Boeker M, Elstub S.

[The Possibility of Critical Mini-Publics: Realpolitik and Normative Cycles in Democratic Theory](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2015.1026205).
Representation **2015, 51(1), 125-144**

Date deposited:

02/03/2016

Embargo release date:

01 October 2016

The Possibility of Critical Mini-Publics: Realpolitik and Normative Cycles in Democratic Theory[1]

Marit Boeker (University of Essex) and Stephen Elstub (University of the West of Scotland)

Abstract

Fifty years ago, democratic theory was largely devoid of normative impulse, and was dominated by the realpolitik and positivist approaches of competitive elitism and rational and social choice theory. While the rise of participatory democratic theory in the 1970s brought a halt to this dominance, it was the arrival of deliberative democracy in the 1980s and 90s that cemented the normative revival in democratic theory. However, as deliberative theory itself increasingly emphasised practice-oriented institutional innovations such as "mini-publics", realpolitik has made a resurgence, rendering deliberative democracy less normative and critical. Yet, although in practice the focus on mini-publics has sometimes resulted in less critical forms of deliberation, we argue that this need not be the case. An important task of deliberative theory today is to find ways in which deliberative democracy can be practically relevant without losing its critical and normative edge. We contend that experimentation with new forms of mini-publics can contribute to this if located within a deliberative system where their deficiencies can be corrected and supplemented by other parts of the system. We conclude by arguing that deliberative democracy has cemented itself as one of the most powerful innovations of democratic theory yet precisely because it can motivate practical innovation on the ground whilst still retaining a strong normative force and critical edge as well. This shows that there need not be an insurmountable divide between theories being *either* realpolitik *or* critical, and for democratic theory it is important that both are achieved in the right measure.

Introduction

Fifty years ago, democratic theory was largely devoid of normative impulse, and was dominated by the realpolitik and positivist approaches of competitive elitism, rational and social choice theory. While the rise of participatory democratic theory in the 1970s brought a halt to this dominance, it was the arrival of deliberative democracy in the 1980s and 90s that cemented the normative revival in democratic theory. However, as deliberative theory itself increasingly emphasised institutional innovations such as "mini-publics" to achieve deliberative democracy in practice, realpolitik has made a resurgence, rendering deliberative democracy less normative and critical. In this article, we argue that, while mini-publics have many important functions in modern democracies, they potentially contribute to a weakening of the normative impulse of democratic theory that coined the origins of deliberative democratic theory. Yet this need not be the case: We argue that it is possible to build on the dominant concept of mini-publics in a way that harnesses both the critical-normative impulse and the real-world innovations of deliberative democracy, and conceptualise, against this background, a type of "critical mini-publics" that fits in with a normative and critical orientation of deliberative democratic theory. We conclude that deliberative democracy has cemented itself – and will continue – as one of the most powerful innovations of democratic theory yet precisely because it can motivate practical innovation on the ground whilst at the same time retaining a strong normative force and critical edge as well. This shows that there need not be an insurmountable divide between theories being *either* realpolitik *or* critical, and for democratic theory it is important that both are achieved in the right measure.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section provides a broad documentation of realpolitik and normative cycles in democratic theory over the last fifty years, particularly noting the normative momentum provided by the development of deliberative democratic theory and its focus on critical opposition. Section two highlights how deliberative democracy's "empirical turn" towards mini-publics has helped refute the critiques of empirical democratic theorists, yet has also implied a new realpolitik direction for deliberative democracy itself, sidelining the theory's critical origins. Advocating a new normative (re-)turn that harnesses mini-publics' positive contributions whilst re-orientating them towards the early critical deliberative norms, section three evaluates the various types of mini-public according to their critical potential, and section four argues that a new type of "critical mini-public" can indeed become a possibility by re-modelling mini-publics' features towards greater openness and decisiveness whilst subjecting their practice to democratic control.

Realpolitik and Normative Cycles in Democratic Theory

The last fifty years have witnessed numerous cycles in democratic theory with varying normative and realpolitik approaches. In 1960, when the first issue of *Representation* was published, the study of democracy was largely dominated by the realpolitik approaches competitive elitism, rational and social choice theory. Although published in 1942, the legacy of Schumpeter's *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1972) was still manifest in the 1960s. In this classic realpolitik text, Schumpeter argues that democracy conceived as rule of the people is impossible because citizens lack the capacity to form this will. Here he differentiates between political and market preferences. Unlike the latter, the former are indefinite because citizens rarely feel the consequences of them directly. Thus, citizens lack the necessary incentives to become informed about political issues and to develop concrete preferences, and are therefore unable to propose coherent policy solutions themselves. This enables a herd instinct to manifest itself, whereby these irrational citizens act on impulse and prejudice, becoming easily swayed by advertising, propaganda, and rhetoric produced by competing elites. Moreover, even if these individual political wills were definite and independent they would be too diverse to be formed into a coherent collective will, as neither rational argument nor decision rules are able to reconcile various preferences and values. Schumpeter concludes that democracy is still possible, providing it is defined as competition amongst elites for votes, where the only input required by citizens is to vote in periodic elections to choose their rulers. These elections do not mean the rulers are held to account, but, rather, they compete to impose their views on the electorate: 'Democracy means only that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them… democracy is the rule of the politician' (Schumpeter 1972: 285). As Mackie (2009: 128-9) comments, 'in the name of realism, his definition stripped democracy of all ethical content.'

A few years before the first issue of *Representation* followed another influential realpolitik text: Downs's *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1956), elaborating on Schumpeter's theory, similarly argued that democracy should be conceived as a competition for power. It became a seminal text in the development of rational choice theory, which subsequently established itself as a dominant approach to understanding political mechanisms and behaviour. One of the primary differences between Downs and Schumpeter, however, is that Downs started from the premise that citizens are rational utility maximisers, who are the best judge of their own interests. Consequently, democracy is interpreted as competition between rational actors, but not just between elites, as the electorate also compete to have their wishes and demands met. On this view, voters vote for the party that offers them more of what they want, and so political parties competing for votes try to offer the majority of the electorate what they want in order to get voted into government, leading to centrist

ideologies being adopted by parties, and associated moderate policies. As a consequence, there are no ideological or normative actors, either parties or voters, operating in electoral systems; each actor simply pursues their own self-interest. Still, Downs' approach resembles that of Schumpeter's in that he argues that due to the time and effort involved, and the impossibility of determining the electoral outcome (i.e. nobody wins by just one vote), it is irrational for individual citizens to vote, and certainly to take the time and effort to become an informed voter. As with Schumpeter's analysis, then, citizens are ultimately ill-informed with indefinite preferences. However, in Downs' analysis voters are not necessarily manipulated by elites, and use heuristics to make electoral choices.

Finally, the seminal social choice theorist Arrow, in *Social Choice and Individual Values* (1963), considered the key problem of how to aggregate individual preferences to make a collective decision or social choice. He set out five conditions that must be met to ensure a rational social choice, but argued that these requirements cannot in fact be satisfied at the same time through the same aggregative procedure. 'Condorcet's Paradox' highlights how intransitive and rotating majorities, in conjunction with strategic voting, make it almost impossible to ensure rational outcomes in the sense that a vote reflects the will of the people. Arrow's (1963) conclusion was that the only way these criteria could be met is through the restriction of the domain and range of preferences citizens could vote upon, which he argued was unacceptable as it would violate citizen autonomy. While there are then normative aspects in Arrow's analysis, in applying his conclusions further, Riker, in *Liberalism Against Populism* (1982), all but dilutes these. Riker famously argued that all aggregation mechanisms are susceptible to instability and ambiguity, which allows for strategic manipulation. They are unstable in the sense that they spawn cyclical and intransitive social orderings and majorities, as a consequence of which voting paradoxes occur. All these problems mean that popular will cannot be identified independently from the aggregative mechanism used to identify it. As such, the outcomes of votes can be controlled by agenda setters and timing in terms of where in a voting cycle a decision is actually made. For Riker, 'populist' democracy is impossible as there is no such thing as 'the will of the people' that should be reflected in decisions (Riker 1982: 117-19). Democracy must therefore be abandoned 'not because it is morally wrong, but merely because it is empty' (Riker 1982: 239). He concludes that the only purpose of elections is for citizens to remove competing officials from office if they distrust them, in order to prevent tyranny. Cohen's (1986) critique of Riker's avocation of elections demonstrates the absence of normativity in Riker's analysis; for if elections do produce random outcomes, suitable and trustworthy candidates are as likely to be removed from office as unsuitable and untrustworthy ones. Random assassinations, a mechanism with no normative democratic credentials, might then be more useful in constraining power in providing external checks.

It is important to note that these works do not conclusively define democratic theory of that period. A notable exception is Dahl's (1956; 1961; 1971) liberal pluralism which had overt normative impulses and looked beyond electoral competition to deliver democracy. He advocated continuous competition between diverse interest groups to influence government policy and promote polyarchy. Still, even Dahl's approach is interpreted by some as an explanatory, rather than a normative, theory (Manley 1983). Therefore, while acknowledging important exceptions, the significance and the common themes embodied by competitive elitism and rational and social choice theory demarcate a distinct phase of theorising on democracy. All conclude that only a minimalist approach to democracy is possible, with elections used to facilitate competition, but not to deliver the will of the people. The empirical evidence that supports each approach is usually positivist and gathered from surveys and election studies (e.g. Berelson 1952; Converse 1964), leading to the development of 'empirical democratic theory' (Berelson 1952). This empirical theory suggests most citizens to be politically apathetic and ignorant, but also that this is 'functional for the democratic system' (Pateman 2012: 7). Since these theories draw their conclusions from their interpretations of actually existing democracy, they are all realpolitik positions. Of course, their analysis of actually existing democracy could be disputed; yet the point we want to highlight in this paper is that these approaches lack a normative and critical edge. They accept too readily democracy as it operates, rather than engaging in an analysis of what democracy should and could be, which could itself guide political change. Consequently, all three approaches are guilty of justifying 'in an ideological and specifically conservative spirit- the existing workings of the political system they have described' (Skinner 1973: 288).

In contrast, we agree with Arblaster (1994: 3) that democracy is 'a concept before it is a fact', and moreover a normative and critical concept 'by which reality is tested and undertaken' (Arblaster 1994: 8). As Elstub (2010a: 255) elaborates, democratic theory 'should criticise and guide practice…'; and this requires 'a critical distance from practical reality', which is absent in the work of empirical democratic theorists. Inasmuch as the normative claims of legitimacy, that are central to democracy, cannot be empirically verified, it is not possible to study democracy in a manner free of normative assumptions (Thompson 2008); and from this follows that 'one should not accept political reality as a reified given, and essentialise the contextual features and the political procedures currently in place. Rather empirical theory must keep sight of the normative goals of democratic theory, and strive to improve practice, accordingly, where possible' (Elstub 2010a: 255).

Indeed, a more normative approach to democratic theory emerged in the 1970s as participatory democratic theorists 'took up the cudgels against proponents of a realistic democratic theory' (Pateman 2012: 7) by asserting that citizens, in the right circumstances, could and should participate

effectively in democratic processes (Pateman 1970; MacPherson 1977; Barber 1984). Participatory democrats argued that it was neither the inability of citizens to participate, nor their rational choice not to, that led to political apathy, but rather socio-economic inequalities that determined participation levels and the extent of the opportunities available to citizens to participate. Moreover, they maintained that opportunities to directly participate in decisions that affect them will enable people to gain the skills to participate, ensure that citizens take an interest in politics, and overcome the instrumental rational barriers to political participation identified by rational choice theorists. These debates, then, 'were about the meaning of democracy itself – "realistic" or participatory?' (Pateman 2012: 10). However, this normative turn was short-lived, as by the 1980s 'participatory democratic theory became unfashionable' (Pateman 2012: 7).

Yet in the late 1980s and 1990s, the theory of deliberative democracy emerged heralding a distinctive normative vision and approach to democracy that took participatory democracy as its starting point, but made stronger normative claims on preferred types of political participation, specifically reasoned and reciprocal public discussion. For many, deliberative democracy has since 'overtaken and subsumed its predecessor of participatory democracy' (Pateman 2012: 8). A key text in the early development of deliberative democracy was Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1992), which, though first published in German in 1962 shortly after the inaugural issue of *Representation*, did not achieve its full impact until translated into English in 1989. The main argument of these early foundations of deliberative democracy was that there is in fact a 'public sphere', and that it plays a key role in democracies in checking government power through critical debate. According to the new standard of legitimacy that subsequently emerged in deliberative theory on this basis, 'outcomes are legitimate to the extent they receive reflective assent through participation in authentic deliberation by all those subject to the decision in question' (Dryzek 2010: 23).

Repudiating as it does both elitist and aggregative models of democracy (Dryzek 2010: 23; Chambers 2003: 308), and approaching democratic theorising from the starting point of this highly demanding ideal of deliberative legitimacy resting on equal access, reasoned justification, and exclusion of coercion (cf. Habermas 1996: 228-30; Dryzek 2000: 2), the arrival of deliberative democracy marked a significant shift from positivism towards radical normativity in democratic theory. Unlike the earlier empirical theories, deliberative democracy is not first and foremost a new explanation of existing democratic life, but its Habermasian foundations are as a critical theory, justifying deeper democratisation as a norm to *resist* illegitimate hierarchies and elitist governance structures. In normatively demanding an active public sphere through which citizens engage in the deliberative processes needed to meaningfully give 'reflective assent' (cf. Benhabib 1996: 68), the theory itself

harbours an *empowering* or *emancipatory* momentum (Knops 2006: 594). Whilst deliberation as such can be employed to a plethora of ends in different contexts, including public education and more efficient governance (Fung 2003), and the theory has by some also been interpreted in more reformist ways orientated to improving existing liberal institutions (e.g. Bessette 1994; Uhr 1998), *deliberative democracy* from this critical perspective means first and foremost respect for a new standard of democratic legitimacy (Parkinson 2006: 4): one which empowers citizens to '*criticize* institutions that do not live up to the normative standard' (Chambers 2003: 308, emphasis added).

Yet, deliberative democracy has itself undergone variations and cycles of normativism and realism. Elstub (2010b) identifies three main 'generations' of deliberative democratic theory. First generation deliberative democrats, such as Habermas (1996) and Rawls (1993), debated the normative justifications of deliberative democracy, interpretations, and necessary components of the theory, but were swiftly criticised for failing to take account of the sheer complexity of contemporary societies (Elstub, 2010b). Second generation deliberative democrats, particularly Bohman (1996) and Gutmann and Thompson (1996), initiated a shift towards considering the institutionalisation of deliberative democracy, reforming the theory of deliberative democracy in important respects, such as those relating to the aim of consensus, and to different forms of communication. On this basis, third generation theorists could begin to experiment with real-world institutional innovation (Elstub, 2010b). This shift in the third generation has led to a proliferation of diverse interpretations regarding the institutional features of a deliberative model of democracy, known as the 'empirical' and 'institutional turns' in deliberative democracy (Dryzek 2010: 6-9).

In demonstrating that the theory has practical impact, the empirical turn has proved vital for the development of deliberative democracy, indeed being regarded as key to the 'coming of age' of the theory (Bohman 1998). However, it has brought with it certain dangers, too. For Elstub (2010b: 305), 'if deliberative democracy accommodates the features of social complexity too excessively, and comes to resemble the current institutional frameworks too closely, it will be more amenable to practice, but will cease to be a critical theory that offers a radical alternative to liberal democracy, and the distinct features of the deliberative model will be lost'. The concern is that deliberative democracy could become an 'empirical democratic theory' like those it provided such a powerful critique of at its origins, and lose its normative and critical credentials. Although an empirical turn in deliberative democracy was required, a revival of the initial normative turn is now essential to reflect on this evidence from the perspective of the theory's original critical orientation. Specifically, we argue in the remainder of this paper, the extensive focus on "mini-publics" that has accounted for much of deliberative democracy's empirical turn (Elstub 2014) has contributed towards deliberative democracy's drift away from its original normative and critical origins towards a more realpolitik

orientation. Yet, despite this, given their current dominance, mini-publics are still a useful starting point for conceptualising the possibility of a new "normative turn" in deliberative democracy that does not deny their successes, but re-orientates them from this perspective.

Mini-publics and Realpolitik

Thus, it is important to start our discussion of mini-publics by acknowledging the vital contribution they have made to the development of deliberative democracy. Mini-publics have been the democratic innovation from which the majority of empirical evidence on deliberative democracy has derived, which has in fact been crucial for testing and further elaborating the normative claims of deliberative democrats (Setälä and Herne 2014: 57) and thus for challenging the empirical democratic theories. Although these empirical democratic theorists were concerned with democracy at the large scale, whereas mini-publics operate on a small scale with a sample of citizens, Niemeyer (2014: 185) argues that 'in principle, the effect of mini-public deliberation should be scalable in a broad sense…' as 'we are talking about the roughly same population in mass-publics, with the same capabilities as those observed in mini-publics.' In sum, the evidence from mini-publics suggests that under good conditions citizens do have the ability to deliberate effectively together on complex issues, refuting the very basis of competitive elitism. Furthermore, deliberators' preferences become more informed and considered, thereby correcting cognitive errors and ensuring they are logically connected with respect to values, causal connections, and policy preferences. Post-deliberative preferences are also more 'public regarding' (Fishkin 2009; Elstub 2014). The various types of random and stratified selection employed to gather a sample of citizens enhances descriptive representation and reduces the chance of systematic exclusion (Smith 2009: 80; Fishkin 2009: 111), so that the socio-economic biases characteristic of most types of traditional forms of participation are ameliorated. Deliberative mini-publics also reduce the reasons for rational ignorance. Once a citizen has been selected and has agreed to participate in a mini-public, the opportunity to influence the outcome provides an incentive to become informed. Once informed, these citizens are less likely to use heuristic shortcuts to settle on a policy position, which in turn makes their preferences less malleable by elites (Fishkin 2009). Deliberation can make lines of disagreement clearer, so a more suitable choice of aggregation mechanism can be made; and, related to this, deliberative democracy can lead to more single peaked preferences, which reduces the dimension of disagreement and cycling. Finally, public reasoning can reduce strategic participation due to the public nature of the debate (Miller 1993; Dryzek 2000; Dryzek and List 2003; Mackie 2003; List 2007). Arguably, then, mini-publics help overcome the problems for democracy presented by rational choice theory and social choice theory.

Despite these numerous and significant benefits, mini-publics are an institutional ideal-type that very much reflects the third generation of deliberative democracy (Elstub 2010b). The rationale for mini-publics is based on the premise that deliberative democracy is so difficult to achieve in practice that it will not occur naturally, and so the conditions for democracy need to be artificially created. As a result, as 'large […] theoretical questions about the nature of democratic legitimacy are being replaced by a growing interest in the nuts and bolts of deliberative institutions' (Chambers 2009: 329), a more realpolitik approach has become dominant in the third generation of deliberative democracy itself. There is no doubt that barriers to the elements of deliberative democracy occurring 'naturally' in the public sphere are substantial, yet this rationale for using mini-publics risks diluting the theory's earlier strongly normative and critical orientation, as this democratic innovation 'still leaves intact the conventional institutional structures and political meaning of "democracy" (Pateman 2012: 10) that make 'naturally' occurring deliberative democracy unlikely to materialise in the first place. Thus, the recent surge of mini-publics may have popularised the idea of deliberation in practical policy-making, but it has been a mixed blessing for deliberative democracy as a normative theory of democratic legitimacy centred around bottom-up critique.

The Critical Limitations of Mini-Publics

To a certain degree, mini-publics can theoretically provide a space for such bottom-up critique. There are many promising examples of mini-publics that have directly shaped policy-making, exerted pressure on governments to reconsider their official line, and mobilised citizens to engage more actively in political debates (Goodin and Dryzek 2006). However, it might be criticised that in doing so, mini-publics have over-emphasised the aspect of control and meticulous design to the detriment of *democratic* theory (cf. Chambers 2009: 332-4). Indeed, short of realising the critical, empowering momentum inherent in the normative theory of deliberative democracy, mini-publics are 'not a method led by citizens, in a truly bottom-up sense, but one which is extremely useful to policy-makers' (Delap 2001: 39), with citizens themselves perceiving them as 'top-down' processes (Parkinson 2006: 16, 71). Their potential empowering effects are thus counteracted by the top-down planning and control involved with running mini-publics. Therefore, mini-publics have so far tended to be 'elite-driven' (Warren 2009: 6); and have in some cases been used instrumentally and strategically (Dryzek et al. 2009: 284; Dryzek and Tucker 2008: 870). Since it is mostly the organisers of the mini-public that select the 'experts' that participants get to question, the discussion can exclude important information and viewpoints from the start (Davidson and Elstub 2014: 375; Smith and Wales 2000: 58); and their control of the agenda as well as the timing and institutional design potentially allows them to 'manipulate the results' (Tucker 2008: 136; see also O'Flynn and Sood 2014; Ward et al. 2003: 288). Moreover, government authorities have discretion over the extent and

in what ways the mini-public influences formal policy-making, allowing them to "cherry-pick" their preferred recommendations (Smith 2009: 93; see also Parkinson 2006; Elstub 2014; O'Flynn and Sood 2014). Consequently, mini-publics have been criticised as potentially 'becom[ing] useful legitimating devices for an already-decided policy' (Pateman 2012: 9), and a kind of setting to which 'protest and opposition are ill-suited' (Warren 2009: 8). Of course, most mini-publics are well-intended, and only few outright manipulative (though see e.g. Freschi and Mete 2009). Still, to the extent that the artificial, top-down design of democratic institutions can itself distort citizens' views and public discourse, mini-publics can be problematic from an emancipatory perspective *even if run by well-meaning organisers*.

However, from such critiques does not necessarily follow that mini-publics could not, or should not contribute to the practice of deliberative democracy at all. As argued above, the fact that mini-publics can purposively facilitate deliberation still makes them a potentially valuable tool for ensuring fairness and equalising access to political debates, including contestatory and critical ones. Thus, it is not an outright dismissal of purposive deliberative designs that is required, but rather the right *balance* between too much and too little controlled design that is decisive for mini-publics to play a role in the critical dimension of deliberative democracy. In what follows, we open up a discussion on where that crucial balance might lie by analysing different types of mini-publics with regard to their emancipatory and potentially counter-emancipatory features, to determine which are decisive for mini-publics to enable rather than undermine bottom-up critique.

Variations in Critical Capacity Between Types of Mini-Publics

To determine what features contribute to mini-publics' critical or uncritical roles, it is worth considering differences between different types. Caluwaerts and Reuchamps (2013: 27), for instance, demonstrate how 'even the most basic choices' in mini-public design such as number of participants, duration of the process, and the source of funding 'have a profound impact upon the contributions we can expect from deliberative events to the legitimate functioning of democracy as a whole'. Thus, Elstub's (2014) categorisation of several different types of mini-publics – specifically Citizens' Juries (CJ), Consensus Conferences (CC), Planning Cells (PC), Deliberative Polls (DP) and Citizen Assemblies (CA) – according to a range of typical features, including inclusiveness, duration, selection method, activities, and outputs, offers an instructive basis for this discussion. Analysing the differences between these different types from the perspective of bottom-up critique can help uncover what aspects of mini-publics are most relevant in terms of their realising (or undermining) the critical dimension of deliberative democracy.

As we argued above, the way in which mini-publics potentially *contribute* to citizen critique is by opening up an accessible space within which citizens can confront the relevant authorities and stakeholders with opposition to their plans (as opposed to minor sympathetic refinements of a policy or choosing between a narrow set of pre-given options) as well as by generating an impact on policy outcomes on this basis (as opposed to playing a mere advisory role). The way in which mini-publics *undermine* the critical elements of deliberative democracy is by constraining and potentially distorting the public discourse through top-down framing and agenda setting. Mini-publics of different types can be evaluated in their suitability to play a critical and emancipatory role based on these criteria. This does not mean that a specific type of mini-public will always result in a specific level of criticality, or that critique can be generated through the right design. However, it insists that whatever mini-public design *is* applied should explicitly take the critical dimension of the normative theory into account, and shows how common types of mini-publics would be evaluated from this perspective.

Indeed, an analysis of the different types of mini-publics shows that mini-public designs differ in the extent to which they enable (or undermine) emancipation and critique. Elstub (2014: 171-2) discusses the relative differences between the different types of mini-publics with regard to representativeness, citizen control over the process, and decision-making impact, as illustrated in figure 1. Although he uses these as indicators of how democratic a mini-public is, they are particularly relevant for critique as well.

Figure 1. Mini-Publics Scalar Typology

Mini-Public	*Representativeness*	*Citizen Control over Process*	*Decision-making impact*
CJ	Low/ Mod	Mod	Low
CC	Low/ Mod	High	Mod
PC	Mod/High	Mod	Mod
DP	High	Low	Low
CA	Mod/High	Mod	High

(Elstub 2010: 172)

To start with, *citizen control* is an obvious precondition for the degree to which a mini-public can be genuinely critical and emancipatory. The more citizen control is constrained, the less space there is for the participating citizens to express their own concerns and critique, both substantively and in terms of how to express them. Even if a mini-public were seen to fulfil some other ends through its design features, a lack of citizen control indicates that the anti-emancipatory effects of its rigid design outweigh any gains for deliberative democracy. Similarly, *decision-making impact* directly affects the level of criticality and emancipation that a mini-public can facilitate. The less consequential the mini-public in terms of impact, the less effective is any critique that is expressed; to the point that a low or nonexistent impact of an otherwise highly critical mini-public might appear to cement the sponsoring authorities' control over such processes more than representing an instance of challenging them. The last aspect, *representativeness*, is mainly relevant in terms of inclusiveness. Whilst a mini-public does not have to be perfectly representative to be critical, a lack of representativeness would raise concerns about possible distortion and exclusion in the wider process of citizen critique, as the views of certain groups would not be picked up. Moreover, a lack of diversity within mini-publics would threaten their ability to establish the deliberative setting that legitimates claims by testing them on their validity through the need to justify them to a heterogeneous audience (Manin 1987: 352; Benhabib 1996: 71-2). Based on Elstub's analysis (Elstub 2014: 170-2), different types of mini-publics enable citizen control and decision-making impact to different degrees; and whilst all aim for some (varying) degree of representativeness and can hence all be said to achieve at least some level of internal diversity, finer details related to this mean that they achieve inclusiveness and accessibility to different degrees.

Of the different types of mini-publics, DPs allow the least citizen control and decision-making impact. Indeed, rather than opening up a space in which citizens can voice critique, the rationale for DPs typically focuses on changing, almost *correcting*, participants' views: According to their creator, DPs are 'a form of public education' (Fishkin et al. 2000: 665), where '[t]he aim is for [participants] to become better informed and refine their individual views' (Fishkin et al. 2000: 661) in order 'to make the participants more like ideal citizens' (Luskin et al. 2002: 460). The panel of "experts" typically includes (inevitably partisan) politicians (Luskin et al. 2002: 459-60), and citizens are formally invited to take part (rather than self-selecting) (e.g. Luskin et al. 2002: 463) and have no control over the planning and agenda of the mini-public.

In contrast, CCs are moderately consequential in terms of decision-making impact and offer greater citizen control over the process (Elstub 2014: 172). Participants are not determined purely by

random selection, but invited and selected partly based on their interest in the issue to be discussed, allowing for some degree of self-selection whilst still ensuring demographic representativeness. At two preparatory weekends, the citizens take part in the planning of the actual mini-public, selecting the experts they want to question (if only from a pre-defined list) (Smith 2009: 78; Elstub 2014: 168). CCs are designed to create a dialogue between citizens and politicians, and the citizens' final report is sent out to the Members of Parliament (Danish Board of Technology 2006). Indeed, in some cases, CCs have been translated into legislation (Bächtiger and Wegmann 2014: 128).

Compared to CCs, CAs allow less citizen control over the process, but they stand out in their high decision-making impact (Elstub 2014: 172). The most famous CA, the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on electoral reform, engaged citizens over as long as eleven months in learning and deliberation (Smith 2009: 73). Although citizens are not involved in planning the mini-public, CAs still offer greater openness and inclusiveness than other designs in that the participating citizens run hearings themselves in their local constituencies (Warren and Pearse 2008: 11; Elstub 2014: 169), and also invite written and online submissions (Warren and Pearse 2008: 11; Smith 2009: 74). Most importantly, citizens decide on a final recommendation (in the case of the British Columbia CA a specific proposal for electoral reform), which the legislature typically (though not always [see e.g. Smith 2009: 75]) commits to putting to a referendum (Smith 2009: 74).

While DPs, CCs and CAs thus sum up the two ends of the mini-public spectrum with regard to their potential for citizen emancipation and critique, CJs and PCs each lie somewhere in between, with low to moderate control and impact. Focussing therefore on DPs, on the least emancipatory end of the spectrum, as well as CCs and CAs, on the most emancipatory end, which of their features account for their respective roles? To rate mini-publics on the scales of control, impact, and representativeness, Elstub considers, amongst other things, their differences in terms of the methods of selection; the activities the mini-publics comprise; the outputs they produce; and the recipient of the output (Elstub 2014: 170-1).

Selection

Although balanced selection is important to avoid distortion of public opinion and public discourse, allowing a degree of self-selection to mini-publics (whilst still attenuating, as part of the procedures, inequalities and potential exclusion or marginalisation) enhances their potential for critique and emancipation in that those who wish to voice critique can take the initiative to access the mini-public as a channel to this end. Whilst most mini-publics select participants purely on the basis of stratified random sampling, CCs and CAs allow for some level of self-selection (Elstub 2014: 168-70). CCs select specifically for interested citizens, posting advertisements and then selecting randomly from that

wider self-selecting sample (Smith 2009: 81); whereas CAs allow submissions and participation in hearings by otherwise non-sampled citizens (Warren and Pearse 2008). DPs, on the other hand, do not allow self-selection.

Activities

Whereas the smaller mini-publics tend to comprise only an information stage and a deliberation stage, as highlighted above, CAs last longer and include a more thorough process of citizen input, including a consultation stage that goes beyond the participating citizens themselves (Elstub 2014: 169-70; Smith 2009: 74). This is significant for critique in that short and clearly delineated activities constrain the space for critique, for instance by inviting views only on very specific questions and in specific forms. The more flexible and thorough the activities, the more power the participants have to use the mini-public to express their own views in their own ways. DPs, like CCs, include an information stage and a deliberation stage, yet there is less room for small-group discussion in DPs than there is in all other types of mini-publics and the comparatively short time frame and large groups mean that genuine expression is limited and, as a result, potentially skewed (Parkinson 2006: 78; Smith 2009: 85). In contrast, CAs incorporate plenaries as well as small-group discussions, which participants in the British Columbia case felt was important for them to organise their thoughts and express their views in a meaningful way (Smith 2009: 85).

Outputs

Whereas clearly delineated, controlled outputs such as pre-defined survey questionnaires or voting schemes constrain the extent of critique that can be voiced, more open and flexible types of outputs, such as reports and open feedback, are less limiting. DPs are geared solely towards polling citizens' views through surveys. This only allows for a narrow form of expression. Citizens cannot actively formulate their own views, but can only passively respond to the specific closed-ended survey questions (O'Flynn and Sood 2014). In contrast, CCs typically result in a report that sums up citizens' post-deliberative views somewhat more openly (though this process can be significantly constrained, too). CAs stand out among the different types of mini-publics in that they result in a detailed policy recommendation (Elstub 2014: 170). Like a report, a policy recommendation allows for greater bottom-up input, and hence greater potential for critique, than narrower types of outputs such as opinion surveys. However, unlike a general report, a policy recommendation is tied to a very specific question, as well as more strongly subject to considerations of political feasibility and other constraints set by the status quo, which might restrict the degree to which it can effectively give expression to radical viewpoints.

Recipient

Finally, the recipient of the output of the mini-public is significant for its critical and emancipatory potential in that it directly affects decision-making impact. The reason why CCs and CAs have a higher decision-making impact is that their recommendations are directed to formal political bodies. In the case of CCs, the report is addressed to both public opinion (via mass media) and parliament, whereas CAs are addressed to the government and result in a public referendum (Elstub 2014: 170). Unlike mini-publics that are addressed only to the media or the specific sponsoring body, CCs and CAs therefore establish channels to formal authorities that would not otherwise exist; a clear instance of empowerment. In contrast, DPs have so far tended to be addressed only to the sponsor and the media. Although DPs can attract considerable media attention, this can be a dubious publicity channel in that the media is often poor at conveying the details and depth of citizens' argumentation at a mini-public (Parkinson 2006: 183).

Summing up, mini-publics tend to better enable bottom-up critique and emancipation the more accessible they are to those wishing to take part; the more thorough and inclusive their activities are; the more open a form of expression their final output allows; and the more effectively they open up channels to convey views to those with formal decision-making power. Of the most common types of mini-publics, CCs and CAs tend to have the greatest emancipatory potential based on these features, whereas DPs so far seem to have had the least.

However, although features have thus been identified that to some degree *enhance* mini-publics' potential for critical emancipation, all existing types of mini-publics still remain unnecessarily limited in their *total* critical potential. For instance, while a report allows for more meaningful expression of citizens' views than a survey, the report can itself be unnecessarily constrained by the procedures that have been set for the mini-public. Not only can the topic and sub-questions of the report be quite strictly delineated, but also its timing and suggested phrasing can distort what citizens might actually express if given a freer context to do so (see e.g. Smith 2009: 83, 89; Lang 2008; Aasen and Vatn 2013).

Similarly, even if a mini-public formally opens up a channel to government authorities, there is no guarantee that citizens' recommendations will be taken up, or even seriously considered. Even in the case of CCs in Denmark, which typically both involve and directly address members of parliament, an actual impact on political outcomes cannot always be observed (cf. Smith 2009: 92-3). In fact, the direct channel between citizens and politicians can be seen as first and foremost benefiting the politicians, who, apparently, 'are satisfied' with the conferences as they 'provide [them] with information, which they normally do not have' (Andersen and Jæger 1999: 334; see similarly Goodin

and Dryzek 2006: 229-30), yet without any obligation to act on the recommendations. CAs, on the other hand, do typically guarantee decision-making impact through the legislature's commitment to a referendum. Yet, as observed earlier, the potential for genuine empowerment that this implies is undercut in turn by the lack of citizen control over the topics, framing, timing, and procedural conditions of CAs. Indeed, even in the widely celebrated case of the British Columbia CA, the framing and conditions set by the "charge" that outlined the issues for discussion foreclosed from the outset one of the preferred options of the Assembly (Smith 2009: 89); the design of the selection process, by under-representing minorities, may have skewed the outcome of the CA (James 2008; Smith 2009: 82); and the facilitation of the deliberation resulted in an indifferent dismissal of a 'substantive point' made by the citizens related precisely to citizen empowerment (Lang 2007: 57). Thus, even the most consequential types of mini-publics still lend themselves to 'misuse as a "fig leaf" of legitimation for predetermined outcomes' (Niemeyer 2014: 177), whether through selective consideration of citizens' recommendations or through strategic framing prior to the mini-public.

Moreover, where mini-publics allow for some degree of self-selection, this is typically very limited. Of course, pure self-selection would likely fail to establish a setting of equality and thus distort the deliberation (Smith 2009: 21); and mini-publics are deliberately based on the concept of inviting non-partisan citizens to discuss an issue from an unbiased, non-strategic perspective (Dryzek and Tucker 2008: 864; Goodin and Dryzek 2006: 231). Yet limiting deliberative institutions to such non-partisan fora again allows for potential misuse of mini-publics to the authorities' advantage, notably precisely if the mini-public has direct decision-making impact. For instance, a mini-public in Italy, of a more unique 'Electronic Town Meeting' design, was allegedly used to distract the political discourse from existing demands from citizen groups, who were actively excluded from the deliberation (Freschi and Mete 2009). In such cases, it is precisely if the mini-public is celebrated as the key reference point for the views of "the public", or even accorded considerable political impact, that previous critical voices are effectively silenced. Once more, this shows that for the empowerment potential of consequential mini-publics not to be undercut by their other features, citizens must have some level of control over the use of mini-publics, including some sorts of channels to raise issues for debate bottom-up.

Critical Mini-Publics: Emancipatory Instruments for Citizens

Having outlined the limitations of mini-publics to deliver the required critical elements of deliberative democracy, we now turn to propose how they could be reformed to enhance their critical and emancipatory potential in line with the normative (re-)turn in deliberative democracy that we are calling for. Based on the above considerations, how can mini-publics achieve the right balance

between controlled design and a more open, critical role? In the following, we propose two possible normative answers to this question. *Firstly*, the existing typical mini-public designs could be amended to better incorporate bottom-up citizen initiative. Yet, inasmuch as it is such a "design approach" itself that entails (yet more) top-down planning and control, proposing an even more refined "design solution" does not suffice for a coherent answer. In addition, we argue, the ongoing evolution and innovation of the practice of mini-publics must itself become subject to deliberative democratisation (as opposed to formal oversight). We thus propose, *secondly*, that conceptualising mini-publics as part of a networked deliberative system might achieve just this.

(Re-modelled) Mini-Publics as Channels for Voicing Critique

To start with, mini-publics might be re-modelled to open up space for critique and avoid any unnecessary control. One in-built (yet to some degree necessary) limitation in this regard is that mini-publics specifically exclude partisans, i.e. those with strong, pre-held critical views. However, expressions of critique do not necessarily have to be conceptualised as part of the actual mini-public deliberation itself. Used in a slightly different way, mini-publics could be one step of *a wider process of voicing critique*. Whilst not in themselves including partisans, they could be *initiated* by partisans, as a criterion for the partisans' injecting their critique into the formal political arena. Recognising their biased and rigid position, partisans would subject their critique to a more balanced and unbiased mini-public that checks it, but also translates those elements of the initial critique that pass the deliberative test – which might otherwise have remained entirely excluded – into legitimate concerns to be taken up by the formal political process.

Such a use of mini-publics goes beyond the existing typical use in that the mini-public would *originate* in an instance of bottom-up critique, rather than top-down control over the political process. As such, they could constitute an instrument not for authorities, but, with adequate support and information available, for citizens to use in a bottom-up momentum towards democratisation. For example, Gastil and Richards (2013: 266) propose new deliberative designs aimed at infusing democratic deliberation into the initiation stage of policy processes . According to their framework, conventional CAs could still be used to draft specific policy proposals to be put to a referendum, but there is no reason why the stages in the overall policy-making process prior to and following this specific stage should not be deliberative democratic as well. Thus, a CA could be one step in a wider process whose origin equally lies in bottom-up citizen deliberation. Gastil and Richards (2013: 266) propose a so-called 'Priority Conference', called for by a petition, to deliberatively determine the issues that citizens demand government action on. Such a petition may well be driven by partisan interest groups, thus representing an expression of bottom-up critique, but the Priority Conference

then acts as a deliberative filter of such partisan views by submitting them to a process that subjects them to critical, reasoned reflection from a publicly oriented perspective. Partisans may well pursue this approach if a mini-public had the potential to influence policy, particularly if they believed they had strong 'publicly orientated' arguments and reasons that could 'win-out' in a mini-public. So long as the ensuing mini-public also incorporates as high a degree of citizen control as possible, the initial biased petition could thus be turned into a publicly justifiable, common-good-oriented policy proposal in a way that does not amount to a top-down, authoritative suppression or distortion of citizen critique.

This brings us to the next point. Moving the initiation of mini-publics into the realm of citizen control is a significant starting point. Yet, as we have seen, granting citizen control in one area whilst instantly undercutting it again through control of other areas still risks undermining citizen empowerment more than advancing it. Thus, the actual mini-publics would need to adopt those features that we have established as essential for bottom-up critique. Following the example of CCs, citizens should be part of the planning committee, selecting the experts to question. Beyond existing CCs, however, citizen oversight should extend, in one way or other, also to the timing and structure of the deliberation as well as the final report; and citizens should be unbound to raise and discuss additional questions they consider relevant, including on the charge itself (cf. Ward et al. 2003: 289; Tucker 2008: 144-5). Following the example of CAs, moreover, the mini-publics should be connected to some procedure that guarantees them political impact without overriding other democratic norms. This does not necessarily have to be a referendum with a decisive and final impact. A better, as itself more deliberative, way to guarantee uptake in the formal political process would be a legal commitment to a transparent, public response to the citizens' recommendations and demands, coupled with a range of accessible channels for citizens to hold politicians accountable for their response, informing and inspiring new deliberative processes growing from that "seed bed". Ward et al. (2003), for instance, propose the concept of "open citizens' juries" that are seen as part of a wider and more open-ended political process. For this, mini-publics must be open and accessible, granting all citizens the right to respond and bear witness (Ward et al. 2003: 290). Yet, beyond such further-going direct involvement in the specific mini-public itself, a public response could also take other forms, including sparking altogether new discourses and motivating all sorts of deliberative follow-up events and processes. In these ways, rather than as isolated instances of final decision-making, mini-publics could be used for further 'deliberation-making' (Niemeyer 2014: 179) in a wider sense, 'nudg[ing] politics in a more deliberative direction' more generally (Niemeyer 2014: 195).

A re-modelling of mini-publics in this way could readjust the practical dimension of deliberative democracy back into line with the critical orientation of the early normative theory. Yet, by

establishing a new type of mini-public as a new formal procedure might itself require significant oversight and planning, thus doing little to move away from top-down planning and control. A better conceptualisation of such processes might be found in the recent shift in deliberative theory towards consideration of deliberative *systems* as opposed to separate deliberative events (Mansbridge 1999; Parkinson 2006; Mansbridge et al. 2012). In a dynamic, interlocking system of different deliberative sites and actors, we argue in the next section, the use of mini-publics could be overseen *by such deliberative processes* rather than by academic or political elites.

Mini-Publics as Elements within a Wider Deliberative System

Indeed, conceptualising 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. The discussion that this opens up, around what mini-publics can and ought to contribute and which of their shortcomings may need to be counter-balanced elsewhere, naturally focuses the debate on a *critical* evaluation of mini-publics, which has the potential to democratise the evolving practice of mini-publics.

A useful systems perspective in this regard is Knops's (2014) account of deliberative systems as networks of inevitably partial instances of deliberation, which respond to and evaluate *each other*, and reinforce the normative force of the demanding deliberative norms in the process. As part of a dynamic network of deliberative processes of different kinds, mini-publics, provided they are fully transparent, could thus be naturally overseen *by other deliberative processes*. They would continue to be used as instruments in democratic policy-making processes, but as critical evaluation of their nature and practice would continually uncover their limitations, their problematic side-effects would be disarmed, and any narrow authoritative (mis)use subverted. As a consequence, it would be bottom-up public oversight that pushes the practice of mini-publics to evolve towards more democratic directions.

Such a perspective demands not just a certain design, but sees the "success" of mini-publics as dependent on their embeddedness in the right kind of context. Specifically, critical mini-publics as instruments for citizens would demand an ethos of critical thinking and wide-spread public engagement with political issues, as well as the plethora of communicative and political channels that allow for an active public sphere, including accessible and independent media, political education, participatory platforms, and greater substantive equality. While mini-publics can, in a design geared towards 'deliberation-making' rather than decision-making, potentially themselves contribute to such a context, their realising the critical dimension of deliberative democracy

ultimately hinges on the existence of a much wider and more dynamic system of multiple interlocking instances of democratic emancipation.

Even then, of course, the evaluative processes Knops envisions might not always materialise; and their preconditions, most notably a high degree of transparency and the existence of a multitude of effective participatory and deliberative channels, are in reality easily contradicted and counteracted by existing governance practices. Nevertheless, we think this perspective is at least a promising starting point for a normative re-conceptualisation of mini-publics in that it implies an approach to realising deliberative democracy that is more democratic in itself; one that demands measures that generally create new room for democratisation to evolve bottom-up, rather than even more fine-grained, carefully engineered, and thus inevitably rigid institutions.

Conclusion

Over the last fifty years, democratic theory has progressed through various realpolitik and normative cycles. The arrival of deliberative democracy produced a significant momentum towards the latter, but this democratic theory has itself undergone its own discrete normative/realpolitik cycles, and the considerable focus afforded to mini-publics has played a prominent role in dragging deliberative democracy in a realpolitik direction. Although mini-publics successfully realise some aspects of the normative theory, they have increasingly side-lined others, most notably the critical core of early deliberative democratic theory.

This need not remain so, however. Despite their in-built limitations, mini-publics can also be part of the solution, providing 'normative and empirical deliberative democrats work closely together' (O'Flynn and Sood 2014: 55). Once awareness exists on the potential side-effects of mini-publics, they can be re-directed to realise a more democratic balance between their strategic use to specific ends and their playing a more emancipatory, bottom-up role. We have sketched a two-pronged answer to this challenge. Firstly, mini-publics can be evaluated and re-designed towards greater citizen control over the process, more open types of outputs, and more direct channels to formal decision-making. Secondly, the practice of mini-publics ought itself to be subjected to bottom-up deliberative processes. By conceptualising mini-publics as part of an overarching network of deliberative exchanges that evaluate and respond to one another, the emphasis shifts towards the establishment of a generally more active, transparent, and democratic system, whose ongoing evolution need not depend on top-down steering and control.

With such a prospect, our paper ends on an optimistic note. The systemic perspective that promises to subject future experimentation with mini-publics to a dynamic democratic momentum marks nothing less than the cutting edge of recent deliberative democratic theory. As such, it shows that deliberative democracy need not become *either* "realpolitik" *or* "normative". Rather, its strength lies precisely in its in-built ability to navigate both in an unceasing oscillation between normative and practical impulses. Inasmuch as its current stage of development illustrates that deliberative democracy does still remain a '[t]heory [that] challenges political reality' and that is 'critical, not acquiescent' (Thompson 2008: 499) even in the face of a simultaneous 'empirical explosion' (Dryzek 2010: 9) of more practice-oriented experiments with deliberation, we can safely conclude that deliberative democracy is rightly 'the most successful' democratic theory yet (Pateman 2012: 7), bound to continue invigorating democracy in *both* theory and political practice.

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