The role of dialogue-oriented participation in the policy formulation process

Claudia Thoms¹ and Uwe Remer-Bollow²

¹University of Hohenheim, claudia.thoms@uni-hohenheim.de
²University of Stuttgart, uwe.remer-bollow@sowi.uni-stuttgart.de

Paper to be presented at the Panel “The ‘Macro’ Impacts of Deliberative Democratic Innovations” of the ECPR General Conference, Prague, 7-10 September 2016

*work in progress*

Abstract

Dialogue-oriented forms of citizen participation are of growing empirical relevance. As supplement to procedures required by law, round tables, public meetings, open fora, etc. are said to produce many favourable effects on the micro and macro level. Within the political process, the function of informal participatory procedures lies in resolving societal conflicts. Perceived legitimacy of results and policy measures may be seen as indicator of successful conflict resolution. But as informal participatory processes do not end in authoritative decisions, it remains unclear how they develop impact within the macro political process in which the decision is ultimately located and consequently how they contribute to the legitimacy of political decisions. The question that arises out of these thoughts involves the causal mechanisms that explain how certain conditions within and around the participatory process (micro) contribute to the processing of political issues on a societal level (macro). The present paper will focus on one aspect that in our view could explain why some participatory procedures have an impact in the sense of generating legitimacy and others do not: the presence of advocacy coalitions in a policy subsystem as a link that connects the participatory procedure to the macro political process. Using the advocacy coalition framework to consider shared beliefs between decision makers and participating citizens, we add a theory-based attempt to the study of dialogue-oriented forms of citizen participation to explain the conditions for impacting participatory procedures. Empirical findings based on a small-N expert survey are presented to illustrate the argument.

Keywords

Introduction

Dialogue-oriented or informal forms of citizen participation are of growing empirical relevance (Fung, Wright 2001; Geißel 2008; Smith 2009; Geißel, Newton 2012). They can be defined as clearly outlined, purposeful procedures for the complementary integration of citizens in the policy process. That means, they are a supplement to juridically prescribed procedures of public participation and to decision making procedures in representative democracies (Vetter et al. 2015, pp. 230-231). As such, round tables, public meetings, open fora, etc. are said to facilitate democratic inclusion, improve decisions, reduce conflicts, generate acceptance, strengthen the community, and countervail disenchantment with politics – at least in the long run (Michels 2012; Vetter et al. 2015). Within the political process, the function of informal participatory procedures lies in resolving societal conflicts as defined in the broadest sense of the term. Perceived legitimacy of results and policy measures may be seen as indicator of successful conflict resolution. But as informal participatory procedures do not end in authoritative decisions, it remains unclear

- how they develop impact within the macro political process in which the decision is ultimately located and consequently
- how they contribute to the legitimacy of political decisions as opposed to the legitimacy of decisions made only within the participatory procedure itself (Michels 2011; Michels, Binnema 2015; Pogrebinschi, Ryan 2014).

While there are different "modes of successful impact" (Goodin, Dryzek 2006, p. 237) of participatory procedures at different stages of the policy cycle (Pogrebinschi, Ryan 2014; Caluwaerts, Reuchamps 2014) we can think of in this context, most of the time we do not really know "why sometimes impact is achieved, and why sometimes it is not" (Goodin, Dryzek 2006, p. 239; see also Michels, Binnema 2015). The question that arises out of these thoughts involves the causal mechanisms that explain how certain conditions within and around the participatory process (micro) contribute to the processing of political issues on a societal level (macro). In this way, our main interest gets into line with current questions in the field of (deliberative) public participation studies (e.g. Hess et al. 2015; Michels, Binnema 2015; Pogrebinschi, Ryan 2014).

Many factors pertaining to the (institutional and social) context or to the procedural design (including the degree of deliberation\(^2\)) can influence the effectiveness of participatory procedures. The present paper, however, will focus on one aspect that in our view could explain why some participatory procedures have an impact in the sense of generating legitimacy and others do not: the presence of advocacy coalitions in a policy subsystem as a link that connects the participatory procedure to the macro political process. This has several implications for the way we look at dialogue-oriented forms of citizen participation. First, it is

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1 We would like to thank Frank Brettschneider, Angelika Vetter, André Bächtiger, and Saskia Geyer for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper, and the experts for their participation in our

2 Indeed, we are convinced that measures of procedural quality based on deliberative theory currently constitute the most elaborate approach when it comes to analyse the connection between process and outcome of dialogue-oriented participatory procedures (see for example Bächtiger et al. 2010a; Bächtiger et al. 2010b; Bächtiger, Wyss 2013; Frewer, Rowe 2005; Rowe, Frewer 2000; Rowe et al. 2008; Rowe et al. 2004; Steiner 2012; Steiner et al. 2004; Weblter 1995; Webler, Tuler 2002). Although we are not going to discuss the measure of degrees of deliberation in participatory procedures in this paper, we consider the combination of an analysis of deliberative quality and the identification of advocacy coalitions as a promising undertaking in this field.
necessary to view informal participatory processes as one arena among others that process societal conflicts and try to affect policy decisions. As a consequence, “we should not be surprised when it proves hard to trace the direct impact of any particular input” (Goodin, Dryzek 2006, p. 238). Second, looking at participatory procedures as isolated phenomena where the political-administrative system acts in sharp distinction to the citizens and other relevant societal subsystems is too shortsighted for two reasons:

- Points of contact between decision makers and citizens are not necessarily restricted to official paths – above all on the local level. Therefore, dependencies and exchange processes relevant to conflict resolution may be overlooked, when they do not occur in an institutionalized setting (either within the participatory procedure itself or through other official links between the participatory procedure and the political arena). Informal and formal forms of communication are equally relevant.
- Similarities in the belief systems of political actors and citizens may be an additional dimension of “embeddedness” as defined by Caluwaerts and Reuchamps (2014) or Michels and Binnema (2015), who concentrate on the political support of the participatory procedure itself and do not explicitly consider the political support of citizens’ positions. With this in mind, shared beliefs are a sort of bracket between the participatory arena and the political arena (just to name the two we are interested in here) and should be considered.

In the first part of our paper, we will develop our argument that the implementation of participatory processes ultimately aims at the legitimacy of political decisions and the acceptance of subsequent measures. Consequently, participatory processes have to be examined with reference to their embeddedness within a policy domain and the function they serve in the political process. The current state of research does not provide an adequate framework to capture and describe this issue. To address this shortcoming, we utilise the advocacy coalition framework as macro perspective to locate the participatory procedure within the policy process. This adaption builds the second part of our paper. Then, as a first attempt to uncover network-like structures within the context of informal participatory procedures, we will present empirical findings based on data collected in an expert survey concerning similarities between relevant actors in selected cases of participatory procedures. Finally, we conclude our paper reviewing the advantages and challenges of our proposal.

2 Legitimacy through participation – The role of dialogue-oriented participation in the policy formulation process

The role of citizen participation within the policy process is a pivotal issue for participation research. However, it is not about the naive question whether or not citizen participation is able or entitled to formally decide a political issue. Rather, the point is to dissect the mechanisms that link participatory procedures to the greater political process.

In the field of public participation research, dialogue-oriented participatory procedures are often treated as isolated phenomena. “[S]tudies on democratic innovations focus on outcomes internal to participation or deliberation, and not on political effectiveness” (Pogrebinschi, Ryan 2014, p. 5). As a result, we know quite a lot about the (micro) effects of different participatory designs, not so much about how generalizable those effects are in view of the prevalence of single-case studies (Hess et al. 2015) and even less about the (macro)
impact of participatory procedures on political decisions and consequently on public policies. In many cases, there isn’t even a distinction between effects on either of these levels. Instead, effects on the micro level – for example the acceptance of the results of a participatory procedure – are simply presumed to be identical to effects on a macro level – for example the acceptance of the final political decision – without ever bearing in mind that there can be a huge gap between the two decisions and as a consequence also between the two acceptance levels.

The concentration on direct or internal participatory effects has epistemological consequences aptly described by Pogrebinschi and Ryan (2014, pp. 26-27):

If democratic innovations are going to make any change in the quality of democracy, they must have been designed with the intent of being more effective – in other words, they must ensure that citizens are the authors and subject of real laws and policies. If democratic innovations do not lead to policymaking and lawmaking that is responsive to citizens’ demands and congruent with their deliberations, their potential to solve the democratic deficits and promote a way out of the crisis of representation is very limited.

Therefore, locating the single participatory procedure in its macro political context is essential to overcome the sort of thinking where participation seems to take place for the sake of participation and we do not know much about its contribution to solving societal issues and generating support for policies. So instead of reviewing participation against ostensible criteria like transparency or levels of information, the evaluation of dialogue-oriented democratic innovations should focus on their actual political function. We contend that this function consists in developing legitimate policies. The concept of legitimacy has a long tradition and is widely used in social sciences (Weatherford 1992; Easton 1975; Tyler 2006; Rawls 1985; Lipset 1959). It can be defined as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman 1995, p. 574).

Practically speaking, even when goals like transparency, knowledge gain, and openess to arguments are sighted, the actual function of participatory procedures lies in raising the legitimacy and acceptance of policies. The demand for transparency is based on the implicit assumption that early, transparent, and comprehensive information will prevent citizens from developing reservations or at least will help to dissolve doubts. In other words, it aims at achieving legitimacy and acceptance. The often-cited democratic qualification of participants may be a desirable side effect of extended participation opportunities. But here again, a deeper understanding of democratic and constitutional processes can increase the acceptance and legitimacy of coming policies. At core, even arguments concerning the improvement of plans and decisions through the integration of citizens as experts on their own behalf revolve around the acceptance of a measure. And participatory processes about the development of visions or procedures like future search conferences (that do not treat concrete measures in the beginning) also have the medium-to-long term goal to discuss controversial questions at an early point in time. If citizens are already integrated in the process of agenda setting, the foundations for legitimate measures are laid at a very early stage of the policy cycle. That means it is easier to demand acceptance for subsequent decisions.
In addition to these practical arguments, there are also theoretical reasons why legitimacy and acceptance should be considered as the actual reference points of participatory procedures. One already mentioned reason to involve citizens in the decision making process – irrespective of how intense this involvement is – lies in improving the quality of decisions. This is due to at least two reasons. First, consensual arenas are said to produce epistemically better decisions based on the wisdom of the many and the involvement of citizens as experts on their own behalf (Lorenz et al. 2015). This ability to produce better decisions stems from the procedural characteristics of the dialogue situation and the decision making rules within the participatory procedure.

Second, in democracies, ‘better’ decisions can be characterized in terms of social standards of value, of which equality and equity are probably the most important in the context of citizen participation. The normative democratic ideal goes beyond formal equality and calls for the equal consideration of interests of all citizens (Dahl 1998; Teorell 2006, pp. 792-793). All interests have to find access to the political system on an equal basis, without privileges and without discrimination. Only then is an “undistorted substantive representation of interests” (Marien et al. 2010, p. 189) possible. Letting all those affected by a decision participate in its production is thus a way to meet this condition. In terms of equity, the requirement is more difficult to formulate because different conceptions of equity claim validity. The respective validity claims can not be objectively deduced because they are normative concepts that can only be negotiated discursively (Renn et al. 2007, pp. 56-57). Even goals like efficiency (Renn 2008, p. 287) can then only be assessed against the background of normative goals. Following this reasoning, the question of ‘better’ decisions is a normative question that can not be answered objectively. This is the main argument for the democratic relevance of dialogue-oriented participatory procedures as negotiation arenas. They are necessary to define what makes a decision just and acceptable for all the persons concerned. And this leads to the conclusion that the quality of policy decisions can only be judged on the basis of their legitimacy as defined above.

To put it in a nutshell, participatory procedures as tools to deal with societal conflicts ultimately always revolve around the generation of legitimacy for political decisions and acceptance for subsequent measures. However, there is a gap between the dialogue-oriented participatory procedure and the political arena as these participatory procedures do not end in authoritative decisions and decision makers are not necessarily obliged to adopt proposals made by citizens within participatory procedures. Therefore, talking about the macro effects of participation presupposes that there is a sort of link between the participatory procedure and the political arena and that decision makers are actually considering the results of participatory procedures. After all, if participatory procedures did not contribute to answering societal questions, it would be perfectly fair to ask why organizers and participants should actually provide their resources to make participation possible and to participate, respectively. To answer this question, a new focus is necessary. If we only take into consideration ‘superficial’ goals, the actual function of participatory procedures is left out. Frequently communicated goals like transparency or knowledge gain are desirable, but only constitute preconditions to unfold effects at a socio-political level. In order to assess the effectivity of participatory procedures to generate legitimacy and acceptance for political-administrative decisions, the whole policy process necessarily has to be considered, not only from an epistemological, but also from a practical perspective.
Our argument is that participatory procedures and their results intervene in the process of policy formulation, mainly by shifting beliefs and perceptions of legitimacy of concurring policy alternatives. But how and why do participatory procedures alter perceptions of legitimacy?

2.1 Factors influencing legitimacy in the context of dialogue-oriented participatory procedures

For the duration of their existence, participatory procedures may be considered as institutions, and can be analysed as such. Likewise other institutions, they are based on normative frames of reference and rules that structure the actions of actors (Scott 2008, pp. 8–59). “Institutions are comprised of regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life” (Scott 2008, p. 48). To unfold their normatively intended impact, participatory procedures depend on social acceptance beyond the group of participants. They need acceptance from all actors directly or indirectly concerned by decisions or institutions (Ullrich 2000, p. 16) – regardless whether they participate or not. In a broad understanding, this incorporates all stakeholders: citizens, political actors, administrations, organisations, investors or other actors from economics or society. In the context of politics, we comprehend acceptance as the empirical expression of legitimacy (though it could be used synonym as well). Within the broader political process that deals with a given issue and that is subject to citizen’s participation, we find four points of reference which legitimacy or acceptance can be linked to. First, legitimacy and acceptance may refer to the participatory procedure as such. Second, to the formal output of that procedure (decisions or suggestions on the issue). Third, to the greater political process in which the participatory procedure is embedded and that is concerned with the policy formulation on the issue in question. And finally, to the actual political decision on the issue, typically made by constitutionally or lawfully authorised institutions, like councils, parliaments, or administrations.

The legitimacy of institutions results from their de facto recognition and from the support they receive (Easton 1975, p. 451; Scott 2008, p. 60). The procedural justice theory discusses this form of legitimacy as well (Tyler 1988, 2006). Prerequisite for legitimacy is that participatory processes have a set of rules that ensure procedural justice. However, legitimacy is not necessarily linked to legal validity. There is a number of governance regimes, where there is no legal basis for negotiation and decision-making power of institutions (e.g. in international regimes) (Black 2008). Yet they take effect and apparent liability by awarding them legitimacy. In those conditions, approaches play a role that highlight the performance of institutions as the source of legitimacy (Easton 1975; Lipset 1959; Weatherford 1992; Scharpf 1999). According to Lipset (1959, p. 86) legitimacy “involves the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate or proper ones for the society”. In this respect, legitimacy is closely connected to effectiveness of political institutions and constitutes output legitimacy as defined by Scharpf (1999). On the input side, legitimacy arises from the fact that preferences find their way into the process of decision making. Effective influence on the decision making process constitutes input legitimacy and is one of the cornerstones of democratic quality (Dahl 1998). These thoughts on legitimacy also play a role in the context of participatory procedures. On the level of the greater political process in which the participatory procedure is embedded, output legitimacy refers to the assessment of macro-political impacts of the
political decision on the issue, while input legitimacy refers to the perception that the political process that arrives at this decision entails an adequate provision for all relevant stakeholders. With regard to the participatory procedure itself, input legitimacy stems from perceived direct or indirect influence on decision making within the proceeding. Output legitimacy refers to the perception that the output of the participatory procedure is in line with one’s interests and results in an effective outcome. Effective outcome means that the output of a participatory procedure actually transforms into substantive policy. As a result, there is a kind of spill-over effect of the legitimacy within participatory procedures to the legitimacy of the policy process and the formal decision.

Particularly, dialogue-oriented procedures derive their potential effectiveness and relevance from awarded legitimacy, since they are not intended to make authoritative decisions. The other way round, procedures whose legitimacy is in doubt, rarely are able to demand commitment. As a consequence, a participatory procedure that is regarded as illegitimate loses it’s potential for conflict resolution (Suchman 1995, pp. 574-575). It is the perceived legitimacy of the proceedings and the legitimacy of the output that determine how much support people are willing to show to recommendations or solutions from a participatory procedure (Suchman 1995, p. 575; Easton 1975, p. 451). Hence, legitimacy is a "reservoir of support" (Weatherford 1992). It can be utilised, if support for decisions or measures does not arise from accordance of interests or the possible benefits are uncertain (Tyler 2006, p. 381; Trüdinger, Bollow 2013). The political and administrative system usually decides the issue that is subject to participation. Therefore it is not only the legitimacy of the participatory procedure that has to be taken into account, but also the legitimacy of the greater political process that is concerned with that issue. The way in which the greater political arena processes and decides the issue is subject to judgement by the people and the stakeholders. This judgement keeps a jealous watch on how the authoritative decision maker deal(s) with the developed output of the participatory procedure. Special justification is necessary, where political decisions deviate from the recommendations of the participatory procedure.

Because most dialog-oriented procedures lack authoritative competence, there must be another mechanism that ensures the actual adoption of the results by political bodies or decision makers. We argue that the advocacy coalition framework is able to explain how and why participatory procedures stimulate or irritate the political and administrative system to adopt the output: through the presence of advocacy coalitions as brackets that bring actors of different arenas together.

2.2 Effectivity of dialogue-oriented participatory procedures through congruence of belief-systems

To what extent is the output of the participatory procedure considered in political decisions? Do the political decision makers, who process the issues in another, separate arena align to the results of the participatory procedure? Given that participatory procedures are not the only source of input to the policy process (e.g., beside protest, lobbying, party-policy), we have to ask for the role of participatory procedures within the policy process. Several strands of research provide an approach for the policy formulation process:

- the governance theory,

\[3\] This may also imply satisficing solutions.
- the representation and interest group research, and
- the policy research, especially the advocacy coalition framework.

The governance perspective is interested in potential and patterns of political governance in the cooperative state (Mayntz 2008). Though its strength is to recognise the interrelatedness of actors within multi-actor configurations, the governance perspective is not appropriate to study participatory procedures within the policy process, because it is not able to provide assertions on causal mechanisms that link the participatory process and its actors with the process of policy formulation.

Representation and interest group research is able to fill this gap (Powell 2004; Baumgartner et al. 2009; Miller, Stokes 1963). The mechanism that connects citizens and politics is representation. In a substantial understanding of representation, interests and demands of citizens – in short, the preferences – should be reflected in the political actions of their elected legislators (Powell 2004, p. 274). Starting from the assumption that politicians always strive to be re-elected, they orient their actions on two accountability principles: first, the responsibility to the electorate, and second, the responsibility to the party that is responsible for the nomination of candidates (Hix 2002). How do parties and politicians know what the preferences of the citizens are? In addition to personal contacts, it is mainly the media representation of public opinion as well as the internal party opinion that shape the perceptions of politicians.

Research on interest groups complements the picture. Interest groups are organised agents that act on behalf of some part of the electorate. Politicians make authoritative decisions under great uncertainty about the likely consequences of the policy measures. Interest groups provide information on how policies take effect (Bernhagen 2013). Since interest groups are specialized in a certain field and because they have the necessary resources, they are able to provide appropriate expertise to the political decision maker (as long as there is some benefit) (Giger, Klüver 2015, p. 3). The participatory process can be considered in a similar manner. Participatory procedures provide information on the preferences of the citizens and other organised actors (action groups, associations, public boards, etc.) to the political decision maker. As outlined above, literature on participation attributes the citizens to be experts on their own behalf, whose participation is able to improve planning and decision making. While this considers only the input side, many participatory procedures are intended to provide reciprocal interexchange to influence each other’s positions. Even participatory procedures that settle at the lower end of the ‘ladder of participation’ (Arnstein 1969), which are intended just to inform the citizens, are aimed to induce some change in beliefs (at least in generating knowledge as a special form of a belief element). It is at the heart of every participatory procedure that actors try to influence each other by providing information and arguments. Representation and interest group research falls short to incorporate the reciprocity in the participatory process. As a result, we suggest that the advocacy coalition framework is able to fill this gap and to provide a comprehensive picture of the process of policy formulation.

The advocacy coalition framework (ACF) dates back on work of Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (Sabatier, Jenkins-Smith 1993; Sabatier 1998; Jenkins-Smith et al. 2014; Sabatier, Weible 2014). They intend „to provide a coherent understanding of the major factors and processes

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4 As political parties are likewise interested in their reelection, this only constitutes another level of aggregation.
affecting the overall policy process” (Sabatier 1998, p. 98). Today, the ACF is one of several theories used in policy analysis (Sabatier, Weible 2014).

The advocacy coalition framework

The ACF assumes that actors within a policy subsystem can be grouped into several advocacy coalitions. These coalitions of public and private actors share common beliefs and apply their resources strategically and co-ordinately to achieve their policy goals. In the end, this is to influence political decisions accordingly to their preferences (Sabatier 1998, p. 103). Advocacy Coalitions may consist of politicians, public administration, citizen or interest groups and a multitude of other actors. The ACF rests on five basic assumptions (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2014; Weible et al. 2009; Sabatier, Weible 2014; Sabatier 1998):

i. Information on the policy problem and the causes and effects of different solutions to the problem play a central role for the policy process.

ii. Policy change bases on long-term policy learning processes, which are prompted by experience with implemented policies.

iii. Level of analysis is the entire policy subsystem that is relevant to a given policy problem. It entails „a policy topic, territorial scope, and the actors directly or indirectly influencing policy subsystem affairs“ (Jenkins-Smith et al. 2014, p. 189). A narrow view that considers only the policy measure in question would neglect existing interdependencies. Likewise, the scope must be wider than only to consider evident actors like parliament, administration, and interest groups. Instead, all relevant public and private actors that are involved have to be included in the analysis (e.g. journalists, scientists, consultants, etc.).

iv. Depending on the policy domain, actors from different levels of the political system have to be taken into account.

v. Policies rest on implicit assumptions on causal relations and hypotheses on how to realise targeted outcomes. In this respect, they are similar to theories. The ACF assumes that policies can be conceptualised as a kind of belief system which is shared by the particular coalitions. These beliefs are „causal driver for political behavior“ (Weible et al. 2009, p. 122). The belief system entails three levels of beliefs (Weible et al. 2009, p. 122):

a. stable, normative convictions constitute the deep core beliefs (e.g. political ideology, orientations regarding values as freedom, equality, etc.),

b. the policy core beliefs, which relate to beliefs on the policy domain in question. These are normative convictions on the policy, conceptions of cause and effect within the policy domain, hypotheses on outcomes of policy measures (Sabatier 1998, p. 103). The policy core beliefs are relatively stable as well, but may be revised under pressure of new information and experience more easily than the deep core beliefs.

c. at last, the belief system entails secondary beliefs that refer to more tangible aspects of a policy domain. On this level we find beliefs regarding the importance of certain policy areas, preferences on actual implementations, institutions, and financing, etc. (Sabatier 1998, p. 104). Compared to higher levels beliefs, secondary beliefs can be altered more easily.

Beside the policy subsystem, several contextual factors assert influence on the policy beliefs that are held by the particular coalitions, on the resources that are available to them, on the
strategies that they adopt, and on the decisions that are finally made (as well as the impact they have). These contextual factors comprise (nearly) invariant factors like properties of the policy domain, given total resources, sociocultural values and constitutional principles. However, there may be external events that induce dynamic. In addition, there can be short-term restrictions, individual resources of the actors as well as long-term opportunity structures on the level of coalitions. Weible et al. (2009, p. 124) explicate four conditions under which the status quo of policy may be altered:

i. **Subsystem external events** change the basic structure in a policy subsystem, e.g. by altered socioeconomic conditions, change in public opinion, changes in and of governmental coalitions, or impacts from different levels of the policy subsystem or neighboring policy subsystems. Consequently, belief systems of coalitions may change and the distribution of resources and the distribution of power may shift between coalitions.

ii. **Policy learning**: New experience and information that are gained by the application of policies and the observation of their impacts gradually change the belief systems of the actors. Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1999, p. 123) define policy learning as “relatively enduring alternations of thought or behavioural intentions that result from experience and/or new information and that are concerned with the attainment or revision of policy objectives”.

iii. **Subsystem internal events** may occur and uncover policy dysfunctions. In contrast to policy learning internal events do not change the belief system gradually, but alter particular beliefs or whole domains of beliefs as previous assumptions on causes and effects within the policy domain are falsified by reality.

iv. **Cross-coalition learning**: Change in belief systems may occur when coalitions are willing to adopt beliefs from each other. That is subject to strong prerequisites. Successful negotiations are likely under certain conditions:
   
   “a hurting stalemate, effective leadership, consensus-based decision rules, diverse funding, duration of process and commitment of members, a focus on empirical issues, an emphasis on building trust, and lack of alternative venues” (Weible et al. 2009, p. 124).

The ACF models the political process as arena in which actors (individual as well as coalitions) act rational and use the available information and resources to pursue their goals (Sabatier 1998, p. 108). These goals are not just economic goals, but derive from ideological and value based deep core beliefs. They are subject to mechanisms that are described by theories of cognitive and social psychology, like the theories of bounded rationality, prospect theory, and cognitive dissonance. In consequence, with increasing degree of conflict, the perceptions of the actors lead to more stable coalitions, making it more difficult to solve the issue. Less polarised conflicts go along with looser coalition structures.

**Adaption of the advocacy coalition framework to analyse participatory procedures**

As we already argued above, participatory procedures ultimately should exert impact on political decisions of socially relevant measures. In this way, they are part of the policy process. The mechanism that links the participatory arena with the political process and that provides the embedding of participatory procedures within the political process are the

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5 For empirical analysis, the relevant orientations have to be fielded for the particular case (Sabatier 1998, p 109).
advocacy coalitions. Within the participatory procedure, advocacy coalitions negotiate and deliberate with the goal to change the belief systems of the opposite coalitions (and the public opinion) to achieve a change in the status quo of the policy issue in question. The ACF points to four paths by which policy change is induced by changes in belief systems.

Especially cross-coalition learning seems appropriate to study participatory procedures within the ACF. Participatory procedures may facilitate cross-coalition learning between advocacy coalitions as they provide arenas for negotiation with supportive properties (e.g. moderators that serve as policy brokers, jointly appointed experts, etc.), whereby the inert belief systems may receive some impulse towards each other. However, this is only likely if there is already a strong conflict and if a high psychological strain to an agreement exists. In such a situation, participatory procedures are already strongly politically charged, the stakeholders take a strong position on their interests and actors have a pronounced awareness of concern (Vetter et al. 2015, p. 253). Relevant stakeholders will dominate the arena as organised collective actors. Applying the logic of the ACF, the actors may be allocated to particular advocacy coalitions by the similarity of their belief systems. The belief systems of the different coalitions will in contrast differ from each other on several domains and levels (that is, deep core beliefs, policy core beliefs, and secondary beliefs). The potential impact of a participatory procedure on the policy in question unfolds as the actors from the political-administrative system (PAS) – who are lawfully entitled to decide – directly or indirectly take part in the participatory procedure and are at least latently affiliated to one of the advocacy coalitions by (partial) congruence of their belief systems. However, an approximation between the belief systems of different coalitions is unlikely and depends considerably on the willingness to compromise (Vetter et al. 2015, p. 319). If the issue is politically charged, there are high costs of leaving one’s position.

The ACF provides insight under which conditions such an approximation of belief systems renders possible. Only few willingness to approach each other can be expected when conflict is high, at least as long as no policy relevant internal or external shock challenges the beliefs of a coalition or a stalemate increases psychological strain. Given such a conflict, citizens only play a minor role as participants within the procedure itself. Instead, they are bearers of public opinion and serve as sounding board for the positions of the advocacy coalitions. Within the ACF, public opinion is a factor external to the policy subsystem, but it serves as resource and it asserts influence on the strategies that the coalitions may adopt to influence policy decisions. Citizens turn into an aggregated distribution of policy preferences that gains influence on the policy via mechanisms of representation and competition for votes. In this case, the participatory procedure is nothing more than an issue-related secondary parliament. A special case is conceivable where only little information is available on public opinion. Then participating citizens may be a source to infer public opinion. Adequate quota – or preferably random sampling – of citizen participants (in sufficient size) enhances this function.

The situation is quite different where the subject of the proceedings is not politically charged or a contentious issue. Many participatory procedures have only limited potential for conflict, especially dialogues with a high level of abstraction in which citizens deliberate on the general aspects of future living together in a community or society, or develop guidelines, overall concepts or define long-term developmental goals. These dialogues concern policies as well, but in a diffuse and non-binding way (Vetter et al. 2015, p. 253). Within those types of procedures, it is less likely to identify pronounced advocacy coalitions that possess a
substantial amount of political power. Rather, citizens among themselves deliberate on the issues in question. The topics are usually non-controversial (e.g. a city worth living, less crime, less pollution, more engagement, etc.). Typically, the results of such deliberations are a general outline that is aimed on decisions in the future and not so much a call for immediate action. Actors of the PAS place their implementation under reservation, but give promise to do their best within the bounds of (financial) possibility. Most of the goals outlined by the citizens are pursued by the PAS anyways. Since terms of implementation are left aside, the output of the participatory procedure concerns only policy core beliefs that are generally acceptable. Secondary beliefs – especially on allocation of limited resources – may be subject to controversies, but are usually excluded from the scope of these types of participatory procedures. Details of implementation are left to the institutions of representative democracy.

Finally, even borderline cases that can hardly be labelled as participatory procedure as measured by formal criteria can be analysed within the framework. On local level, many PAS actors perceive unidirectional information as citizen participation. Examples are informative meetings or the German citizen assembly (‘Bürgerversammlung’), which is mandatory in larger communities and in which the PAS informs about relevant projects. Although information meetings are not dialogue-oriented participatory procedures in the strict sense, they are a central part of public relations on local level and for major (infrastructure) projects. They inform the citizens and shall prevent that speculations and half knowledge determine the discourse. The intention is a) to signal transparency on the draft measure, b) to provide fact based knowledge to the citizens and c) to illustrate the relevant restrictions to the PAS that frame their actions d) to give some understanding of the rationale of projects and measures. Information meetings provide reasons for plans and decisions. If they take place in an early stage they are able to structure the belief systems of the citizens and other stakeholders. Applying the ACF it is possible to formulate conditions under which information meetings are able to avoid or decrease conflict. It is more feasible to influence belief system before the conflict hardens and pronounced advocacy coalitions develop. In contrast, mere information meetings offer no additional benefit when facts are subject to political interpretation, as it is often the case in high conflict situations.

The ACF is a well-established theoretical approach to analyse policy processes. As shown, the ACF is able to serve as an analytical framework to investigate dialogue-oriented participatory procedures as well. It provides plausible mechanisms that link the participatory arena with the overall policy process on the issue in question. To analyse participatory procedures as embedded in a broader policy process with respect to advocacy coalitions yields two major advantages: First, the ACF allows deriving possible explanations on the effectiveness of participatory procedures. Second, it closes the existing gap on how participatory procedures contribute to the legitimacy of political decisions, measures, and projects. Since both arenas are connected via actors that are part of advocacy coalitions on basis of shared belief systems, the output of the participatory procedure may unfold effective impact on political decisions.

3 Data and Measurement

Central assumption of the ACF is that at least one advocacy coalition can be found on a given political issue. A second important condition to apply the ACF on participatory
procedures requires that PAS actors who decide the issue are directly or indirectly part of the advocacy coalitions. As a first attempt to assert whether the ACF is suitable to analyse participatory procedures, we take a look at some recent participatory procedures and try to identify the expected advocacy coalitions. The empirical part of our paper contains findings of a preliminary study. We apply a simple and convenient measure that allows us to assess the relative locations of the actors on the issue with reference to each other. Presently, our approach of data collection is best labelled as an exploratory use of the instrument. It pursues four objectives.  

- First, we want to explore whether advocacy coalitions can be found in a diverse set of participatory procedures.
- Second, we want to explore if actors entitled to make a subsequent decision on the issue in question are part of the advocacy coalitions.
- Third, we want to determine whether our method of collecting data is generally suitable for this purpose.
- Fourth, we want to explore possible weaknesses in the design of data collection to improve our approach.

In June and July 2016, we conducted a small online-survey. A convenience sample of 24 experts who are concerned with the evaluation of a participatory procedure were asked to answer some questions on the process. From 14 responses, four have to be discarded since the participatory procedure had not yet begun or answers on central items are missing. Table 1 lists the ten cases with some background information on their setting. They cover typical instances of participatory procedures concerning conflictuous infrastructure projects and questions about future living together in a community or society. In most of the cases a discursive exchange about the issue was said to have taken place.

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6 The empirical part does not address the question of subsequent political decisions or questions of legitimacy, but focusses solely on the identification of advocacy coalitions.
7 Among these experts are researchers and students from master programs from the Universities of Hohenheim and Stuttgart.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Concreteness of the issue</th>
<th>Type of participation</th>
<th>Time to decision after participation</th>
<th>Role of political-administrative actors</th>
<th>Overall position of citizens towards the issue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>concrete</td>
<td>exchange about issue (discursive exchange of positions)</td>
<td>decision should be made at short notice after the participatory procedure (within one year)</td>
<td>did participate actively</td>
<td>citizens are polarized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>rather abstract</td>
<td>exchange about issue (discursive exchange of positions)</td>
<td>decision should be made in the medium term after the participatory procedure (within 1-5 years)</td>
<td>did not participate actively, but initiated the procedure to get results (top down)</td>
<td>citizens are polarized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>rather concrete</td>
<td>other (referendum)</td>
<td>decision should be made at short notice after the participatory procedure (within one year)</td>
<td>did not participate actively, but are addressees of the results (bottom up)</td>
<td>citizens are indifferent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>rather abstract</td>
<td>implementation (citizens develop measures and implement them by themselves)</td>
<td>decision should be made at short notice after the participatory procedure (within one year)</td>
<td>did participate as observers</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>rather abstract</td>
<td>exchange about issue (discursive exchange of positions)</td>
<td>if and when there is going to be a decision is not foreseeable</td>
<td>did participate actively</td>
<td>citizens are in favour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>concrete</td>
<td>exchange about issue (discursive exchange of positions)</td>
<td>decision should be made immediately after or during the participatory procedure (within days or weeks)</td>
<td>did participate as observers</td>
<td>citizens are polarized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>rather abstract</td>
<td>exchange about issue (discursive exchange of positions)</td>
<td>if and when there is going to be a decision is not foreseeable</td>
<td>did participate actively</td>
<td>citizens are in favour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>rather concrete</td>
<td>exchange about issue (discursive exchange of positions)</td>
<td>if and when there is going to be a decision is not foreseeable</td>
<td>did participate as observers</td>
<td>citizens are distributed broadly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>rather abstract</td>
<td>gather opinions (check how opinions are distributed)</td>
<td>decision should be made in the medium term after the participatory procedure (within 1-5 years)</td>
<td>did participate as observers</td>
<td>citizens are distributed broadly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>concrete</td>
<td>information</td>
<td>if and when there is going to be a decision is not foreseeable</td>
<td>did participate actively</td>
<td>citizens are against it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Core of the questionnaire is an instrument to assess the location of participating actors relative to the position of other involved actors. In the ACF, advocacy coalitions emerge as a result of congruence in the belief systems of the actors within a policy subsystem. This applies also when the ACF is used to analyse policy issues that are subject to participatory procedures. Identifying advocacy coalitions requires that attitudes on all policy-relevant elements of the belief system be surveyed for every actor. This would require a considerable effort in data collection. As a simple and convenient approximation to the congruence of belief systems, we apply a measure of the altogether congruence of positions on the issue between dyads of actors. The resulting structure can be explored by means of network analysis. The instrument contains the following steps:

I. To identify the relevant participants of the given participatory procedure, the respondents are asked to list the participating actors:

"Which groups or actors were involved in the participatory procedure (e.g. citizen initiatives, associations, investor, parties, council faction, other groups etc.)? Note: Please name up to eight most important groups. If political actors (e.g. council) differ in their positions, please mention them as separate groups. The unorganised population is not relevant in this question."

II. The list of actors or groups of actors mentioned by each expert is presented to the expert again and it has to be checked, which actor is entitled to make a subsequent decision on the issue in question.

"Which of the mentioned groups or actors are entitled to decide the issue subsequent to the participatory procedure?"

III. The experts have to locate every actor or group of actors of a given participatory procedure in relation to every other actor of that procedure with regard to their position on the issue. We utilise a function of the online-survey tool to construct these items dynamically, based on the mentioned actors as provided by the experts. The first mentioned actor is combined with every other actor, then the second actor is combined with every other actor, except the first, and so forth:

"Now, please just consider the issue on which the participation takes place. How close are #actor_1 and #actor_2 concerning their position on that issue? Please use the slider. 0 means that both actors diverge to the extent possible. 100 means that both actors share an identical position."

For all actors or groups of actors provided by the experts, we additionally code if these are political or non-political actors and to which generic group of actors they pertain to. We distinguish five groups of actors: investors (INV), interest groups (IG), environmental groups (EG), actors from the political-administrative system (PAS), and others (OTH). The dyadic measure of proximity between the actors and the supplemental information about the nature of these actors is then converted into a graph object with R package igraph, version 1.0.1 (Csardi, Nepusz 2006). To plot the networks, we use the default algorithm “layout_nicely” as implemented in igraph. This layout tries to select an appropriate graph layout algorithm based on the available data. In our case, it ends up using the Fruchterman-Reingold layout algorithm (Fruchterman, Reingold 1991) that distributes vertices to avoid overlapping nodes and makes edge lengths uniform. Nodes or vertices represent the actors in a network while edges represent the ties or links between them. In our data set, all actors in one case are
(undirectedely) linked to the other actors in the same case. The edge width represents the degree of overlap between the positions of two actors and thus stands for the gathered altogether congruence of positions on the issue. For reasons of visual clarity, edges with a value smaller than 50 are deleted. An overlap with less than 50 would mean that the actors tend to find more aspects in which they disagree. In consequence, our networks show the strongest connections between the actors and give a first notion of possible advocacy coalitions.

As a matter of fact, the visualization of our data as networks first and foremost serves to get an idea of the network-like structure behind a participatory procedure. We use the visual representation in a mere explorative way. Nonetheless, typical network measures and indices like density, centrality, or modularity could be used to quantitatively assess the quality of specific participatory networks. A recent study that does so is the one from Sandström and Lundmark (2016), though they too analyse rather small networks and also refer to the question on how well such measures work with such small data sets.

4 Results

The visualisation of the configuration of actors as a network structure allows us to identify possible coalitions of actors. Figure 1 depicts the networks of all ten cases. By and large, we can see that there is always at least one cluster of actors with greater proximity in their position to the issue as a result of the pairwise comparison of all actors. Following the logic, if actors A and B as well as A and C show a great amount of positional overlap, then it is very probable that B and C show a similar congruence in their positions too. At the same time, if A and D are not very similar in their positions, than B and D as well as C and D should also be quite different. This leads to a greater congruence between the actors within a given cluster then between the actors pertaining to two different clusters. This is most evident in those cases related to conflictuous infrastructure projects (cases 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, and 10), but can also be seen in the discursive participatory procedures concerning the development of a local traffic concept (case 5) or the possible risks of future technology (case 8). Most of the networks seem to be divided or polarized, sometimes quite strong, sometimes with at least one actor functioning as a sort of mediator between the opposing groups. This seems to happen in case 1, where the PAS actor holds a central position in a dispersed network, and case 9, where the PAS actor holds the connection to the IG actor, though we can only presume that they are fulfilling this function based on our data. Indeed, the polarization seems to be independent of the urgency of the issue (see Figure 1 and Table 1). It exists either if there is going to be a decision in the near future or if it is unclear if a decision is going to be taken. In some cases, the polarization leads to a proper isolation of single actors (case 2).
Figure 1: Network structures of the cases
Besides the identification of at least implied advocacy coalitions, we can also see that PAS actors and actors with the right to make a subsequent decision on the issue in question are present in all networks (though this can not least be due to our sample). Although we are talking about citizen participation, political-administrative actors or actors provided with the right to actually decide in a (political) question are often involved in participatory processes in different roles: as sponsors, organizers, observers, or as addressees, just to name the most common roles. Even in cases where political actors are deliberately excluded from participatory processes, it would be naive to think that they do not take sides, above all if we take into account that participatory processes are one arena among others that process societal conflicts and try to influence a (political) decision. So it is natural to expect political actors to be involved in some way or another in the discussion of the issue. In our cases, we can often see that they tend to be inclined to the position of certain actors involved in...
participatory procedures, irrespective of how active or passive the role of the PAS actors was in the participatory procedure (see Figure 1 and Table 1).

In some other cases, as already mentioned, above all PAS actors seem to be between the rock and the hard place (cases 1, 3, 6, 9, and 10). This can be the result of political-administrative actors acting as mediators, or an artefact of our measure. In many cases, political parties in the district council can be supporting different positions. Putting all of the parties in one group leads to a heterogeneous group. Comparing this group with other actors can lead to an averaging of the parties’ positions. In this case, an overlap with a value of 50 could mean that one half of the parties in the council is sharing the position of the compared group and the other half not. This is not necessarily a problem for the overall interpretation of the data, as it still means that the PAS actor shares the position of another actor to the given extent, no matter how that overlap actually comes about (i.e. either because of the fragmentation of the council, or because all share the same position but only overlap in half of the points). But in the end, this can lead to an impression of a central, almost neutral-looking, conciliatory PAS actor, while we actually have political parties that form part of different coalitions and as a result probably advocate the implementation of the position they are sharing. We would not know how strong the different camps in such a heterogeneous group are actually connected to their coalitions. So if groups of actors are being compared, it is a prerequisite that those groups actually have a homogeneous structure in terms of their beliefs. Otherwise the overlap with other actors can have different meanings.

5 Discussion

All in all, we can record the fact that we could reach our two first objectives with this study. With regard to the first objective, we can state that it is possible to identify advocacy coalitions in the setting of participatory procedures. With regard to the second objective, it is apparent that political actors and actors entitled to make a subsequent decision most of the time tend to be part of a coalition. In some other cases they seem to fulfil a role as mediators, though this assumption would need further investigation. Nonetheless, in our view, the instrument is able to reveal coalitions based on the proximity of the actors’ positions on the issue in question. In this paper we could not take into consideration the repercussions of such different constellations. But this would be an interesting undertaking for future studies. There are several questions that arise from this study:

- Which conditions can influence the strength of coalition building?
- What influences the embedding of political actors in such coalitions?
- Which effect do participatory procedures have on the polarization of the coalitions? Can we observe changes over time?
- Can we confirm our assumption that impact on policies depends on (strong) decision makers being part of the coalitions that are discussing an issue in the participatory procedure?

This last question is the key to our argument about the generation of legitimacy.

Of course, we also want to discuss some weaknesses of the proposed method of data collection to identify where improvements are needed. At first, there were some apparent problems. Some of the respondents did not keep to instructions formulated in the items. As we noticed from the comments at the end of our survey, in several cases, the experts
grouped actors by themselves. In other cases, PAS actors are treated as unitary actors, though they are fractioned in their position (e.g. a local council that consist of different fractions with differing positions on the issue). We assume that this happened in case 3 and that it may be due to the limitation of the possible number of actors to 8 because of technical constraints and practical considerations. This probably led to the creation of heterogeneous groups. This draws our attention to a more general consideration of the PAS actors. PAS actors that decide the issue in question do not necessarily participate in the participatory procedure. While our questionnaire identifies participating actors that are concerned with the subsequent decisions, we missed to assess the positions of possible non-participating PAS actors that are relevant for policy making. To improve the instrument, it is necessary to survey the position of the actor or institution that is entitled to authoritative decision making more explicitly and more differentiated with regard to its fractioning. Different camps in heterogeneous groups need to be treated as individual actors to avoid inaccuracies.

Another weak spot is the incorporation of the public opinion on the issue in question. The expert ratings may be biased, since they are strongly exposed to the reports of the stakeholders in the participatory procedure. It may be virtually impossible to get an objective impression of public opinion. A population survey on the issue would greatly improve validity and scope of analysis. To analyse effects of participatory procedures on legitimacy of political decisions, it is inevitable to survey citizens’ perceptions.

Finally, though the applied instrument was able to reveal plausible coalitions, it remains somehow superficial, given the complexity of the ACF. We do not collect information on level of beliefs, and so, the advocacy coalitions are constructed only on basis of estimated congruence. Aspects like resources and the strategic use of the resources are constituent properties of advocacy coalitions, but are neglected in our approach. However, we intentionally decided to implement a less complex instrument, to see whether greater effort would be promising. Expert surveys can be a valuable source in explorative studies and in cases where the actors involved can not be asked for different reasons (e.g. economic or time constraints). Nonetheless, we do not really know how reliable and valid those experts’ judgements are concerning our specific epistemological interest unless we do not compare them with other judgements. At this moment, we can at least speak of a sort of face validity concerning the results of our exploratory study. As a next step, we have to validate the proximity-instrument with data based on beliefs of the respective actors and groups. A possible approach could be a document analysis or a survey among the actors themselves. Within such a survey two forms of the instrument could be compared: a more sophisticated survey of the belief structure versus a self-report of the estimated proximity to the other relevant actors in the issue-domain.

6 Conclusion

Our main argument in this paper concerns the isolated study of participatory procedures. It is often ignored that participatory procedures are functionally tied to the process of policy formulation. If public participation is not just taking place for the sake of participation, it has to be effective in some way. In the political context, this effectivity consists in resolving societal conflicts as defined in the broadest sense of the term. Perceived legitimacy of results and policy measures may be seen as indicator of successful conflict resolution. In consequence, questions about the effectivity of dialogue-oriented forms of citizen participation necessarily
concern their impact on the wider process of policy formulation. Otherwise it would be fair to ask in what the public is actually participating. If they are not thought to influence policies following the participatory procedure, why should we expect these policies – decided in another arena by other actors – to be more legitimate than if the participatory procedure had not taken place? And how could we expect them to solve societal issues and generate support for policies outside the participatory procedure itself?

As informal participatory procedures do not end in authoritative decisions, it remains unclear how they contribute to the legitimacy of political decisions as opposed to the legitimacy of decisions made only within the individual participatory procedure. The question that arises out of these thoughts involves the causal mechanisms that explain how certain conditions within and around the participatory process (micro) contribute to the processing of political issues on a societal level (macro). The current public participation research suffers from a theoretical deficit that relates to the mechanisms that transform a single participatory procedure into an instrument that increases legitimacy. To investigate participatory processes in their effect on socially relevant issues, we integrate the participatory processes in an overarching framework for the analysis of the policy process. The advocacy coalition framework provides for a social psychological access to answer the question, under what conditions participatory processes can unfold policy-relevant effects. In this way, its use allows the formulation and evaluation of concrete hypothesis on effectiveness of participatory processes. Following the logic of the adapted framework, we contend that one of the main mechanisms that influences the effectivity of dialogue-oriented citizen participation consists in the presence of advocacy coalitions in a policy subsystem as a link that connects the participatory procedure to the macro political process. Similarities in the belief systems of the wider public, participating citizens, and political actors or other decision makers act as a sort of bracket between society, the participatory arena, and the political arena, though our main interest concerns the last two ones.

We hypothesize that the affiliation of (strong) political actors or other decision makers to an advocacy coalition present in a participatory procedure acts as a catalyst that increases the opportunity of a coalition to have an impact on related policy decisions. To approach this claim, we conducted an exploratory study to examine a) if we can actually find advocacy coalitions in typical participatory procedures, and b) if political actors and other decision makers are being part of such coalitions. Using network analysis to visualize the relations between relevant actors based on their altogether congruence of positions on the issue, we saw that both objectives could be achieved using a rather simple instrument. Most of the cases show a sort of polarization, and political actors or other decision makers are often inclined to a certain group. In some other cases they seem to act as mediators, though it is not possible to ascertain this with certainty based on our data, so that further investigation is necessary.

Our approach to gather information about the congruence of belief systems is persuasively simple. Although it has some weaknesses, we see a lot of potential in the consideration of the advocacy coalition framework and our measure of actors’ proximity. Of course, the next step would consist in observing the actual relation between different congruence structures and the impact of participatory procedures on policies and their legitimacy. Future work could optimize the weak spots already identified and strive to a combination with a detailed measure of the degree of deliberation as done by deliberative scientists to assess the impact of the procedural quality on the evolution of coalitions and consequently on the possible
impact of participatory procedures. In addition, having a universal, albeit superficial measure of congruence of belief systems that is independent of the concrete issue gives us the possibility to compare different types of participatory procedures without greater inconveniences. As one of the main recent questions in public participation research concerns the link between conditions and effects, and the main problem generally results from the limited comparability of highly individualized cases, the embeddedness of participatory procedures, in this case defined by the presence of advocacy coalitions with political members, can be an interesting factor to be considered.
References


