

9 Citizens' assemblies: A critical perspective

Abstract: There are a number of significant concerns about the democratic legitimacy of CAs. In this chapter we identify six of the most prominent critiques. Firstly, that members of the public do not have the capacity to engage in meaningful deliberation and decision-making. Secondly, that CAs do not contest power relationships in society. Thirdly, that they are excessively manipulated spaces, with participants having little control over their own agendas. Fourthly, that they are easily co-opted by public authorities and have little policymaking impact. Fifthly, they only include small numbers of participants, and therefore exclude most of the public from deliberation and decision-making. Sixthly, because they are representative, they do not do enough to promote the voice and interests of minorities and marginalized groups. While these problems are significant, we conclude by arguing that CAs can provide democratic value in the right circumstances.

Keywords: Deliberative democracy, deliberative systems, CAs, mini-publics, political participation, representation, power, agenda-setting, co-option, inequality

9.1 Introduction

Citizens' assemblies (CAs) have been lauded as one of the best ways to institutionalise deliberative democracy (Curato et al. 2021; Landemore 2020). Recently we have seen a significant increase in the number of CAs being used to enable representative samples of the public engage in informed deliberation on topical issues and make policy recommendations on how to address these issues (OECD 2020; Paulis et al. 2020). The extent that this trend is a good thing for democracy is disputed. There are a number of significant concerns about the democratic legitimacy of CAs. In this chapter we identify, and consider, six of the most prominent critiques. Firstly, that members of the public do not have the capacity to engage in meaningful deliberation and decision-making. Secondly, that CAs do not contest power relationships in society that is the essence of democracy. Thirdly, that they are excessively manipulated spaces, with participants having little control over their own agendas, evidence, and programme of activities. Fourthly, that they are easily co-opted by public authorities and have little policymaking impact, and are consequently often symbolic exercises. Fifthly, they only include small numbers of participants, and therefore exclude most of the public from deliberation and decision-making, representing an unacceptable short-cut to the institutionalization of deliberative democracy. Sixthly, because they are representative, they do not do enough to promote the voice and interests of minorities and marginalized groups who are most

adversely affected by the policy issues. In this sense they exacerbate inequalities rather than alleviate them. While these problems are significant, we do not think they are terminal for the democratic legitimacy of CAs. Rather, we argue they can be mitigated if we take a deliberative systems approach and CAs are democratized, appropriately linked with other democratic institutions, and legally embedded in political systems. We deal with each critique in turn, before proving our defence.

9.2 Critique 1: Public incapacity

The first critique dates back to, at least, ancient Athens and Plato (2007). The argument is that the public do not have the capacity to meaningfully deliberate and make decisions on the complex issues that society faces. CAs are therefore dangerous for the effective functioning of the political system. Schumpeter (1952) concluded that there was no will of the people, as the public are incapable of forming one. He distinguished between the market and the forum to explain why. People are capable of rational choices when purchasing as they will be affected directly by the decision. However, most public policies only affect certain groups in society directly so there is little incentive for the unaffected to become informed about these issues. Consequently, their views are irrational, impulsive, prejudicial, and easily swayed by advertising, rhetoric, and propaganda. Similarly, Converse (1964) argues that the public have “non-attitudes” on public issues, which are inconsistent and fluctuate greatly, due to low levels of knowledge. For Zaller (1992), this means public opinion can be “induced” by political elites. Each concludes that democracy can, at best, be competition between political elites, facilitated by elections. The only involvement of the public in democratic decision-making is to vote periodically to select who will make decisions on their behalf. Downs (1957) argues, as a result, that public ignorance, and political apathy, are actually rational choices, as each individual has such a small chance of affecting public policy decisions in an election. These arguments were presented before the proliferation of CAs, and Böker and Elstub (2015) argue that empirical evidence from mini-publics challenges these arguments as it has demonstrated that, in the right circumstances, where participants engage with a range of information and views in a facilitated, supportive, and inclusive environment, people can deliberate complex issues and develop informed and coherent views. Furthermore, they argue that, theoretically, if mini-publics afford their participants meaningful opportunities to influence policy through credible institutional links with legislatures, governments, and referendums, they can mitigate the “rational” incentives not to engage. Nevertheless, “public incapacity” arguments have been resurrected and aimed specifically at deliberative democracy; labelled as “an idealistic version of liberalism” (Achen and Bartels 2016: 217) or a “fantasy” (Brennan 2016: 60) due to being based on naive perceptions of the public’s capacity to reason and become informed. Whilst they do acknowledge that mini-publics are “creative” (Achen and Bartels 2016: 2) and provide “evidence that this kind of moderated deliberation can work” (Brennan 2016: 66), they have concerns about their scalability to political sys-

tems as a whole. Achen and Bartles (2016) refer to the lack of influence the British Columbia CAon electoral reform had on the broader public,¹ whilst Brennan (2016) is concerned they will become overly politicized if given decision-making authority and as a result pressurized by partisan political bodies such as parties and interest groups.

9.3 Critique 2: A neglect of power

CAs can be criticized from radical views of democracy that see any political order as the expression of particular power relations. This critique is rooted in an understanding of democracy as disruptions of the established order. It is usually either anti-institutional or opposes the deliberative democratic ideal of free and unconstrained public deliberation.

Rancière exemplifies the anti-institutional strand of radical democracy. He argues that the administrative and distributive arrangements that normally goes by the name of politics, and which he calls “the police”, inevitably rest on norms that decide who is included and excluded and who is entitled to govern others and who is not (Rancière 1999). In other words, the police order determines hierarchical relationships between human beings. For Rancière, politics proper implies a disruption of the police order. It occurs when a group that is excluded from the political community asserts its equality by undoing the naturalness of the police order. From this perspective, inclusive and democratic politics cannot be institutionalized – not even through CAs, which aim to select a diverse body of citizens. Politics, which for Rancière always means democratic politics, is rare, sporadic and temporary, and comes as a surplus to the established political order (Rancière 1999, 2001).

Wolin also offers an anti- and extra-institutional account of democracy. He characterizes democracy as a “rebellious moment” that is “doomed to succeed only temporarily” (Wolin 1996: 43). Thus, democracy, for Wolin, is not a form of government or social life – it is a spontaneous moment of rupture carried along by uprisings and revolutions. Consequently, Wolin conceives democracy as only existing outside of established institutions. He asserts that the institutionalization of politics “marks the attenuation of democracy: leaders begin to appear; hierarchies develop; experts of one kind or another cluster around the centres of decision; order, procedure, and precedent displace a more spontaneous politics” (Wolin 1996: 39). From such a perspective, CAs are fundamentally anti-democratic because, like other formal political institutions, they are inevitably governed by rules, procedures, and norms of practice. This remains the case even if the CA is convened by a civil society organization or social movement as it will still be operating in a rigged and biased system. Hammond (2020) argues that deliberative processes can be systems disruptors but to do so the established norms of the

¹ See Jacquet and Minsart's chapter in this *Handbook* on ‘The impact of citizens' assemblies on policy-making’, for a further discussion of this case.

CA format (e.g. participant recruitment, evidence provision, discussion facilitation) need to be relaxed, with the focus on the number, rather than the design of social spaces for deliberation, and aiming to generate societal debate rather than to influence policy.

In addition to the anti-institutional critique, radical democrats have criticized the deliberative democratic ideal of free and unconstrained, rational, argumentation. Most notably, Mouffe (1999) argues that the deliberative democratic idea to ground legitimacy on pure rationality fails to recognize the link between legitimacy and power. For Mouffe, rules and processes that are believed to be rational or natural are in fact always constrained by, and supportive of, particular power relations (Mouffe 1999, 2005). Hence the main task of democracy cannot be to eliminate power – but to acknowledge and transform power relations by enabling diversity and conflict (Mouffe 1999). According to this view, the deliberative democratic quest for public reasoning and mutual understanding, which is usually adopted by CAs, forecloses possibilities for democratic politics.

The deliberative idea of rational argumentation has also been criticized by so-called “difference democrats”. While these scholars usually do not reject the whole project of deliberative democracy, they argue that there are good reasons to believe that marginalized groups’ arguments and modes of expression will be perceived as unreasonable in deliberation, especially if they threaten the position of advantaged groups (e.g., Williams 2000; Young 1996). In short, these theorists claim that the norms of deliberation often operate as forms of power, and risk excluding and constraining certain voices and kinds of people. To resist such exclusions, they encourage deliberative democrats to tolerate group-based struggles, and to allow for other forms of reason-giving than rational argumentation (Williams 2000; Young 1996). This certainly poses a challenge to CAs as they are usually conducted.

9.4 Critique 3: Manipulated spaces

CAs are often commissioned by parliaments and governments (OECD 2020). Although they are sometimes called for by civil society organizations and social movements, public authorities are often in charge of their design. This has given rise to strong criticism. Scholars have argued that institutional engineering from the centre of political power has inherent control mechanisms that tames radical energy and gives government authorities control over political processes and discourses (Blaug 2002; Böker 2017).

CAs, as with all mini-publics, are certainly highly artificial and controlled spaces. However, not all control mechanisms are destructive. Some of them are meant to be positive for the institutionalization of deliberative democracy. For example, there is control over who can participate to ensure diversity, and the discussions are facilitated to promote deliberative norms (Elstub 2014). Nevertheless, other common characteristics risk being manipulative and having less positive consequences for deliberative de-

mocracy. These include elite control of the assembly agenda and the information and evidence fed into the assembly. We deal with each in turn.

Firstly, the remits of CAs are usually pre-determined by the commissioning authorities and are therefore “elite-driven” (Warren 2009: 6). This can be done instrumentally and strategically to advance the interests of political elites (Dryzek and Tucker 2008). Agenda-setting is the stage of the CA process where the “mobilisation of bias is at its highest” (Smith 2001: 84) as the assembly remit generates a path-dependency that determines most aspects of the design of the process (Goodin 2005; Elstub et al. 2021a). For Richardson (2010: 184), this means that CAs “will tell us little of value about the popular will” as the pre-determined agenda means we do not know what the public’s policy priorities are, just what they think about the issue they have been asked to reflect on.

Secondly, in CAs, the information, and the experts and advocates that provide it, are selected by the assembly organizers. These choices frame the debate on the issue and can heavily influence the outcome of the assembly (Fournier et al. 2011; Elstub et al. 2021a). Smith and Wales’ (2000: 58) point about citizens’ juries seems to apply equally to CAs that “there is a danger that even before citizens are directly involved, issues, information and witnesses might be mobilised out of the process” (see also Roberts et al. 2020 and Curato et al. 2021). To mitigate this danger balanced advisory boards usually select relevant experts and advocates to speak to the assembly members and guide them on, and review, the specific information to provide, and the manner in which they provide it (Elstub 2014). Whilst this type of oversight is essential, it is not sufficient to prevent manipulation as it “recreates existing power relationships” (Roberts et al. 2020: 7). Indeed, CAs have been criticized for excluding interest groups and thereby promoting co-opted processes rather than an open, and inclusive dialogue (Elstub 2014; Böker and Elstub 2015). This is important as research indicates that it is the information provided that has the greatest influence on the opinions of mini-public participants (Goodin and Niemeyer 2003; Setälä, Grönlund and Herne 2010; Thompson et al. 2021). This is also the case in CAs specifically, especially early on in the assembly when the participants learn the most (Elstub et al. 2021a).

Because Böker and Elstub (2015: 5) see deliberative democracy as a critical theory that opposes illegitimate hierarchies and elitist governance structures, they see the manipulation of the agenda and information in a CA as significantly compromising the contribution they can make to institutionalizing deliberative democracy. This is a more acute problem for CAs than smaller mini-publics, with fewer participants, as they allow less citizen control over the process than citizens’ juries and consensus conferences, for example (Elstub 2014).

9.5 Critique 4: Symbolic engagement

The impact of mini-publics on policy is unclear and difficult to assess despite extensive research in this area (Jacquet and van der Does 2021). As a result, one of the most per-

sistent critiques of mini-publics is that they are benign and easily co-opted by public authorities who organize them for symbolic reasons, to provide a veil of legitimacy to elitist policymaking and to make it look as though they are enabling the public to have a say, when the decisions have already been made (Dryzek and Goodin 2006; Böker and Elstub 2015; Curato et al. 2021). Indeed, even when it appears that a mini-publics' recommendations have been implemented by a public authority, this could be the result of "cherry-picking" and "retro-fitting", whereby authorities select recommendations they already planned to implement and ignore the others that they do not support (Smith and Wales 2000; Andrews et al. 2022). Consequently, mini-publics have been criticized as potentially "becom[ing] useful legitimating devices for an already decided policy" (Pateman 2012: 9). If the recommendations do not align with the public authority's initial priorities then they are unlikely to be adopted (Vrydagh 2022). The danger is then that they are a "tokenistic consultative exercise convened to legitimize predetermined policy outcomes" (Curato et al. 2021: 107). Other stakeholders, opposed to the recommendations, may critique the mini-public in order to prevent their uptake (Dryzek 2010: 27).

However, CAs are often linked with other democratic institutions in order to overcome this critique. They have preceded referendums (Farrell et al. 2020), and been linked with governments (OECD 2020) and parliaments (Beswick and Elstub 2019; Elstub et al. 2021a; Elstub et al. 2021b) in order to give them some leverage in the political system. The outputs of a CA are usually detailed policy recommendations which make it easier to see if they have been implemented and thereby hold the relevant policy-makers to account. According to some studies these institutional features are seeing the recommendations emerging from CAs being increasingly adopted into policy (OECD 2020; Paulis et al. 2020).² As a result the emancipatory potential of CAs is greater than other types of mini-public (Böker and Elstub 2015).

Nevertheless, CAs remain susceptible to the symbolic engagement critique. In Gdansk, the Mayor has committed to implementing any CA recommendations that receive over 80 per cent support (Carson and Gerwin 2018). But this is still ultimately influence at the discretion of the elected representatives. Even with CAs where there is a prior commitment to implement recommendations, implementation does not necessarily happen as was the case with *Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat* (Courant 2020). In other cases, policy impact is reduced due to the absence of clear plans to deal with the recommendations (Elstub et al. 2021a). Even in Ireland, which has some of the most celebrated CAs producing recommendations on abortion and marriage equality which were adopted into legislation via referendums and parliament, most of the other recommendations have not been picked up (Harris 2019). Cherry-picking is rife then even with the CA model.

² Although see Vrydagh (2022) for a critique of the approach adopted by these studies to assessing the policy impact of mini-publics.

9.6 Critique 5: A short-cut to deliberative democracy

In order to facilitate both genuine deliberation, and a diversity of experiences and perspectives, CAs usually consist of around 100 participants. One of the loudest criticisms against these institutions has been that the small numbers of participants generate a problematic or illegitimate short-cut to deliberative democracy. According to Chambers (2009), a full theory of deliberative democracy needs to include the mass public. She warns that abandoning the mass public in favour of institutionally bounded deliberation risks sending deliberative democracy on a path toward participatory elitism. Making a distinction between “deliberative democracy” and “democratic deliberation”, Chambers argues that mini-publics are exercises in the latter and thus only internally democratic. She considers them to be fully democratic to the extent that they can convince the general public that they have made policy choices worth pursuing. Chambers therefore emphasizes the importance of deliberation in the mass public sphere and the deliberativeness of the political system as a whole.

Lafont (2015) offers a similar, albeit more pessimistic, account of mini-publics. She asserts that a deliberative assembly of randomly selected participants does not provide any mechanisms of direct authorization and accountability to the wider citizen body (see also Parkinson 2006). At the same time, participants in that assembly might change opinions as a result of their internal discussions, and end up in a position that is not representative of the broader public. Granting these participants decision-making powers is, according to Lafont, in line with elite models of democracy, which ask citizens to blindly defer to the deliberations of a few. While the participants might very well end up being more knowledgeable than those who have not deliberated, a blind deference to their deliberation would imply that a vast majority of the people are dominated by a few selected citizens. Thus, Lafont concludes that it is democratically illegitimate for CAs, and other mini-publics, to directly feed into a decision-making process. As she discusses in more detail in her later work (2017, 2019),³ they can serve democratic goals and improve the quality of deliberation in the public sphere when they contest the majority opinion, play a vigilant role, or anticipate issues.

Finally, the critique that CAs constitute a problematic short-cut to deliberative democracy has been expressed from a critical democratic perspective. According to Böker (2017), deliberative democratic theory should conceptualize ways of opening up social and political space for critical scrutiny of authorities, and enable emancipation from structural forms of domination. While Böker acknowledges that mini-publics can enable emancipatory critique, she argues that this possibility hinges on a political culture characterized by genuinely critical attitudes. According to her, participants in a deliberation would not assume a position to critique in an emancipatory sense as a result of

³ See also Lafont, in this *Handbook*.

a facilitator's instructions. Rather, "emancipation requires a self-empowering potential within citizens themselves" (Böker 2017: 31), and has to do with their own norms and expectations. Thus, in Böker's view, deliberative democracy cannot be artificially engineered through a set of institutional specificities. It can only self-evolve gradually and bottom-up, through a long-time process of cultural change. Like Chambers and Lafont, Böker's account of deliberative democracy, and critique of mini-publics, emphasizes the role of the informal public sphere in deliberative democratic theory.

9.7 Critique 6: Exacerbating inequality

The small numbers of participants in CAs have also given rise to discussions about their representativeness. While, pure random sampling, and the equal probability to be selected, has been considered to guard the democratic legitimacy of unelected deliberative bodies (Fishkin 2009; Khoban 2021), CAs usually use stratified random sampling based on demographic criteria to try to ensure a diversity of social perspectives, and to counteract self-selection biases (Escobar and Elstub 2017). Nevertheless, since there is no compulsion to participate, a degree of self-selection is unavoidable, and risks exacerbating inequalities in political influence between resourceful and marginalized groups.

Another problem with random sampling to CAs is that small minorities risk not being represented. A proposal that can, to some extent, solve this problem is to maximize the number of different social perspectives, rather than to try to achieve demographic proportionality (Brown 2006). According to this view, the injustice of oversampling minority groups is outweighed by a more socially diverse deliberative body, which may improve the quality of the deliberation and increase feelings of being represented among non-participants. While some have pointed to the impracticality of oversampling minorities (Landemore 2013), others have argued that it addresses social inequities that skew sampling frames, and counterbalances social injustices that are prevalent in other arenas of society (Steel et al. 2020).

In addition to injustices that affect the composition of CAs, it is likely that CAs reproduce inequalities in voice among those who participate. Studies on small group deliberations show different results. While some have found that inequalities in skills and social status do not translate into inequalities in speaking time and influence (Siu 2017), others have observed that women and working-class participants tend to make fewer contributions to the discussions (Gerber 2015; Setälä, Grönlund and Herne 2010). A recent study on Ireland's Convention on the Constitution finds that men tended to speak more frequently than women in the plenary debates, while women participated more than men in the roundtable sessions (Harris et al. 2021). However, privilege might not necessarily express itself in more contributions. An analysis of Deliberative Polls in the United States shows that white, highly educated, and older participants did not provide as many reasons for their arguments as non-white, less-educated, and younger partic-

ipants, suggesting that privileged individuals might believe their statements carry more weight because of their social position (Siu 2017).

As a case of a formal institution for citizen participation, CAs are also subject to criticism that highlights participatory and consultative processes' embeddedness in social structures that reproduce oppression and racism. According to Almeida (2019), who has studied diversity and political participation in the City of Toronto, consultation with ethnic minority and immigrant groups converges with the racial norms of diversity discourse to reproduce and occlude colonial and racial thinking. Almeida shows that labour market and economic disparities identified by racialized minorities during a consultation process on how to address racism and discrimination was met with suggestions by the city to implement mentoring programmes to assist immigrant workers. Thus, residents' input was contextualized under the city's broader diversity narrative, which emphasized racial *lack* rather than racial *exclusion*.

Almeida's finding on the reproduction of racial practices in participatory processes further underlines the risk of CAs being overlooked and co-opted (see critique 4). It demonstrates that co-option can take place at a structural, rather than agential, level, and has particularly negative consequences for marginalized social groups. In addition, her observation of a diversity discourse that emphasizes racial lack gives reason to be vigilant against certain types of arguments about the desirability of CAs. While CAs have different goals, scholars often emphasize that they can improve participants' civic skills and knowledge of issues (Bächtiger et al. 2018; Fishkin, Luskin and Jowell 2000). Knowledge acquisition is indeed an important aspect of CAs. However, an over-emphasis on the educative function of CAs may risk overshadowing their empowering and emancipatory capacity (cf. Böker and Elstub 2015). Such a tendency is most likely to disarm and inhibit participants who are considered to have relatively little knowledge and skills, i.e. those who are assumed to have a lot to learn.

9.8 In defence of citizens' assemblies

We have highlighted six important critiques of CAs. However, some of them do contradict each other. For example, it would be inconsistent to conclude that the public are incapable of meaningful participation in CAs (critique 1) and maintain that assembly members should have more control over the assembly process than they are usually afforded (critique 3). Indeed we reject critique 1 outright with respect to its limited normative vision of what democracy entails and the conclusions it draws from the empirical evidence about public participation. We believe the evidence from mini-publics, and many other avenues for political participation and deliberation, clearly demonstrate the capacity of the public to make meaningful contributions to policy debate and formation. Elsewhere, there are clear synergies between critiques, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 that ultimately all call for a more radical approach to democracy than the use of CAs can deliver. We therefore agree with Curato et al. (2020) that we should take an

ecumenical approach to CAs. They should not be seen as necessarily positive contributions to democracy.

Nevertheless, we still maintain that CAs can provide democratic value in the right circumstances. The opportunities they afford for a diverse group of people to deliberate important political issues together, in a rather supportive and inclusive environment, are rare elsewhere in the political system. Consequently, we take a deliberative systems approach (Elstub, Ercan and Mendonça 2016). Accordingly, CAs should not be seen in isolation and should not be expected to promote all of the norms of deliberative democracy themselves: “conceptualizing mini-publics not as full instances but as incomplete parts of a wider system of deliberative democracy allows for acknowledgement of their inevitably limited nature, contributing certain specific components to the overarching system but failing at providing others” (Böker and Elstub 2015: 17).

This would help CAs democratize, not just by giving participants more say over the remit and information they receive (critique 3), but enabling non-participants to have input on these issues too (critiques 5 and 6). There needs to be concrete and established links between CAs and other parts of the political system including civil society, parliaments, government, and the media to enhance their impact on policy debate and opinion in the informal and formal public spheres (critiques 4, 5 and 6). To help achieve this there needs to be laws on when CAs are held, how they are organized, and on what should happen to the resulting recommendations, to reduce elite control over the process (critiques 3 and 4). We need an array of democratic innovations, not just CAs, to provide opportunities for the public to engage in meaningful participation and deliberation. As each “family” of democratic innovation contribute different types of democratic norms, and include different types of publics, they need to be combined in varying ways in different contexts (critiques 5 and 6) (Elstub and Escobar 2019). Furthermore, the democratic qualities of claimed participatory spaces, such as occupied public squares, should not be underestimated (critique 2).

The good news is that we are starting to see CAs become embedded in democratic systems and connected with established democratic institutions and democratic innovations in a variety of ways (OECD 2020, 2022; Paulis et al. 2020). We need to learn from these cases, but also push the experimentation further. We can do so without assuming that CAs will ever be fully inclusive, and while being responsive to groups that claim to be excluded and oppressed by the political system (critique 2). There will always be barriers. The critiques of CAs are real and significant. However, they apply to other parts of the democratic system too. If we learn how these parts can be most effectively combined, we can move towards deliberative systems, and CAs can play an important role in this.

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