To Deliberate or Not to Deliberate: Non-participation of Randomly Selected Citizens in Two Mini-publics

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Panel: What Citizens Want From Democracy: Popular Attitudes to Existing Political Processes and their Alternatives

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Abstract: This paper offers an empirical analysis of (non-)participants deciding (not) to deliberate in two mini-publics in Belgium, the so-called G1000 and the G100. These 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 does the very large majority of the population refuse to participate in such mini-publics when they are randomly selected? Indeed, when random selection is used to select participants, organizers always have difficulty composing a diversified panel of citizens. Analyzing 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 current and ideal political process and actors. Different conceptions of democracy shape the interpretation of the mini-publics, which results in different kinds of participation and non-participation.

1 Introduction

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 a good solution to reach two political goals: representativeness and equal participation on one hand, decisions based on deliberation on the other hand (Fishkin, 2009). Several institutional innovations are nowadays organised, such as consensus conferences, deliberative opinion polls, citizens' juries and citizens' assemblies (Smith, 2012). Yet, a major problem remains. The organizers of such mini-publics always have difficulty composing a diversified panel of citizens. Indeed, the majority of the population does 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
does a large majority of citizens refuse to attend mini-publics when they are selected? Do people want to be involved in public deliberations and the decision making process?

This paper offers an empirical analysis of the (non-)participation in a mini-public. For the first time, a research gives voice to people who refused to deliberate after their selection. The empirical study of real opportunities of deliberation is important since other studies underline that the desire to deliberate is not necessarily translated into real participation (McHugh, 2006).

This paper explores two cases of grassroots mini-publics with random selection procedures in Belgium: the so-called G1000 and the G100. The first case was organized at country level during the political crisis of 2010-2012 in the absence of 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. 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 papers build this analysis on twenty-two in-depth interviews with nine participants and fourteen 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, the researcher has to grasp their attitudes towards the current political system, its major process and actors. By doing so, it is possible to test the hypothesis proposed by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, who consider that people refuse to participate and deliberate not because they cannot, but because they do not want to (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). Accordingly, this research proposes to study the relation between democracy preferences and (non-)participation in mini-publics.

Firstly, the paper briefly presents works on the citizens’ (absence of) willingness to participate and deliberate in politics, as well as major hypotheses proposed in the literature. The second section introduces both cases of mini-publics, the G1000 and the G100, and the methodology used to collect and analyse the interviews. The analysis is divided in two parts. The first one, more descriptive, presents different motives of action that citizens provide to justify their acceptance and non-acceptance to participate in the mini-public. The second analytical part shows that, to fully understand the (non-)participation in the mini-public, the researcher has to grasp the analysis of the citizens’ conceptions of democracy, which are the representations of the current and ideal political process and actors. These different conceptions of democracy shape the interpretation of mini-publics settings, which results in different kinds of participation and non-participation.

2 Ambiguous citizens

2.1 Democratic innovations and random selection

A large number of scholars agree to consider that the traditional representative and electoral model has suffered for several years from a lack of confidence (Inglehart & Catterberg, 2002; Norris, 1999; Putnam, 2002). The number of political parties’ members declines, less people can identify themselves to political parties, the mistrust in government, political parties and politicians increases in national and international surveys, and traditional forms of participation mobilize fewer citizens (Dalton, 2004; Mair & van Biezen, 2001; Wattenberg, 2000). In this context, several democratic innovations are 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). They are deliberative forums of citizens selected by a ‘near-random’ process (Smith, 2009; Warren & Pearse, 2008). These citizens are gathered in order to deliberate on a specific topic in a forum of one or more days. Various mechanisms are used around the world, but the most common 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 real institutionalized power as proposals of constitutions’ revisions to referenda (Grönlund et al., 2014; Reuchamps & Suiter, forthcoming).

In these different cases, and following the seminal concept of Dahl (1989), the idea is to gather a representative group of citizens. Random selection, or more precisely ‘near random’ selection, is usually used. This mechanism of participation selection is however not really a rupture: it rather reactivates a historic mode of selection that had prevailed during centuries. In the ancient Athena and in the Italian Republic of the Renaissance, numbers of officers were chosen by random selection or sortition and it was considered as the most democratic way to select rulers in comparison with elections (Dowlen, 2008; Manin, 1997). After a disappearance linked to the French and American revolutions – except for juries in court of law – we observe today a renewal of this technique in the political arena 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. First, 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. 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, only already active citizens come to deliberate. Furthermore, these groups are unrepresentative of the larger public. 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. It is based on the political principle proposed by Barber according to which all citizens are equally capable of political judgment and equally responsible for public good (1984, p. 293).

But, as Smith explains it, the potential of random selection is limited because participation is never compulsory and citizens can accept or not to deliberate when there are selected by lot (Smith, 2012). In this sense, sortition does not cancel the effect of self-selection. Participation rate in mini-publics is different according to the minipublic; from 0,4 % in a Canadian city (Culver & Howe, 2004) to 30 % with deliberative polls organized by James Fishkin (Luskin &

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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.
Fishkin, 1998). The second problem is the fact that the probability to accept is not socially equal. From a descriptive point of view, volunteers are unrepresentative of the whole population but less than with other forms of participation (Curato & Niemeyer, 2013; Cutler, Johnston, Carty, Blais, & Fournier, 2008; Fishkin & Luskin, 2005; Smith, 2012). The aim of this paper is to go beyond this descriptive analysis of non-participation and to understand why some people do accept to take part in the process and others do not. Indeed, the relative overrepresentation of some sociodemographic categories of population does not explain why, in these categories, people take different stances toward democratic innovations. To my knowledge, this study is the first systematic attempt to assess the reason why citizens randomly selected for a mini-public voluntarily decline to participate.

2.2 The democracy preferences hypotheses

How can we explain this lack of desire to participate in deliberations? In the context of growing interest among political scientists, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse proposed a provocative thesis (2002): they explain that most American people want a stealth democracy. This thesis is interesting because it rejects classical results of sociology of political participation:

> Participation in politics is low not because of the difficulty of registration requirements or the dearth of places for citizens to discuss politics, not because of the sometimes unseemly nature of debate in Congress or displeasure with a particular public policy. Participation in politics is low because people do not like politics even in the best of circumstances; in other words, they simply do not like the process of openly arriving at a decision in the face of diverse opinions. They do not like politics when they view it from afar and they certainly do not like politics when they participate in it themselves. (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002, p. 3)

According to the two authors, people refuse to participate not because they are lacking material and cognitive resources to participate in the political process (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), but because they do not believe that it is the role of citizens to be more involved. This thesis has initiated a new field in political science: the study of democracy preferences. Previous studies focused on this aspect through voters’ surveys. Some scholars showed that the willingness to participate is more spread than what Hibbing and Theiss Morse exposed (Neblo, Esterling, Kennedy, Lazer, & Sokhey, 2010). Others studied the relations between democratic orientations, education, political attitudes (Coffé & Michels, 2014), the kinds of citizens who support referendums (Bowler, Donovan, & Karp, 2007; Donovan & Jeffery, 2006) and more broadly, different models of democracy (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009).

A small number of studies have begun to grasp these democratic ideals in the real world and to link them with citizens attitudes (Neblo et al., 2010; Webb, 2013). 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). They show that the support for a representative, participative and expert-based form of governance is congruent with their political activity in Finland.

In the wake of this literature, this paper aims to move the debate forward in two directions. Firstly, citizens’ preferences are studied today from responses to closed questions and it is

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2 The difference of participation rate between deliberative mini-public is an interesting topic nevertheless neglected in the literature (Curato & Niemeyer, 2013).
difficult to assess whether these responses are consistent with the real democratic desire of citizens. For instance, it is methodologically difficult in surveys’ data to assess 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’ representations and wishes. Secondly, previous researches mainly studied the impact of such preferences on conventional modes of participation but not on democratic innovations that are most discussed in the theoretical literature. In this case, the aim is to study real opportunities to participate in two innovate mini-publics and not only an abstract desire (McHugh, 2006).

3 Analysing participation and non-participation in two mini-publics

3.1 Two mini-publics

Two cases of mini-publics are analysed in this paper. The G1000 and the G100 were organized by a group of activists who wanted to create new forms of democratic engagement and to invite citizens to deliberate about the future of their political community.

The G1000 took place in particular circumstances for the country (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2012). After the 2011 elections, Belgian parties were unable to find an agreement to form a new government. 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 voice and not only their vote. On 11 November 2011, sitting at 81 tables, 704 participants were invited to discuss and argue their positions on the three issues (social security, immigration, redistribution of wealth) that were chosen in a first online phase. At the end, the report was handed over to the presidents of the parliaments of the country (G1000, 2012).

In order to have a high degree of penetration, organizers asked an independent recruitment agency to contact participants through Random Digit Dialing. 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 some predefined population quotas: gender, age and province (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2012). There were no quotas for education level. The composition reflects the usual overrepresentation (see above) of better educated people.

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<th>Table 1: level of education of participant of the G1000</th>
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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%.
The G100\textsuperscript{5} was born following the G1000. Inhabitants of a municipality in the South of Brussels, Grez-Doiceau, followed the experiences 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 is composed of active inhabitants of the municipalities and two associations. The first one is an environmental organization and the second one is specialized in the facilitation of groups. At the beginning of the process, G100 participants imagined an ideal situation for their municipality in thirty years. Ten actions were proposed and transformed into working groups: conviviality, nature, intergenerationality, education, local economy, wellbeing, culture and solidarity, energy autonomy. These different themes reflect very well the interests of the G100 participants.

With regard to participants’ selection, the organizers were also interested in the use of random selection inspired by the G1000 experiment. But they also wanted to invite a maximum of people to participate in their G1000. Considering these two objectives, they decided to adopt a mixed method and to use random selection and a more traditional and general call campaign for participation. They used the comprehensive municipal list of telephone numbers, provided by an employee of the post office. A group of seven volunteers called 115 numbers and offered the respondents to be members of the G100. But on the G100 day, only three individuals (one man and two women) were randomly selected participants. 42 other participants had all been invited by another means (friends and family, email, posters). The number of randomly selected participants is very low, but the positive response rate is similar to the G1000 and other local experiences (Culver & Howe, 2004). The aim of this paper is not to give an exterior analysis of the participants’ selection process but to understand the citizens’ reaction when they are selected and contacted by phone to deliberate.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

I conducted in-depth interviews with participants and non-participants. These are interviews between 45 minutes and two hours, during which interviewers ask a series of very open questions (Hermanowicz, 2002; 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 et al., 2003, p. 141). This interview technique is most particularly appropriate to understand the way people make sense of different objects in this mini-public, and how they connect them with a series of elements (Kaufmann, 2011). This provides very rich data to analyse meanings, representation and motives. 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 as the G1000 or the G100. At the beginning of each interview, I explained the goals of the research, guaranteed the confidentiality of the interview, and asked the permission to record it. The venue of the interviews was mainly the respondents’ home, but also their workplace.

I conducted twenty-two original face-to-face interviews with nine participants and fourteen non-participants. The G1000 and G100 organizers accepted to provide the list of participants’ and

\textsuperscript{5} Informations are available on www.G100.be
non-participants' phone numbers. I randomly selected people in each category. The response rate for non-participants is very important for this research because one can assume that people who refuse to deliberate are also the same who refuse to have an interview with a social scientist. However, it was not the case. For the G1000, 15 out of the 20 individuals I contacted, accepted to be interviewed and for the G100, four out of five. This good response rate may be due to the fact that people could choose the venue and time of the meeting (including during the weekends) over a period of two months (between November 2014 and January 2015).

As regards the participants, every G1000 participant accepted the interview. The only problem concerns the three participants who were randomly selected for the G100: it was impossible to meet them. To establish a comparison with the non-participants, I conducted interviews with three completely self-selected participants of the G100.

The profiles of interviewees are diversified, with 10 women and 12 men. These 22 people include 5 young ones (< 35 years), 12 middle-aged (36-60 years), and 5 aged (60+). The level of education is also diversified; 3 people with primary education level, 4 with secondary education level, 10 with higher education level and 5 with a university degree.

Every interview was transcribed and I made use of the NVivo software to manage this large amount of data. I used an inductive approach 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 representation that exists in the minds of participants and non-participants.

I conducted a thematic analysis in order to obtain a deep and thick knowledge of my qualitative data. I first read each interview and made a summary for every one of them. With this smallest piece, I inductively constructed a coding scheme to conduct a thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). The coding scheme is made up of 137 codes, structured in three levels, from the most descriptive (e.g. Politicians are here to earn money) to the most abstract (e.g. Representation of politicians). The use of this thematic analysis is described in the paper.

4 Motives of non-acceptance and acceptance

The first step of the analysis is dedicated to the study of motives of (non-)acceptance to come to the mini-publics. Motives of action are not profound motivations but self-declared reasons to explain their activities (Mills, 1940). They are justifications used by actors in a specific situation. They are interesting because they give a first insight in the framing individuals mobilize to make sense of the mini-publics and the kind of justification (general vs. particular, political vs. other…) they used. A first research (Curato & Niemeyer, 2013) studied the motives of acceptance but no paper investigated the motives provided by non-participants. That is the reason why we began with this category. These different motives are not mutually exclusive.

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6 I have simply drawn phone number in the list of participants and non-participant and phone them to propose an interview in the context of an academic research.
7 One was ill, the second one was abroad and the last one refused the interview without giving me particular motives. I still hope to conduct interviews with the first two people in the coming months
8 The more abstract categories of codes are: political activity, attitudes in the mini-public (for participants), definition of democracy, motive of acceptance and non/acceptance, normative proposals, priorities (politics vs. other), representation of politicians, representation of lay citizens, representation of experts, opinions related to public policies, representations of current decision making process, opinion about the vote, ideal form of society.
4.1 Motives of non-acceptance

Three types of motives of non-participation are distinguished. They were constructed inductively with responses to the very simple question “Why did you refuse to come to the G100/G1000?” The first group of motives is based on auto-exclusion. A number of citizens express the idea that they are not in their place in these mini-publics, for two diverging reasons. On one side, a group of unpolitcized people explains that they are not the appropriate people to take part in the process because of their lack of competence in the political issues. These results are in line with the relation observed between the political participation and the level of internal efficacy, which is the beliefs about one’s own competence to understand and to participate effectively in politics (Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991). These elements proved that random selection does not abolish the unequal subjective competences. The proclaimed equality of citizens linked to the mechanism of random selection (Barber 1984) interacts with the resistance of some citizens to feel legitimate to act in this arena.

This mechanism also plays a role between different levels of deliberation. After the 11th November 2011 G1000, the organizers proposed to the participants to be candidates for the G32, a more intensive deliberation that lasted three week-ends in order to write concrete proposals to members of parliaments. Here is the reproduced discourse of a woman who refused to continue the process after the G1000 summit.

Because the topics were pretty specialized and I thought it was interesting to submit them to people who could be involved for a longer time. They didn’t hide the way it was going to happen for the people; the investment, with the support of experts, etc. And I didn’t want to go further; I thought it was more appropriate to leave this project to people who really know the subject, who are going to bring new elements besides the experts’ work, or who are simply passionate about this subject. I thought it was more interesting to let those people go. I was rather seeing myself as a lambda individual who doesn’t have any particular knowledge in such domain and who gives an outside opinion. (Participant, G1000, man, 46 years old)\(^9\)

But one of the most surprising elements is the fact that auto-exclusion is not only mobilized by the less politicized. This idea is also used by people who are very active in the political process. In the following extract, the lot has selected a woman active in one of the major political parties of the country.

I felt uncomfortable because, in my opinion, my number should not have been selected. Because of my function…Well, because I work for a political party. […] I had this feeling but… I can’t… I can’t explain it. As if I was an impostor in their organization, actually. I had the feeling that the G1000 wanted to go against political parties. And not… not to have one among its participants, actually. (Non-participant, G1000, woman, 34 years old)

This motive of auto-exclusion exposes therefore a complex relation between the internal political efficacy and the wish to deliberate consisting in a double threshold. A small part considers that they are not capable enough to come but another number considers that they are too competent, too embedded in the decision making process to come and deliberate with other lay citizens.

Secondly, the most common argument used to justify the non-acceptance is the lack of time. This is a general justification aiming to explain one’s non-participation (Verba et al., 1995). Nine interviews of the fourteen non-participants were based on this motive. But the interviews allowed to go beyond this first explanation. Some of the non-participants could give a clear problem of

\(^9\) All extracts are translated from French into English.
overlap with their schedule (birthday, on duty). But for the other respondents, the lack of time is a matter of priority. 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.

- And do you regret having little time to do such things?
- [...] No because, but we all have our own affairs to take care of and so… I have to run my little business, so yeah, I’m obviously going to take time for it. (Non-participant, G1000, man, 25 years old)

Finally, the last category of motives of non-acceptance is related to an evaluation of the mini-public itself. Three non-participants explained that they were not against the idea of gathering citizens to organize discussions, but that they were not convinced by this specific initiative.

Mixed reaction at first because I didn’t know anything about that, 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)

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)

This shows that a number of people accept to participate only if they have the guarantee that the process is serious and it can have influence. In this case, they point out that the G1000 and his mobilization process did not convince them. A third G100 non-participant gives the most elaborate critics of the mini-public. During the interviews, he explained that the major reason was his evaluation of the ideology behind the initiators of the project. After taking a look at the G100 website, he had considered that the association was too green, too radical regarding problems of ecology and consequently, that the mini-public was too oriented to create an open discussion for citizens. These three non-participants show that a number of citizens, but not all, had a real reflexive attitude towards the project. For them, the question was not: “do they want to participate or not” but well “why accepting to come in such mini-public”.

4.2 Motives of acceptance

Among the participants, it is very important to underline the fact that they report multiples motives during the interview. For instance, one participant explains that he wants to participate to give his opinion, out of curiosity, to see how a meeting with 1000 citizens is organized, because he thinks that gathering citizens is important and that they are not only voters, and finally, to help organizers.

The most common motives among participants rely on the fact that they wanted to give their advice, to express their point of view. But the target of these people giving voice is different between the national G1000 and the local G100. In the first case, participants explain that they hope to put the citizens’ interests and opinions on the political and governmental agenda. They all speak about general opinion and direction but not about more precise proposals. In the second case, participants explain that the mini-public was the occasion to propose concrete projects. The target was not necessary the local council, but every citizen interested to develop
new projects of cooperation. In these circumstances, they explain that acceptance to come to the G100 was seen as the extension of their other activities at local level.

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 (G100 participant, man, 46 years old).

What I hoped for? Well, that it would lead to very good and concrete ideas that are easy to implement. Um… but well, I admit that I did not think much at the time about the implementation of actions (G100 participant, woman, 45 years old).

These two elements are in line with the official discourse of the two mini-publics. So, interviews show that participants mobilize as motives slogans that were repeated by the organizers of the mini-publics during the summits and in the media to legitimate the mechanisms. But participants also provide other motives. Some participants express the idea that acceptance is a form of duty, as shown in the quotes hereunder.

I must admit that I felt that as a “duty”, you know… It was like when we go voting. We are happy to be allowed to vote but, at the same time, it’s a real pain in the arse. So, um, it was, well, not a good deed, because I had a pretty good day, but it was still exhausting. (Participant, G1000, man, 29 years old)

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)

Yes, I did not think for long before accepting. (Laughs) I did not think for long because I’m also interested in politics in general so, I thought it was a good experience. (Participant, G1000, man, 46 years old)

Given that voting is compulsory in Belgium, some participants draw a parallel between this legal but mainly moral duty to vote and the participation in deliberative panels. They explain that in democracy, it is ‘normal’ for the citizens to give their opinion. For people who give this motive, participation in grassroots deliberative mini-publics organized in the context of absence of government is not seen as an alternative way of doing politics. Quite the contrary, the first two participants explain that they regard their acceptance as the same as the act of voting. During both interviews, they note that they are not sure whether these two institutions (vote and G1000) are efficient means to influence politics and policies, but that it is a form of duty to participate. But this does not imply that every participant considers voting as a duty and normal attitude in democracy. For instance, one non-participant explains that she leaves the ballot blank and that she only goes to the polling booth because it is compulsory in Belgium. She argues that she does not want to vote anymore because “these are always the same who govern the day after the elections” and she has the feeling that politicians live in a world apart and are not preoccupied with the interests of lay citizens. But in this context, how does she justify her implication in the G1000?
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, the participant justifies her investment 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 unions. Before the attendance, the G1000 is not seen as an alternative or continuation of current political process but well as the search for a space of sociability and social integration (Talpin & Mazeaud, 2010). In this category of social gratification, the willingness to please the organizers is also present.

Well, I had the same reaction as when you called me, you know, I thought: ok, if they call me and if everybody says no… It was on 11th November, we could have said that we had a day off but if everybody refuses to participate, nothing changes. Some people were really committed to this organization. I thought we had to help them. (Participant, G1000, woman, 67 years old)

4.3 Comparison and discussion

The comparison between theses motives appeals two conclusions. According to Pateman, a process has more chance to attract people if they consider that there is a clear connection between their participation and the outcomes (Pateman, 2012). Indeed, some citizens say that the mini-publics are not sufficiently connected with possible practical outcomes as a reason for non-participation. But as others have already analysed it (Curato & Niemeyer, 2013), motives of acceptance are not only oriented towards an instrumental goal. Some participants explain that they come in mini-publics not to propose new public policies or express their mistrust in politics. The feeling of duty but also the pleasure to meet new people or to have contact with their neighbourhood is a usual motive to justify participation in deliberative forums.

The second conclusion is that lots of participants consider their participation in the mini-public as continuity but for different reasons. Some consider that voting is a duty, and that it is the same to come to the deliberative mini-publics. It is interesting because the G1000 was born in the context of difficulty with the electoral system. The mini-public was presented in the media and in the official manifestos as a real innovative and a new form of political engagement. This affirmative continuity of the participants is therefore striking. On the opposite, in the case of the G100, two activists consider their participation in the G1000 as continuity in their involvement for the creation of a new society.

All these elements suggest that there exist different views on mini-publics. Some (non-) participant link their decision to the potential outputs but the others do not. The G1000 and G100 are interpreted as an commitment of continuity by different profiles of citizens. How can
we explain these differences? This invites to understand which place has the mini-public in the citizens’ view on the current political system and its alternatives.

5 Conception of democracy and (non-)participation in mini-publics

The previous sections have shown that people mobilize different kinds of motives to justify their position and, more broadly, that different conceptions of mini-publics can be observed in interviews. This section shows that these different interpretations are related to four different conceptions of democracy which are the representations of the current and ideal democratic process and actors. Different groups have different conceptions of democracy and citizens interpret mini-publics, or more generally institutions used to invite people to share their opinion outside the ballot box, in the light of these conceptions. For each group, reasons to accept or not the invitation to deliberate are different.

5.1 The notion of conception of democracy

To make sense of the reality and to understand it, actors use social representation (Moscovici, 1984; Voelklein & Howarth, 2005). Social representations are not mere ‘passive’ representations of social reality; they are specific perceptions of actors’ environment that enable them to guide their actions. It is the case when citizens try to understand political actors and institutions. In this paper, I argue that citizens can have different conceptions of democracy. This notion is close to Hendrik’s concept of participatory storylines. “Each storyline promotes an idea of who constitutes ‘the public’, whether ‘the public’ should participate in the policy process and, if so, who should speak on their behalf. Policy actors such as government officials, interest groups, experts, activists and the media not only view a policy issue through a particular discursive frame, but they also have a constructed narrative of the role and character of ‘the public’” (Hendriks, 2005). I prefer the notion of ‘conception of democracy’ to insist on the fact that this cognitive map does not only concern participation of lay citizens, but the whole political process, and especially the place of elected politicians, political parties and experts. Moreover, Hendriks uses this concept to analyse the dominant narratives attached to different political issues among stakeholders. This paper mobilizes this concept at the citizens’ level and explains that these different conceptions frame the reaction towards the mini-publics.

These different conceptions of democracy 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. Like other cognitive concepts, this notion is at the same time descriptive – what is the reality – and normative – what the reality should be. These two components are related and must be analysed together. These conceptions of democracy are not necessarily mobilized by actors who agree on every point (Hendriks, 2005). The most important element is that this framework offers a general map to interpret political reality. 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 conception of democracy considering the idea that parties have to represent certain groups of the population. Also, people can have different positions in the political arena but share the same conception.

All conceptions of democracy consist in the research for ideal articulation between political actors. That is the reason why it is a mix of social representation. Most political philosophies present indeed a complex articulation of participation, delegation, expertise, mobilization of
political parties (Held, 2006). Interviews show that this is the same for lay citizens. No respondent exposes the idea that only one kind of actors must have power in the political process. No interviewee proposes to reject elections and experts’ bodies and to only use sortition in order to select the political rulers. On the opposite, no interviewee wants total independence for the MP’s or refuses citizens’ participation. But each conception articulates differently the relations between these processes and actors.

To study these conceptions, I first used the thematic analysis (see above). On the basis of this analysis, I created a big matrix with each interview in row and a summary of the content of each superior theme of the coding scheme in column. This allowed me to compare different profiles of citizens regarding similarities and dissimilarities in the representation of current and ideal democracy and to distinguish different conceptions of democracy. This analysis permits to develop an inductive typology of conceptions of democracy (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The different categories are not totally new – it is normal because citizens’ conceptions are based on discourses present in the society– but they are constructed from the content of interviews and not from prior theoretical assumptions.

These conceptions of democracy are composed of three elements summarized in table 2. The first one incorporates the assessment of the current political system. It is the first topic discussed by citizens and always the easiest one for them. The second one is called democracy preferences and refers to normative ideal and political process desires that people propose during interviews. The last one is more interpretative and makes the link between the democratic framework and the mini-publics. For each conception of democratic representation, I explain that reasons, motives and incentives to accept to deliberate are different. It is interesting to see that in each group except one, there are participants and non-participants but the reason to (non-)participate differs.

Finally, it is important to note that these conceptions of democracy 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 certain conceptions of democracy are mobilized by citizens with certain profiles and trajectories.

5.2 Four conceptions of democracy

On the basis of the twenty-two interviews of participants and non-participants, I identified four conceptions of democracy. Only one person, for not having provided sufficient insight during the interviews, does not fall into one of these categories.
Table 2: Conceptions of democracy and interpretation of the G1000/G100

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment of the current political system</th>
<th>Distrust-based</th>
<th>Partisan</th>
<th>Postmodern</th>
<th>Stakeholders-based</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Nothing works anymore” Politicians are selfish and collect benefits at the expense of the people. Foreigners are the only beneficiaries of the political system</td>
<td>Politicians are disconnected from reality. Policies implemented by politicians are not always the same as the ones proposed in manifestos and during the electoral campaign. Corruption exists but it is not generalized.</td>
<td>Capitalism, society only directed by money. Environmental crisis. Too professionalized politicians. Influences of international companies.</td>
<td>Lots of politicians are incompetent to achieve their task. They do not have clear objectives and their work is confused by their will to be re-elected. Ideological oppositions are inaccurate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democracy preferences</td>
<td>People are not able to speak about one ideal process. They are always exposing difficulties they face. The situation is considered as blocked.</td>
<td>Before elections, politicians propose different forms of society and citizens can choose among them. Participation outside the ballot box is important to give feed-back. Proximity with politicians.</td>
<td>Construction a new society based on small communities, sustainable development. Participation is important but not sure whether every citizen is able to participate.</td>
<td>Politics is a matter of good governance. Stakeholders are the best people who can take decision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation of mini-publics</td>
<td>All political activities are useless, even these organised with citizens. But a reason to come is to meet new people and the pleasure to participate to a social event.</td>
<td>Mini-publics are - among others – a good mechanism to give feedback. Participation is a duty but depends on the feeling to be represented by one political party, evaluation of the G1000/G100, and feeling to be legitimate.</td>
<td>Mini-publics are part of the society they want to promote. Participation is a form of engagement to defend new modes of governance.</td>
<td>These forums are too open. It is more appropriate to gather stakeholders on a specific project. Participation is only needed when rulers are incompetent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mottes of (non) acceptance to participate in the G1000/G100</td>
<td>No: Does not care about politics; change impossible; time (priority). Yes: Pleasure to meet new people and to take part in a social event.</td>
<td>No: Time ; auto-exclusion; evaluation of the mini-public. Yes: Giving feedback to politicians; duty, helping organizers.</td>
<td>No: overlap with their schedule Yes: Continuity with their other involvement; give feed-back to government; develop new local projects; help organizers.</td>
<td>No: negative evaluation of the mini-public because lack of impact, time (matter of priority) Yes: /</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.2.1 Distrust-based conception of democracy

Citizens who have this conception are not members of any association, and never participated in politics. These people adopt a position towards politics which takes some classical elements of populism (Rooduijn, 2014). Throughout the interviews, they explain that they do not like politics because politicians do not care about people’s interests. They consider that the major problem is the fact that politicians are selfish and collect benefits at the expense of the “real” people who work every day under the pressure of taxes. Every politician is involved for his/her own interest, and especially to earn money. For them, politicians are people who make promises before the elections, but the results do not change anything and there are “always the same” who govern the day after the ballot.

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).

They also have in common to consider that foreigners are the only beneficiaries of the system. They explain that there are too many foreigners in Belgium, and that it is a huge threat to the “real” Belgian people.

One interesting element is the fact that these interviews were the most difficult to conduct because these citizens have high difficulties to speak about political ideals, especially when questions are normative. After questions such as: “Should people have more power in the political process? Do you think that politicians should consult more citizens? What is for you the ideal place for the experts in the political process?”, this group was always embarrassed and preferred to go back to the idea that politicians are only selfish or to expose their difficulties in their everyday life.

- And, in your opinion, could the citizens do something else to change the situation or is it impossible?
- But what could they do? What? That’s the question. Protesting… Well, there are always violent people in demonstrations. Besides, people protest in Brussels. Who do we bug? The citizens. Not the politicians. (Non-participant, G1000, man, 50 years old)

In this group, two refused to come in the mini-public and one accepted. How can we explain the difference? On the one hand, the two non-participants (G1000 and G100) were the most unable to speak about possible alternatives to the current situation. They only explained that it was better before but without giving any clear illustration of this assertion. The “system” is blocked and nobody can change it. The hope and ideals necessary to be engaged in political activity are not present. They encountered difficulties explaining why they refused to deliberate and told that they refused every invitation and that they do not want to be dealing with any political activity.

- Those people wanted to gather citizens...
- (interrupts) Yes, that’s it! They wanted to gather people and I told “and how do I go there?” “well, we’ll come and get you”, that’s true, I don’t own a vehicle. I’m not going to go there by bike! I don’t have a bike anyway. And I can’t go there by train. Or, if I do, I have to take the bus and the train, I mean, no, I won’t do that! But that happened some time ago, I told them it didn’t interest me.
- What if it happened right next to your house, in this street?
- Still no. No.
- Why? It didn’t interest you?
- Well, what they say, that’s still nonsense! (laughs) (non-participant, G100, woman, 84 years old)

On the other hand, the participant is the abstentionist studied at the beginning of the paper, 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. Here, the motive to participate does not make sense in the light of the woman’s political imaginary but in the light of her desire of inclusion into a community.

In short, both grassroots mini-publics do not appear to be alternatives for those who feel most excluded from the current political process. They think that democratic innovations are as unable as any other political setting to influence politics in their sense 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 other reasons than political goals, like desire of inclusiveness and pleasure to take part in a social event.

5.2.2 Partisan conception of democracy

With regard to political activity, this conception of democracy is mobilized by a diversified group of citizens: highly politicized citizens active in political parties but also people who do not care about politics. But one central element gathers these people: their representation about the ideal political process. The centre of democracy consists of the activity of citizens who read different manifestos and vote for the parties that propose policies congruent with their preferences. In this model, parties are not only groups of candidates but also symbols of values with which citizens can identify. This logic seems standard because it is the most common way to present the electoral system in political science textbooks; it is however not the case for people who have other conceptions of democracy.

Some are very critical and think that an important number of elected politicians do not implement the program they proposed before the elections. Nevertheless, these citizens also explain that the process is very difficult to understand and that they cannot really judge because they do not have all necessary information. They also tell that elected politicians are not the only players in the decision process and that they sometimes want to initiate some reforms but cannot do it because other actors or circumstances have an influence, like multinationals, international organizations or budgetary limits. Comparing these elements with the previous group, some are also quite in disfavour of the current political system, but they consider that causes of problems are very complex and that elected politicians are also victims of other forces.

- And, in your opinion, if they don’t implement them after that, is this because they don’t want or because they can’t?
- Well, that’s precisely what I don’t know… I think, they may… in fact, it’s useful to make propaganda for themselves but it doesn’t interest them, or there may be other people who pull the strings. But if you are not really into politics and you don’t know the system, I, um… Well I don’t know. Not necessarily at local level but higher, we have the feeling that they occupy a function but that they don’t take the decisions. But… I don’t know how it works exactly with the ministerial cabinets. (Non-participant, G1000, woman, 38 years old)

People who mobilize this conception of democracy never indicate clear public policy proposals. They explain that policies implemented by politicians are not always those that were proposed in the parties’ manifestos and discourses during the political campaign but they never give clear
illustration. They argue that, in their opinion, the most important is the core values and major orientations defended by political parties but not every detail of public action.

With regard to participation of ordinary citizens, all members of this group are interested in the idea of sometimes using mini-publics to collect the population’s opinion on specific topics. More broadly, they are in favour of more participation in order to allow and give opportunities to the citizens to express their opinion. Regarding this question, differences in intensity between people of this group must be observed. Some are in favour of strong innovations and others are less enthusiastic. As shows the following two extracts, these differences of degree are not related to the involvement in the mini-public.

Well, pff, 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)

It may work like that, all women give their opinion, then all blond people give their opinion, then… I don’t know… Everybody with a big nose! And everything must be read by our politicians. And they have to take it into account. (Non-participant, G1000, man, 46 years old)

There are lots of extracts where people explain that it is a good idea to innovate and to find new forms of political engagement. In each case, I asked if they wanted these mechanisms to have real power. All respondents, participants and non-participants, refused this possibility. This proves that, for people who have this conception of democracy, mini-publics and other democratic innovations are elements to improve the quality of the electoral and representative system. The problem today is that politicians are perceived as out of touch with the population and such deliberative experiences are opportunities to (re)create connections between citizens and elected citizens. That is the reason why the notion of proximity (Rosanvallon, 2011) is often mobilized by the respondents. They do not see citizens’ participation as an alternative model of democracy but as a means to reinforce the relation between elected representatives and voters, and to give feedback. An immigrant, who left Morocco for political reasons, illustrates this position. He is not allowed vote but took part in the G1000. He considers that citizens have to be interested by the politicians’ actions once there are elected.

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)

This group is composed of ten interviewees: five participated while the others did not. How can we explain these different behaviours? Various mechanisms play a role depending on the level of political confidence and partisan identification. The persons who are the most confident in the current political elites and who can most easily identify themselves to political parties do not accept to participate. They are the less interested by the idea of mini-publics. It can be hypothesised that their high confidence in one political party discourages them to participate outside the ballot box. Among less confident interviewees, they tend to participate but it depends
on their spare time and their evaluation of the seriousness of the democratic innovation. Also, some interviewees explain they are not sufficiently competent and that other citizens are more legitimate. Those who participate are the ones who argue that this is a form of duty because citizens have to vote but also express their voice outside elections to send feed-back to elected representatives. But more broadly, all explain that participation in the mini-public is a valuable activity and they were not proud when they refused. For all these people who have a partisan conception, political participation in elections but also outside of it are important but not necessarily a pleasure. In this context, the paper raises the idea that this group is the most diversified because they are centred on the elections but also think that democratic innovations can be useful in certain circumstances. Therefore, the feeling to be represented by a political party but also time and evaluation of the seriousness of the mini-public are key elements to explain acceptance to deliberate among people who have a partisan conception of democracy.

5.2.3 Postmodern conception of democracy

This group is composed of young people with a university or high school diploma. This is the group that develops the clearest discourse on current public policies and desirable alternatives concerning sustainable development, creation of small communities to build new space of solidarity, self-realization …

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 manifestations for human rights. They also consider that politics is not only a matter of parliaments and political parties, and that every space of the social world is politics. Choices in their everyday life are, for them, a major source of power (Stolle, Hooghe, & Micheletti, 2005). To sum up, they are a typical paragon of critical citizens or dissatisfied democrats (Dalton, 2005, 2008; Inglehart, 1997; Norris, 1999).

Members of this group are not against the model of electoral representative government. Two are sympathizers of the green parties without a high involvement in these. The others say that they identify themselves to the left, but that different parties can embody these principles. However, they explain that electoral and partisan democracies are not at the heart of today’s democracy.

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. (Participant, G100, woman, 46 years old)

Every person who has this conception participated, with the exception of a woman who gave birth during the week-end of G1000 and explains that she was terribly disappointed not to participate in the mini-public. This group is the most in favour of democratic innovations and to accept to come and deliberate. They explain that participation is a real continuity of their other engagements. The idea itself to organize a group of discussion and to create new forms of involvement is an objective they want to promote.

I also think that this kind of project [the G100] is evolving, that there are more and more of them and that I need to be nourished with this, with this participative spirit, to see that it exists, to be among the people who participate to make it live, like a colonisation that happens naturally and becomes a part of us, like the practices we imagine to take place 20 years from now. (Participant, G100, woman, 46 years old)
But while taking a closer look at their representation, the most surprising fact is that this group has contradictory discourses on these questions, which can be observed in different extracts. At the beginning of the interviews, they explain that the equal participation of citizens is necessary, that it is a problem that always the same activists are present in meetings. But at the end of the interviews, they also express their fear of such innovations because every citizen does not have the same capacities.

And, at the same time, I feel like a number people who may be more conservative, who didn’t change their mind and who will keep old values or ideologies, won’t join this kind of movement. (Participant, G100, man, 36 years old)

But I still think we can’t take everything the citizens say at face value. I don’t want to be mean, but I think people are simply a little bit stupid. The education level in Belgian isn’t bad but I think people are stupid. Even the more educated ones, actually, everyone… it may be a little bit dangerous. (Participant, G1000, man, 29 years old)

In different extracts, members of this group show their ambiguity. They defend on one hand the ideal of equal participation of all citizens but, on the other hand, they express their fear to give voice to people who do not defend these ideals of democracy and who have « traditional » or « old-style » values on a series of topics (e.g. concerning environment or sexual liberty).

To sum up, this conception of democracy is mobilized by people considering that their involvement in a mini-public is the extension of other engagements to create a more democratic, ecological and equal society. Paradoxically, it is also the most ambiguous group regarding the citizens’ equal capacities to interact in such institutions, especially people who have different opinions from their own.

5.2.4 Stakeholders-based conception of democracy

This last group is only composed of non-participant men. For them, the major problem is that politicians are disconnected from reality and are too embedded in conflicts in the political arena. Throughout their interviews, they explain that ideological oppositions are vestiges of old-style politics and are irrelevant to face problems in a globalized world. Politicians lack long-term perspectives and knowledge of the practical field. They do not believe in reforms proposed by politicians because they think that they are motivated by the willingness to be re-elected but not to change the reality.

Fundamentally, politics is not a matter of opposition of values and ideologies, but a matter of good governance. The most important is that competent actors develop strategies. Two points must be stressed to fully understand this conception of democracy. The first one is related to the notion of technocracy. Does this model imply that only experts get to decide? The answer is nuanced. Experts are constantly valued in the discourses of this group, but they have specific interpretations of experts. They do not trust politicians as much as technocrats. 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. For them, distant and impersonal experts lead to the same problems as distant politicians. According to these perspectives, experts are people in direct contact with one special issue: they are the stakeholders.

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)

Different members of this group draw a parallel between democracy and the structure of companies for two reasons. The first one is the fact that companies have to develop strategies with clear long-term objectives in order not to perish. In the political arena, these incentives are not present and that is the reason behind the lack of efficacy.

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)

The second aspect regards the internal organization of companies or factories. 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 take good decisions because they know every post and every member of the factory. They explain that it should be the same in politics.

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 conception of democracy? They explain that the principle is interesting, but that it is not the best practice to implement changes in modern societies. 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. [...]And by definition, when we do it like that, and that comes from my experience as a construction site supervisor, if we don’t agree on one or two lines of action to work together, we fail. To me, fully opening the door, because that’s what it’s about in such a case, 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)

More precisely, a non-participant explains that experiences of participation will be useless if good experts make decision. It is only when decisions are taken by distant and incompetent rulers that we have to use the citizens’ opinion.

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)

Nobody accepted to be involved in the G1000 or G100 in this group. In the light of this conception of democracy, gathering citizens by lot does not make sense because politics is not a matter of discussion among people with different backgrounds, but good governance and decisions taken by competent stakeholders. The hypotheses proposed by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse seem to be verified in the in-depth interviews (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). But it is
not because these people tend to avoid political conflict and divergent opinions (Mutz, 2006). It is more because of their conception of democracy. According to them, public consultation is not necessary since ordinary citizens are only competent in the matters they face directly in their everyday life or workplace. They valorise an expertise that does not fit with the idea of randomly selected mini-publics but prefer forums of cooperation with major stakeholders where strategies and logics of action can be imagined and initiated.

6 Conclusion: Participation and non-participation in mini-public

The development of democratic innovations, and more precisely mini-publics, is based on the assumption that a large majority of the population desire 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. Yet, the following question remains: Why do a large majority of citizens refuse to attend mini-publics when they are selected?

This paper analyzes in-depth interviews with participants and non-participants to understand why some do accept and the others do not. The first step of the analysis has shown that motives of actions are multiple and related to different interpretations of opportunities to participate in the mini-public. But to fully understand the reaction towards the invitation, it is important to replace them in citizens’ conceptions of democracy, which are representations of the current and the ideal political process. Each conception promotes an ideal articulation of influence and power of lay citizens, experts, stakeholders, politicians, political parties. The paper argues that these conceptions shape the interpretation of the mini-public. In the different groups, there are participants and non-participants, but the reason and motives of actions are different. Four conceptions of democracy can be distinguished. The postmodern conception is mobilized by citizens who consider that participatory and deliberative mechanism as a part of a “new society” oriented towards cooperation of small community. They think that the representative governments are an old-style form of governance and that their participation in the mini-public is in itself an engagement for new political order. The most ambiguous conception is the partisan one. It is based on the centrality of electoral mechanism and the openness towards participatory mechanism to give feedback to elected officials. The interviews show that people who can most easily identify themselves to a political party refused the invitation. On the opposite, the others tend to participate and consider the acceptance as a duty as voting. Nevertheless, their engagement depends on their spare time and their evaluation of the seriousness of the device. The two last democratic conceptions are less open to democratic innovations. People with stakeholders-based conception concentrate their discourse on the necessity to gather specialists to develop strategies for the community. For them, the gathering of randomly selected citizens with different opinions does not make sense and all interviewees who mobilized this conception did not accept to participate. People with distrust-based conception consider that politicians are selfish and collect benefits at the expense of the people. Neither the G1000 nor the G100 appears as an alternative way of conducting politics. However, interviews show that participation is possible if people are motivated by other reasons than political goals, like the desire of inclusiveness and pastime. This research shows then that people who feel more excluded from the actual system are not attracted by (grassroots)mini-publics for political and instrumental reasons (agenda setting or feed-back giving), but can be interested for social gratification.
In conclusion, this research proves that the conceptions towards the current and ideal political process matter when researchers try to explain the willingness to participate in mini-publics. But the puzzle is more complex. People accept but also refuse for very different reasons and this is related to their different conceptions of democracy, which results in different kinds of participation and non-participation.

7 Bibliography


8 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?

In general, 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 citizen?

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