

The perceived problem-solving potential of deliberative minipublics: Evidence from a survey of Belgian citizens

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Abstract. Concerns about widespread democratic dissatisfaction have prompted a search for remedies, such as increasing citizens' role in politics. While the public seems supportive, it remains unclear whether such newly introduced procedures can effectively tackle citizens' dissatisfaction with present-day politics. This paper develops a problem-solving approach to studying this question. It proposes that combining insights on what 'pushes' and 'pulls' people to support procedural reform is crucial: Only then can we uncover if and how people consider procedural reform as addressing the problem(s) they see in the representative system today. Using the example of deliberative minipublics and original, pre-registered survey data from Belgium ($n = 1,579$), we find that respondents generally think of minipublics as problem-solvers rather than problem-creators, albeit to different degrees. For instance, this perceived problem-solving potential is more pronounced among discontent citizens. This study sheds new light on the importance of studying citizens' reasoning about the roots and remedies for political dissatisfaction.

Keywords: deliberative minipublics; democratic innovations; political dissatisfaction; process preferences

Introduction

Widespread disenchantment with the functioning of the political system is a core problem in established democracies (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Norris, 2011). Time and again, public opinion research shows a high tide of dissatisfaction and frustration in citizens' outlook on contemporary politics (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2019). This can have detrimental consequences for political stability and the capacity of a democracy to address pressing problems such as climate change or a health crisis, to take recent examples (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015; Mansbridge, 2019; Marien & Hooghe, 2011).

How can widespread political dissatisfaction be addressed? Reforming the process through which political decisions are made is often proposed and put into practice as a solution, for instance by introducing tools that increase citizens' role in politics (Elstube & Escobar, 2019). Most research to date connects people's evaluation of politics today to their support for such procedural reforms, generally showing that support is highest among dissatisfied citizens (e.g., Schuck & de Vreese, 2015). Yet, what this relationship signifies remains unclear and is debated in the literature: A simple expression of frustration? A normative preference for a different model of democracy? In essence, we still do not know whether citizens see procedural reform as a fitting response to the perceived deficiencies of our democracies.

This paper sheds novel light on this question by proposing a bottom-up, problem-solving approach to studying citizens' preferences for procedural reform. It moves beyond earlier works by not only looking at what problems that citizens perceive in today's democracy motivate them

to support procedural reform, but also at what they think these newly introduced processes are particularly good or bad at. After all, it could very well be that people consider current politics to be deficient in certain regards, but think a procedural reform performs equally bad or even worse as the existing system. Only if we combine these appraisals, we argue, it is possible to comprehend whether citizens conceive of procedural reform as a *solution* to the *problems* they see in the existing political system. Obtaining these insights is crucial to better understand the potential role of different kinds of procedural reforms in addressing political dissatisfaction. In effect, it is hard to imagine how a novel procedure could address political dissatisfaction if people do not think it addresses their main problems with the political system.

Moreover, this problem-solving lens enables us to go beyond generalized notions of citizens' support for procedural reform. It does not just identify 'fans' and 'haters' of certain types of procedural reform but, instead, acknowledges the context dependence and conditionality of citizens' process preferences. For instance, people could believe that increasing citizens' role in politics makes political decisions more responsive to their views and interests (Boulianne, 2018; Knobloch et al., 2020), but also that decision-making becomes much less time- and resource-efficient (Goldberg et al., 2020). In line with recent theoretical debates (Saward, 2021; Warren, 2017), our approach allows for a nuanced and more detailed picture of citizens' thinking about procedural reform.

In this paper, we illustrate how we can advance our knowledge on this perceived problem-solving potential by studying public opinion on an increasingly discussed and implemented reform: deliberative minipublics (Dryzek et al., 2019; OECD, 2020). Deliberative minipublics typically consist of between 10 to a few hundred citizens, who are selected (or at least invited) at random to debate a specific political issue. They come together to learn from experts, deliberate in small groups, and formulate opinions or recommendations (Curato et al., 2021; Smith, 2014). We collected original, pre-registered survey data in Belgium ($n = 1,579$). Our findings show that people think of minipublics as being able to address a range of problems they see in contemporary politics, yet to varying degrees and not overwhelmingly so. Indeed, we find that people tend to see minipublics not as magical solutions but as improvements to democracy's functioning. In addition, this perceived problem-solving potential is mostly pronounced among respondents who are highly dissatisfied with today's democracy – while this does not come at the expense of general support for minipublics among satisfied respondents. This highlights the importance of our approach for understanding the reasoning of citizens who are the driving force behind concerns about widespread discontent with the state of democracy.

This study contributes to the emerging field on procedural reforms as a solution to widespread dissatisfaction with contemporary politics. We propose a novel way of studying citizens' preferences for procedural reform. This bottom-up, problem-solving approach goes beyond existing studies that connect (specific types of) dissatisfaction with representative democracy to generalized support for direct democratic tools in two ways (e.g., Gherghina & Geißel, 2019; Pilet et al., 2023; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015; Werner et al., 2020). First, we investigate what motivates citizens to support procedural reform not only by looking at push factors (i.e., particular sources of dissatisfaction with the functioning of the political system) but also pull factors (i.e., expectations of what procedural reform would deliver). Existing studies cannot establish whether citizens actually consider newly proposed processes as solutions to the deficiencies they perceive (Werner et al., 2020 speculate about this in the context of referendums, but cannot present empirical data in this regard). Our study takes a step further in investigating the (mis)match between the

problems citizens perceive in the political system and the expectations connected to -in our case- deliberative minipublics to address these exact problems.

Second, by measuring citizens' expectations of minipublics on a wide range of problem areas, we obtain novel insights into how citizens think about minipublics as a new political practice. Do they see it as a magical solution or as a modest improvement (or as a marginal downgrade or severe impairment)? This is, in our view, a crucial empirical finding: People's expectations about what minipublics can do for the functioning of democracy are relatively moderate. It is thus not the case that citizens are supportive of minipublics because they are overly optimistic about their performance, but these novel tools fare consistently better than the low baseline evaluations of the status quo and, hence, are expected to bring about improvements to the political system. Potential concerns that citizens' expectations of newly introduced processes are naively high do not find support in our data. As such, this paper offers concrete and nuanced insights into the role that citizens foresee minipublics to play and the expectations that are attached to them.

Theoretical framework

Procedural reform in democratic theory: The case of deliberative minipublics

Procedural reforms can take a variety of forms, whereby increasing citizens' role in politics has become popular both in the scholarly debate and in practical use (Elstub & Escobar, 2019). In recent years, especially deliberative minipublics take centre stage as an archetypical and increasingly used tool to engage citizens in the political process (Dryzek et al., 2019; OECD, 2020; Paulis et al., 2021).

A prominent question in the scholarly debate on procedural reform is whether and how these can address the ills of our contemporary democracies. Several (deliberative) democratic theorists have taken a practical understanding of what procedural reform can and cannot do for our democracies. Specifically, Archon Fung (2012) suggests a pragmatic conception of democracy which starts from the actual context, conditions and circumstances that characterize contemporary political decision making (see also Felicetti's (2021) practice-based understanding). This comes with specific problems and deficiencies, to which participatory and deliberative tools may be a solution (Fung, 2012). This way of thinking is also reflected in Mark Warren's (2017) problem-based approach, which argues that different democratic practices come with strengths and weaknesses of their own. It is, therefore, that different problems in a democracy can potentially be solved by different practices – including deliberative and participatory tools (see also Saward's (2021) proposal for democratic design).

Following this theoretical tradition, minipublics are considered as part of the broader democratic system – that is, as complements to the existing political system, rather than as attempts to replace representative democracy with a deliberative model (Beauvais & Warren, 2019; Chambers, 2009; Curato & Böker, 2016; Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012; Setälä, 2017; Vrydagh & Caluwaerts, 2023; Warren, 2008). As such, it is recognized that minipublics cannot be a catch-all solution to existing deficiencies in today's democracy (Crosby et al., 1986; Curato et al., 2021; Dienel, 1989; Fishkin, 1995; Lafont, 2020; Parkinson, 2006). Accordingly, minipublics are conceived of as a tool that can tackle specific – but not all – problems in the representative political system (Beauvais & Warren, 2019; Jäske & Setälä, 2020; Kuyper & Wolkenstein, 2019).

Indeed, it is argued that minipublics can address a variety of deficiencies in the current political system (Dryzek et al., 2019). These range from improving the quality of information in public debates (Gastil & Knobloch, 2020) to offsetting inequalities in electoral representation (Farrell & Stone, 2020) as well as from countering polarization among citizens (Grönlund et al., 2015) to enhancing (perceived) democratic legitimacy (Gastil, 2018). At the same time, it is acknowledged that minipublics cannot solve each and every problem of today's democracy and that they come with drawbacks of their own (Achen & Bartels, 2016; Chambers, 2009; Lafont, 2020; Landa & Pevnick, 2021; Parkinson, 2006). Some, for instance, highlight that the invitation might be random but actual participation not so much: Some people are more likely than others to make use of an opportunity to take part due to both political (e.g., low internal efficacy, lack of impact) and practical reasons (Devillers et al., 2021; Jacquet, 2017). In sum, deliberative democrats often paint a rather nuanced picture of whether and how minipublics can enhance the health of contemporary democracies.

So far, however, this pragmatic approach remains primarily a theoretical exercise that shapes how academics think about procedural reform in general and minipublics in particular. As such, it remains largely unknown whether this view of minipublics resonates with citizens' ideas and perceptions. It is the aim of this paper to translate this 'problem-solving' logic into an empirical research project of citizens' process preferences. Given the high levels of frustration with contemporary politics among the general public and the expectation that newly introduced processes such as deliberative minipublics will alleviate them, it is essential to understand (a) whether citizens also think in such problem-solving terms about minipublics and (b) whether and which problems they perceive can be addressed through the addition of minipublics to the political system.

How citizens think about minipublics

Despite a flourishing literature on citizens' preferences for political decision-making processes, rather little is known about whether and why the general public is in favour of deliberative minipublics. Most of the existing studies on public opinion about increasing citizens' role in politics focus on support for referendums (e.g., Bowler & Donovan, 2019; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015) or for citizens making political decisions more generally (e.g., Gherghina & Geißel, 2019) – a lot less is known about support for minipublics. In addition, previous works on citizens' process preferences typically measure general support for newly introduced procedures by measuring to what extent people support or reject the introduction of these tools (Bowler et al., 2007; Pilet et al., 2023).

In the existing literature, the most consistent finding is that dissatisfied citizens are more supportive of the public directly deciding on important issues (Bengtsson & Mattila, 2009; Bowler & Donovan, 2019; Donovan & Karp, 2006; Gherghina & Geißel, 2019; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015; but see: Bowler et al., 2007). Although the bulk of studies connects support for direct democratic mechanisms to general notions of satisfaction with democracy or political trust, some have taken a more fine-grained approach by differentiating between specific kinds of political discontent (del Río et al., 2016; Gherghina & Geißel, 2019; Werner et al., 2020). Notably, Werner and colleagues (2020) show that citizens are more supportive of referendums when they are dissatisfied with representatives not listening to the public, whereas this is not the case for those who are dissatisfied

with representatives' capacity to lead – yet it remains unclear whether citizens actually consider the referendum a solution to the source of their dissatisfaction.

Turning specifically to deliberative minipublics, we have recently gained some insights into public support for these novel tools and several studies again find evidence for a positive association with political dissatisfaction (Bedock & Pilet, 2021, 2023; Neblo et al., 2010; Pilet et al., 2023; Pow et al., 2020). But also, again, dissatisfaction is generally measured in generic terms and not connected to specific expectations of the benefits or weaknesses of this type of process. These studies, moreover, fairly often ask about support for lottery-based bodies being endowed with decision-making authority, thereby positioning minipublics as binding tools that replace representative structures on a given issue (Bedock & Pilet, 2021, 2023; Pilet et al., 2023). For instance, in their cross-national study on support for minipublics, Pilet et al. (2023) ask if respondents 'think it is a good idea to let a group of randomly-selected citizens make decisions instead of politicians' (p. 6). This description, however, hardly fits the way in which minipublics are used in practice: These generally take on an advisory role and, as such, are embedded in existing representative structures (OECD, 2020; Paulis et al., 2021).

Overall, we still know little about citizens' support for deliberative minipublics and the push and pull factors that make them more or less attractive as complements to existing political systems. We aim to contribute to this research line and advance both theoretical and empirical knowledge about citizens' appraisal of minipublics. We build on the theoretical advancements discussed earlier and test to what extent people take a problem-solving perspective to procedural reforms, in particular deliberative minipublics.

A pragmatic, problem-solving citizenry?

Setting the baseline: Dissatisfaction with representative politics. Our argument starts from the premise that citizens are not likely to form their ideas about democratic practices in a space of philosophical abstraction, removed from their daily lives (Fung, 2012; see also Felicetti, 2021). Rather, people are expected to develop attitudes and ideas about democracy in reference to the political context they are embedded in (Fung, 2012). Citizens anchor their thinking about democracy in the present representative context and presumably use it as a baseline when evaluating democratic practices or tools. Indeed, we argue that people may think of procedural reform in terms of performing better, equal or worse *compared with* the status quo of today's representative democracy. From this follows that citizens' evaluations of the existing representative system likely plays an important role in their position towards novel democratic tools such as deliberative minipublics (Werner & Marien, 2022).

How do citizens look upon the status quo of representative democracy? By and large, the scholarship on political trust and satisfaction with democracy show that many citizens take a critical position towards contemporary politics (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Klingemann, 2014; Norris, 2011). Clearly, a large share of the public expresses dissatisfaction with the functioning of current politics and is quick to point out various problems and deficiencies they see in the existing representative system (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2019). These range from thinking of politicians as corrupt, power-hungry and self-serving individuals to feeling that decision-making processes are characterized by opacity, bickering and gridlock, and perceiving that policies benefit a few big, special interests rather than society as a whole (Dahlberg & Holmberg, 2014; Dommett &

Temple, 2019; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Jennings et al., 2016; Ulbig, 2002).

Deliberative minipublics as a solution? In citizens' thinking about newly introduced procedures, however, it is arguably not only their evaluation of the existing representative system that matters. This, we argue, only constitutes part of the picture. Instead, we put forward that it is crucial to also consider people's appraisal of its proposed solution – that is, of procedural reform. Specifically, what do people find attractive and/or problematic about (different kinds of) democratic tools or practices? Posing this question can help us understand which expectations citizens connect to deliberative minipublics and how they see their function in the wider political system. Importantly, by studying deliberative minipublics as complements to broader democratic systems rather than isolated institutions, we do not focus on citizens' views on specific design factors of these processes (e.g., the amount of participants or the exact recruitment strategy; Christensen, 2020; Goldberg & Bächtiger, 2023) but rather on their potential systemic contribution to democracy (Curato & Böker, 2016; Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012; Setälä, 2017). Aside from scholarly insight, understanding these concrete hopes and fears of what minipublics can bring to the table is essential for democratic design and for understanding why these processes might sometimes struggle to address dissatisfaction in practice (van Dijk & Lefevere, 2023).

This problem-solving approach provides three types of novel insights. First, in line with theoretical work, this perspective does *not* expect citizens to see minipublics either as a catch-all solution or, alternatively, as failing to do anything for democracy. It can provide a nuanced understanding of citizens' views and expectations of minipublics. Second, our approach also sheds light on the extent to which people even follow a problem-solving logic in their appraisal of newly introduced procedures: Are they enthusiasts of minipublics or instead hold moderate expectations of what these can do for our democracies? Third, a problem-solving lens allows to see if people think procedural reform (also) comes with drawbacks of their own. For instance, they could think procedural reform does nothing for democracy or that it improves its functioning in some ways but impairs it in others. To take just one example, citizens may consider that the use of minipublics can improve democracy's functioning in the sense of politics being more responsive to the public (Boulianne, 2018; Knobloch et al., 2020). At the same time, however, citizens may think minipublics can also impair the working of democracy by, for instance, slowing down political decision making (den Ridder et al., 2021; Goldberg et al., 2020). For this reason, we will examine citizens' evaluations of minipublics' problem-solving potential across a diverse collection of problem areas in a democracy (see the methods section for more details).

To sum up, our problem-solving lens combines insights on the problems that citizens diagnose in the current system with those on what they think makes new procedural tools such as minipublics attractive (or, indeed, problematic). This allows to uncover if and how people think the use of minipublics can fix the deficiencies they see in the current system. In doing so, we study citizens' expectations – rather than their evaluations of – minipublics' role in our democracies. While there is good reason to assume that experience is of importance (e.g., van Dijk & Lefevere, 2023), this focus allows us to gain insights into the potential that people see in minipublics and, hence, to understand which expectations these newly introduced processes fulfil or fail to meet when they occur in practice.

Beyond mapping the problem-solving potential of minipublics, we also aim to gain insight into the relevance of this logic for general support for the use of minipublics as part of political

decision-making. We argue that citizens think in terms of the problems they see in today's democracy, and consider whether and how democratic practices or tools can be a solution or not – and, hence, that these problem-solving considerations play an essential role in their appraisal about these novel tools. This is an important question: If we find that citizens expect minipublics to address (aggravate) deficiencies of the political system, this would be largely irrelevant if this is not reflected in higher (lower) support for these tools. We expect that the higher the perceived problem-solving potential of minipublics, the more they are in favour of minipublics in general. We specify this in two hypotheses. The first aggregates the different problem areas for a test of the average relationship, while the second hypothesis zooms in on the specific problem areas under study.

The more citizens consider deliberative minipublics to make politics perform better than it does today, the more they are supportive of deliberative minipublics – both on average (Hypothesis 1) and in specific problem areas (Hypothesis 2).

Data and methods

To increase the transparency of our research process, the design, hypotheses, measurements and analytical approach were pre-registered at <https://aspredicted.org/fb825.pdf>. The pre-registration can be accessed here and is also available in the Supporting Information Appendix A (including an overview of minor deviations).

Case

We test our argument in Belgium and, more specifically, its two main regions: Flanders and Wallonia.¹ This small consensus democracy in Western Europe has some experience with deliberative minipublics. A well-known case is the G1000 in 2011, which brought together people from around the country to deliberate on various problems facing Belgium (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2018). More recently, a number of minipublics have been organized on the regional and local levels (Vrydagh et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, there are reasons to consider Belgium a rather typical case when it comes to how citizens think about the functioning of the political system and their attitudes towards minipublics in Western Europe. First of all, in comparison with other European countries, Belgian citizens exert average levels of dissatisfaction with the way democracy works (for instance Standard Eurobarometer 97, 2022) and average levels of trust in institutions (e.g., OECD, 2022). Furthermore, recent cross-national research has shown that Belgian citizens' belief in the capacity of fellow citizens to take political decisions is also situated around the average in a study of nine Western European countries (Pilet et al., 2023) and slightly above average for support for deliberative minipublics (Pilet et al., 2023).

Since, as in many other European countries, the average Belgian citizen has limited experience with deliberative minipublics (OECD, 2020; Paulis et al., 2021), our respondents will most likely base their evaluations of minipublics primarily on expectations rather than evaluation. This not only allows us to better understand citizens' baseline outlook on minipublics, but also to separate this from their appraisal of the status quo (as minipublics are far from an integrated part of the existing system).

Sample and data

We collected our data in the Spring of 2021 with the survey sampling company Kantar TNS. Our sample approximates the Belgian population in terms of gender, age and education level, as shown in Supporting Information Appendix B. An overview of question formulations can be found in Supporting Information Appendix C.

Dependent variable: Support for deliberative minipublics

Since respondents might have limited knowledge of minipublics, it is crucial to provide a description of the process design before measuring support. In our study, this description of minipublics reads as follows²:

‘A citizens’ forum consists of 30 to 100 citizens who are selected by lot from the population. The participating citizens are a reflection of the Belgian population in terms of gender, age, education level and region. They receive information from experts, discuss a specific topic and arrive at policy recommendations.’

Afterwards we ask them: ‘To what extent are you, in general, in favour or against citizens’ forums on important topics?’ Answer options range from 1 ‘Strongly against’ to 7 ‘Strongly in favour’. Don’t know answers are coded as missing values.

Independent variable: Perceived problem-solving potential of deliberative minipublics

In a later section of the survey, we measure citizens’ evaluations of the current representative system as well as their expectations of deliberative minipublics across a range of potential problem areas. Specifically, to tap into respondents’ perceptions of how Belgian politics works today, we ask: ‘To what extent do you think that, in Belgium today, ...’. Next, we inquire about respondents’ appraisals of minipublics’ potential with regards to those same problem areas by asking: ‘To what extent do you think citizens’ forums would provide that...’.

For both questions, respondents were presented with the following problem areas:

... policy is in the interest of society? [responsiveness]

... citizens are listened to when making political decisions? [listening]

... there is a thorough, open debate before important political decisions are made?
[transparent debate]

... political decisions are made quickly and efficiently? [efficiency]

... competent people make political decisions? [competence]

The order of the items was randomized across participants, but each respondent saw the same order for the evaluation of representative politics and of deliberative minipublics. The answer options range from 1 ‘Not at all’ to 7 ‘Very much so’, whereby ‘don’t know’ – answers are again treated as missing values.

The selection of problem areas was based on various considerations. First, they connect closely to existing literature on political dissatisfaction. It is widely reported that many people feel that policies do not benefit society as a whole, citizens' voices are not heard, decision making takes place behind closed doors, politics is characterized by gridlock and that politicians are not particularly competent (del Río et al., 2016; Dommett & Temple, 2019; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002; Jennings et al., 2016; Ulbig, 2002). Second, we also used a most – and least-likely logic – that is, we include problem areas that we foresee as potentially being addressed by the use of minipublics in the eyes of citizens (e.g., responsiveness and listening; Boulianne, 2019; Knobloch et al., 2020) and those that are not (e.g., efficiency and competence; den Ridder et al., 2021; García-Espín & Ganuza, 2017). Apart from these theoretical considerations, we also pre-tested the importance of these problem areas for the Belgian context. This indicated that people were generally dissatisfied in these regards, while also having sufficient variation within the population. Importantly, we do not aspire to map all objects of political dissatisfaction but rather provide an illustrative collection of problem areas that can be expected to matter to citizens to test our argument (and indeed do matter to our respondents; see Supporting Information Appendix; Table F5 for the perceived importance of these problem areas). In our selection of problem areas we, therefore, focus on core aspects of democratic decision-making that are likely to be important to people's perceptions of the political system and its potential reforms.

We construct our independent variables by subtracting respondents' scores on the evaluation of representative politics from their appraisals of minipublics. We do this for the sum index (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$; Hypothesis 1) and for the individual items separately (Hypothesis 2). This provides us with a measure of the perceived problem-solving potential of deliberative minipublics, whereby values range from -6 meaning that respondents consider minipublics to create severe problems to 6 denoting that respondents consider minipublics to fully solve problems they see in current politics.

Covariates

We control for respondents' gender, age group, education level and region. We also control for respondents' political interest and vote choice. The operationalization of these variables is specified in Supporting Information Appendix C.

Method

We use ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis. We present complete case analyses in our manuscript, and we discuss results from multiple imputation in our robustness checks (e.g., van Buuren, 2018; White et al., 2011).

Results

A problem-solving perspective to public support for minipublics

To get a better understanding of the perceived problem-solving potential of deliberative minipublics, we provide descriptive statistics (Figure 1). To begin with, respondents indicate to

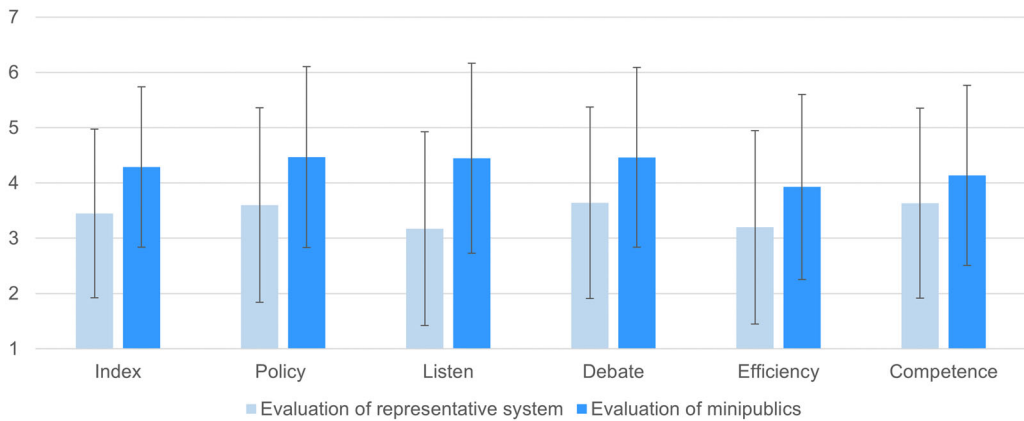


Figure 1. Respondents' evaluations of representative politics and of minipublics across different problem areas.

[Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ajps.12691)]

Note: Bars represent means, error bars represent standard deviations. N = 1,579. See Supporting Information Appendix; Tables C2 and C3 for the corresponding tables.

be rather dissatisfied with the functioning of current politics, both on average and in the various areas under study (with the mean being consistently below the midpoint). At the same time, they seem to be relatively positive about minipublics' potential role in those same areas (with the mean almost always above the midpoint). Indeed, for each of the problem areas under study, respondents on average expect minipublics to perform better than the existing system.

At the same time, we also see some indication that respondents think minipublics can solve some problems better than others. For instance, respondents see minipublics as a relatively bigger improvement in terms of citizens being listened to in political decision-making, whereas they see minipublics as a relatively smaller improvement to the competence of decision-makers. As such, respondents tend to see minipublics as problem-solvers rather than problem-creators, and as better able to address some problems compared to others. Overall, however, respondents' expectations of what minipublics can do for democracy are not sky high: They seem to think of minipublics as an improvement rather than a Magical solution to the problem areas studied here.

Next, we turn to the question to what extent citizens take a problem-solving perspective in their reasoning about minipublics, that is, in their general support for minipublics. Using OLS regression models, we observe that there is a strong positive and statistically significant association between respondents' perceptions of the problem-solving potential and their support for the use of deliberative minipublics. This signifies that the more respondents think that minipublics can address the problems they diagnose in current politics, the more they are in favour of the use of these novel tools. This holds both for our aggregated measure (Hypothesis 1, Figure 2) and across the individual problem areas under study (Hypothesis 2, Figure 3). We, moreover, observe positive associations between being female, political interest and living in Wallonia, and a negative association with levels of education. These observations correspond closely to the findings of cross-national survey research on support for minipublics (Pilet et al., 2023). All in all, these findings suggest citizens think in terms of the *problems* they perceive in current politics, and consider whether and how newly introduced procedures can be a *solution* or not. Indeed, it tells us that such problem-solving considerations play a role in their reasoning about procedural reform.

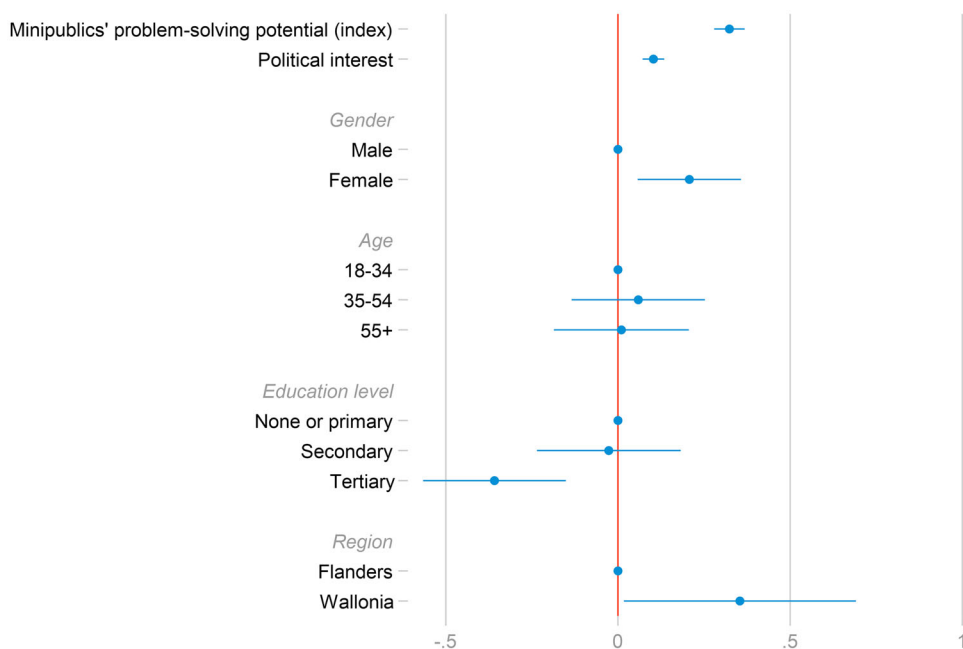


Figure 2. OLS Regression of general support for minipublics³ on the perceived problem-solving potential of minipublics (index).

[Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Note: N = 1,579. Estimates are unstandardized regression coefficients (OLS) with 95% confidence intervals. The model includes vote choice as a control, but this is not shown for ease of readability. The variable gender includes the categories 'non-binary' and 'prefer not to disclose'. These are not shown due to very few cases and hence large confidence intervals. Full models can be found in Supporting Information Appendix; Table D2.⁴

Robustness checks

To assess the robustness of our findings, we conduct two further analyses. First, we have argued that it is not about citizens' perceptions of minipublics per se, but relative to the problems they see in the existing system. For this reason, we additionally control for respondents' evaluations of minipublics in our models (Supporting Information Appendix; Table D3). When doing so, we find that the effects of the perceived problem-solving potential of minipublics mostly remain statistically significant, though with smaller effect sizes. This implies that our results are not just an artefact of lower or higher evaluations of minipublics, but also depend on how respondents' consider minipublics in relation to the problems they see in politics today. Second, we present alternative ways of dealing with don't know responses to one or more items under study. In our main analysis, these responses are treated as missing values and are omitted from analysis (complete case analysis with list wise deletion) – resulting in a sample size of 1,579; that is, 77.8 per cent of all respondents. This is particularly driven by the creation of the perceived problem-solving potential index, which relies on 10 individual items. Listwise deletion of missing values may introduce bias and imprecision in the reported regression coefficients (e.g., van Buuren, 2018). Importantly, don't know responses are not equal to missing values because they can contain (partially) substantive information which can make their exclusion from the model even more



Figure 3. Ordinary least squares regression of support for deliberative minipublics on the perceived problem-solving potential of DMPs across problem areas.

[Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

Note: $N = 1,579$. Estimates are unstandardized regression coefficients (OLS) with 95% confidence intervals. All models include control variables (political interest, gender, age, education level, region, vote choice). Full models can be found in Supporting Information Appendix; Table D2.

problematic. To address this problem we conduct two robustness checks: (a) we construct the index variable based on those items with available scores, and (b) we impute missing values using the Multiple Imputation by Chained Equations (MICE) approach (Azur et al., 2011; van Buuren, 2018; White et al., 2011). Both analyses largely confirm the results of the main analyses: The association between the perceived problem-solving potential and general support for minipublics remains statistically significant and positive with roughly similar effect sizes (Supporting Information Appendix, Table E3 and E4). An elaborate explanation of our multiple imputation procedure can be found in the Supporting Information Appendix E.

Post-hoc, exploratory analyses: Different citizens, different appraisals of minipublics?

The scholarly literature on deliberative minipublics increasingly recognizes the need to explore differences between various subgroups in society (e.g., Már & Gastil, 2021). This gives rise to various questions: Are particular groups of citizens more supportive of the use of minipublics? Do different subgroups ascribe different roles to minipublics in improving or impairing the functioning of democracy? And does the perceived problem-solving potential have a stronger influence on support for minipublics among specific subgroups in society? Using an exploratory approach, we conduct additional analyses to deepen our understanding of the reasoning of different subgroups of citizens about the use of minipublics.

To begin with, we focus on respondents who are highly dissatisfied with democracy's functioning – as they are the driving force behind widespread concerns about frustration with and alienation from representative democracy. It is among these dissatisfied respondents that we observe the highest expectations towards minipublics' role in solving a wide range of problems they perceive in politics today (Figure 4). Whereas dissatisfied respondents thus see minipublics

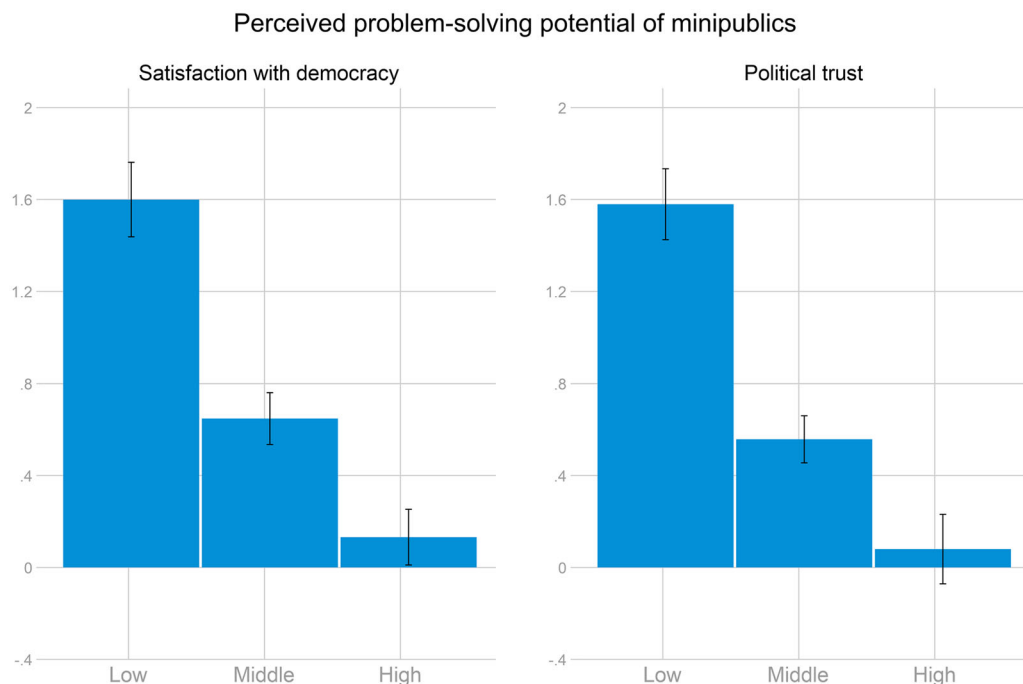


Figure 4. Perceived problem-solving potential of deliberative minipublics across subgroups.

[Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1475-6765.1269)]

Note: $N_{\text{swd}} = 1,578$, $N_{\text{poltrust}} = 1,574$. The scale for perceived problem-solving potential of minipublics ranges from -6 meaning problem-creators to 6 meaning problem-solvers. Splits are scale based. Corresponding tables can be found in Supporting Information Appendix; Tables F1 and F2.

as problem-solvers, respondents who are highly satisfied with democracy's functioning seem to expect minipublics to do little for democracy in terms of the problem areas under study.

At the same time, this is not necessarily indicative of the extent to which dissatisfied and satisfied respondents support the use of minipublics in the first place. Accordingly, we observe that both dissatisfied and satisfied respondents are roughly equally supportive of the use of minipublics (Figure 5). Hence, interestingly, in contrast to existing research on referendums, this finding suggests that general dissatisfaction or low trust is not related to general support for minipublics. Instead, it emphasizes the usefulness of our problem-solving approach: People may support minipublics for a variety of reasons, and one of them is the perceived problem-solving potential.

Accordingly, we explore to what extent dissatisfied citizens take a problem-solving approach in their thinking about minipublics, and whether and how this differs from their satisfied counterparts. To this end, we interact satisfaction with democracy and political trust with our independent variable of perceived problem-solving potential. Importantly, this is an exploratory analysis for which we did not formulate hypotheses and, hence, significance values have to be interpreted with caution.

Both dissatisfied and satisfied respondents appear to use a problem-solving perspective in their thinking about minipublics (the marginal effects plots show positive coefficients above

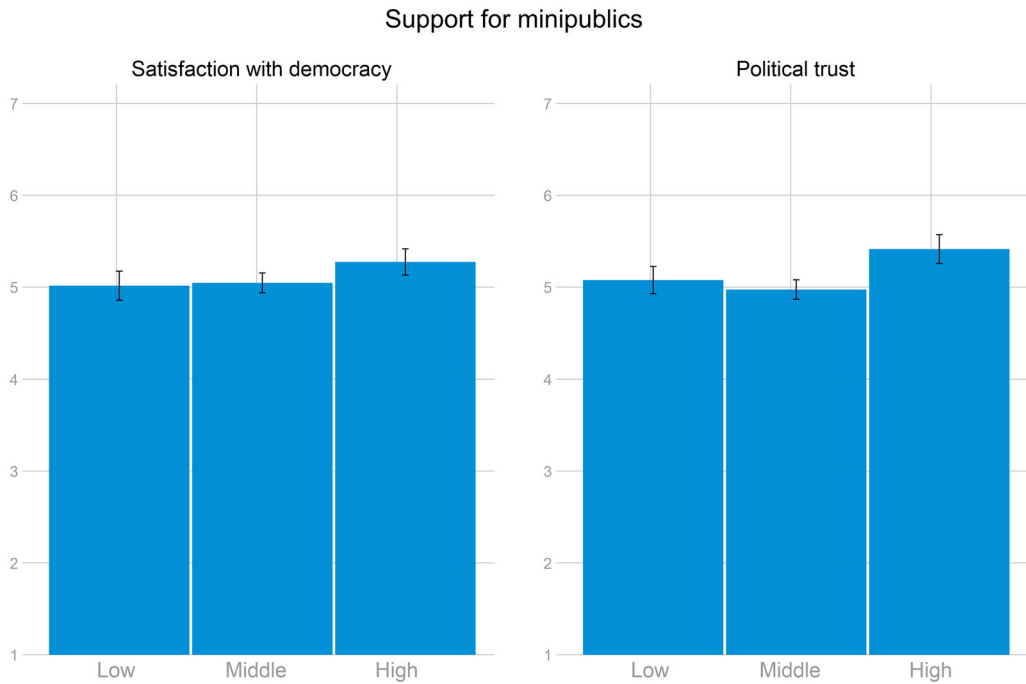


Figure 5. Support for deliberative minipublics across subgroups.

[Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ajps.12689)]

Note: $N_{\text{swd}} = 1,578$, $N_{\text{poltrust}} = 1,574$. Support for minipublics was measured on a seven-point scale, ranging from 1 'Strongly against' to 7 'Strongly in favour'. Splits are scale based. Corresponding tables can be found in Supporting Information Appendix; Table F3.

the horizontal zero-line; Figure 6). Yet, among respondents with low levels of satisfaction with democracy and political trust, a problem-solving perspective appears more prominent in their thinking about the use of minipublics, compared with those with high levels of satisfaction or trust. Indeed, this provides further indication that respondents who are generally dissatisfied with politics would tend to support minipublics for their perceived potential to solve problems in contemporary democracy – whereas their more satisfied counterparts seem more inclined to draw on other reasons in their support for minipublics.

Finally, we also explore whether our main conclusions hold across different subgroups in society more generally. To this end, we additionally look at differences between people in terms of political sophistication (i.e., education level and political interest) and their familiarity with minipublics (Supporting Information Appendix F). In doing so, we observe that respondents with both low and high levels of political sophistication both think of these novel tools as performing better on the various problem areas and they tend to have roughly similar levels of general support for minipublics. The exploratory moderation analyses suggest that respondents with different levels of political sophistication use a problem-solving perspective in their support for minipublics to a fairly similar degree. Moreover, our findings suggest that citizens who are most familiar with minipublics are somewhat more sceptical about the problem-solving potential of minipublics, while their general support for these novel tools is rather similar. Furthermore, we find some indication that the problem-solving potential of minipublics is more important for citizens with

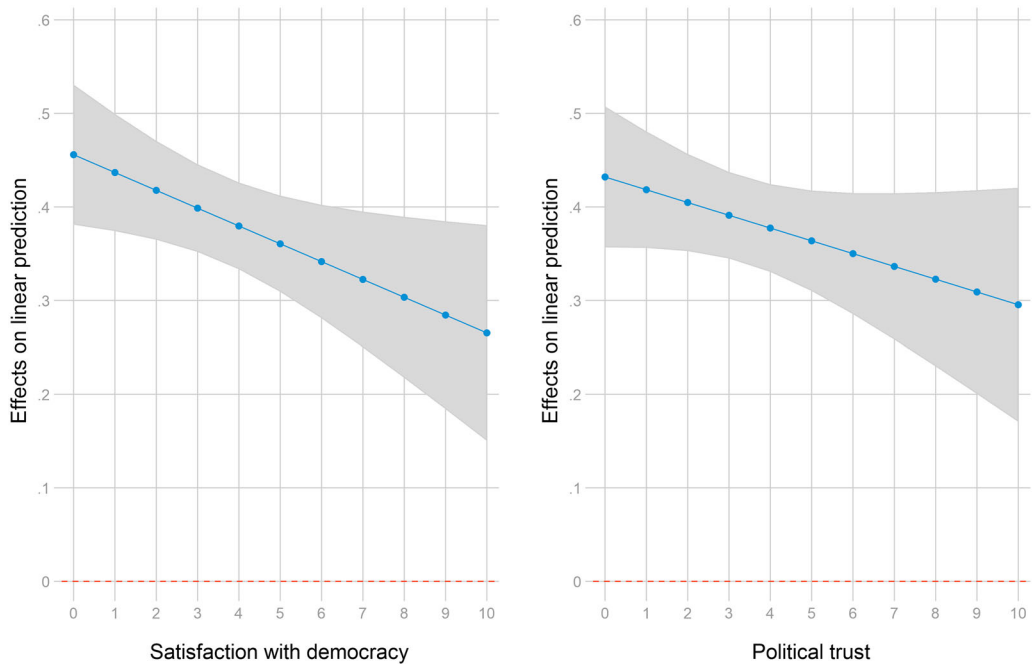


Figure 6. The average marginal effects of perceived problem-solving potential on support for minipublics across subgroups.

[Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Note: $N_{\text{swd}} = 1,578$, $N_{\text{poltrust}} = 1,574$. Estimates are average marginal effects with 95% confidence intervals. All models include control variables (political interest, gender, age, education level, region, vote choice). Corresponding tables can be found in Supporting Information Appendix; Table F4.

higher levels of familiarity with the process, but given the large and overlapping confidence intervals, substantial uncertainty about the role of familiarity remains. All in all, these insights on subgroup differences add to the relevance of our approach to understand the role of procedural reform in addressing widespread dissatisfaction with the existing representative system.

Conclusion

With procedural reforms being widely debated and put into practice, the question of whether they tackle widespread dissatisfaction with representative politics becomes increasingly pressing. Therefore, we propose a research approach that investigates citizens' attitudes to their problem-solving potential. It is first and foremost essential to take those actors' perspectives seriously whose problems we are trying to solve – citizens. Moreover, we should not only look at what problems people see in the existing representative system, but also whether and in what ways they think procedural reforms can address those perceived problems. The core argument is that, to assess if a procedural reform can address political dissatisfaction, it is important to study whether and in what ways citizens perceive that the introduction of different procedures will actually solve the specific problems they see in contemporary politics. After all, a large part of the appeal of minipublics stems from the expectation that they can address political dissatisfaction (Elstubb & Escobar, 2019;

OECD, 2020). Yet, we do not know whether people see minipublics as problem-solvers or as problem-creators, nor what specific ills of democracy they think can improved or impaired by the use of minipublics.

Using original survey data from Belgium ($n = 1,579$), we show that respondents generally consider minipublics as being able to address various problem areas in today's democracy. Yet, they are not overwhelmingly enthusiastic about minipublics' problem-solving potential, and they believe minipublics are better suited to address some problems (listening to citizens) than others (competence of decision-makers). As expected, we find that the extent to which respondents think that minipublics can improve different areas of politics is associated with their support for its use. This holds across a diverse range of specific problem areas and across different subgroups in society. In sum, these findings suggest that citizens indeed think about minipublics from a problem-solving perspective. Especially given the absence of a relation between general democratic dissatisfaction and support for minipublics, the problem-solving approach proves particularly useful to achieve a comprehensive picture of how people think about the role of minipublics in contemporary democracies.

Moreover, for minipublics to alleviate dissatisfaction with contemporary democracy, it is also important that dissatisfied citizens, in particular, see minipublics as problem-solvers. After all, it is they who diagnose the most severe problems in politics today. Our exploratory approach suggests that dissatisfied respondents are more optimistic about the ability of minipublics to act as problem-solvers, and these problem-solving considerations seem to figure more prominently in their support for minipublics compared with satisfied citizens. Yet, importantly, this does not necessarily come at the expense of satisfied respondents being less or even unsupportive of the use of minipublics. This points to a promising insight for the expectation that minipublics can tackle dissatisfaction.

This study does not come without limitations and subsequent calls for further research. First, the findings are situated in Belgium, where minipublics tend to be the exception rather than the rule (OECD, 2020; Paulis et al., 2021). For this reason, our respondents likely base their appraisal of minipublics on their expectations about these tools. This raises questions about the role of (extensive) experience with minipublics, and how this would affect citizens' thinking about these deliberative practices. After all, the abstract measurement of citizens' preferences and expectations may well be different from their real-life experiences, in particular given the messy reality of the broader context in which minipublics take place in practice (e.g., Bussu et al., 2022; Vrydagh & Caluwaerts, 2023). Our findings suggest that citizens who are most familiar with minipublics are somewhat more sceptical about the problem-solving potential of minipublics. Do their high expectations become tempered, less idealized and more practice-based? And, in the long run, do they still see minipublics as problem-solvers or, rather, as problem-creators? This latter may not be the case as we also find that, among citizens who are familiar with them, support for the use of minipublics is not much different from those who are less familiar with these novel tools. This resonates with the conclusions reached by Werner and colleagues (2020) on support for referendums in countries with more extensive use of direct-decision-making as well as those of Goldberg and colleagues (2020) who suggest that citizens do not change their preferences for democratic decision-making schemes after becoming informed and/or thinking these through. Yet, in doing so, it is also important for future studies to take account of what kind of experience and whether these instances fulfil or fail to meet citizens' expectations of minipublics. For instance, there are prominent examples of where minipublics have led to policy changes (e.g., in Ireland on

abortion) but also of ones where their advice was generally not adopted (e.g., in France on climate change; OECD, 2020). In fact, it may be especially important to account for the policy impact of minipublics, as their recommendations are often not fully implemented (Font et al., 2018; Goodin & Dryzek, 2006) and this has important ramifications for how citizens look upon them (van Dijk & Lefevere, 2023). As such, future research in other settings and countries with more experience with minipublics is needed to see how citizens reason about minipublics when these practices become embedded in broader systems of governance (Bussu et al., 2022).

A second limitation is that we test our argument for five specific problem areas. While extensive thought went into the selection, these problem areas function primarily as illustrative cases to explain and test the structure of our problem-solving argument. We do not argue that this is an exhaustive or most important list of aspects that citizens criticize about the functioning of democracy (also to avoid overburdening respondents). Instead, we want to test if and how citizens expect minipublics to bring improvements and/or impairments to the existing political system and to what extent this matters for their general support for procedural reform. Related to this, we pretested the relevance of the selected problems areas and explored the perceived importance thereof (see Supporting Information Appendix; Tables F5-F6 and Figure F6). Future studies could investigate to what extent people from different countries perceive different deficiencies in present-day politics. While some problems likely matter to many people (e.g., a lack of responsiveness; ESS Round 9, 2018), other perceived deficiencies and the importance thereof may be more specific to the case at hand. This context- and time-dependency can also be relevant for the expectations attached to minipublics – it presumably being contingent on the narrative around minipublics and their intended purpose (e.g., to counter political apathy, offset inequality, overcome polarization; Curato et al., 2017). This is especially important in the context of our study because of the legacy of regional division in Belgium and the focus on deliberative tools to bridge these divides both in the academy and in political practice (e.g., Caluwaerts & Deschouwer, 2014).

Third, the cross-sectional nature of our data does not allow for any causal inference. It can only serve as a first starting point to understand how citizens' attitudes about deliberative minipublics and the existing political system are structured. Ideally, future studies can test these relationships in a causal manner, either using a real case of a deliberative minipublic or an experimental design.

Aside from empirical insights into public opinion on deliberative minipublics, we also made an argument about how to study citizens' preferences for democratic design more generally. We proposed that rather than making citizens choose between grand models of democracy (cf. Font et al., 2015), we should employ a problem-solving perspective to studying what procedural reforms can or cannot do for contemporary democracies. The proposed approach helps us to uncover whether people think of a procedural reform as a solution to all, some, or none of the problems they see in representative politics. By using this problem-solving lens, we can obtain insights into whether and in what ways citizens think procedural reform can address specific deficiencies of the political system – and, as such, potentially address dissatisfaction with politics today. We find that citizens indeed support minipublics more if they believe they are problem-solvers, and we also observe that they do so for all problem areas under study. It could be the case that Belgian citizens hold the status quo in such low regard that several alternatives are considered an improvement. Accordingly, future studies are necessary to test this theoretical argument for different procedural reforms (for instance, expert involvement), across different problem areas and across different subgroups of the population.

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Conflict of interest disclosure

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study is available in the Supporting Information.

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Ethics approval statement

This study was approved by the KU Leuven Research Ethics Committee (G-2021-3318-R2(MIN)).

Online Appendix

Additional supporting information may be found in the Online Appendix section at the end of the article:

Appendix A: Pre-registration and minor deviations
 Appendix B: Description of the sample and the population
 Appendix C: Survey items and descriptive statistics
 Appendix D: Main analyses
 Appendix E: Dealing with don't know responses
 Appendix F: Subgroup analyses
 Dataset file
 Do file

Notes

1. Belgium's two main regions comprise 10.3 million of its total population of 11.5 million – that is, 89.4% of its inhabitants in live in Flanders and Wallonia whereas 10.6% lives in the Capital Region of Brussels.

2. This description refers to an ideal-typical deliberative minipublic and does not provide a comprehensive definition: For instance some minipublics involve up to 1,000 participants (Paulis et al., 2021).
3. On average, respondents were mostly favourable towards the use of minipublics on important political topics ($M = 5.09$; $SD = 1.58$; $N = 1579$; seven-point scale).
4. Coefficient plots were produced with the Stata graph scheme 538 developed by Daniel Bischof.

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