



# Who supports deliberative mini-publics in a context of direct democracy? The role of trust and dissatisfaction

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## Abstract

Existing research on public perceptions of deliberative mini-publics focuses on contexts of representative democracy. We present the first study that explores citizen support for deliberative mini-publics in a polity characterised by extensive direct democracy, where citizen participation is already substantive and frequent. Empirically, we draw on a population survey featuring a conjoint experiment with 3700 respondents conducted in early 2023 in Switzerland, after the holding of three deliberative mini-publics on climate policy. We find that citizens generally have positive views of deliberative mini-publics, but that they do not want them to replace existing direct democratic

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institutions. Factors associated with citizen support for replacing existing institutions by deliberative mini-publics are trust in fellow citizens and dissatisfaction with direct democracy in both normative and instrumental terms. Regarding design features, we found that citizens prefer deliberative mini-publics that delve into salient topics and have unconstrained modes of participation as well as time-efficient formats, but that do not make binding decisions. Financial compensations to deliberative mini-public participants had no effect on citizens' preferences. Citizens were sceptical, moreover, about sortition as a recruitment procedure for the deliberating group.

### **Points for practitioners**

Deliberative mini-publics (DMPs) are participatory designs in which a group of randomly chosen citizens deliberates on policy issues and formulates recommendations. Our study shows that citizens generally find DMPs an attractive participatory format, even though random selection of participants is not (yet) well understood. And although citizens are sceptical about handing power directly to DMPs, they want them to have real influence in the policy process.

### **Keywords**

Deliberative mini-publics, democratic innovation, citizen perceptions, Switzerland

## **Introduction**

In the last three decades, new instances of citizen participation beyond electoral democracy have proliferated across the world. Currently prominent are so-called 'deliberative mini-publics' (DMPs) (Curato et al., 2021) based on a random selection of groups of citizens who then deliberate and formulate policy recommendations on selected issues. This study seeks to contribute to the emerging strand of scholarship examining how DMPs are perceived by the wider public. This is important, as the often too implicit common assumption behind many democratic innovations is that, as they aim to expand participation, citizens will necessarily welcome them. Empirically, however, the answer to the question of what citizens think about these democratic innovations is far from evident. It is plausible, for instance, that different groups of citizens have different perceptions about such innovations, and that, in addition, these perceptions vary according to the characteristics of these democratic innovations. Who are the citizens who welcome (or not) democratic innovations? And what do citizens think about the design of such participatory mechanisms?

So far, existing studies on these questions have focused on polities characterised by representative democratic institutions. In such a setting, DMPs necessarily equate to an increase of citizen participation, and it is therefore difficult to assess if citizens' attitudes towards them relate to participatory expansions in general or to DMPs as such. Our study innovates in that it investigates citizens' support for DMPs in a context characterised by a long tradition of extensive and frequent citizen participation through existing institutions of direct democracy: Switzerland. Given the extensive institutions of direct democracy in

this country (Serdült, 2018), the development of additional channels of citizen participation was not seen as a priority. Switzerland is therefore a latecomer in terms of democratic innovations. But in recent years, new forms of citizen participation have increasingly been used in Switzerland as well, especially at the local level (Kübler et al., 2020). However, we still know rather little about how such democratic innovations are perceived and assessed by a public that is already used to extensive citizen rights and frequent opportunities to participate in political decision-making. Our study thus investigates citizen perceptions of democratic innovations not only in relationship to institutions of *representative democracy* – on which almost all studies to date are focusing – but also in relationship to legacy institutions of *direct democracy*. It does so by taking advantage of the implementation of three DMPs that were organised as pilot projects in three cities of the canton of Zurich in 2021 and 2022.

## Citizen perceptions of DMPs

DMPs, sometimes also referred to as ‘citizen assemblies’ (Reuchamps et al., 2023), can be defined as ‘carefully designed forums where a representative subset of the wider population come together to engage in open, inclusive, informed and consequential discussions on one or more issues’ (Curato et al., 2021: 3). The claim to representativeness is important, and, in order to achieve such representativeness, the predominant form of participant recruitment for DMPs today is algorithmic sortition through multi-stage random selection procedures (Flanigan et al., 2021). The objective is to counter the reproduction of political inequalities and constitute a diversified panel of citizens for the DMP, the assumption being that diversity enhances the epistemic quality of deliberation and eventually produces better and smarter outcomes (Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2008).

Notwithstanding the scholarly debate over their deficits in terms of legitimacy and representation (Lafont, 2020), DMPs are quite popular today, both with governments and public authorities, as well as with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or civil society groups. A recent study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development even reports a ‘deliberative wave’, as an increasing number of DMPs are being organised in countries across the world (OECD, 2020). Scholarly interest in DMPs is also high. But although a large number of studies have focused on DMPs as such, it is only since the early 2010s that scholars have started to more thoroughly investigate how they are perceived by the wider public, and under what conditions citizens view them favourably (Talukder and Pilet, 2023). So far, however, the existing studies focus on contexts in which DMPs are introduced alongside representative institutions and therefore entail a participatory expansion of citizens’ political involvement. This is different in the context under scrutiny here. Indeed, Switzerland is characterised by extensive opportunities for political participation beyond elections. Citizens not only have the possibility, at all state levels, to challenge government decisions in popular votes (so-called referendums), but can also formulate proposals which, if accepted in a popular vote, take legal force (so-called popular initiatives) (for details, see Stadelmann-Steffen and Leemann, 2024). With existing studies on citizen support for DMPs predominantly conducted in a context of representative democracy, it is

important to ponder how a context of direct democracy might qualify the explanations provided by this literature.

### *Key support factors for DMPs: Trust, engagement and dissatisfaction*

Studies on public perceptions of deliberative democracy tend to find that citizens are generally open towards deliberative procedures and view them as attractive alternatives to standard partisan and interest group politics (Font et al., 2015; Neblo et al., 2010; Webb, 2013). This is also true for DMPs: scholars found that citizens generally have a positive attitude towards DMPs. But despite this overall positive assessment, most citizens do not consider DMPs as a valid alternative to existing democratic institutions. In a survey conducted in 15 European countries, Pilet, Bol, et al. (2023) found that in every country, a clear majority of citizens is strongly opposed to the replacement of elected politicians by randomly selected DMPs. Regarding the reasons for citizens' attitudes towards DMPs – be it as complements or as alternatives to existing democratic institutions – studies have identified social trust and civic engagement as well as citizens' dissatisfaction with existing institutions as the key explanatory factors.

A first important argument is that citizens' support of DMPs is conditional on the extent to which they trust fellow citizens and consider them competent to participate in political deliberations (Goldberg et al., 2024; Pow et al., 2020). This *trust hypothesis* directly relates to the set-up of DMPs. As they involve sortition to recruit the panel of citizens that deliberates, DMPs are highly selective, and the probability for an ordinary citizen that she or he will eventually end up taking part in such a DMP is rather low. A DMP therefore implies that most citizens cede their sovereignty to randomly chosen fellow citizens to represent them in the actual deliberation. As a corollary, 'one might expect citizens who trust their fellow citizens to be more in favour of [DMPs] than those who believe that their fellow citizens are not competent enough to take part in the decision-making process' (Talukder and Pilet, 2023: 318). We can assume that this argument applies independently of whether DMPs are implemented in a context of representative or direct democracy. The *trust hypothesis* can thus be formulated as follows:

**H1:** *Citizens' support of DMPs is stronger the more they trust their fellow citizens' ability to make good political decisions.*

Second, the *civic engagement argument* focuses on citizens' motivations to get involved in new participatory opportunities. Echoing the 'new politics explanation' (Dalton et al., 2001), this hypothesis conveys the notion that social modernisation and value change have increased the general desire for more citizen involvement. Enlightened understanding thanks to generalized access to education, as well as post-material values, has led to a citizenry that is increasingly distrustful of hierarchical structures such as political parties and elites in general. Simultaneously, better education and access to political information have improved citizens' skills to get involved in political decision-making directly, without the need for parties or elites. According to this line of argument, it is the 'engaged citizens' (Bedock and Pilet, 2023) – that is, those with more

civic resources and higher abilities for political participation – who tend to manifest higher support for DMPs. Again, there is no reason why this should be different across representative or direct democratic contexts. We therefore formulate the *civic engagement hypothesis* as follows:

**H2:** *Support of DMPs is stronger in citizens with higher resources for political participation.*

Finally, the *political dissatisfaction explanation* emphasises the argument that when citizens are asked about their opinion on democratic innovations, they necessarily evaluate them against the democratic institutions and practices in place (Dalton et al., 2001). Hence, their appreciation of DMPs might just as well translate a critical view of the actual functioning of existing democratic regimes or a negative evaluation of the elites who are in charge. Support for an expansion of direct citizen participation would thus not so much express a quest for a new, more deliberative and citizen-based way of decision-making, but rather feed on the dissatisfaction with the current polity. According to this view, it is not so much a true desire for more or more deliberative citizen involvement in politics that drives support for democratic innovations, but discontent with the existing political order, epitomized by disappointment with political parties or frustration with specific government policies. According to this hypothesis, support for increased citizen participation should be viewed as a quest for changing a system that produces disappointing results. It is the ‘enraged citizens’ (Bedock and Pilet, 2023) who are most in favour of DMPs. In a context of representative democracy, political dissatisfaction mostly has to do with the ruling elite – that is, the elected politicians who make the decisions and are responsible for policies that citizens like or dislike. Indeed, scholars who found evidence supporting the political dissatisfaction hypothesis emphasise that citizens support DMPs when they are unhappy with representative politics (Goldberg et al., 2024), and that this political dissatisfaction is rooted in a feeling of losing out in representative democracy (Pilet, Bedock, et al., 2023). But in a context of direct democracy, when government policies need to be confirmed by citizens to take effect, political elites are not the only ones responsible for policy decisions. Political dissatisfaction in such a context implies dissatisfaction with direct democracy as well (Rojon and Rijken, 2021). This adds a first qualification to the dissatisfaction hypothesis. Moreover, as Werner (2020) has forcefully argued, citizens’ attitudes towards direct democracy do not only entail the adhesion to a normative model. She found that citizens who tend to lose out in referendums are also more critical towards direct democratic institutions. The dissatisfaction hypothesis thus needs to distinguish between a normative and an instrumental dimension of citizens’ attitudes towards direct democracy. Hence, to capture the influence of political dissatisfaction on citizens’ support of DMPs in a direct democratic context, we formulate the following hypotheses:

**H3a** (*dissatisfaction with representative democracy*): *Support of DMPs is stronger in citizens who are dissatisfied with elected politicians.*

**H3b** (dissatisfaction with direct democracy – normative dimension): Support of DMPs is stronger in citizens who are critical towards direct democracy as a normative model.

**H3c** (dissatisfaction with direct democracy – instrumental dimension): Support of DMPs is stronger in citizens who see themselves more often on the losing side in referendum voting.

### **DMP design features as an additional element for citizen support**

Citizens' assessments of DMPs, or their support for reforms that introduce DMPs, do not only depend on their attitudes towards democracy, their ability for political participation or their trust in fellow citizens. Specific design features of DMPs, which can vary across different implementations and experiences, can also impact on how citizens assess them.

Evidence on these aspects is scarce. Nevertheless, the few existing studies that systematically test the impact of DMP design features on citizens' perceptions point towards a number of important elements (Christensen, 2020; Germann, 2025; Goldberg and Bächtiger, 2023; Goldberg et al., 2024; Pow, 2023). First, the size and composition of the deliberating body is important, with larger and more diverse groups being preferred. Second, prerogatives of a DMP are crucial, in the sense that citizens tend to prefer DMPs that have an advisory role rather than one that involves making binding decisions – this echoes survey evidence on citizens' hesitation about DMPs replacing representative institutions. Third, citizens are also sensitive to policy topics, in the sense that they prefer DMPs that deliberate on topics citizens deem salient. Finally, practical matters are important. Regarding the discussion format, citizens were found to prefer DMPs in which the interaction is organised as a face-to-face event, rather than an online discussion, and – rather unsurprisingly – shorter formats are preferred over ones that take more time. Interestingly, the question of participant compensation has not yet been assessed widely. However, based on Neblo et al.'s (2010) findings, it can be expected that citizens would prefer DMPs in which compensation is offered to participants to acknowledge their investment.

All these DMP design features crucial for citizens' support can be expected to play out irrespective of the democratic context. However, the question of prerogatives of a DMP is complexified in a context of direct democracy. Besides a distinction between an advisory role to representative institutions and binding decisions in replacement of elected representatives, a third possibility is imaginable, namely that a DMP formulates proposals that are then submitted to a popular vote. In the absence of previous research on this aspect (but see Schwaiger and Bächtiger, 2025), it is, however, unclear if we should expect this third possibility to generate more or less support than the other two. Hence, we can formulate the hypotheses on DMP design-features as follows:

**H4a** (policy topic): Citizens prefer DMPs focusing on highly salient policy topics.

**H4b** (deliberating group): Citizens prefer DMPs with an inclusive deliberating group.

**H4c** (practicalities): Citizens prefer DMPs with face-to-face interactions, shorter durations and higher compensations to participants.

**H4d** (prerogatives): Citizens prefer DMPs that do not lead to binding decisions.

## Method, data, and analysis

### *The empirical context*

The Swiss canton of Zurich, in which this study was conducted, counts roughly 1.6 million inhabitants and is the most populous of the 26 cantons that constitute the Swiss federation. In terms of its democratic polity, the canton of Zurich features not only representative institutions – a parliament and a government which are both directly elected by universal suffrage – but also several direct democratic instruments: mandatory referendum, optional referendum, financial referendum, and legislative and constitutional popular initiatives, as well as so-called single citizen initiatives. The canton of Zurich thereby belongs to the group of those cantons with an extensive direct democracy (Ezzaini et al., 2024; Stadelmann-Steffen and Leemann, 2024). In the last 50 years, the citizens of the canton of Zurich voted on roughly 600 objects. From 1970 to 2000, the annual number of popular votes fluctuated between 12 and 16. From the 2000s onwards, this number fell to roughly six per year, in the context of a constitutional reform in 2006 that reduced the range of the mandatory referendum and thereby led to a drop in the frequency of such referendums.

Direct democracy is also very widespread in the municipalities of the canton. Popular votes on local bills and popular initiatives are possible in all municipalities of the canton. In addition, the overwhelming majority of the municipalities in the canton (147 out of 160) feature so-called communal assemblies, meaning that the legislative branch of the municipal government is not organized as a council with elected members, but the supreme authority is exercised directly in assemblies of citizens who have the right to participate and are routinely invited to attend (Ladner, 2002). These communal assemblies convene at least twice a year to approve municipal laws and regulations, decide the municipality's budget and validate accounts given by the municipal government. In recent years, however, communal assemblies in the canton of Zurich have increasingly been subject to debate. Declining turnout and biased mobilisation – that is, when interest groups call on their supporters to participate in an assembly and influence decisions on particular issues – have raised concerns about the democratic legitimacy of communal assemblies (Kübler and Rochat, 2009).

In 2021 and 2022, the government of the canton of Zurich conducted a pilot project with DMPs in three mid-sized cities (Uster, Winterthur and Thalwil), bringing together 20 to 21 participants who had been randomly selected from each city's population via a multi-stage stratified sampling procedure. In each of the three cities, the DMPs convened for two weekends to deliberate on issues of municipal climate policy from different angles and under the guidance of professional facilitators. Each of the DMPs produced a report with recommendations that was presented to the municipal government, as well as to the wider public. The data analysed in this paper were collected in the framework of a scientific analysis of these three DMPs (for details, see Heimann et al., 2023).

### *Data collection, sample and weighting*

Our analysis draws on a population survey with roughly 3700 respondents conducted early in 2023 in the canton of Zurich, after the holding of the three DMPs just described.

In collaboration with the statistics office of the canton of Zurich, a random sample of 12,120 inhabitants aged over 16 years was drawn from official residents' registers. Among those, 3030 were drawn from the whole canton, and 3030 each from the three cities in which the DMPs had taken place. These individuals were sent a postal invitation to participate in a self-administered survey (online or by filling in and sending back a paper questionnaire).<sup>1</sup> Three thousand, seven hundred and six individuals completed the survey (3244 online and 462 on paper), which corresponds to a response rate of 30.6%. Response rates were very similar across the four subsamples, resulting in almost equal shares in the samples for the whole canton, as well as for the three cities (see Table A1 in the online Appendix). To correct for the varying probability of being recruited into the overall sample, we applied a survey design-weight calculated as the normalised share of the sampling fraction of each subsample. Weighting scores range from a minimum of 0.05 to a maximum of 3.63. The correlational analyses were performed on the design-weighted data. However, there is a debate in the literature as to whether weights should be used in survey experiments. Given that our sample is high quality and broadly representative, we follow the recommendation by Miratrix et al. (2018) and do not use weights for the conjoint analysis to avoid the loss of statistical power that accompanies weighting.

The study was approved by the ethics committee of the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Zurich in December 2022 (approval number 22.12.8). All analyses were performed with the statistics software R (version 4.5.0).

### *Individual-level survey data: Variables and operationalisation*

The aim of this study is to understand citizens' support for DMPs in a context characterised by extensive direct democracy. Our operationalisation draws on the distinction made in the literature between general support for DMPs and support for replacing existing democratic institutions by DMPs. On the one hand, we measure general support for DMPs as citizens' view on DMPs as a sensible means for enhancing citizen participation. More precisely, this is the response to the question 'To what extent do you think that mini-publics are appropriate to make citizens participate in the policy process?', with answer categories ranging from 1 ('not at all appropriate') to 7 ('very appropriate'). On the other hand, we measure support for DMPs as citizens' opinion on a reform replacing an existing direct democratic institution: 'To what extent would you agree to the following reform: replace communal assemblies by assemblies of randomly chosen citizens', with answer categories ranging from 1 ('I don't agree at all') to 5 ('I fully agree'). Hence, our two dependent variables measure respondents' general assessment of DMPs (1), as well as their support for a reform that replaces an existing direct democratic institution by DMPs (2).

Independent variables of interest relate to respondents' level of trust in fellow citizens (H1) and their resources for civic engagement (H2), as well as their extent of political dissatisfaction (H3a–c). Level of trust in fellow citizens was operationalised as the agreement to the statement 'I trust that ordinary citizens make good political decisions' with answer categories ranging from 1 ('I totally disagree') to 7 ('I fully agree'). Civic engagement was measured by an important prerequisite: the sentiment of internal political



efficacy (see Anderson, 2010) – that is, the mean of the responses to the statements ‘I am good at understanding and assessing important political issues’ and ‘I have the confidence to take active part in a discussion about political issues’ with answer categories ranging from 1 (‘totally disagree’) to 5 (‘fully agree’). To measure political satisfaction, we first focus on representative institutions (H3a). Using two items from the political efficacy battery, we operationalise respondents’ assessment of elected politicians by the mean value of the responses to the two statements ‘Politicians care what ordinary people think’ and ‘Politicians strive to keep in close touch with the people’, with answer scales ranging from 1 (‘totally disagree’) to 5 (‘totally agree’). Next, and this is the core contribution of this study, we focus on satisfaction with direct democracy. To capture (dis)satisfaction with direct democracy, we use two variables. On the one hand, we use respondents’ agreement to a general statement about direct democracy in a list of items asking their opinion about different forms of political decision-making (‘The people make political decisions by voting on referendums and initiatives’ with answers ranging from 1 (‘the worst form of political decision-making’) to 7 (‘the best form of political decision making’)) as a proxy for a positive normative attitude towards direct democracy (H3b). On the other hand, we consider the instrumental dimension of democratic satisfaction (H3c), measured by the extent to which respondents see themselves as losers in procedures of direct democracy (‘Out of 10 popular votes, how many times are you on the losers’ side?’ with answers ranging from 1 to 10).

Individual-level control variables include socio-demographics (gender, age and education), but also openness as a personality trait. Indeed, as Jennstål (2018) has argued, attitudes towards democratic innovations are significantly associated with openness as operationalized in the so-called ‘big five’ dimensions of personality (Rammstedt and John, 2007). In addition, we control for ideology (measured by left–right self-placement on a 0–10 scale), as most existing studies find left-leaning citizens to be more supportive of democratic innovations (Talukder and Pilet, 2023: 318). Similarly, belonging to a group that is under-represented in traditional institutions has also been shown to increase support for DMPs (Talukder and Pilet, 2023: 317); we operationalise this by distinguishing respondents who have the right to vote in elections or referendums from those who have not – that is, between those who have Swiss nationality and those who do not. Finally, we consider respondents’ familiarity with one of the DMPs implemented in the canton of Zurich. As Goldberg et al. (2024) have argued, DMPs are mostly experimental institutions and many citizens might simply not be familiar with DMPs and therefore have no stable preferences. More precisely, we measure DMP familiarity with a dummy variable based on answers to a question asking respondents about how well informed they feel on any of the three pilot DMPs held in the three cities. The variable takes the value of 0 when a respondent ticked ‘don’t know’ or answered ‘not at all informed’, and the value of 1 if a respondent chose any other answer. For details on the variables and their operationalisation see also Table A2 in the online Appendix.

### *Choice experiment and conjoint analysis*

To investigate the effect of DMP design features on citizens’ attitudes, we conducted a conjoint experiment built into the survey, with randomly varied design characteristics

of DMPs. These design characteristics consisted of six attributes which were defined drawing on similar experiments conducted by other scholars (see Christensen, 2020; Goldberg and Bächtiger, 2023; Goldberg et al., 2024). Each of these attributes can take on two to four different levels (Table 1).

Each respondent was shown three pairs of randomly generated DMPs and had to: (a) indicate which one in each pair he or she would be more likely to attend (forced choice), as well as (b) rate the likeliness that he or she would attend the DMP at all (see Table A3 for an example of such a choice task). Respondents' choice and ratings can then be used to calculate the effects of the individual levels of each attribute on a respondent's preferred DMP. To measure perceived salience of the different policy topics, the survey included a question asking respondents how important each of the four policy fields was to them personally, with answers ranging from 1 ('not at all important') to 4 ('very important') on a 4-point scale. Based on the answers given to these questions, we calculated the perceived salience of the policy topic. Drawing on Leeper et al. (2020), we calculate *Marginal Means* to gauge respondents' preferences for or against conjoint profiles with specific attribute levels.

## Results

### *Descriptive results*

The distribution of the answer categories on our two dependent variables measuring respondents' support for DMPs echoes the findings from earlier studies on the topic: citizens are generally open towards DMPs but are quite strongly opposed to them being introduced in replacement of an existing institution. On the one hand, the general attitudes towards DMPs as a means of citizen participation are positive in our sample: there are more respondents ticking responses towards the right of the middle category than towards the left (Figure 1).

On the other hand, a clear majority is firmly opposed to the idea of replacing an existing direct democratic institution – the communal assemblies – by DMPs. Indeed, the responses concentrate to the left of the middle category, denoting strong opposition to such a reform (Figure 2).

### *Support for DMPs: Multivariate analyses*

To test hypotheses H1–H3, we estimated ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models for our two dependent variables (Table 2). For each dependent variable, three separate models were estimated for each hypothesis, as well as a full model including all independent variables. In addition, a full model without the variable of referendum losing was estimated, as this variable leads to a loss of nearly 800 cases due to missing values.<sup>2</sup>

First, let us consider the factors associated with positive views of DMPs in general. The estimates of the three separate models are clearly in support of H1: trust in fellow citizens is strongly associated with positive views of DMPs in general. The results are mixed regarding civic engagement as an explanatory variable (H2): although the separate

**Table 1.** Hypotheses, attributes and attribute levels for the choice experiment.

Hypotheses	Attributes	Attribute levels
H4a	Saliency of policy topics	(1) Climate policy (2) Housing for refugees (3) Increase or decrease of local tax
H4b	Group composition	(4) Gender quota for jobs in local government (1) Sortition (2) Self-selection
H4c	Assembly format	(1) In person (offline only) (2) Online only (3) Hybrid (offline and online)
	Compensation offered to participants	(1) None (2) 100 CHF per day (3) 250 CHF per day
	Duration of deliberative mini-public	(1) 1.5 days on one weekend (2) 4 days within one month (3) 10 days within 6 months
H4d	Prerogatives	(1) Recommendation to elected officials (2) Recommendation submitted to a binding popular vote (3) Binding decision

**Table 2.** Determinants of attitudes towards deliberative mini-publics (DMPs) (ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions).

	DMPs as a means of citizen participation				DMPs to replace municipal assemblies			
	H1: Trust	H2: Engagement	H3: Dissatisfaction <sup>a</sup>	Full model <sup>a</sup>	H1: Trust	H2: Engagement	H3: Dissatisfaction <sup>a</sup>	Full model <sup>a</sup>
Age	-0.012*** (0.001)	-0.008*** (0.001)	-0.010*** (0.001)	-0.015*** (0.002)	-0.015*** (0.001)	-0.014*** (0.001)	-0.015*** (0.001)	-0.017*** (0.001)
Gender female	0.034 (0.045)	-0.023 (0.045)	-0.032 (0.051)	0.003 (0.058)	0.086* (0.046)	0.037 (0.036)	0.101* (0.037)	0.105** (0.040)
Personality trait openness	0.128*** (0.025)	0.107*** (0.028)	0.137*** (0.031)	0.148*** (0.028)	0.003 (0.025)	0.014 (0.020)	0.028 (0.021)	0.040 (0.020)
Citizenship (Swiss)	-0.273*** (0.055)	-0.313*** (0.055)	-0.313*** (0.062)	-0.313*** (0.055)	-0.469*** (0.055)	-0.463*** (0.044)	-0.463*** (0.045)	-0.439*** (0.044)
University education	0.036 (0.048)	-0.110* (0.048)	-0.098 (0.055)	0.044 (0.062)	-0.026 (0.049)	-0.030 (0.038)	-0.053 (0.039)	0.016 (0.043)
Left-right self-placement	-0.067*** (0.010)	-0.065*** (0.011)	-0.056*** (0.013)	-0.066*** (0.011)	-0.005 (0.008)	-0.005 (0.008)	-0.007 (0.009)	-0.004 (0.008)
Familiarity with DMP	0.403*** (0.084)	0.542*** (0.084)	0.636*** (0.094)	0.497*** (0.107)	0.330*** (0.084)	0.400*** (0.066)	0.418*** (0.067)	0.363*** (0.072)
Trust in other citizens	0.489*** (0.016)	0.489*** (0.016)	0.489*** (0.016)	0.521*** (0.018)	0.146*** (0.016)	0.146*** (0.012)	0.176*** (0.014)	0.171*** (0.013)
Internal efficacy	0.129*** (0.028)	0.129*** (0.028)	0.129*** (0.028)	-0.070* (0.029)	0.011 (0.026)	-0.050* (0.020)	-0.055* (0.022)	-0.064** (0.020)
Satisfaction with representative democracy			0.167*** (0.035)	0.110*** (0.031)	0.095*** (0.027)		-0.069** (0.024)	-0.084*** (0.022)
Support for direct democracy			0.096*** (0.021)	0.008 (0.019)	0.016 (0.017)		-0.033* (0.015)	-0.073*** (0.013)
Referendum loser			-0.001 (0.016)	-0.017 (0.014)			0.021* (0.011)	0.021* (0.011)

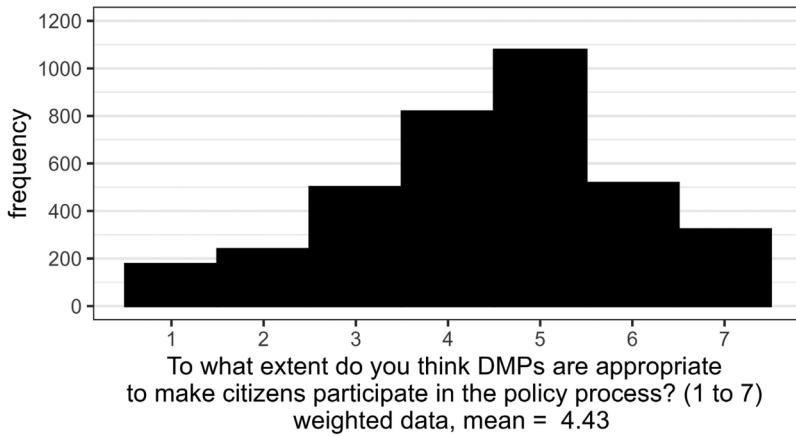
(continued)

Table 2. Continued

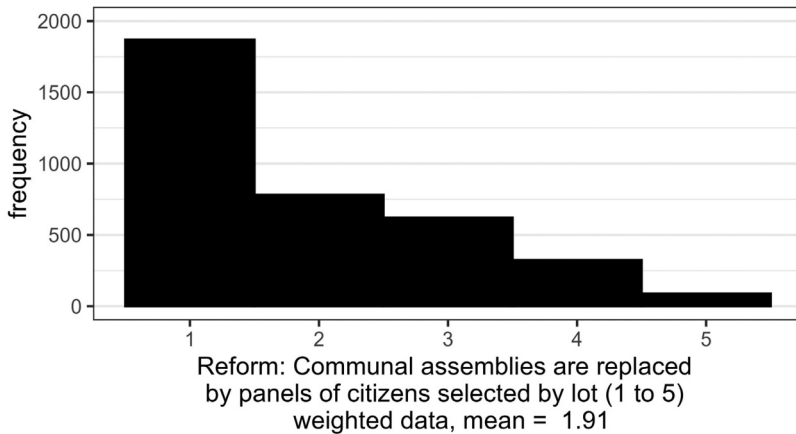
	DMPs as a means of citizen participation					DMPs to replace municipal assemblies				
	H1: Trust	H2: Engagement	H3: Dissatisfaction <sup>a</sup>	Full model <sup>a</sup>	Full model (reduced)	H1: Trust	H2: Engagement	H3: Dissatisfaction <sup>a</sup>	Full model <sup>a</sup>	Full model (reduced)
Constant	3.093 <sup>***</sup> (0.139)	4.558 <sup>***</sup> (0.158)	3.750 <sup>***</sup> (0.216)	2.761 <sup>***</sup> (0.201)	2.783 <sup>***</sup> (0.167)	2.432 <sup>***</sup> (0.110)	3.099 <sup>***</sup> (0.113)	2.709 <sup>***</sup> (0.148)	2.422 <sup>***</sup> (0.153)	2.913 <sup>***</sup> (0.132)
Observations	3.616	3.626	2.894	2.886	3.604	3.614	3.638	2.905	2.883	3.602
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.247	0.052	0.062	0.268	0.249	0.131	0.102	0.080	0.127	0.144

Note: Table entries are OLS regression coefficients, standard errors in parenthesis. Significance levels \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ . Data are weighted.

<sup>a</sup>Only respondents with Swiss citizenship (i.e. formal voting rights).



**Figure 1.** Assessment of deliberative mini-publics (DMPs) in general (histogram).



**Figure 2.** Agreement to replacing communal assemblies by a deliberative mini-public (DMP) (histogram).

model suggests that internal political efficacy is positively associated with support for DMPs in general, the effect of internal efficacy changes direction and is no longer positive or significantly positive in the full models. The results go rather clearly against H3, however: satisfaction with democracy is positively associated with general support for DMPs, rather than negatively, as we had expected. In addition, the full models show that the influence of views on direct democracy is explained away when the other variables are added to the model. Overall, the multivariate results thus robustly support H1, according to which citizens' positive views of DMPs in general are dependent on

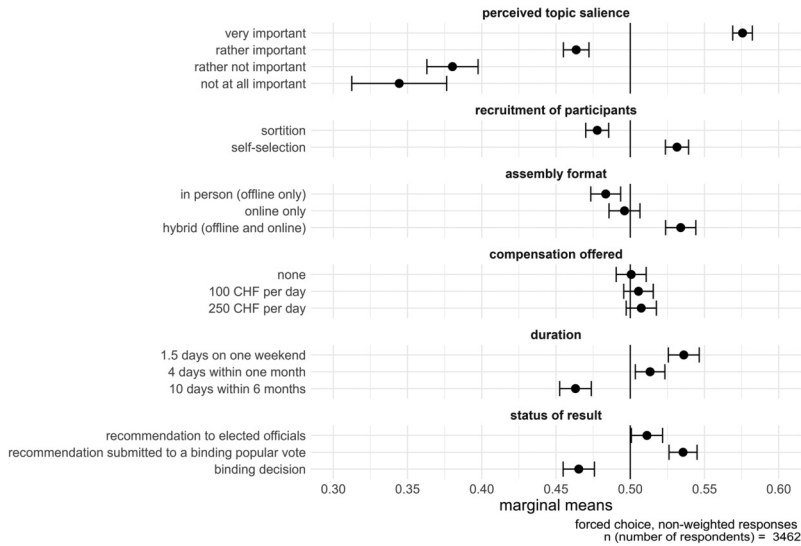
the level of trust in fellow citizens to make political decisions that are in the public interest. In addition, these results contradict H3a–c: general support for DMPs is *not* associated with political dissatisfaction.

Second, regarding the support of DMPs as an alternative to existing direct democratic institutions (here: the communal assemblies), the results clearly corroborate H1 and H3. Trust in fellow citizens as well as political dissatisfaction (both with representative and direct democracy) are significantly and robustly associated with support for reforms that aim to replace municipal assemblies with DMPs. A closer inspection of the results shows that it is both the normative and the instrumental dimensions of dissatisfaction with direct democracy that play out. In other words, if respondents support the replacement of direct democratic institutions by DMPs, this is because they are critical of direct democracy not only as a normative model, but also because they see themselves as losers in direct democratic decision making. Finally, the results clearly go against H2, as internal political efficacy is negatively associated, in all models, with support for reforms replacing direct democratic institutions by DMPs. It seems that respondents with a strong sense of internal political efficacy are confident that they can make good use of the existing institutions and do not see the need to replace them with anything else.

In addition, several effects related to the control variables should also be emphasised. Across the board, age is significantly and negatively associated with support for DMPs, both in general and as a replacement of existing institutions: it is the younger respondents who are more in favour of DMPs. Psychological factors are also somewhat important: respondents with predispositions of openness are more supportive of DMPs in general but not necessarily as a replacement for existing institutions, likely as a function of their general open-mindedness, and their preferences for variety and new experiences. We also see that respondents who do not hold a legal right to vote are more supportive of DMPs, and that women are more supportive of replacing municipal assemblies by DMPs in some of the models. This suggests that under-representation in existing democratic institutions fosters supportive attitudes for democratic innovations such as DMPs. This is particularly true with respect to communal assemblies, where under-representation of women is notorious (Gerber et al., 2019; Kübler and Rochat, 2024). Ideology also plays a role: in all models, respondents who place themselves towards the left of the political spectrum were more supportive of DMPs in general, thereby confirming empirical results of previous studies in other contexts. Finally, familiarity with any of the DMPs implemented in the three pilot cities – rather unsurprisingly – is also associated with higher support for DMPs, buttressing the assumption that real-world experience with DMPs is an important determinant for people's attitudes towards them.

### *Preferences towards DMP design features*

The results of the conjoint experiment confirm that respondents' attitudes towards DMPs depend on their design features (Figure 3). Respondents prefer DMPs delving into policy topics they deem very salient (H4a), and in which recruitment of participants is an open process (self-selection) rather than restrictive (sortition) (H4b). With respect to practicalities (H4c), a hybrid format allowing for online and offline interaction simultaneously is



**Figure 3.** Citizens' preferences of deliberative mini-publics (DMPs), and the influence of various design features (conjoint analysis, forced choice).

preferred to online or offline only, as are shorter formats. Interestingly, financial compensation turns out to be unimportant: whether participants receive compensation, and how high this compensation is, has no significant effect on respondents' attitudes towards DMPs. With respect to prerogatives (H4d), it clearly appears that respondents are sceptical towards DMPs that make binding decisions. But DMPs that make decisions which are then submitted to a referendum are preferred over those that have only advisory functions.

## Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to explore the attitudes of the citizen public towards DMPs, and, in particular, to discuss to what extent findings by other scholars in predominantly representative contexts can also be validated in a polity that is already characterised by frequent citizen participation.

First, our results confirm that citizens are generally open towards DMPs and tend to view them positively, but that, at the same time, most citizens are opposed to replacing existing institutions by DMPs (Goldberg and Bächtiger, 2023). Our study corroborates these findings also for a context characterised by extensive direct democracy. Indeed, levels of support for DMPs in general in the canton of Zurich are comparable to those found in other European contexts (Pilet, Bol, et al., 2023). Also, like their counterparts in other European countries, the public in the canton of Zurich is opposed to reforms



that would replace existing democratic institutions by DMPs – notwithstanding widespread criticism that these institutions (communal assemblies in our case) face. Citizens not only want elected politicians not to be replaced by DMPs (as was found in other studies), but they also do not want to introduce DMPs as an alternative to existing direct democratic institutions (as the present study shows). The implication of this finding is straightforward: advocates of DMPs should limit themselves to an agenda that conceives these as complements, but not as alternatives to existing democratic institutions – be these representative or direct democratic.

Second, our study also sheds new light on the factors that are associated with support for DMPs (Table 3). Our results do not support the ‘engagement hypothesis’: there is no robust association between civic engagement and support for DMPs, neither in general nor as an alternative of existing institutions. We do, however, find consistent evidence corroborating the ‘trust hypothesis’. Support for DMPs in general, as well as support for the replacement of existing institutions by DMPs, is significantly associated with trust in fellow citizens. The evidence is mixed regarding the political dissatisfaction hypothesis: dissatisfaction with the existing political order is not robustly associated with positive views of DMPs in general, but is a determinant for agreement to reforms that replace existing institutions with DMPs. Regarding the latter, we find that democratic innovations are supported mainly by citizens who have a critical view of existing institutions. Although this is in line with findings from previous studies (Bedock and Pilet, 2023; Goldberg and Bächtiger, 2023; Pilet, Bedock, et al., 2023), our study goes further by showing that dissatisfaction also drives support for replacing *direct* democratic

**Table 3.** Summary of hypotheses and results.

Variables	Hypotheses on citizen attitudes towards DMPs	Result
Individual level	<i>Citizen support of DMPs is stronger ...</i>	
	... the more they trust their fellow citizens’ ability to make good political decisions (H1)	Confirmed
	... in citizens with higher resources for political participation (H2)	Rejected
	... in citizens who are dissatisfied with elected politicians (H3a)	Partly confirmed
	... in citizens who are critical towards direct democracy as a normative model (H3b)	Partly confirmed
	... in citizens who see themselves more often on the losing side in referendum voting (H3c)	Partly confirmed
Assembly-design	<i>Citizens prefer DMPs...</i>	
	... focusing on highly salient policy topics (H4a)	Confirmed
	... with an inclusive deliberating group (H4b)	Confirmed
	... with low practical hurdles (format, duration, compensation)	Partly confirmed
	... that do not lead to binding decisions (H4d)	Confirmed

DMPs: deliberative mini-publics.

institutions. Our results suggest, in addition, that it is both the normative and the instrumental dimension of dissatisfaction with democracy that accounts for this effect. In this respect, our findings are in line with those of similar studies made in contexts of representative democracy, where voters of the opposition parties were found to be much more in favour of replacing existing institutions by DMPs (Pilet, Bedock, et al., 2023). Support for substantial democratic innovations is thus driven by dissatisfaction with existing democracy – independently from whether this existing democracy is representative or participatory in nature.

Third, our results show that design features are important for citizens' perceptions of DMPs. As in previous studies, we found that citizens prefer DMPs delving into salient policy topics, and unconstrained modes of participation, as well as time-efficient formats. In contrast to other studies, however (in particular Goldberg and Bächtiger, 2023; Pow, 2023), we found that citizens are more sceptical towards deliberating groups recruited through sortition, as compared to self-selection. This could have to do with the direct democratic context, in which citizens are used to participation procedures being broad and inclusive. This finding therefore speaks to Cristina Lafont's (2020) critique of random selection procedures as suffering weak legitimacy, especially in broadly participatory contexts. In addition, we found that financial compensation for participating in DMPs does not matter. Although this result is also in contrast to what other scholars found (see Neblo et al., 2010), it echoes more general arguments about the detrimental effect of gifts on civic behaviour: external rewards can undermine the intrinsic motivation to engage in an activity, especially when this activity is viewed as altruistic or a civic duty (Frey and Jegen, 2001). With respect to DMP prerogatives, our results are in line with previous studies finding that citizens are sceptical towards DMPs that make binding decisions (Christensen, 2020; Goldberg and Bächtiger, 2023). However, and in addition to what other scholars found (Schwaiger and Bächtiger, 2025), our study shows that citizens prefer DMPs whose decisions are then submitted to a popular vote. This is arguably an effect of the direct democratic context in which this study was conducted. Citizens who are used to direct democracy obviously consider DMPs as an attractive complement to representative institutions, as long as the people retain the final word in a popular vote. More generally, this suggests that, although the public is sceptical about handing power directly to DMPs, it wants them to have real influence.

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## Authors' Note

Dr. Colombo was also a lecturer at the University of Zurich, but her collaboration in this research was part of her function at 'Canton of Zurich', where she is affiliated to the Statistical Office.

## Data availability statement

Anonymised data, as well as replication codes to reproduce the analysis are available from the FORS replication service (<https://doi.org/10.25597/7gba-6384>).

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## Supplementary material

Tables, figures and appendix are available online at <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ras>.

## Notes

1. Practical handling of respondent recruitment (i.e. sending out invitation letters, reminders and paper questionnaires on request) as well as survey administration (i.e. setting up the online survey tool, providing support to respondents and securing the data) were entrusted to a commercial survey provider.
2. Respondents who do not hold Swiss citizenship (and therefore have no voting right) have not answered the question about losing out in referendums – which is why the number of cases with missing values on this variable is rather high.

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