</i>	8				
Results	-Propositions were redundant to existing measures	3		•	•	
	-Propositions were not feasible (e.g. financially)	2	•	•		
	-Propositions remain vague	2	•	•		
	-Propositions lack expert preparation	1		•		
	-Propositions do not go far enough	2				•
	<i>In favour:</i>	8				
	-It restores a positive attitude towards politics	2				•
	-It makes decisions more acceptable for citizens	3				•
	-It has an educative value	3			•	•
	-It creates a societal uptake	3			•	•
	-It can counter extremist opinions	1				•
	-It can overcome NIMBY opinions	1				•
	<i>Against:</i>	4				
	-Politicians would stop being needed	3	•		•	•
	-The project is only used as media-coverage	1	•	•		

\* Number of interviews where the argument was mentioned at least once.

• Arguments used jointly and hence grouped into one argument-structure (view).

Appendix 6: Boxplot of actors' aggregated opinions on the CCP recommendations by their general view



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