Preferences for deliberative democracy: Who does not want to participate in mini-publics?

ECPR General Conference
Université de Montréal 26 - 29 August 2015

Panel: Democracy preferences, participation, and deliberation

Work in progress

Vincent Jacquet, vincent.jacquet@uclouvain.be, UCLouvain, boursier FRESH F.R.S.-FNRS, Belgium

Abstract: This paper offers an empirical analysis of participation and non-participation to two mini-publics in Belgium, the so-called G1000 and G100. These two deliberative experiences were built on the assumption that people want to be involved in political deliberation about public issues. Yet, the following question remains: Why do some citizens refuse and others accept to deliberate in mini-publics? Indeed, less than three percent of randomly selected citizens accepted to attend. Analysing thirty-eight in-depth interviews with participants and above all non-participants, this paper shows that motives of acceptance and non-acceptance are always related to the evaluation of the political context and political actors. Five discourses on the political process (suspicious discourse, professional discourse, postmodern discourse, partisan discourse, lost representative discourse) shape the interpretation of the mini-publics. Mechanisms that explain acceptance and refusal differ in function of these discourses, which results in different kinds of participation and non-participation.

An increasing number of scholars and political actors argue that mini-publics – deliberative forums of randomly selected citizens – are a key ingredient to cure the democratic malaise of modern democracies (Brown, 2006; Geissel, Newton, 2012; Goodin, Dryzek, 2006; Niemeyer, 2011). They consider that this mechanism provides an appropriate means to achieve two democratic goals: equal and representative participation on one hand, deliberation on the other hand (Fishkin, 2009). Several kind of mini-publics are nowadays organised, such as consensus conferences, deliberative opinion polls, citizens’ juries and citizens’ assemblies (Smith, 2012). Yet, a major problem remains. The very large majority of citizens do not want to participate and to deliberate when they are randomly selected. The participation rate varies from 0,5% to 30% (Curato, Niemeyer, 2013). This raises the following questions: Why do some citizens refuse
and others accept to deliberate in mini-publics? If the overrepresentation of the socially advantaged is well known (Goidel et al., 2008; Griffin et al., 2015), this study aims to go beyond this approach. Indeed, these statistical biases do not elucidate the reason why citizen are attracted or not by such democratic innovation. We propose therefore to look at the diversity of meanings that citizens attribute to mini-publics. But, in order to make sense of these different interpretations, it is needed to set them in the light of the different discourses on political process. These discourses are systems of meaning, ways of representing the political world. They give a frame of reference to interpret political events, and in this case, an invitation to participate in a mini-public. By doing so, the research can contribute to the ongoing debate about the link between democracy preferences and the way people engage themselves in the political arena (Bengtsson, Christensen, 2014).

This paper explores two cases of grassroots mini-publics in Belgium: the so-called G1000 and G100. The empirical study of real opportunities of deliberation is important since other studies underline that the desire to deliberate in surveys is not necessarily translated into real participation (McHugh, 2006). The first case was organized at country level during the political crisis of 2010-2012 in the absence of a federal government due to difficult negotiations among parties from the northern and the southern parts of the country. During this crisis, a group of citizens initiated a mini-public, the G1000, gathering more than 700 individuals for a one-day deliberation (G1000, 2012). The second case was inspired by the former but organized at local level, in the municipality of Grez-Doiceau, and gathered about fifty participants. The paper builds this analysis on 38 in-depth interviews with 17 participants and 21 non-participants. This technique of interview provides rich data to understand the place mini-publics hold in the social and political trajectories of the participants. This work indeed argues that, in order to fully understand the citizens’ reaction to mini-publics, one needs to grasp their general discourse on political process. From an inductive analytical approach, five discourses have been distinguished: the suspicious discourse, the professional discourse, the postmodern discourse, the partisan discourse and the lost representative discourse. Mechanisms that explain the participation and the non-participation differ in function of these discourses, which results in different kinds of participation and non-participation.

Firstly, the paper briefly presents works on the citizens’ (absence of) willingness to participate and deliberate in politics, as well as the democracy preferences hypothesis. The second section introduces both cases of mini-publics, the G1000 and the G100, and the methodology used to collect the interviews. The notion of discourse on the political process is introduced afterwards, with the description of the five discourses on political process and their links with democratic innovations. The paper ends with the analysis of the impact of random selection and deliberation on the citizens’ willingness to be engaged in politics.

1 Citizens towards democratic innovations

1.1 Mini-publics and random selection

For several decades, the representative institutions have suffered from a lack of confidence (Inglehart, Catterberg, 2002; Norris, 1999; Putnam, 2002) and traditional forms of participation have mobilized fewer citizens (Dalton, 2004; Mair, van Biezen, 2001; Wattenberg, 2000). In this context, several democratic innovations have been proposed in order to foster the participation of lay citizens in the decision making process and the
responsiveness of policy-making process (Fung, Wright, 2003; Grönlund, Bächtiger, Setälä, 2014; Smith, 2009).

This paper mainly focuses on mini-publics. According to an ‘intermediate definition’ (Ryan, Smith, 2014, p. 18), these are groups small enough to be genuinely deliberative, and representative enough to be genuinely democratic (though rarely will they meet standards of statistical representativeness, and they are never representative in the electoral sense) (Goodin, Dryzek, 2006, p. 220). These citizens are gathered in order to deliberate on a specific topic in a forum lasting one or more days. Various mechanisms are used around the world, but the most standardised forms are planning cells (Garbe, 1986), citizens’ juries (Crosby, Nethercut, 2005), consensus conferences (Joss, 1998), deliberative polls (Fishkin, 1992) and citizens’ assemblies (Warren, Pearse, 2008). Their impacts can differ from pure consultation to integration in the decision making process as proposals of constitutions’ revisions to referenda (Reuchamps, Suter, forthcoming)

Random selection, or more precisely ‘near random’ selection, is used to compose the public of these events. This mechanism of participants selection is not new in the political field. In the ancient Athenian and the Italian Republic of the Renaissance, numbers of officers were chosen by lot (Dowlen, 2008; Manin, 1997). After a disappearance linked to the French and American revolutions – except for juries in trial – we see today a renewal of this technique with the selection of participants for mini-publics (Carson, Martin, 1999; Sintomer, 2010). Several theoretical arguments are proposed in the literature to justify random selection of citizens. For some, it allows to create a representative microcosm of the society (Fishkin, 2009). For others, the use of random selection with a small n-number of participants does not give real statistical representative samplings of the population but brings into the mini-public a diversity of population and points of view (Burnheim, 1985). According to Bohman (2007, pp. 351-352), increasing heterogeneity among participants enhances the epistemic qualities of deliberation. When forums are only composed of completely self-selected citizens, these are the already active citizens who come to deliberate and these groups are unrepresentative of the larger public (Ryfe, 2002). They are wealthier and better educated (Fung, 2006). The aim of random selection is to break this logic of social and political reproduction and to create spaces where people who never participate, come to deliberate with other citizens. This technique also symbolizes the value of equality. According to Barber, sortition embodies the idea that all citizens are equally capable of political judgment and equally responsible for public good (1984, p. 293).

However, the potential of random selection is limited because participation is never compulsory and citizens can accept or not to deliberate when there are chosen by lot (Ryfe, 2005; Smith, 2012). In this sense, sortition does not cancel the effect of self-selection. Participation rates in mini-publics differ from one another according to the mini-public; from 0.4% in a Canadian city (Culver, Howe, 2004) to 30 % with some deliberative polls (Luskin, Fishkin, 1998)2. But who are these participants? Previous research has provided mixed results. Some show that the bias follows the classical pattern of social inequalities observed in other

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1 According to Warren and Pearse (2008) and Smith (2012), it is more accurate to speak about near random selection for three reasons. First, databases are rarely complete. Second, organizers often prefer to combine random selection with stratification. Thirdly, participation is never compulsory and there is an effect of self-selection. This last element is the core of this paper.

2 The different participation rates between deliberative mini-public is an interesting albeit neglected topic in the literature (Curato, Niemeyer, 2013). Further macro comparisons are welcome to impact on the different a factor (the issue, the level, the design, the impact on the decision).
kinds of political participation (SES model). Participants are more men, better educated and older than the whole population (Goidel et al., 2008; Griffin et al., 2015). But some observers argue these overrepresentations are limited (Curato, Niemeyer, 2013; Jacobs, Cook, Carpini, 2009; Luskin, Fishkin, 1998), and by no means reflect the wide differences between participants and non-participants in more traditional political activities (Smith, 2012). Nevertheless, others studies show that some deliberative events are characterised by the exact opposite pattern. In a study on online deliberation with congress men in the USA, Neblo et al. argue that it is precisely people who are less likely to participate in traditional partisan politics who are the most interested in deliberative practices (Neblo et al., 2010). The kind of citizens interested in such democratic innovations is thus ambiguous.

1.2 The democratic preferences hypothesis

How to explain the (lack of) desire to participate in deliberations? This question can be interpreted from diverse points of view, but a growing concern in political science gives ways to tackle this questioning. Recent research deals with the kind of democratic arrangements that citizens would like (Coffé, Michels, 2014; Font, Wojcieszak, Navarro, 2015; Hibbing, Theiss-Morse, 2002). These research data show that citizens have different aspirations for the way politics should be conducted. Some prefer greater citizens’ involvement and participatory style of governance, but others do not want to deal with politics. Some insist on the representative role of elected people and others favour decisions left in the hands of non-elected independent experts. But as explained by Bengtsson and Christensen, “[…] these different conceptions of democracy are not just ideals without substantial consequences. On the contrary, they have systematic effects on the way and extent in which people choose to engage in political activities” (Bengtsson, Christensen, 2014, p. 18). Consistent with other studies (Neblo et al., 2010; Webb, 2013), citizens’ implicit folk “philosophies” about how democracy is supposed to work, influence the level and the nature of citizens participation. They show in the Finnish context that the citizens who support representative models of democracy are more likely to vote in elections and to participate in institutionalized activities; citizens who support an expert-based model tend to participate less and citizens with a participatory orientation are more engaged in institutionalized and non-institutionalized activities.  

In the wake of this literature, this paper aims to move the debate forward in two directions. Firstly, it focuses on democratic innovations that are the most discussed in normative literature: mini-publics. The objective is to look at the citizens’ behaviour when they are confronted to a real opportunity of participation in such a deliberative event. Secondly, closed questions currently compose surveys. It makes difficult to assess whether these responses are consistent with the real democratic representations of citizens. For instance, it is problematic to know whether or not the support for a more participatory democracy reflects a real desire to be involved in the political process instead of a frustration with the current political process (Webb, 2013). Therefore, this paper proposes to use in-depth interviews to collect qualitative data regarding the citizens’ evaluation, representations and wishes regarding politics. The aim is to look at the way citizens integrate current and ideal roles of elections, politicians, experts, direct participations with the invitation to attend a deliberative mini-public. As proposed by several authors (Curato, Niemeyer, 2013; Karjalainen, Rapeli, 2015), this provides the opportunity to go beyond a socio-demographic description of participants and non-participants by understanding why some accept and others refuse to deliberate.
2 Analysing participation and non-participation in two mini-publics

2.1 Two mini-publics

Two Belgian cases of mini-publics are analysed in this paper. The G1000 and the G100 were both organized by groups of citizens and used random samplings to select participants. The two experiences differ in their level of organization (national vs. local) and their operational objective.

2.1.1 The G1000

The G1000 took place in particular circumstances for the country (Caluwaerts, Reuchamps, 2015)\(^3\). After the 2011 elections, Belgian parties were unable to find an agreement to form a new government and the federal level was left without full-function government during several months. During this crisis, a group of citizens decided to create a mini-public gathering 1000 inhabitants of the country to show that citizens are able to give their voices and not only their votes (G1000, 2012). On 11\(^{th}\) November 2011, sitting at 81 tables, 704 participants deliberated about three issues – social security, immigration, redistribution of wealth – that were chosen in a first online phase. They were invited to discuss these issues, to listen to short speeches from experts and to propose some options of public policies and vote for them. At the end of the day, a report was given to the presidents of the six parliaments of the country, who were invited to observe the forum (G1000, 2012).

Organizers asked an independent recruitment agency to contact participants through Random Digit Dialling\(^4\). Every inhabitant – who has a fixed or a mobile telephone – had thus an equal chance of being selected for participation in the G1000. The participation rate was 3\(\%\), which is a standard result (Caluwaerts, Reuchamps, 2014). In order to guard over the quality of the participants sample, the random selection was checked for three predefined population quotas: gender, age and province (Caluwaerts, Reuchamps, 2012). At the end, these quotas seemed to be well respected in the group of final participants. 52\% of the participants were female, 48\% were male, which is a perfect reflection of the gender composition of the population. Moreover, 61\% of the participants were Dutch-speaking, versus 39\% of French speakers, which is also an accurate reflection of the Belgian population. There was also a large diversity in age groups, with the youngest participant being 18, and the oldest one being 85. There were no quotas for the level of education. The composition regarding this dimension reflects the usual overrepresentation of better educated people (table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of education</th>
<th>G1000 participants</th>
<th>Belgian population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>low</td>
<td>16,6%</td>
<td>33,8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>middle</td>
<td>28,3%</td>
<td>37,7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high</td>
<td>55,2%</td>
<td>28,5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^3\)Information are available on www.G100.org

\(^4\)This technique generates random phone numbers for fixed and mobile lines and enjoys in Belgium a penetration rate of 99\%. 
2.1.2 The G100

The G100 was born following the G1000. Inhabitants of a municipality in the South of Brussels, Grez-Doiceau, followed the experience of the G1000 and decided to create their own mini-public. As for the G1000, the experience was totally independent from public authorities. The small group of organizers was composed of active inhabitants of the municipality and two associations. The first one is an environmental organization and the second one is specialized in the facilitation of groups’ dynamic. The mini-public consists in a two day-deliberation (11-12th October 2014). During the first day, G100 participants were invited to imagine their ideal municipality in thirty years from now. On the second day, they proposed mid-term and long-term actions to achieve this ideal situation. At the end of the event, citizens were invited to create and join working groups to work on their proposal of actions. Contrary to the G1000, the deliberative dimension of the event was thus coupled with a participatory objective.

With regard to participants’ selection, the organizers used the random selection but also wanted to invite a maximum of people to participate in their G100. Considering these two objectives, they decided to adopt a mixed method: general appeal for participation and random selection by phone. For the latter, they used the comprehensive municipal list of telephone numbers, provided by an employee of the post office. A group of seven volunteers called 115 randomly selected numbers and invited inhabitant of the municipality to deliberate. But on the G100 day, only three individuals (one man and two women) were randomly selected participants. The 44 other participants had been invited by another means (friends, family, advertisement). The number of randomly selected participants is very low, but the positive response rate (2.6 %) is similar to the G1000.

2.2 In-depth interviews with participants and non-participants

In-depth interviews with participants and non-participants were conducted. These are interviews lasting between 45 minutes and two hours, during which interviewers ask a series of very open questions (Hermanowicz, 2002; Kaufmann, 2011; Legard, Keegan, Ward, 2003). This technique of interviewing combines rigidity and flexibility. It is based on an interview guide (see appendix), but “the structure is sufficiently flexible to permit topics to be covered in the order most suited to the interviewee, to allow responses to be fully probed and explored and to allow the researcher to be responsive to relevant issues raised spontaneously by the interviewee” (Legard, Keegan, Ward, 2003, p. 141). This interview technique is most particularly appropriate to understand the way people make sense of different objects and provides very rich data to analyse meanings, representation and their structuration. The aim of these interviews is to understand the representations of the current democratic system, actors and process and how (non-)participants see democratic innovations like the G1000 or the G100. The venue of the interviews was mainly the respondents’ home, but also their workplace.

I conducted 38 original interviews (for the repartition see table 2). The G1000 and G100 organizers accepted to provide the complete list of participants’ and non-participants’ phone

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3 Informations are available on www.G100.be
4 Conviviality, nature, intergenerationality, education, local economy, wellbeing, culture and solidarity, energy autonomy. These different themes reflect very well the interests of the G100 participants.
numbers. I randomly selected people in each category\textsuperscript{7}. Because of the small number of randomly selected participants (3) in the G100, three completely self-selected participants were also interviewed. The response rate for non-participants is very important for this research because one can assume that people who refuse to deliberate are also those who refuse to have an interview with a social scientist. However, it was not the case, as shown in the table 2 which gives the number of interviews and the number of contacted people who refused to meet for an interview. The good response rate may be due to the fact that people could choose the venue and time of the meeting (including during the weekends). The profiles of interviewees are diversified, with 19 women and 19 men. These 38 people include 7 young (18-35 years), 21 middle-aged (36-60 years), and 10 aged (60+) people. The level of education is also diversified; 2 people with primary education level, 14 with secondary education level, 16 with higher education level and 6 with a university degree.

Table 2: Interviewed individuals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>G100</th>
<th>G1000</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>participants</td>
<td>3 volunteers (1)</td>
<td>12 (1)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 randomly selected (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-participants</td>
<td>10 (6)</td>
<td>11 (15)</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15 (8)</td>
<td>23 (15)</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Number of people who refused the interview is in bracket

An inductive approach is used to analyse the interviews. This is not to say that existing categories are pointless, but to understand how citizens make sense of mini-publics. The aim is to go beyond the theoretical assumptions of literature and to study representations that exist in the minds of participants and non-participants.

3 Five discourses on political process and (non)engagement

This paper argues that the different discourses on the current political process and their possible alternatives shape the citizens’ representations of democratic innovations and, accordingly, their attitude towards it. Five discourses on political process have been identified among interviews: the suspicious discourse, the professional discourse, the postmodern discourse the partisan discourse, and the lost representative discourse. Each of these discourses brings different aspects of the political process into focus and has different implications for what lay citizens should do or not. Therefore, mechanisms that explain the participation and the non-participation differ in function of theses discourses. Before describing them, this section presents the notion of discourse on political process.

3.1 Discourses on political processes

The starting point for this analysis comes from the fact that citizens adopt divergent interpretations of their (non-)involvement in mini-publics. Also, all non-participants firstly say that lack of time explains their refusal. This is a general justification aiming to explain one’s

\textsuperscript{7} I simply drew phone numbers out of the list of participants and non-participants and called them to propose an interview in the context of academic research.
non-participation (Verba, Schlozman, Brady, 1995). But the pursuit of interviews shows that this can be associated with very different motives and representations. In this situation, how can we understand participation and non-participation? In order to fully grasp this diversity of attitudes, we must pay attention to the citizens’ broader conception of the political system. Indeed, the invitation by phone to deliberate does not operate in a vacuum. It interacts with the citizen’s representation of the political process and their socio-political trajectory.

This broad conception is called discourse on political processes. According to Durr, discourses are systems of meaning, ways of representing ourselves and our social world, which not only constitute what people think and say, but also what people do (1995, p. 58). Social sciences are interested in different type of discourses, but we refer here to large-scale, ordered, integrated ways of reasoning constituting the social world (Alvesson, Karreman, 2000). These discourses provide a frame of reference, a way of interpreting the world and giving it meaning. This paper shows that the citizens’ reaction towards the G1000/G100 is shaped by the discourse on the political process they use. Discourses construct social phenomena in different ways, and entail different possibilities for human action (Burr, 1995, p. 10).

Five discourses on the political process have concretely been identified (see table 3 for a summary). Two major steps have structured the work of analysis. Firstly, every interview was read twice and every normative assumption concerning actors, process, situation and event was coded and characterized positively or negatively. This allows to analyse the discourse structure and to begin to establish the frame of reference that citizens use to make sense of the political process. A central opposition always structures each discourse (Demazière, Dubar, 1997). Each interview produces a normative framework, with elements valued and others devalued. This allowed to compare the interviewee in the way people speak about the political process and to identify groups of common frame of reference. The aim was not to gather citizens with the exact same opinion but to identify types of discourse. For instance, two people can disagree on the fact that a party X represents the interests of the group of people Y, but they share the same discourse about the idea that parties have to represent certain groups of the population. Also, people can have different positions in the political field but share the same discourse. This comparison has led to the identification of five types of discourses on the political process: the suspicious discourse, the professional discourse, the postmodern discourse, the partisan discourse, the lots representative discourse. This approach is inductive. The different types are not totally new – it is not surprising because citizens’ conceptions are based on discourses present in the society (Burr, 1995) – but they are constructed from the content of interviews and not from prior theoretical assumptions.

Secondly, I conducted a more classical thematic analysis in order to obtain a deep and thick knowledge of every five discourse (Boyatzis, 1998). The coding scheme is made up of 137 codes, structured in three levels, from the most descriptive (e.g. Politicians are motivated by earning money) to the most abstract (e.g. Representation of politicians). This second step has led to consolidate the typology, to determine the major themes associated to each discourses and to list the possible attitudes towards the mini-publics for each discourse on political process.
## Table 3: discourses on political process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-electoral-centred discourses</th>
<th>Suspicious discourse (6 no, 1 yes)</th>
<th>Professional discourse (5 no)</th>
<th>Post-modern discourse (2 no, 3 yes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Structural opposition</strong></td>
<td>People vs. Politicians</td>
<td>Good governance vs. bad governance</td>
<td>‘old-style’ society vs. postmodern society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key themes of the discourse</strong></td>
<td>Politicians are selfish and collect benefits at the expense of the people. Foreigners are the only beneficiaries of the political system Proclaimed political apathy All political activities, including mini-publics, are unable to deliver alternatives to the current process</td>
<td>Politicians are too interested by conflict of ideologies, values, parties. Good governance is characterized by qualified people developing clear strategies with rational use of means to achieve it The society should be run like a company Participation only useful to coordinate stakeholders and management. Participation of randomly selected citizens is too open and too broad to develop clear strategies and achievable goals</td>
<td>Tension between ‘old-style’ society characterized by hierarchy, capitalism and too professionalized politicians and postmodern society with ecology, sustainable development, self-realization, direct participation Distance from the conventional political arena Support for a participatory conception of democracy and the use of random selection in politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Refusal to participate in the G1000 / G100</strong></td>
<td>➔ Rejection of every political activity. The more you participate, the less you have influence</td>
<td>➔ Auto-delegetimization because of lack of skills to deal with political issues (especially at the national level) ➔ Devalorization of the process, especially its deliberative character (discussion and ordinary citizens)</td>
<td>➔ Schedule conflicts (work, birthday, wedding, …)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Acceptance to participate in the G1000 / G100</strong></td>
<td>➔ Pleasure to take part to a convivial space, social integration and to escape from difficult social reality</td>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>➔ Mini-publics are part of the society that they promote. Participation is a form of engagement to defend new modes of governance ➔ Acceptance as pioneer act</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Electoral-centred discourses (21)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Partisan discourse (6 no, 7 yes)</th>
<th>Lost representative discourse (2 no, 5 yes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Structural opposition** | Parties vs. Parties  
Majority vs. Opposition                                                                                      | Skilled and responsive elected officials vs. unskilled and selfish officials     |
| **Common themes of the discourses** | Decision-makers are and must remain elected officials. The result of elections has to influence the composition of the government and the orientation of public policies  
Participation including mini-publics reinforces the link between elected representatives and voters, and is an opportunity to give feedback  
The scope of mini-publics has to remain limited |                                                                                  |
| **Divergent themes** | Positive and negative identification to political parties  
Satisfaction with politics depends on the parties that are in charge  
Other citizens designated by their partisan proximity | Political elites do not live up to what these citizens expect  
Lack of competencies and responsiveness of current political supply |
| **Refusal to participate in the G1000 / G100** | ➔ Continuation of the will to delegate to their political parties and leaders and to spend time in other kind of activities (time priority)  
➔ Avoiding to speak up in public | ➔ Schedule conflicts (work, birthday, wedding, …)  
➔ Lack of confidence in the instrumental ability of the process proposed to organize the voice of the participants and to transfer it to elected officials |
| **Acceptance to participate in the G1000 / G100** | ➔ Continuation of the conventional participation in the conventional politics (from pleasure to speak about politics or to defend a special point of view) | ➔ Limited but extraordinary participation to realize a bottom-up agenda setting |
This paper argues that citizens receive the invitation to participate in the G1000 and G100 through these particular discursive frames. These discourses are broader than the notion of democracy preferences. The interviews show that democracy preferences are not autonomous opinions, but are intrinsically attached to the evaluation of the current political system. These two components are related and must be analysed together. In the following pages, we describe the five discourses by showing the central opposition which structures citizens’ views on the political process and the main themes that compose it. We then explain how this particular discourse invites citizens to interpret the invitation to deliberate from a certain point of view. Mechanisms that explain the participation and non-participation differ in function of theses discourses. Each discourse brings different aspects of the political process into focus and has different implications for what lay citizens should do or not. It does not mean that every citizen with the same discourse on political process has the same behaviour; but that the latter shapes the meaning that citizens attribute to such initiative and the way citizen receive the proposal to deliberate.

Finally, these discourses are not randomly present in the society. The aim of this paper is not to explain where these frameworks come from and how they are enacted by individuals. Nevertheless, this research shows that some conceptions of democracy are mobilized by citizens with certain profiles and trajectories.

3.2 Non-electoral centred-discourse

3.2.1 Suspicious discourse

This discourse is structured around an opposition between people – or the middle class – and politicians. Politicians are selfish and collect benefits at the expense of the people. Every politician is involved into politics for his/her own interest, and especially to earn money or to gain prestige. Political parties and their leaders live in an “apart world”, distant from the very large majority of the population. Throughout the interviews, people who use this discourse explain that they hate politics because politicians do not care about people’s interests. The fact that people work every day under the pressure of taxes is never heard by political elites. All individuals who take this line also have in common to consider that foreigners are the only beneficiaries of the system, and that this is a huge threat to the “real” Belgian people. For them, politicians are individuals who always make “beautiful promises” but the results of election do not change anything and these are “always the same” who govern the day after the ballot.

Belgium is not made up of its elected representatives. Belgium is made up of its people. So, people choose elected officials to lead them but…once they’re elected, they do what they want. [hesitates for 5 sec] Do they keep their promises? … No. A part of them, but well, they always make grand promises and that’s all. Do they take the majority of citizens into account? I’m not sure of it. (Non-participant, G1000, woman, 34 years old)

I’m not convinced and that’s why I don’t vote anymore, because, I’m not going to say that I’m unmotivated but… I don’t think they… I really have the feeling that all politicians live and stay in their bubble. (Participant, G1000, woman, 40 years old).

8 All quotes were translated from French to English.
The vote is compulsory in Belgium, but these people argue that if it was not the case anymore, they would no longer vote. More generally, they claim their desire to not participate in politics because they perceive the system is not made for them.

These interviews were the most difficult to conduct because these citizens have high difficulties to speak about ideal political process. After questions about possible alternatives to the current political regime, this group was always embarrassed and preferred to go back to the idea that politicians are only selfish, or to expose their difficulties in the everyday life. The most common solution they proposed was to reduce the number of ministers, their staff and their salaries. But they never suggested consulting citizens. On the contrary, there are suspicious with the notion of citizen participation and explain that every form of participation is useless, because the voice of the people is always distorted by the activities of politicians.

No. The more we consult now…The more we consult people, the less we take their opinion into account. And it's intentional, it's a communication policy, […] “Let's poll people, let's pretend to listen to...to listen to the public or the people, or anyone you want.” The more we listen, the more poll them, the less we'll take their opinion into account. (Non-participant, G100, man 64 years old)

Among people who share this discourse, all but one refused to come to the mini-public. How can we explain the difference? On the one hand, the six non-participants (G1000 and G100) were the most unable to speak about possible alternatives to the current situation. The “system” seems blocked and nobody can change it. The hopes and ideals necessary to be engaged in political activity are not present. They told that they refused the invitation and that they do not want to deal with any political activity. Their non-participation is presented as in continuity with their general apathy.

I don't want to spend my time doing that. Because the citizen consultation is a good thing, but we know how it will turn out in Belgium. So, I really don't want to waste time for that. […] They ask a few questions to ease their consciences, to be able to say that they did it, but I don't know if they really take it into account… Concretely, I don't feel like they take it into account. (Non-participant, G100, woman, 34 years old)

Well, you were selected… Well, I listened to them, like I am listening to you and then, um, and then they sent me papers and I saw it was a kind of scam to approach you like that. You were selected as what? Uh... I don't know. There it is. And then I had a look at it, yes, and then I… it didn’t…pff. (Non-participant, G100, man, 64 years old)

It is important to note that, for them, the bottom-up style of both initiatives is not perceived. They speak about the G1000 and the G100 like they were organized by public authorities. In the light of this suspicious discourse, mini-public is considered as politics as usual and no instrumental goals seem to attract these citizens.

On the other hand, one participant is an unemployed woman who reports that she mainly took part in the G1000 to meet people and to experience a new event in a situation characterized by loneliness due to unemployment.

Well, at first, I wondered what they wanted from me; because I didn’t know anything about that, I didn’t even know it existed. And I went there more out of curiosity than conviction. And after all, I don't know if it was useful, but I think it was well organized. […] Well, I was unemployed at that time, I was bored to death at home, and I thought: “well, why not!” It was

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9 The term “politicians” is preferred to MPs, government, parliament because this discourse does not make any difference between the different kinds of institutions and actors.
a chance to go out, to meet people and to do something I never do. So, I said to myself “let’s be crazy and… let’s go” (Participant, G1000, woman, 40 years old)

Political participation is not only motivated by abstract political goals but also by a series of material and cognitive incentives (Gaxie, 2005). In this case, this participant justifies her involvement in the G1000 not as a means to place political questions on the political agenda but as a good opportunity to meet new people and to take pleasure. This is corroborated by the fact that, when she speaks about the deliberative event, she mainly refers to the practical organization of the day. She explains that the G1000 was well organized, that the baby-sitting service was perfect. During her journey to the G1000 venue, she met other participants in the train and she found it very funny to be with so many people coming from all around the country to go to the same place. She was totally disconnected from usual political bodies like the vote, parties but also trade unions. Before the attendance, the G1000 is, for this participant, not seen as an alternative or continuation of current political process but well as a space of sociability and social integration (Talpin, 2011, p. 110).

In short, both grassroots mini-publics do not appear to be alternatives for those who feel most excluded from the current political process. Citizens who give this type of discourse are not members of any association, and never participate in politics. In their sense, democratic innovations are unable as any other political settings to influence politics and cannot give any alternative political process to cure the actual failure that they perceive. Interviews show that the participation is nevertheless possible if people are motivated by goals like desire of inclusiveness and pleasure to take part in a social event associated with the face to face nature of the mini-public.  

3.2.2 Professional discourse

This discourse is structured around the opposition between good and bad governance. On the one side, the metaphor of company and its related vocabulary is used to characterize their ideal decision making process. The most suitable political process is based on competent actors developing strategies with clear objectives and appropriate means to achieve it. Fundamentally, politics is not a matter of opposed values and ideologies, but a matter of good governance, decision-makers who face problems and who have to find solutions.

Because everything is a project, actually. Even if there are short or long-term projects, everything is a project. So, when you become involved in a project, you need a business plan, and when an entrepreneur talks about a business plan, a politician talks about a budget and we can see that some projects are launched, even industrial ones… (Non-participant, G1000, man, 49 years old)

At the opposite, the political field and its logic are depreciated. People sharing this discourse explain that politicians are disconnected from reality and are too embedded in conflicts that divert them to take good decisions. They lack long-term perspectives, are more concerned by “having a career”, by the willingness to be re-elected, by “political cronyism” and rhetoric. Ideological oppositions are vestiges of old-style politics and are irrelevant to face problems in a globalized world.

One point must be stressed to fully understand this discourse on political process. The lack of politicians’ competencies is a key theme in this discourse. Does this model imply that only

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10 Deliberation can transform citizens and change their motivation during the process (Curato, Niemeyer, 2013; Talpin, 2011) but this goes beyond the scope of this paper, which mainly focus only the willingness to enter the deliberative mini-public.
experts should decide? The answer is nuanced. Experts are constantly valued in the discourses of this group, but the interviewees have specific interpretations of experts. They do not trust politicians as much as bureaucrats. For instance, a citizen explains that a humpbacked bridge in his street presents plenty of defaults because the design of it was imagined by EU technocrats who never ride in their own car. According to this discourse, appropriate decision-makers are therefore actors in direct contact with one specific issue mainly because of their professional activities.

Let’s say I have a very personal opinion. For example, instead of choosing councilors or mayors, we should elect professionals: a financial director, someone who is specialized in sports, in arts, but not someone who won votes because he bought beers for half the village, like it happens in the countryside. Because, I’m sincerely sorry but when I see education ministers who become finance ministers, it really makes me wonder. And the same thing happens at local level, actually. (Non-participant, G100, man, 67 years old)

The internal organization of companies is also used to summarize the best way to select decision-makers. They explain that, in an ideal situation, workers begin at the lowest level and they later go from rags to riches to become directors of the company. In this context, people can make good decisions because they know every post and every member of the factory.

The same problem exists in politics. And that’s why politicians who began their career at local level by vocation should evolve and operate at national level. But here, we choose young people with clear elocution who were, I think it already happened, never elected at local level and who are thrown in national elections. Something is wrong with that. (Non-participant, G1000, man, 58 years old).

What is the place of mini-publics like the G1000 and the G100 in this professional discourse on political process? They explain that it is not the best practice to implement rational changes. Participation is interesting if it allows the use of knowledge to make a decision, but randomly-selected mini-publics are too broad and open to develop a clear strategy.

But the strategy itself, once it’s implemented, must be implemented in a powerful way. Yes, and we shouldn’t ask too many questions to the citizens because they will, by definition, always find something that doesn’t work for them. [...] To me, fully opening the door, because that’s what it’s about in such a case [G100], doesn’t result in anything. Except raising discussion, exchanges, etc. but which are, I my opinion, most of the time sterile. (Non-participant, G100, man 71 years old)

The more we work with experts in the various fields, the less we have to involve the citizen, because these people know what they are doing. (Non-participant, G100, man, 67 years old)

More precisely, the second quote exposes that experiences of participation will be useless if skilled persons make decisions. The citizen’s input is only needed when decisions are made by distant and incompetent decision-makers. The mechanism of mini-publics is depreciated because the presence of ordinary citizens and the centrality of discussion in the process aren’t associated to properties of successful decision-making process.

Accordingly, nobody sharing this discourse accepted to be involved in the G1000 or G100. They are all men, more than 45 years old. In the light of their discourse, they give two kinds of motives to justify their refusal. The first is the auto-delegitimization to deal with large problems. For instance, one road worker says that he finds himself competent to speak about very local issues related with his professional skills but not for the G1000 which dealt with national issues. The proclaimed equality of citizens linked to the mechanism of random
selection (Barber 1984) interacts with the resistance of some citizens who do not feel legitimate to act in this arena.

I am talking because I work in this sector but I am not going to deal with finances, for example... uhm... Each to his own. Once you are in the upper reaches of power, you have to be a real partisan and really follow... because I'm not the one who is going to give an idea that is going to change the world. I'm not going to tell you that have to do that and that. I am like I said, the one who wants to follow has to join a party; he has to do that and to spend his whole time doing that... professionally... There it is. (Non-participant, G1000, man, 44 years old)

The second motive is related to a negative evaluation of the process itself. Some non-participants explain that these guaranties are necessary to prove the possible impact of an institution. It is thus a reference to the potential instrumental impact of the deliberative event that is contested.

I tried to look on the internet to see what it was about, what that group, that association did. So, I had a look to see what it was about, what their aim and their potential levers were. If they wanted to organize a participatory group without having a powerful lever to influence something or someone, well, I would not have seen the point. (Non-participant, G1000, man, 49 years-old)

3.2.3 Postmodern discourse

According to the postmodern discourse, there is today a tension between an “old-style society” and a “new” logic. The exact form of this ideal society is not fully determined but it favours different themes attached to postmodern ideal (ecology, sustainable development, self-realization, direct participation) (Inglehart, 1997). This discourse opposes the development of these logics to the ancient conception of democracy centred on elections and parties. They explain that electoral and partisan democracies are not at the heart of today’s democracy because representative governments have weak influence compared to the power of private actors “in the development of capitalism”. For people sharing this discourse, the notion of citizen participation is central because it is at the heart of the political model that they want to promote.

No, I think we live in a democratic society but (representative) democracy isn’t enough. Democracy is richer if there is a participative democracy. I don’t think participative democracy is going to make up for or replace democracy. It’s going to complement democracy. Since it is active and living and there are connections between democracy and participative democracy, democracy is going to evolve. I think it may be a usable idea. (Voluntary participant, G100, woman, 46 years old)

This discourse is characterized by a form of distance with conventional politics (parties, government, vote). They respect the institution of universal suffrage because it is the result of actions from social movements from the past, but they explain that in the current context, it is time to develop new logics. They tend to disconnect politics from the governmental institutions, and consider that the most important is to change the logic of the “system”. For them, this kind of formal structure is less pertinent than to build a network among citizens who can share their experiences and perspectives to create a space of autonomous and horizontal cooperation. From a biographical perspective, it is interesting to see that this depreciation of formal political organization, for two people, follows a negative experience as members of political parties. They explain that the logic of parties with the importance of “personal conflict”, “inertia” and “ideological position” restricts the liberty of its members
and the potential of creativity. On the contrary, the movement from the sixties and seventies are valorised.

Democracy is a game where everyone plays his role […] (Goosens) It’s… If you expect the others to act, it won’t work: they will always introduce to their friends, I’m sure of that. So, we’re all responsible, it’s our inertia. I am from a time that isn’t really yours: the end of the 60’s-70’s, well, we were members of the 68 Movement and we took responsibility for it, but uhm… it was a time with its wanderings and its excesses… still thrilling because it was the time of the neighbourhood committees, of the third-worldism, of the beginnings of the ecology movement, of nature awareness. People… there was a whole dynamic, people wanted to control their destiny. (Participant, G1000, woman, 67 years old)

Every person who has this conception participated or had a clear problem with their schedule (new baby or work). They explain that participation is a real continuity of their other commitments. All of them are very active in non-institutionalized forms of participation (Marien, Hooghe, & Quintelier, 2010). They sign plenty of petitions, are members of international NGO’s, participate in demonstrations for human rights. They also consider that every space of the social world is politics. Choices in their everyday life are a major source of power (Stolle, Hooghe, & Micheletti, 2005). The idea itself to organize a group of discussion and to create new forms of involvement is an objective they want to promote. For this group, the deliberative process seems attractive for its alternative features to the politics as usual. Compared to other participants, people with this discourse also tend to consider their involvement in the mini-public as a first step that appeals other commitments for this new society.

It doesn’t change my life [G100], it’s a part of my life. So, it doesn’t change my life. My life changed 5 years and a half ago, because of an illness, a break up and a divorce, etc… So my life took a strong turn then, which allowed me to free up my time for things I really like, like these things for example. (Voluntary participant, G100, woman, 46 years old)

This discourse stresses the bottom-up nature of the G1000 and the G100. According to them, they decided to attend the mini-public because the events were organized by a-partisan citizens and it attested an alternative to the current society. They expose that they are suspicious about possible participatory bodies organized by public authorities because there is an important threat of manipulation.

Finally it is important to emphasize that this discourse is the one proposed by two self-selected participants of the G100. Both are active in other environmental projects in the municipality and know the organizers. They insist the most on the tension between these two conceptions of society and tend to consider their involvement as a “pioneer” attitude to develop the society of tomorrow.

3.3 Electoral-centred discourses

This is the most present discourse among the interviewees (21). The centre of political process is idealised as citizens who read different manifestos and vote for the parties that propose policies congruent with their preferences. They explain that decision-makers are and must remain elected officials and it is their responsibility to take the leadership in the representative process. Both participants and non-participants share the discourse that the result of elections has to influence the government’s composition and policies’ orientation.

At a superficial level, all members of this group seem interested in the idea of using mini-publics to collect the population’s opinion on specific topics. More broadly, they are in favour
of participation in order to give citizens opportunities to express their opinion. Participation mechanisms are key elements to improve the quality of the electoral and representative system. It is not an alternative to electoral democracy but a means to reinforce the link between elected representatives and voters, and to give feedback. Vote and participation in the mini-public are part of the same opportunity to influence and control elected leaders.

You have to vote, if you don’t vote, you can’t do anything. It’s like giving up democracy. To me, people need to vote, they need to follow the ones they gave their advice, their vote to. They need to follow them. If they see that they take bad measures for the people, they need to protest, to participate in meetings like the G1000, you can find them everywhere in Belgium. The follow-up is as important as the vote. To me, that’s the way it is. (Participant, G1000, man, 32 years old)

But beyond this superficial openness to democratic innovations, it is possible to observe different kinds of citizens’ attitudes towards the invitation to deliberate. Some explain that this kind of mechanism is a funny idea, but that they have no time to go there, while others explain that it was a form of evidence to accept. To make sense of this diversity of attitudes, we need to distinguish between two kinds of discourses related to different perceptions of self-position in the electoral system.

### 3.3.1 Partisan discourse

The discourse of this group of citizens is structured around the opposition between political parties. Contrary to other groups, confronted with questions about their attitude towards the government they explain that it depends on the parties that are in charge. It is also the discourse that easily refers to the orientation of public policies. They do not give precise critics or proposals. But they explain that they want to favour a direction that the party with which they identify want to promote. They explain during the interview that their positive or negative attitudes towards politics are linked to the party in charge in the current situation.

Maybe there are not many people who trust the government. But, if you ask a socialist, he’s going to tell you that he’s not confident [laughs]. Of course, a socialist is the opposite of a liberal! I don’t really follow politics, but I am more of liberal than a socialist. (Non-participant, G100, man, 50 years old)

In this quote, it is interesting to observe that citizens are designated by their partisan proximity. According to this discourse, the link between parties and their electorate is stable and provides a framework to interpret politics and interactions in the society.

In the light of this partisan discourse on political process, how do people react when they are chosen by lot? The mechanism at stake here is the continuation of their attitudes towards the electoral model. The mini-public is an opportunity for citizens active in conventional politics to continue their involvement. Their commitment after the phone call was a form of evidence. In their life, they take part to lots of political activities or are members of protest groups and consider the G1000 and G100 as ways to carry these attitudes into the mini-public.

I found it normal to say “ok, I am a citizen, and for once, finally, they question the citizens “. To me, it is and was a duty to go and participate. That’s why I said “yes” right away and that’s how I committed to participate. It seemed logical to me. (Participant, G1000, woman, 37 years old)

I say “well, yes, I am retired anyway, I have time for that”. It’s an interesting experience; we’re going to see different people. So, I said yes. (Participant, G1000, man, 71 years old)
And so, I was interested. Within one minute I answered: “Ok, no worries, I am interested” […] I didn’t think for long, in fact. Yes. It seemed great, yes, I think it was motivating. I told myself it was the time to act. I like politics, it was interesting, so… I was happy to have picked up the phone… (Participant, G1000, woman, 71 years old)

This continuation does not imply that all participants give the exact same interpretation of their involvement in the mini-public. In the last quote, this young student speaks about politics as something that she really loves, a bit like a hobby, because her dream is to work in the communication team of a ministerial cabinet. Another woman is very active in her municipality, and she explains that she also wanted to be in the new G100 group in Grez-Doiceau. But others give a more instrumental meaning to their acceptance. An unemployed woman, very active in labour unions, explains that she wanted to go there to expose her views about the situation of employment in Belgium. These interpretations are different, but they reflect a same view of mini-publics as ordinary events in their lives.

On the opposite, non-participants with this partisan discourse on political process explain that a lack of time was the prime motive for their refusal to deliberate. But the interviews allow going beyond this first explanation. It is a matter of priorities between political activity and other activities. They explain that family and work are the most important, so they do not want to take time for a deliberation with other citizens, or more generally, political activities. They explain that their concerns are adequately addressed by the political party that they follow and they prefer to leave the issues to elected officials because it is seen as their responsibility, especially when their party is in the government.

- Do you regret having less time to do this kind of things [G100]?

- No, because actually, well, I’m going to say no because it’s the national level but we all have our own concerns. I have to run my business so, yeah, of course I have to dedicate time to that. (Non-participant, G1000, man, 25 years old)

No, I’m not extroverted and … No, I don’t… I am staying quiet on my own. I mind my own business (laughs). Anyway, when you are my age, well, I don’t have anything to gain from that: I know how my life will unfold (laughs). What I would like is that they give me more for my pension. (Non-participant, G1000, woman, 69 years old)

All these non-participants explain during the interview that they prefer to spend their time in the private sphere and that involvement in the deliberation, but more broadly in the political sphere, does not seem important to them. Also, the second quote illustrates the reluctance of some citizens to come to mini-publics because they are required to to speak up in public. The deliberative nature of this mode of participation, with the implication of speaking in public, discourages interviewees to engage in the mini-public.

3.3.2 Lost representative discourse

This discourse is mobilized by citizens who explain that the decision making process must be based on the leadership of competent and responsive elected officials but that they do not find them in the current system. Politicians are today more interested by the will to be re-elected, the “power for the power” and their disputes than the “general interest” of the population. This general interest implies at the same time attention to the citizens’ concerns and decisions made by competent individuals. Contrary to the previous groups, they do not refer to policies’ orientation but deplore the quality of the current political elites.

But I think the problem in Belgium is to find strong politicians […] Maybe they wouldn’t have better ideas, but they would federate the people. We would be less likely to say “he’s an idiot,
he isn’t worth anything...”. Maybe we would tell ourselves “Ok, maybe he still knows where he is going”. (Non-participant, G100, woman, 48 years old)

I think that, at a given point of time, we need to make room for the politicians’ imagination and creation. Because we’ll always need politicians. Maybe not the politicians we have now or their way of acting, but I think we must keep representatives who, I hope, were chosen among the elites. Not especially the intellectual elites but with imagination and common sense (Non-participant, G1000, man, 46 years old)

As showed by these two quotes, the discredit about the current inertia of the political process does not imply the determination to move beyond the representative system. The fact that the current political elites do not live up to what they expect makes the core of this discourse but the interviewees remain attached to institutions of representative democracy. In this context, what is their attitude when they are selected to participate in the mini-public? The trend is clear. They tend to participate in the process. Participants with the lost representative discourse on political process explain that this involvement was a means to put on the political agenda the interest of the population neglected by the current elected officials.

And the G1000, well, I found it to be a very powerful idea because, for once, they really gave a voice to the people, to us who form the democracy in which we live in Belgium. And, we had maybe the feeling that they were going from the citizens to the politicians instead of voting for a traditional party as we usually do etc. (Participant, G1000, man, 56 years old)

I hoped it would maybe lead to more concrete results, results that are closer to the people’s wishes than to fights between parties. Well, than useless quarrels… (Laughs). I hoped it would bring politics down to earth while saying: ‘What are the real problems?’ without beginning to fight about something that is less important (G1000 participant, man, 46 years old).

The participation in the mini-public is seen here as a way to re-orientate the politicians’ action. But the pursuit of this interview shows well that it does not imply a redefinition of the political system and that mini-publics should have a restricted scope. They can shed light on citizens’ concerns but not replace elected officials and their experts.

Well, pf, I don’t see why he [the citizen] could have any influence because they were elected for a 4-year program, so why would it change? No, the elections took place on the basis of a program that each party presented, so it’s logical; they make a 4-year program. So, why in the meantime… I don’t believe that citizen debates can bring changes in the short term. I believe more in the exchange of ideas, long terms, bioethics… I don’t believe in short term projects, no. You have to let politicians, technicians take care of that. Yes. (Participant, G1000, man, 46 years old)

Accordingly, their engagement in the G1000 and the G100 is viewed as extraordinary. They explain that they barely used conventional or unconventional modes of participation in the past and that their acceptance to be involved in the process was a form of interlude in their lives since they spend more time in the private sphere. But they all insist that this involvement has to remain limited.

Accordingly, their engagement in the G1000 and the G100 is viewed as extraordinary. They explain that they barely used conventional or unconventional modes of participation in the past and that their acceptance to be involved in the process was a form of interlude in their lives since they spend more time in the private sphere. But they all insist that this involvement has to remain limited.

And maybe…well, I’m maybe going to talk about it, actually. But at the G100 level, if I can organize my schedule for one week-end, it’s ok, but let’s say you want to do it every Monday or something like that, then it’s too complicated. So no, we’re not very active. My husband always says that he would like to be active but that he has even less time than I have, so… And uh, when I left, I told myself “yes, it’s a good thing to be involved”. And then I forgot. Routine gained the upper hand. (Participant, G100, woman, 48 years old)

The non-participants who share this lost representative discourse expose the same logic and give the same argument of bottom up agenda setting but explain that they did not find
time in their agenda (schedule conflict). Some also point out that this kind of mechanism has to prove its potential to really canalise citizens’ demands and put issues on the political agenda. The mechanism has to give clear guaranties of effectiveness to mobilize this group of citizens who are not very active in the political process.

Interested, but total lack of information. And therefore, lack of motivation. [...] It was a little bit… I had the feeling that it was a little bit, how am I going to say this, cobbled together. A non-profit organization being set in motion… it was not really framed. And I think that something like that should be absolutely serious. If not, you don’t do it. (Non-participant, G1000, man, 46 years old)

4 On random selection and deliberation

The previous section has shown that five discourses can be distinguished regarding the political process (suspicious, professional, postmodern, partisan, lost representative) and that they shape the way citizens react when they are randomly selected. But what is the real singularity of mini-publics among other forms of participation?

Firstly, the originality of mini-publics is the use of random selection to invite the public of the forum instead of using more traditional calls for volunteers. But does it change anything? This study shows that it depends on the citizens’ discourse on political process. For some citizens, the random selection reproduces the logic already present in other modes of participation. Post-modern activists and active citizens with partisan discourses tend to quickly accept the invitation because it gives them a space where they can continue their involvement. Citizens identifying themselves to one political leader or party but who are relatively inactive in the political arena consider that their concerns are already well defended by their representatives and do not see the relevance of an involvement in a consultative mini-public. Citizens with professional discourse are the most reluctant to accept because they do not see why the division of political work between experts and lay men should be contested. For these different groups, the random selection procedure has not influenced differently the behaviour of citizens. However, this research shows that random selection can break the logic of reproduction of political participation, and in this case, attract people usually reluctant to engage in political sphere. Interviews show that the G1000 and G100 were a real extraordinary event in some citizens’ trajectory. But the most interesting finding is the fact that this logic is totally different for two kinds of participants. On the one side, citizens who feel the most excluded from the current political system (suspicious discourse on political process) do not consider this consultative mini-public as an alternative able to attract them to reverse the political order that they continuously criticize. But the deliberation can (sometimes) attract these people for other reasons. The gathering of citizens can influence people who feel more isolated and are in search of convivial spaces. It is such non-disruptive characteristics that seem to attract these people. On the opposite, individuals who share a discourse on political process centred on elections, but who feel lost and cannot identify to the current political supply, also accepted more easily to come and deliberate. For these people who declare to be usual by-standers, mini-publics appear as a real alternative to the current political situation and may put the citizens’ interests on the agenda. In this case, these people are motivated by the political impact and possible output on the decision making process. This qualitative approach shows therefore that random selection is partly capable of attracting citizens not familiar with political discussion.
Secondly, what is the impact of the deliberative aspect of mini-public on the involvement process? Contrary to more traditional forms of participation, face-to-face deliberative mechanisms place citizens in situation of hearing a diversity of points of view and force them to express their voice in public (Mutz, 2006). Previous studies already showed it has an impact on the willingness to deliberate (Karjalainen, Rapeli, 2015; Mutz, 2006). This research shows it differs according to the different discourses on political process. The centrality of speech is for citizens with the professional discourse a major source of criticism and motivation to refuse the invitation because they explain that “we need decisions and note speeches”. On the opposite, for citizens with the postmodern discourse, the idea itself to take time to give opportunity to every citizen to share its point of view is repeatedly valued in their discourse. For the three other groups, the connection is more complex. If some non-participants explain that they prefer to avoid speaking in public, the face to face meeting with citizens with different backgrounds seems to attract citizens with different discourses on the political process. At the local level, some citizens explain that the rural municipality of Grez-Doiceau is characterized by the coexistence of separated groups (old farmers, the new generation works in Brussel) and that they hope that the G100 can bring together these different groups. At the national level, the G1000 took place during a crisis where political parties from the Dutch-speaking North and French-speaking South were unable to find an agreement. Participants with different discourses explain that the G1000 was a great opportunity to be engaged in dialogue with the other community since they have little contact. Also, some active citizens in political parties explain that their usual space of involvement is characterized by a form of homogeneity, and that the heterogeneity of such panel was an important source of motivation to attract them. However, the relative importance of instrumental and deliberative aims (Curato, Niemeyer, 2013) differ between groups. Citizens with electoral-centred discourses tend to consider the latter as by-products of the event but not as central reasons to participate. On the contrary, we have showed that citizens with the suspicious discourse are mainly interested by this kind of social gratification and less by the possible political impact.

To conclude, the development of democratic innovations, and more precisely mini-publics, is based on the assumption that a large majority of the population desires to be more involved in the political process and to deliberate with other citizens. But several experiences, including the two cases studied in this paper, show that this willingness is largely overestimated. To fully understand the reactions towards the invitation, it is important to place them in the citizens’ discourse on political process, which are representations of the current and the ideal political process. Each discourse promotes an ideal articulation of influence and power of lay citizens, experts, stakeholders, politicians, political parties and shapes the meaning that is attributed to the mini-public. Mechanisms that explain the acceptance and the refusal differ in function of theses discourses, which results in different kinds of participation and non-participation.

5 References


6 Appendix: Interview guide

Could you briefly introduce yourself?

I am going to ask you a series of questions, and some of them are linked to democracy. Is it something you are interested in?

Are you particularly concerned about some public problems?

Could you tell me if you happen to stand up for your ideas or a political opinion?

Could you tell me what went through your mind when you were contacted by the G1000/G100 organization? Why did you or did you not participate?

(for participants) What was your attitude during the process?

In general, what do you think about this kind of experience that invites people to discuss the organization of the community life?

Do you trust the elected representatives? Do you think they represent us? Do you think they take the citizens’ opinion into account?

What do you think of the place of the common citizens in the current political system? Do they have an influence? If yes, what is it? Should we give another place to the citizens?

In the G1000/G100, they use the drawing of lots to select people. What do you think of that?