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Climate communications and deliberative approaches

The impacts of the climate crisis, and the urgency, depth, and breadth of the socio-economic changes required to avoid ever more severe and widespread consequences, are becoming increasingly apparent. However, no democratic nation has yet implemented a plan for emissions reduction that is compatible with the 2015 Paris Agreement (UNEP, 2023). Emissions reductions to date have largely relied on technology-driven supply-side measures that have not had significant impacts on the everyday lives of citizens. From this point on, more significant changes to everyday practices – for example, in terms of transport, domestic energy use, diet, and patterns of work and consumption – will be necessary to reach national climate targets (Climate Change Committee, 2023).

Public discussion about the trajectories of change and the values and principles behind them is therefore essential. However, even in a country which has had a history of climate leadership such as the UK, the government’s statutory advisers note that “an overarching strategy for public engagement and communications is lacking” (Climate Change Committee, 2023: 28). More and better engagement is necessary to deliver a social mandate for increasingly radical changes to policy and practice and to drive behavioural change (Howarth et al., 2020; Smith, 2021). This need is exacerbated by increasingly low levels of trust and confidence in governments and democratic institutions internationally (Foa et al., 2020). There is therefore growing interest in finding ways to complement the existing focus on expert-driven and technocratic solutions to emissions reduction with greater public engagement (Clarke et al., 2020).

At the heart of increased public engagement is communication. However, much communication regarding the climate crisis (and many other issues on which states or other powerful actors communicate with publics) is distinguished by two notable characteristics:

1. Communication is often only in one direction (from state to citizen or vice versa) (Ainscough and Willis, 2022). This includes informational approaches (e.g., to drive behavioural change or to increase social acceptance of policy decisions); consultative approaches both informal (e.g., surveys, polls, focus groups) and formal (e.g., public consultations); and autonomous citizen-led attempts to influence policy and decisions (e.g., protests and petitions).

2. Communication is viewed as a means to remedy a knowledge or information deficit in the public (Wynne, 2006). Publics are conceived as lacking the knowledge, understanding, willingness, or capacity to adopt the “right” (or even coherent) attitudes or actions (Barnett et al., 2012; Brennan, 2017). Under this conception, publics, therefore, require educating, nudging, cajoling, incentivising, or coercing into the correct course. UK studies have suggested that politicians consistently underestimate public support for action on climate (Climate Barometer, 2023; Westlake and Willis, 2023). “Lay” publics are often effectively marginalised or disregarded in consultative approaches in favour of well-resourced stakeholders or existing policy preferences, often in conjunction with a public deficit framing (Rydin et al., 2015).

There is an increasing awareness of the need for more dialogic and inclusive communications between publics and policy actors on climate (Badullovich, 2023). This can be seen as exploring and developing the “social mandate” for climate action: engaging people as active citizens rather than passive recipients of government action (Howarth et al., 2020). One set of attempts to meet this need takes the form of a range of democratic innovations – institutions and initiatives designed to increase and deepen public participation in democratic decision-making (Smith, 2009). Below, the principles of such approaches are considered, before a review of practice, including the flourishing of Climate Assemblies in recent years.

Deliberative democratic principles

Popular accounts of democracy often centre around electoral competition: the formal processes by which political elites gain and maintain power. In this account, the primary role of citizens is to take part in elections, expressing their preferences through choosing periodically between the offerings of different political parties (Przeworski, 2010; Schumpeter, 1972). This is a “thin” conception of democracy – one in which citizen participation is focused simply on voting.

In contrast, in the “thick” conception of democracy put forward by deliberative democrats, citizens are empowered, in various ways, to participate in, and influence, outcomes (Bächtiger et al., 2018b). In this thick conception, routes to democratic engagement may come through civil society, via media and educational organisations, and through informal discussion and organising – as well as through formal routes, including deliberative mini-publics (described below) and elections.

Deliberative democratic theories have evolved from various roots, associated particularly with Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls in the 1980s, and which continue to branch out in different directions today (Floridia, 2018). However, all rely on the same basic foundations: the idea of inclusive groups of well-informed people coming together in a spirit of mutual respect, recognition, and equality to discuss shared issues that affect them and jointly reach decisions about ways forward. They conceive of democracy as a deliberative *process*, in which citizens increase their understanding of matters of common concern, and debate and reflect on diverse interests, values, preferences and reasons, taking account of the complexity and compromises needed to address public issues. This deliberation is required to take place under certain conditions to ensure its quality, that are “egalitarian, uncoerced, competent, and free from delusion, deception, power, and strategy” (Dryzek, 1990: 202). These conditions represent a communicative ideal.

If this is the ideal, how can it be realised? There are two broad ways of answering this, which are not mutually exclusive, but involve differences of emphasis. Firstly, through setting up a controlled space in which deliberative ideals can be prioritised through careful curation, embodied in “deliberative mini-publics” (DMPs) such as citizens’ assemblies, citizens’ juries, and consensus conferences (Curato and Farrell, 2021). This has been the focus of much work by deliberative

democrats: academics and practitioners working together to theorise, test, and refine the communicative conditions within DMPs, in order to design processes that could improve the quality of deliberation and, by extension, the quality of outputs (Elstub et al., 2016). DMPs, nevertheless, face an intractable problem: however perfect the conditions for deliberation within the controlled space, their success in improving overall democratic performance rests on the wider public sphere, which determines whether and how DMPs and their conclusions are used.

As a result, more recently, deliberative democrats have turned to a second way of answering this question, shifting their focus beyond individual processes to the idea of deliberative democratic systems (Parkinson and Mansbridge, 2012). This provides a way of thinking about how a wide range of people and perspectives interact across the whole democratic system, at local, national, and even global levels, and the capacities and functions that such systems require to be considered deliberatively democratic. It recognises that no one forum is sufficient to provide deliberative legitimacy to democratic decision-making. However, such legitimacy can be achieved if the system as a whole reflects the communicative goals of “mutual respect, consistency, acknowledgement, open mindedness, and moral economy” (Mansbridge, 1999: 224).

The system consists of a wide diversity of sites, moments, and interactions, which can complement, supplement, and correct the failings of each other (Mansbridge et al., 2012). These interactions occur within and between a wide variety of public spaces (where publics, policymakers, and other stakeholders interact) and empowered spaces (where collective decisions are made) that constitute the system as a whole (Dryzek, 2009). So, while not all individual elements or institutions of the system may meet, or even approach, the communicative ideals of deliberation, depending on the nature and quality of the sum of these diverse interactions, the system as a whole may. Efforts can be made to change cultures, institutions, and practices in various sites across society in order to prioritise and nurture deliberative ideals. This approach has been applied specifically to the system of global climate governance to analyse its failures and opportunities for improvement (Stevenson and Dryzek, 2014).

Deliberation in practice: National Climate Assembly (France)

Title: La Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat (Citizens' Convention on Climate)

Commissioning body: President/Prime Minister

Brief description: This was one of the first national Climate Assemblies, held in 2019/20. It brought together 150 participants, selected through sortition, over seven sessions (some online during the COVID 19 pandemic). It was overseen by a Governance Committee. The Convention members were tasked with defining measures to achieve at least 40% emissions reductions by 2030, “in a spirit of social justice.” The Convention discussed overall aims and broke these down into themes including housing; transport; food; and consumption. Recommendations were developed across all of these areas, and then voted on.

Outcome: The Convention made 149 recommendations, which were considered by the French Parliament. President Macron had promised to take forward the recommendations “unfiltered” (sans filtre). A government website tracks progress and claims that 101 of the recommendations have been fully or partially implemented, but the Convention members dispute this. Some members have remained active, tracking progress and holding the government to account.

Further information: <https://www.conventioncitoyennepourleclimat.fr/> / <https://www.knoca.eu/national-assemblies/french-citizens-convention-on-the-climate>

Deliberative practices

Deliberation in practice: National Climate Assembly (Maldives)

Title: Climate Assembly Maldives

Commissioning body: Ecocare, a civil society organisation

Brief description: One of the first formal climate assemblies in the Global South, held in three regions of the Maldives, the capital Malé, Addu City and Haa Alif Atoll with around fifty participants in each region. The process is run by Ecocare, with input from the National Democratic Institute and an expert advisory group. In the three-day sessions, randomly selected citizens have interacted with specialists and deliberated and voted on recommendations.

Outcome: Findings will be used in developing a National Citizens' Manifesto on Environment and Climate Actions. As it is run by a civil society organisation, the route to policy or governance change is not direct, but via civil society.

Further information: <https://www.climateassembly.mv/home>

As discussed above, DMPs provide a controlled space within which to foreground deliberative ideals. As such, they can generate meaningful insights into what public views on specific issues would be, if publics had adequate, appropriate evidence and the time to deliberate, under relatively ideal communicative conditions, with people from different backgrounds and perspectives. They differ in this from other social research techniques such as surveys, polls, or focus groups, which seek to capture unmediated snapshots of public views.

The rising interest in DMPs in recent decades, from the hyper-local to the supranational, has been described as a “deliberative wave” (OECD, 2020). The OECD (*ibid.*) reviewed 282 processes from 18 member countries since 1986, noting a major surge since 2010. Issues most commonly addressed at local and regional levels were urban planning, strategic planning, and health, with environment and technology policy issues (including climate) more common at national and international levels. A separate review of DMPs – covering contexts as diverse as electoral reform in British Columbia, constitutional reform in Iceland and Ireland, energy generation in New South Wales, and the acceptability of specific kinds of medical research in the UK – drew out specific lessons for the use of DMPs in the development of climate policy (Ainscough and Willis, 2022). They identified a set of rationales for the use of deliberative approaches on climate, and factors to consider when undertaking such approaches, along with specific suggested actions for governments.

As deliberative systems theorists make clear, DMPs do not necessarily lead to more deliberative systems. Although these limitations are acknowledged, DMPs remain the most widespread and celebrated deliberative democratic innovation and enjoy increasing popularity, particularly in Europe and North America. While they take a range of different forms (Paulis et al., 2021; Ryan and Smith, 2014), they all typically involve four core elements:

1. **Representativeness** of a larger (geographical or thematic) public, usually achieved by selecting participants at random from that population, which facilitates the inclusion of people who are often unheard and under-represented in self-selecting engagement and formal decision-making.

Deliberation in practice: Policy-specific Citizens' Panel

Title: Addressing emissions from owner-occupied homes: A citizens' panel on home energy decarbonisation

Commissioning body: Lancaster University and the Climate Change Committee

Brief description: The Climate Change Committee (CCC) is the UK's statutory advisor on climate change. This project was a collaboration between the CCC and Lancaster University, exploring the potential for citizen deliberation on specific aspects of policy development. The CCC identified emissions from owner-occupied homes as a challenging area where existing policy is inadequate. 24 panel members were selected through sortition, to be representative of the UK as a whole, and met online and in person for 25 hours in total. They learned about the topic and then worked with CCC analysts to co-design solutions they thought would work for homeowners.

Outcome: The Panel produced a recommendation for a package of measures to support decarbonisation in the home, built around the "homeowner lifecycle" of buying, renovating, and living in a home. They stressed the need for support at each phase in this lifecycle, and for an overall enabling environment including government leadership and regulation, and impartial advice and information. The Panel also enabled the CCC to test deliberative approaches to the formulation of policy advice, and they have gone on to commission their own Deliberative Panel to contribute to the development of policy advice to the UK government.

Further information: <https://climatecitizens.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Lancaster-University.-2022.-Addressing-emission-from-owner-occupied-homes.pdf>

2. **Learning**, by participants engaging with experts and social commentators to consider evidence on the topic at hand and ask questions. Participants often have the opportunity to request particular speakers or evidence topics, and an independent advisory group may guide the selection of speakers and evidence to ensure plurality and balance.
3. **Deliberation**, which is structured and usually led by trained facilitators. This enables participants to exchange, reflect on, and develop their views and knowledge, based on their interactions with experts, commentators, and each other.
4. **Producing conclusions**, decisions, or recommendations. These may reflect consensus (collective support), consent (active support from some and acceptance by others), and/or division (identifying and clarifying the spectrum of views and degrees of support, opposition, and conflict). These conclusions are then typically passed on to public authorities with responsibility for action in the topic area (Ainscough and Willis, 2022).

Since 2018, there has been an upsurge in climate-focused DMPs. Thirteen national-level climate assemblies had been conducted in Europe by the end of 2023, in Denmark, France, Germany, Scotland, the UK, Spain, Poland, Austria, Luxembourg, Finland, Jersey, and with two in Ireland (KNOCA, 2022). Beyond the national assemblies, the Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies (KNOCA) have recorded at least 49 local or regional climate DMPs in the UK, 92 across the rest of Europe (with a concentration in Western Europe), and just 8 outside of Europe, in Japan, Brazil, the Maldives, the United States, and Canada (KNOCA, 2024).

The world's first "global assembly" on climate, initiated by civil society organisations, was also conducted in 2021, engaging citizens from 110 countries (Global Assembly, 2021). The Declaration developed from their deliberations was presented on the first day of COP26 at a dedicated event and was described by the UN Secretary-General as "a practical way of showing how we can accelerate action through solidarity and people power" (Global Assembly, 2021, unpaginated). The UN has an ambition to create a permanent citizens' assembly with over 10 million participants annually and which is recognised by over 50% of the global population, to improve our collective ability to tackle global issues such as climate change, health, and inequality (Global Assembly, 2021).

However, despite the increasing momentum of climate-related DMPs, they are still far from a mainstream element in climate policymaking and communication. Their degree of integration with and impact on political institutions, public debate, and civil society is highly varied (Boswell et al., 2023). In the following two sections, we discuss the impacts and benefits claimed for DMPs and other democratic innovations, and some empirical observations about their limitations.

Deliberation in practice: Local Climate Assembly (Barcelona)

Title: Assemblea Ciutadana Barcelona Pel Clima (Barcelona Citizens' Assembly on Climate)

Commissioning body: Barcelona City Council

Brief description: 100 citizens between the ages of 16 and 75, randomly selected to be representative of the city's population socially and geographically, met 12 times between September 2022 and January 2023. Meetings were in-person, with additional spaces for engagement on digital participation platform decidim.barcelona (including open access spaces for the wider population, and a private space for assembly members). They were tasked with considering how the city could respond to the climate emergency within its powers as a municipal authority, specifically without increasing social inequalities. It was overseen by an advisory board consisting of political, expert, bureaucratic, civil society and citizen representatives.

Outcome: The Assembly developed 36 proposals, focused on energy, mobility, and consumption and waste. Recommendations were applicable at various scales, including city, district and neighbourhood level. Following scrutiny by a technical team from the council, 34 of these were accepted in full, in part, or with modifications. The council committed to explaining which recommendations were accepted, which were not, and the rationale behind these decisions. However, the extent to which the recommendations are taken forward lies with a new city administration of a different political makeup.

Further information: <https://www.buergerrat.de/en/news/climate-assembly-with-online-participation/> / <https://cooperativecity.org/2024/04/22/barcelona-climate-assembly>

Deliberative potential

Many claims are made for the contributions that deliberative approaches can make to the democratic process and to communicative action between citizens, states, and other stakeholders, both in general and with particular regard to the climate crisis. These include substantive, procedural, ethical, and instrumental claims.

Substantively, it is argued that they enable better, more robust policy to be made (Curato and Farrell, 2021). Publics can identify problems, issues, and solutions that experts may miss by

drawing on their differently situated knowledges, perspectives, and experiences. Their disconnection from electoral politics, their inclusion of people from across the political spectrum, and a deliberate orientation towards the longer term facilitates the consideration of issues on a longer timescale than the electoral cycle (Willis et al., 2022). This should enable political deadlocks to be broken and political action that would otherwise be delayed, avoided, or compromised to be driven forward: all national climate assemblies that have produced their own recommendations have advocated stronger climate action than their national governments are pursuing (Smith, 2023). It allows participants to consider interactions between policy choices in different areas (e.g., land use, nutrition, energy supply, and mobility) in ways that are rarely practical in non-deliberative social research methods such as polls or focus groups (Ainscough and Willis, 2022).

Procedurally, they facilitate a more discerning use of the kinds of technical evidence and economic analysis that tend to dominate public decision-making at the expense of social intelligence. They provide both a more socially informed perspective on the issues at stake and insights into public understanding of and responses to technical and economic evidence and analysis (Willis et al., 2022). They enable informed public views to be obtained on the governance of new technologies and other innovations that, due to their novelty, currently have low levels of public awareness or understanding, or about which views and preferences are not well-formed (Cobb, 2011). They can ameliorate the domination of policymaking processes by incumbent vested interests and well-resourced stakeholders (Lockwood et al., 2019), strengthening the integrity of the policymaking process.

Ethically, they are argued to enable voices from across the population who will be affected by policy decisions to inform those decisions (Curato and Farrell, 2021). This not only empowers citizens to shape public decisions that will affect their lives, but also counteracts the biases and exclusions that tend to be built into conventional policymaking processes. They therefore doubly enhance the representativeness of decision-making processes: firstly, by empowering affected citizens and, secondly, by ensuring the inclusiveness of that citizen representation. They signal respect for public views, experiences, and capabilities, countering prevailing conceptualisations of publics as in some respect in deficit, and of institutions as remote or corrupt (Jacquet, 2019).

Instrumentally, they are considered to increase public trust and confidence in government policy and public institutions, boosting social acceptance and perceived legitimacy for policy decisions and the likelihood of achieving behavioural changes (Bächtiger et al., 2018a). They enable the testing of policy proposals in controlled circumstances, deepening understanding of which aspects, framings, or presentations of policy choices might be controversial and how this might be managed. They build citizen capacity to engage in policy processes and understanding of important issues (Niemeyer, 2013). Of increasing importance, they are also argued to provide a countervailing influence to the rise of disinformation and polarisation that emanates from populist culture wars (Setälä et al., 2023).

Deliberative limitations

While their advocates thus claim considerable benefits for deliberative approaches, significant limitations in practice have been identified through empirical study. For a long time, the focus on the internal characteristics of DMPs meant that very limited attention was given to their empirical effects on influencing policy (Elstub et al., 2016). These effects have often proven to be quite limited. Most obviously, their powers tend to be advisory (Paulis et al., 2021), meaning their commissioning authorities retain the right to accept, amend, reject, or simply ignore their

recommendations. There is evidence of public authorities cherry-picking recommendations that align with their existing agendas and priorities (Font et al., 2018), and primarily taking forward recommendations that already enjoyed support from the incumbent administration (Vrydagh and Caluwaerts, 2023). The extent of this limitation is exemplified by the perceived inadequacies of the French government's response to the recommendations of the Citizens' Climate Convention in France, which media outlets described as "a concrete betrayal" (Minsart and Jacquet, 2023: 283).

One reason for the disappointing follow-up of DMPs may be that the promises made for them were, in hindsight, unattainable. Lewis et al. (2023) highlight the "convenient fiction" used by advocates of DMPs, including commissioning bodies such as parliaments or local governments, that proposals emerging from DMPs can be, and will be, adopted wholesale. In practice, however, they are subject to power dynamics and limitations to institutional capacities.

Even where there has been substantial political will invested in delivering DMPs, there may well be political, practical, bureaucratic, or institutional barriers preventing the translation of recommendations into concrete action – for example, recommendations may be beyond the remit or powers of the commissioning authority, or they may be too broad or vague to drive specific implementation (Shepherd, 2024). This is exacerbated by DMPs generally being treated as an external input into the decision-making processes of representative democracy, rather than being institutionally integrated into them (Setälä, 2017). Furthermore, there is evidence that DMPs may be most impactful when they focus on a relatively narrow or limited set of issues, limiting their capacity to address broader systemic or interrelated issues (Wells et al., 2021).

Despite their promise to deepen and widen democracy, even when embedded in policy processes with political backing, and where there is evidence that they do affect policy outcomes, they can fail to shift existing power relations or challenge elite interests (Johnson, 2015). On climate questions, this is particularly problematic given that high-carbon economic interests, such as oil majors and airlines, have disproportionate influence in political circles (Franta, 2022; Lamb et al., 2020). While DMPs may play a role in rebalancing political debate by providing a louder voice for citizens, they have not yet provided enough of a counterbalance to these incumbent voices. There is also evidence that in some cases they are used in a highly instrumental fashion, to enhance the governability of citizens in situations where public resistance on particular policy issues is anticipated (Kübler et al., 2020).

Turning to an evaluation of the DMPs themselves, despite the strenuous efforts made to design communicative conditions approaching the deliberative ideal, in reality power imbalances may persist within DMPs. For example, due to cultural or social capital or status, access to resources or information, and persuasive skills. Also, they can be open to manipulation either by participants or external influences (Sanders, 1997).

The claims made for the positive impacts of DMPs on building trust and capacity both in their participants and society more widely, while solidly theoretically grounded and with some empirical support, require more research to support them. While there is evidence for such effects on participants in the short term, it is less clear whether these effects are lasting, and to what degree they can be considered to scale up to the wider public (van der Does and Jacquet, 2023). There is also emerging evidence that trust in the legitimacy of democratic innovations varies across society, with responses ranging from engaged through indifferent to sceptical and outright critical (Rojon and Pilet, 2021), and that more polarized citizens are likely to view DMPs as less legitimate than more moderate citizens (van Dijk et al., 2023).

Alternative theoretical perspectives

Alternative theoretical perspectives: key features

Participatory democracy

- Citizens should be directly involved in decision-making.
- Total numbers of citizens participating should be increased as far as practicable.
- Diverse perspectives, especially marginalised groups, should be meaningfully included.

Agonism

- Diverse and incompatible values, beliefs, and interests are inevitable in society.
- Critical engagement and contestation between differences enrich democratic discourse.
- Conflict is productive and can generate new insights and possibilities.

Relational approaches

- Participation is performative, bringing issues and publics into being.
- This process is both social and material, combining subjects and objects.
- There are always multiple valid understandings of any given situation.

DMPs such as climate assemblies have been the major focus of recent democratic innovations on climate. However, there is a growing recognition that the deliberative democracy tradition is not the only perspective from which we need to view such innovations, especially on major issues such as climate (Asenbaum, 2022; Smith, 2019). The key features of some alternative theoretical perspectives from which democratic innovations have been considered are summarised in the text box.

From a participatory perspective, it has been argued that the emphasis on one-off designed forums such as DMPs is both too narrowly focused, and artificially removed from real life. Participatory democracy theorists argue for more of a focus on critique of, intervention, and organic emergences in already existing institutions (Dzur, 2019). “Institutions” can be considered both formal structures, such as governments, workplaces, and educational establishments, and also the sets of rules, practices, norms, conventions, and shared understandings that shape our interpretations and actions (Schmidt, 2008). Advocates of participatory democracy tend to prioritise increasing numbers of participants (ideally to include all citizens) and the breadth of participation, especially from under-represented groups, over particular modes or depth of participation.

There have been recent calls to combine the theory and practice of participatory and deliberative democracy to strengthen and extend both (Elstub, 2018). This wider focus on the democratization of everyday life can be combined with deliberative systems thinking to better understand the range of citizen engagements with public issues, and the ways in which they might communicate and connect with each other, with wider society, and with policymakers. Building on this perspective, and taking a relational and systemic approach, Chilvers and colleagues explore the diversity

of and relations between a wide variety of public engagements with climate change and energy system transitions in an “ecology of participation” (Chilvers et al., 2018, 2021).

From an agonistic perspective, it has been argued that an excessive focus on arriving at, or at least moving towards consensus prevents the emergence and effective articulation of divergent viewpoints. In other words, it represses the plurality and conflict of interests, morals, and values that lie at the heart of political communication (Mouffe, 1999). An emphasis on rational deliberation and reasoning has been criticised as excluding styles of communication that may be more characteristic of marginalised or disadvantaged groups, further advantaging already privileged sections of society (Sanders, 1997). Connected to this, it is argued that this also marginalises impassioned or emotional communication, on issues which people do care deeply about (Mouffe, 2000). However, deliberative theorists respond that these arguments are either misplaced, or have been addressed over time as deliberative theory and practice has evolved (Bächtiger et al., 2018a; Curato et al., 2017).

A further perspective on democratic innovations emerges from relational approaches such as Science and Technology Studies, assemblage theory, and practice theory. These perspectives emphasise that publics, public issues, and modes of participation and engagement do not just exist “out there” but are produced through the very act of participation (Felt and Fochler, 2010). Rather than waiting “out there” to be engaged, publics are called into being in particular forms by the specific circumstances in which they encounter public issues (Marres, 2012). The carefully structured, expert-led processes that dominate deliberative approaches, and DMPs in particular, are therefore in important ways performative – they do not just convene but co-create the publics and issues that they involve (Lezaun and Soneryd, 2007). The ways in which the issues and participants are framed and enacted through concrete practices necessarily shape participants’ understanding not just of the issues, but of themselves and of the process itself. Only certain types of knowledge and belief, certain ways of participating and communicating, certain types of reasoning, certain ways of being a citizen are performed as being legitimate (Welsh and Wynne, 2013). Rather than opening up issues to diverse public meanings, they can (albeit inadvertently) close down debate where only expert framings are considered valid, reasonable, or credible (Blue, 2015).

On this account, the key role of the experts and authorities commissioning and leading the process, and their role in (consciously or otherwise) determining the framing within which communication is legitimised requires far greater scrutiny. It is also argued that far greater attention needs to be paid to the physical materiality, and the unpredictability, spontaneity, and dynamism inherent in democratic innovations and their interactions with wider society, which cannot be wholly accounted for either in the careful design of individual initiatives (Asenbaum, 2023) or in understanding society as a whole as a rigid, hierarchical system (Mendonça et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Practical advice on democratic innovations

KNOCA: European network for sharing best practice on the design and implementation of climate assemblies. <https://www.knoea.eu/>

Participedia: Global network and crowdsourcing platform for public participation and democratic innovations. <https://participedia.net/>

EU Competence Centre on Participatory & Deliberative Democracy: Experiences and recommendations on methodologies to engage citizens. <https://cop-demos.jrc.ec.europa.eu/>

Democracy Next: International, non-profit, non-partisan knowledge hub on deliberative democracy. <https://www.demnext.org/>

Democratic innovations designed to extend and deepen public participation in decision-making on the climate crisis are of vital importance to enable meaningful and impactful multi-directional communications between states, citizens, and other stakeholders. Such innovations have, in practice, largely taken the form of deliberative mini-publics underpinned by theories of deliberative democracy. DMPs offer great promise, but in practice they have, to date, also been shown to have serious limitations. These empirical findings can be used to guide the future development of deliberative approaches, in terms of their internal design, their institutionalisation into decision-making processes, and their wider social relevance. Embracing theoretical perspectives beyond deliberative democracy has already enriched the field and enabled the theoretical underpinnings of deliberative approaches to evolve. This development should continue in order to embed and better understand the functioning of democratic innovations, internally and in relation to wider society, and to realise their potential in contributing to addressing the climate crisis.

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Suggestions for further reading

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This policy report examines ways in which deliberative methods can contribute to better policymaking, and the factors to be considered in developing and using deliberative public engagement.

Bächtiger, A., Dryzek, J. S., Mansbridge, J. and Warren, M. E. (eds.) (2018) *The Oxford handbook of deliberative democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This handbook, edited by leading scholars in the field, provides a comprehensive introduction to key lines of thought in deliberative democratic thinking.

Smith, G. (2023) *Climate assemblies: Emerging trends, challenges and opportunities*. Brussels: KNOCA. Available at: https://assets-global.website-files.com/65b77644e6021e9021de8916/65dc863503f4a3f03a160b35_KNOCA_2023_Climate-assemblies_emerging-trends-challenges-and-opportunities.pdf.

This report reviews recent developments in climate assemblies, including their commissioning and design, as well as their wider impact on policy, governance, and politics. It is a publication by the Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies (KNOCA) whose website is a comprehensive repository of information.

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