Understanding and enhancing democracy – a new agenda.

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Abstract
This paper addresses and discusses three assumptions that are often implicitly made in research on citizen participation and democracy. The first assumption is that citizen participation has positive effects on the quality of democracy. A second assumption often made is that people desire to have a greater voice in decision-making. And a third assumption is that governments want citizens to participate more often. The paper presents finding from empirical research by the author (and co-authors). These include findings from a meta-study in various countries on the effects of democratic innovations on democratic values, and a large internet survey in the Netherlands on the support for different types of democracy. This finally leads to an agenda for future research in democratic innovations.
Introduction
Many western industrialized nations are facing an increasing volatility in elections, a decreasing turnout, a loss in party membership, and the growth of populist right-wing parties. Moreover, survey research has documented a decline in satisfaction with democracy and confidence in intermediary political institutions (Dalton 2008; Kaase & Newton 1995). Although these developments do not necessarily lead to a crisis of democracy, they are viewed as a cause for concern. They foster the discussion of how politicians should bridge the gap between politics and the public. At the same time, Western democracies are experiencing a shift of citizens’ attitudes towards an increasing interest in political participation, however not in the conventional form (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Cain et al 2006). As a consequence, many reformists, scholars, and citizens have called for new forms of political participation to complement the existing forms of representative democracy.

Embedding democratic innovations that increase and deepen citizen participation in decision making is now a common policy of governments in many countries. Over the past decades, many countries have gained experience with referendums, citizens’ forums, citizens’ juries, collaborative governance, participatory budgeting, and other models in which citizens have a more direct say.

This paper first gives an overview and categorizes different forms of participatory innovations. Four types will be distinguished which differ in institutional design. It then continues addressing and discussing the following assumptions that are often implicitly made in research on citizen participation: 1) citizen participation has positive effects on the quality of democracy, 2) citizens desire to have a greater voice in political decision-making, and 3) governments want citizens to participate more often. The concludes with some ideas for further research on democratic innovations in relation to the understanding and enhancing of democracy.

Different forms of participatory innovations
Participatory innovations may take various forms (Barnes 1999; Smith 2009). This section provides an overview of different forms by categorizing these into four categories of

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1 This section is based on Michels 2011 and Hendriks and Michels 2011.
participatory innovations. Examples in the Netherlands are used to illustrate the different forms.

We can map the different forms of participatory innovations using two key distinctions. The first distinction, between individual and collective participation, refers to whether citizens are approached as individuals and asked for individual opinions or votes, or collectively as a group. The second distinction, between outcome and process, refers to the focus of citizen participation. Some types of democratic innovation focus on the outcome and guarantee that decisions will be taken seriously. Politicians share decision making power with others, such as citizens and social groups. Other forms of participatory innovations focus on the process itself. In the latter type, opinion formation is more important. Public policies are discussed and advice is given to decision makers, but there is no guarantee that advice will be taken seriously. The difference in focus is reflected in the institutional design, including the relation to the process of decision making by the institutions of representative democracy. Combining these two distinctions, four types of democratic innovation can be distinguished: referendums, participatory governance, deliberative surveys, and deliberative forums (see table 1).

**Table 1: Forms of citizen participation**

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<th>Individual</th>
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<td><strong>Outcome / decision</strong></td>
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Referendums include popular initiatives and both binding and non-binding (consultative) forms of referendums. With respect to the other forms of participation, different concepts are used for similar types. For example, what I call participatory governance is sometimes also referred to as interactive policy making or governance, citizen governance, or co- and network governance. Likewise, deliberative surveys are also referred to as deliberative polls. Deliberative forums include different types of forums, such as citizens’ juries, citizens’ conferences and dialogues, consensus conferences, and planning cells, as will be further discussed below.
The first category concerns different forms of referendums. Referendums give individual people a direct vote on some issue. They may be binding or non-binding (the consultative referendum). In most European countries a referendum can be triggered only by one of the institutions or representative government (Setälä & Schiller 2009). Some countries also have a provision for the initiative which gives the people the opportunity to bring about a popular vote. The use of referendums varies across countries, with Switzerland at the forefront. Between 1945 and 2010, Switzerland took the initiative for almost two-thirds of all referendums in Europe (Gallagher et al 2011: 400).

The Netherlands has no provision for a binding referendum (Michels 2009). In 2001, the country authorized citizen-petitioned non-binding referendums by the Temporary Referendum Act (Tijdelijke Referendum Wet) but, according to previous agreement, this provision was ended in 2005. The advisory referendum on the ‘EU-constitution’ in 2005 was made possible by temporary law and has been the only national referendum which the Netherlands has ever had. Although there is no provision for a national referendum, local governments may allow for a local referendum. About 10% of the local governments have a provision for a non-binding referendum. Since 1990, 97 local referendums were held in more than 70 municipalities. About half of these concerned the amalgamation of municipalities (De Graaf et al 2009).

In contrast to referendums, participatory governance initiatives approach citizens more as a group and less as individuals. Characteristic to participatory governance, otherwise known as interactive policy making or co-governance, is that there is a clear relation with decision making in the sense that citizens and stakeholders are being asked to advise and to cooperate with government. Participatory governance operates under the premise that citizens and other stakeholders take an active role in the policy process. The main aim is to involve people in policy making before taking decisions. Usually, a large group of people is involved. This approach to policy making is considered to be particularly useful in circumstances where there are many stakeholders with conflicting interests, complex issues, and many solutions to the particular problem (Walters et al. 2000). In the UK, at the level of urban neighbourhoods, there have been many initiatives geared at ‘empowered participation’, using ABCD (Asset Based Community Development) and similar methods (John & Copus 2009).

The Netherlands has broad experience with various forms of participatory governance, where it forms part of a long tradition of cooperation and consensus forming (Duyvendak &
Krouwel 2001). At the local level, citizens and stakeholders participate in projects that, for example, aim at improving the quality of life or the safety in a particular neighbourhood or the redevelopment of a particular area (De Vries 2008; Denters & Klok 2005; Edelenbos & Monnikhof 2001). National issues in interactive policy making often relate to infrastructural problems or problems of physical planning.

One specific form of participatory governance concerns participatory budgeting. The method of participatory budgeting allocates a budget, often a neighbourhood budget, directly to the residents of an area for improving the quality of life or the safety in that particular area. The best-known international example is participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, which combines decision making on the allocation of a budget with deliberative elements (conferring, negotiating). In the Netherlands, several cities have been experimenting with neighbourhood budgets, and the number is growing; the instrument is currently en vogue. Examples are the cities of Almere, Zwolle, Delft, Waalwijk, Groningen, and parts of Amsterdam (see the respective websites of these cities; Van de Wijdeven & De Graaf 2008).

Although deliberation can be part of participatory governance, deliberative forums differ from participatory governance by the fact that they are designed to be deliberative. In other words, in their design the emphasis is on following the ideal deliberative procedures; opinion formation and the exchange of arguments are more important than decision making. A deliberative process involves discussion and the exchange of arguments, during which individuals justify their opinions and show themselves willing to change their preferences. A deliberative process assumes free public reasoning, equality, inclusion of different interests, and mutual respect.

Deliberative forums, often also termed ‘mini publics’, include different types of forums, such as citizens’ juries, citizens’ conferences and dialogues, consensus conferences, and planning cells. Characteristic to deliberative forums is that they use forms of random sampling to bring together a diverse body of citizens to discuss matters of public concern (Smith 2009: 29). The design details vary, but there are common features: participants usually spend several days to deliberations; evidence is provided by experts who are then questioned by participants; often the discussions have an facilitator; and citizens are given the opportunity to deliberate amongst themselves in plenary and small-group sessions (Dryzek and Tucker 2008; Smith 2009). In all cases, the specific role of deliberative forums and surveys in policy making is hard to define. The forum is often one actor among many, and policy making a result of a mix of various processes and actors.
Examples of deliberative forums include *Citizens’ juries and citizens’ forums*. A citizens’ jury consists of 12 to 16 jurors. They are brought together and may question experts in a quasi-courtroom setting (OECD 2001; Lenaghan 1999). Their task is to offer recommendations for public decision making after deliberation. The recommendations of the jury are advisory only. Citizens’ forums differ from citizens’ juries by the fact that there is no quasi-courtroom setting. The Netherlands has developed some, but not much, experience with citizens’ forums and juries as well. Examples are the citizens’ forum in Flevoland on the regional planning of this area (2004), the citizens’ jury on air quality in Amsterdam (2006), and the national citizens’ forum on the electoral system (Huijtema & Lavrijsen 2006; Leyenaar 2009; www.parlement.com).

A specific form of a citizen’s forum is the so-called *Planning cell*. A planning cell is a non-partisan, ad hoc, randomly selected, single issue, short-term micro-parliament in which people from different backgrounds work together for a limited time to look for solutions and recommendations (Garbe 1986). The difference with the category above is that a planning cell involves more participants, usually consists of various sub-cells, and typically focuses on planning issues. There is little evidence for the use of this method in the Netherlands, although in the Netherlands the idea of the planning cell formed the basis for Forum Amsterdam, which aimed at developing ideas for the future of Amsterdam.

Finally, *civic round tables*, ‘common future forums’, citizen (or consensus) *conferences* enable a panel of non-experts, with access to a range of experts, to discuss an issue and report on its conclusions. Citizen conferences are often held around topics in the area of biotechnology and genetic technology; the perspective is usually long-term and future-oriented. In the Netherlands, the Rathenau Institute has conducted several citizen conferences, for example on predictive genetic technology in collaboration with the Health Ministry and the Health Council, and on ethical dilemma’s in biomedical science (www.rathenau.nl).

The design of *Deliberative surveys* or deliberative polls, is in many respects similar to that of deliberative forums. Just as in deliberative forums the link with decision making is weak and forms of random sampling are used to bring together a diverse body of citizens to discuss matters of public concern. However, different from deliberative forums, individual opinions are asked about a particular issue. Characteristic to deliberative surveys is that a random, representative sample of the population is first questioned on a particular issue. Members of the sample are then invited to gather to discuss the issue at stake. After the deliberations, during which people have had the time and the opportunity to become more informed and
more engaged by the issue, the sample is again asked the original questions in order to see if opinions have changed (see e.g. Fishkin, http://cdd.stanford.edu; Fishkin & Laslett 2002).

Deliberative surveys have been held in many countries, but mainly in the United States of America. In the Netherlands, the method of deliberative polling has not been used hitherto.

**Assumption 1**: ‘Citizen participation has positive effects on the quality of democracy’  

The role of citizen participation in democracy is a central theme in contemporary democratic theory. Over the past decades, a number of theoretical perspectives have emerged that emphasise a greater citizen participation in public policy making. Examples are participatory democracy (Pateman, 1970), strong democracy (Barber, 1984), deliberative democracy, and direct democracy (Setälä & Schiller 2009). Participatory democrats, in particular, have argued that delegation of decision-making power leads to citizens becoming alienated from politics. They regard citizen participation as vital to democracy. Similar to that, Barber (1984) argues that an excess of liberalism has undermined our democratic institutions and fostered cynicism about voting and alienation among citizens. Large groups of citizens never vote, while those citizens who are politically active mainly participate by electing persons who then do the actual work. Others, notably theorists on deliberative democracy, consider the essence of democratic legitimacy to be the capacity of those affected by collective decision to deliberate in the production of that decision, and thus deliberation rather than voting should be regarded as the central mechanism for political decision-making (Gutmann and Thompson 2004; Gastil and Levine 2005; Dryzek and List 2003; Elster 1998).

Citizen involvement contributes to what Smith calls a number of democratic goods (Smith, 2009: 12-20; for a similar approach, see also Michels & De Graaf 2010; Agger & Löfgren 2008). Although by no means exhaustive, the main arguments in favour of more direct forms of political involvement of citizens brought forward in democratic theory are (for a more extensive elaboration of these theoretical arguments, see Michels & De Graaf 2010):

- that it gives citizens a say in decision making (*influence*),
- contributes to the inclusion of individual citizens in the policy process (*inclusion*),
- contributes to *knowledge, democratic skills and virtues*,
- leads to rational decisions based on public reasoning (*deliberation*),
- and increases the legitimacy of decisions (*legitimacy*).

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2 Based on Michels 2011, and Michels 2012.
But what can we say about the contribution of participatory innovations to democracy in the real world? Do these innovations give people a say, do they contribute to the inclusion of more people and of other (groups of) people, do they lead to deliberation and rational decisions, and does it increase the legitimacy of decisions?

The empirical evaluation of democratic innovations remains a relatively unexplored area of research. The conclusions that will be presented below are based on a meta-study of 120 cases of participatory innovation in Western countries on which cases was reported in academic articles and evaluation studies by research institutions between 2000 and 2010 (see for further details about this study, Michels 2011). Based on this study, we can picture some patterns and draw conclusions with respect to the contribution to democracy for different types of participatory innovations.

The study shows a number of patterns in the way participation affects democracy. The contribution of citizen participation to knowledge, skills, and virtues shows a similar pattern for referendums, participatory governance, deliberative surveys, and deliberative forums. In the large majority of cases, there is an increase in knowledge, skills, and virtues. Skills are understood to refer to civic skills, such as debating public issues and running a meeting. Civic virtues pertain to public engagement and responsibility, political interest, the feeling of being a public citizen, and willing to be active in public life. However, we must guard against overhasty conclusions, because the information on referendums and participatory policy making was derived from only a small number of cases.

A second conclusion is that for all types of participatory innovations, involved citizens generally have positive attitudes about the process and the outcome (legitimacy). The general picture is that those who participate are positive about the process and the outcome. This finding contrasts with the low support reported for other actors, although information on this is sparse.

But the analysis also makes it clear that, with respect to other criteria, the contribution of participation to democracy differs according to type of democratic innovation. The main difference is between participatory governance and referendums on the one hand and, deliberative surveys and deliberative forums on the other hand. The distinction in focus (outcome and decision making versus process and opinion formation) appears to be crucial in understanding the contribution of different forms of citizen participation to democracy.

Participatory democrats believe that participation gives citizens a say in decision-making, and thus enables them to exert influence on the decision-making process. As
expected, citizens participating in referendums and participatory governance projects appear to have more influence on policy than do participants of deliberative surveys and deliberative forums (*influence*). Influence is usually not used as a criterion as such in evaluation studies of participatory innovations. Instead, often some indication of what has been done with the recommendations or vote of the participants in terms of policy is given.³

Moreover, there appears to be a tension between the quality and the quantity of participation. Whereas deliberative forums and surveys are better at promoting the exchange of arguments, referendums and participatory governance projects are better at involving more people. This conclusion falls apart in two parts, the first reflecting the element of deliberation, the other referring to inclusion.

Deliberative democrats, in particular, claim that citizen participation in deliberative settings may contribute to rational decisions based on public reasoning. Whether or not decisions are rational is difficult to assess, therefore we focus on the quality of public reasoning (*deliberation*). Deliberation refers to the exchange of arguments and to the willingness to hear other points of view and to debate issues, and second, to the shift in preferences (are people willing to change opinions). The conclusion is that deliberative surveys and forums would appear more effective when it comes to encouraging the exchange of arguments and the willingness to shift preferences compared to referendums and to participatory governance.

*Inclusion* refers to the inclusion of individual citizens into the policy process. Studies do not use the concept of inclusion, but instead use two different types of criteria that may be regarded as two aspects of inclusion: access to the forum and the representativeness of the forum. Inclusion first refers to the openness of the forum to all citizens. Is everyone allowed to take part or is there a selection of participants? And, secondly, inclusion refers to how representative the forum is. How representative is the forum for the population at large (age, sex, education), and have no relevant groups or interests been excluded from participation? Referendums and cases of participatory governance appear to be more open than deliberative forums and deliberative surveys, however the level of representativeness was higher for the deliberative types of cases, in particular for deliberative surveys. Hence, participation in referendums and participatory governance was found to contribute to the inclusion of more.

³ In those cases where we do find an impact on policy, we cannot always be sure whether this change is a direct effect of the recommendations of the participants. Other factors may also have played a role, and it could very well be that changes in policy might have been carried out, even if the participants had recommended otherwise. Impact on policy, therefore, refers to a connection between participation and policy, but does not tell us much about the causality of the relation.
people than deliberative surveys and forums do, but also more often to the exclusion of particular groups.

What are the implications of this for our understanding of the relevance of citizen participation to democracy? How does citizen participation contribute to democratic values? Citizen participation has a number of positive effects for those that participate. It encourages civic skills and virtues, and thus contributes to democratic citizenship, it increases the legitimacy of decisions, and either encourages deliberation or gives citizens an impact on policy. Each design has its own strengths. Notably, whereas deliberative forums and surveys are better at promoting the exchange of arguments, referendums and projects of participatory governance are better at involving more people and giving them a real impact on policy.

However, one should be aware of the fact that these effects are only able to be perceived with regard to those taking part. We do not know whether citizen participation projects also lead to more support, deliberation, or skills among those that do not take part. And thus, we cannot draw conclusions about the benefits of participatory innovations to democracy as a whole.

**Assumption 2**: ‘Citizens desire to have a greater voice in political decision-making’

Since positive effects of democratic innovations are perceptible only to those taking part, and the number of participants is often small or particular groups are underrepresented, the benefits to individual democratic citizenship are far more conclusive than to democracy as a whole. This leads to the question what type of democracy the people themselves actually desire.

Many reformists and scholars have called for various mechanisms of direct democracy to complement the existing form of representative democracy (see the sections above). The people, it is alleged, desire to have a greater voice in political decision-making processes. Yet, the extent to which people actually desire more of a voice is an ongoing debate. Whereas some research investigating people’s support for direct democracy has found some demand among citizens for more direct involvement (Bengtsson and Mattila 2009; Bowler et al. 2007; Dalton et al. 2001; Donovan and Karp 2006), others have questioned these conclusions. In particular, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2001; 2002) have argued that public support for direct democracy is mainly due to a feeling of dissatisfaction with representative democracy, rather

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4 Based on Coffé and Michels 2012.
than to any actual desire to engage more in political decision-making processes. In particular, they (2002) have argued that citizens in the US have no desire for any greater involvement in political decision-making or providing more input to decision makers. These citizens are unhappy with the processes characteristic of representative democracy, including debating, compromising, and slowness, and would prefer not to know all the details about the decision-making process. This does not mean that people believe that no mechanism for government accountability is necessary. Yet, they would prefer the mechanism to come into play only in unusual circumstances. According to Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002), citizens prefer a kind of *stealth* arrangement. They want a democratic decision-making process, but prefer it to be visible only in exceptional circumstances. Stealth democracy, therefore, refers to a form of democracy that stresses efficiency, less debate, less influence of partisanship interests, and a greater use of expert opinions in the political decision-making process. Thus, while direct democracy, as compared to representative democracy, entails a higher degree of involvement of ordinary citizens in the decision-making process, stealth democracy calls for less active citizen involvement.

In sum, the question of which type of democracy citizens would support remains, in particular since the research to date has focused mainly on one particular type of democracy (and in particular on direct democracy), as such lacking a comparative perspective between different types of decision-making processes (and thus ways of representation). In our study (2013), we focused on public support for different types of democracy: stealth, direct and representative democracy and investigated to what extent this support differs between groups with different levels of educational attainment. It is well known that education has a major influence on voting decisions and many political attitudes, with some even claiming a trend towards an *increasing* educational gap in political interest, attitudes and behaviour (e.g., Bovens and Wille 2010; Gallego 2007; Stolle and Hooghe 2011; Stubager 2010). Education increases cognitive skills and feelings of citizen duty to participate, and less well-educated citizens are consistently found to be less likely to engage in politics and to be more distrustful and cynical about politics and politicians (e.g., Bovens and Wille 2010; Kriesi et al. 2006; Stubager 2010). If different educational groups have different opinions about how democracy should preferably be organized, that might eventually have consequences for the legitimacy of democracy in particular because a legitimate democracy demands some sort of a common idea of what democratic decision making should entail.
Overall, using data collected at the end of 2011 within the scope of an ongoing Dutch internet survey (LISS), our analyses of the data of 4,655 respondents, lead us to conclude that when asked about their support for each of the different political decision-making processes, less well educated citizens are more likely to support stealth and direct democracy compared to higher educated citizens. While supporting both stealth and direct democracy may seem contradictory (the first requiring less citizen involvement whereas the latter involves a higher degree of citizen engagement), both seem to offer an alternative to representative democracy for those who feel dissatisfied and ineffectual. For, while educational gaps remain significant after controlling for educational differences in political attitudes, they can be partly explained by lower levels of political efficacy and satisfaction among the groups with a lower level of educational attainment. In general, therefore, our study finds support for political dissatisfaction theory as well as for the idea that those who feel political inefficacious will be more likely to support an alternative decision-making process compared to those who feel that they can influence government policy. This support for alternative decision-making processes can also be linked to a populist discourse which emphasizes the exaggerated influence of partisanship and (mainstream) political parties, and the ideal of the vox populi (Mudde 2007).

At the same time, we found no substantial educational differences in general support for representative democracy. In fact, if citizens with a lower level of education displayed the same levels of political efficacy, trust and satisfaction as more highly educated citizens, they would be found to be slightly more supportive of representative democracy than the better-educated group. Less well-educated citizens’ greater support for direct and stealth democracy compared to representative democracy can mainly be ascribed to the lower educated citizens’ lower levels of political trust, efficacy and satisfaction.

In sum, there appears to be general agreement in the support for representative democracy among different levels of education. Hence, there does not seem to be an outspoken manifestation of an educational polarization in support for representative democracy. Yet, the link between education and support for decision-making processes deserve further scientific (and political) attention as it seems that lower educated citizens are substantially more likely to support alternative ways of decision-making compared to higher educated. These gaps can be partly explained by low levels of political satisfaction and trust, which are more prevalent among less well-educated citizens compared to more highly educated citizens. It would therefore seem relevant to investigate how trust and satisfaction with the main institutions of representative democracy can be improved. While our study did
not address this issue, one possibility would be to look for ways to strengthen citizens’ feelings of being represented, which are on average weaker in the groups with less education compared to those with a higher level of educational attainment (see Van Dijk and Coffé 2011, Webb et al. 2010).

Furthermore, further research is needed to investigate to what extent our findings also hold outside of the Netherlands by taking a comparative cross-national perspective. Bovens and Wille (2010: 393) concluded that the well-educated “dominate every political venue in the Netherlands.” This major educational gap might be reflected in the educational differences we found in this study. Hence, it would be interesting to see to what extent educational differences in support also occur in countries where such educational gaps are generally less strong. Also, the Dutch political context with limited experience with the organization of referenda, a strong tradition of neo-corporatist policymaking and influence of expert councils, is likely to influence how Dutch citizens think about decision-making processes. For example, its relatively strong tradition with expert councils may mean that citizens are in generally relatively reluctant towards more influence of experts in decision-making given that they already have a substantial impact, compared to countries where this is not the case.

Assumption 3: ‘Governments want citizens to participate more often’

A third assumption often made is that governments want citizens to participate more often. In promoting citizen participation and coproduction, government increasingly presents itself as a partner of citizens. In this section, the focus shifts from citizen involvement in decision-making to participation in the implementation of policy.

Increasingly, governments seek to cooperate with citizens. This fits a more general trend towards cooperation in networks in which both public and private actors are involved. It is argued that due to increasingly complex policy challenges and the changing capacity of governments to pursue collective interests, government needs to cooperate with others (O’Toole et al. 2005; Pierre and Peters 2000). The assumption is that cooperation leads to better service provision and more efficiency.

In the relation between citizens and government, the increasing popularity of coproduction evidences this trend. Coproduction is not a recent phenomenon. The contemporary concept of coproduction is defined in the early 1980s by American academics (Brudney and

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5 Based on Van Dooren, Van Montfort, and Michels (2013)
England 1983). Yet, it seems that the contemporary practice of coproduction is both more intense and global (Bovaird 2007). Co-production between governments and citizens takes place in different areas of public services. For example: citizens cooperate with the police in neighborhood watch schemes, patients work together with health professionals to develop personalized medication schemes, participatory budgeting, and peer learning are some concrete projects (see for instance the case catalogue of Governance International (2012) for more cases). One of the explanations for the increase in coproduction initiatives is the technological innovations and social media, which provide new means of involving citizens (Meijer 2012).

In promoting initiatives of co-production, government increasingly presents itself as a partner of citizens. The state is both activist, but also restrained. It wants to intervene and to improve society, but due to a lack of resources and support, it cannot do this alone. Therefore, the state appeals on the citizen (Peeters and Drosterij 2012). Likewise, in the implementation of regeneration policies in disadvantaged neighborhoods, governments see citizens as partners. The former Dutch Balkenende-cabinet presented a picture of an ideal society where citizens take part in society as responsible and loyal participants instead of being passive subjects who only put forward demands and complaints against government. This view finds a translation in local policy. In recent years, citizens in many cities in the Netherlands have been given more room to take initiatives to improve their neighborhoods. These so-called ‘citizens’ initiatives’ are assumed to strengthen the role of citizens in the public domain (Verhoeven and Oude Vrielinck 2012).

However noble these initiatives may be, the dominant discourse of partnerships between citizens and government conceals that citizens and government may have conflicting interests. The discourse of partnerships between citizens and government in most cases also implies that government expects citizens to behave in a specific way. Citizens are expected to behave ‘responsible’, that is to contribute to social cohesion, to confront fellow citizens when they show unsocial behavior, or to make the right choices in order to live healthy (Peeters and Drosterij 2012). In a similar way, citizens’ initiatives that do not fit government plans or protest initiatives that seek to confront government are often seen as unproductive and therefore as not desirable (Van Dooren 2012). Citizens are partners on the state’s terms. As a consequence, the silent ideology of partnerships between citizens and the state minimizes the voice of the ‘irresponsible’ and deviant citizen. The adagio ‘you are either with us, or against
us’ forms a barrier for new ideas and criticism to get accepted. The exclusion of the voice of some (groups of) citizens in the public sphere may finally lead to a decrease of legitimacy and democratic equality, which belong to the fundamental principles of democracy (Young 2000).

Understanding and enhancing democracy – a new agenda
In this paper I addressed and discussed three assumptions that are often implicitly made in research on citizen participation:

1) citizen participation has positive effects on the quality of democracy.
Based on empirical research I concluded that citizen participation indeed has positive effects on the quality of democracy. It encourages civic skills and virtues, and thus contributes to democratic citizenship, it increases the legitimacy of decisions, and either encourages deliberation or gives citizens an impact on policy. Furthermore, the design of the provision for citizen involvement matters; each design has its own strengths.

It seems relevant to further develop systematic comparative empirical research that investigates the relation between the design of democratic innovations and the effects on democracy, also within specific democratic institutional contexts. For example, it would be interesting to investigate whether the implications differ between majoritarian democracies and consensus democracies, the latter being more used to integrative interaction and consensus seeking.

The conclusion of my study was that democratic effects were only able to be perceived with regard to those taking part, and thus the benefits to individual democratic citizenship are far more conclusive than to democracy as a whole. Since the number of participants is often small or particular groups are underrepresented, the question remains what citizens themselves desire?

The assumption often made is that 2) citizens desire to have a greater voice in political decision-making. Empirical research by Hilde Coffé and myself shows that lower educated citizens are substantially more likely to support alternative ways of decision-making, that is both stealth and direct democracy, compared to higher educated. These gaps can be partly explained by low levels of political satisfaction and trust, which are more prevalent among less well-educated citizens compared to more highly educated citizens.

As suggested before, it would therefore seem relevant to investigate how trust and satisfaction with the main institutions of representative democracy can be improved. While our study did not address this issue, one possibility would be to look for ways to strengthen
citizens’ feelings of being represented, which are on average weaker in the groups with less education compared to those with a higher level of educational attainment.

Another way of investigating the relation between citizens and government is to approach this from the perspective of governments. Governments increasingly seek to cooperate with citizens. The assumption often made is that 3) governments want citizens to participate more often. A critical analysis of local policy in the Netherlands revealed that the discourse of partnerships between citizens and government in most cases also implies that government expects citizens to behave in a specific way. Citizens’ initiatives that do not fit government plans or protest initiatives that seek to confront government are often seen as unproductive and therefore as not desirable. Citizens are partners on the state’s terms, which minimizes the voice of the ‘irresponsible’ and deviant citizen and may lead to the exclusion of the voice of some (groups of) citizens in the public sphere.

The research done so far only includes a number of cases in the Netherlands and Belgium. A more systematic discourse analysis of policy in various areas and countries would therefore seem relevant in order to unravel the assumptions and motives of governments to implement forms of cooperation with citizens.

In sum, I would like to make a strong point for future research that includes:
- systematic comparative empirical research focusing on the design of democratic innovations and its effects on democracy (democratic values and democratic system).
- qualitative research to explore alternative ways to strengthen citizens’ feelings of being represented.
- discourse and policy analysis to investigate the assumptions and motives of governments to implement forms of cooperation with citizens.
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as partners: information, consultation and public participation in policy making.