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Public Attitudes Toward Democratic Innovations in Switzerland: Evidence from Conjoint Experiments in Swiss Cantons

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Since the early 2000s, deliberative mini-publics—assemblies composed of randomly selected lay citizens—have gained international traction (OECD 2020). Switzerland was a latecomer to this trend. While comparative research has emphasized the benefits of participation for individual political engagement, much less is known about how mini-publics are perceived by the broader public, especially (but not only) in the Swiss context.

This paper explores public attitudes toward mini-publics using original data from two conjoint survey experiments conducted with representative samples in the cantons of Valais and Ticino ($N \approx 1,050$ each). These cases were selected not only because both cantons recently hosted mini-publics (Sion 2019; Bellinzona 2023), but also because they span the three language areas and offer a link between deliberation and direct democracy. In both cases, in fact, mini-public participants assessed referendum proposals and produced a “citizens’ statement” distributed to all enfranchised voters. We therefore expect public awareness to be higher in these contexts than in cantons without such experiences.

Preliminary findings from Valais (the Ticino survey will be concluded few days after the deadline for this call) indicate a clear public preference for participatory formats with binding outcomes and for sortition as the recruitment mechanism—reflecting support for impartiality and representativeness. They contrast with a similar conjoint within the canton of Zurich (Kübler et al. 2015), which found skepticism toward sortition and binding formats. We conclude by discussing these differences and their implications for future comparative research on democratic innovations.