

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Empowered Mini-Publics: A Shortcut or Democratically Legitimate?

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Contemporary mini-publics involve randomly selected citizens deliberating and eventually tackling thorny issues. Yet, the usage of mini-publics in creating public policy has come under criticism, of which a more persuasive strand is elucidated by eminent philosopher Cristina Lafont, who argues that mini-publics with binding decision-making powers (or ‘empowered mini-publics’) are an undemocratic ‘shortcut’ and deliberative democrats thus cannot use empowered mini-publics for shaping public policies. This paper aims to serve as a nuanced defense of empowered mini-publics against Lafont’s claims. I argue against her claims by explicating how participants of an empowered mini-public remain ordinary, accountable, and therefore connected to the broader public in a democratically legitimate manner. I further critique Lafont’s own proposals for non-empowered mini-publics and judicial review as failing to satisfy her own criteria for democratic legitimacy in a self-defeating manner and relying on a double standard. In doing so, I show how empowered mini-publics are not only democratic but can thus serve to expand democratic deliberation—a goal Lafont shares but relegates to non-empowered mini-publics.

Keywords: deliberative democracy; sortition; representation; mini-publics; legitimacy; accountability

Introduction

As electoral democracies continue to suffer from a crisis of faith in the publics they are meant to serve, scholars and governments alike have begun searching for ways to rejuvenate public confidence through democratic innovations. One innovation that has gained traction in recent years has been that of mini-publics or analogous institutions to inform policymaking, seen in the recent ‘Deliberative Wave’ (OECD 2021). Inspired by the Ancient Greeks’ method of selecting magistrates through lottery machines (Manin 1997), contemporary mini-publics similarly involve randomly selected citizens coming together in a forum to deliberate and eventually tackle thorny issues. The efficacy of such mini-publics has been varied, but deliberative democrats have nevertheless stressed their importance in granting regular citizens (who are statistically representative of a population; Landemore 2020: 42) access to high-level decision-making normally only available to professional elected politicians, as well as the deliberative quality of these mini-publics (Landemore 2020: 37).

Yet, the recent push by some scholars to use mini-publics as a tool in creating public policy has come under criticism for its supposed trading of mass participation in the broader public for high-quality deliberation among a much smaller group of people. One of the more

persuasive criticisms comes from eminent philosopher Cristina Lafont (2014), who argues that mini-publics with binding decision-making powers (or ‘empowered mini-publics’) are an undemocratic ‘shortcut’ and because of this, deliberative democrats cannot use empowered mini-publics for shaping public policies as they sacrifice mass participation (Lafont 2014: 59). Of course, the institution of an ‘empowered mini-public’ is, as of now, theoretical, with most existing mini-publics having only consultative or recommendatory roles. Nevertheless, it is important to engage with the literature insofar as there is a genuine push for empowered mini-publics or analogous institutions to be institutionalized such that scholars need to debate its implications, even if such a construct remains hypothetical for now. In this light, Lafont thus criticizes the admittedly high expectations of deliberative democrats in touting non-electoral modes of governance as being unequivocally better than electoral representation, pre-empting more radical democratic theorists’ proposals.

While I articulate her arguments more fully in the following section, a summary of Lafont’s criticisms are as follows: She criticizes empowered mini-publics for being unable to satisfy the mutual justification criterion (justifying political decisions to the broader public) because the deliberation process involves a small number of citizens with privileged access to information, transforming participants into a version of elite leaders whose decisions the rest of the public cannot hold accountable and has no reason to endorse. This

bypassing of the broader public is thus an undemocratic 'shortcut' that, despite the good intentions of deliberative democrats, estranges them from the democratic process even more by forcing them to blindly defer to the mini-public. Lafont then suggests that non-empowered mini-publics and the institution of judicial review are instead the appropriate and democratically legitimate options for expanding deliberation to citizens.

This paper dives into the debate by serving as a nuanced defense of empowered mini-publics (and other lottocratic institutions) against her claims. In doing so, it argues empowered mini-publics are not only democratic but can serve to expand democratic deliberation beyond itself—a goal Lafont (and many others) shares but relegates to only non-binding mini-publics. I make these claims by explicating how even participants of an empowered mini-public remain ordinary, accountable, and therefore connected to the broader public in a democratically legitimate manner. I then critique Lafont's own proposals, pointing out that they do not satisfy mutual justification in a self-defeating manner and concerningly rely on a double standard, showing that her well-intentioned strategy to expand democracy is flawed. Finally, I explain how a system of multiple, empowered mini-publics can instead be a valid and legitimate strategy to catalyze further democratic deliberation and participation, with reference to some real-life practices.¹ In other words, I agree with Lafont that mini-publics should be expanded to facilitate expanded deliberation (Rountree & Curato 2023) but not that we should preclude mini-publics from assuming authoritative decision-making roles. The two need not be mutually exclusive.

Lafont's Argument

Lafont argues that, according to the deliberative democrats' own criterion for democratic legitimacy, the usage of empowered mini-publics for generalized policy-making is illegitimate. The criterion in question is that of *mutual justification*, where the 'legitimate exercise of political authority requires justification to those people who are bound by it, and decision making by deliberation among free and equal citizens is the most defensible justification anyone has to offer for provisionally settling controversial issues' (Lafont 2014: 45). As such, it is the force of the better argument (as opposed a simple majority of votes; Lafont 2017: 86) that generates the legitimacy of decision-making. In other words, the decisions that affect the governance of the citizenry cannot only be better in the objective sense—they must also *convince* those who are subject to such decisions that they are indeed superior. Not justifying to citizens the policies that affect their daily lives is to expect them to *blindly defer* to those who make laws, forcing them to comply with policies which they had no control in influencing (even if indirectly through representatives; Lafont 2020: 8). This forms the basis of the first part of her argument (which is relevant to my paper) where she criticizes explicitly what she calls 'epistocratic' views of democracy.

In this light, the function of deliberation in a mini-public (or elsewhere) is *not* just to 'track the truth', as what Lafont

calls democratic epistocrats would claim (Lafont 2020: 98). Instead, truly inclusive deliberation will track the 'justifiability of the policies in question to all those who must comply with them and without whose cooperation many of the policies' intended outcomes will not materialize.' (Lafont 2020: 98). By reducing the function of mini-public deliberation to finding the best policies without emphasizing the importance of justifying those policies to the broader public, the epistocratic view of lottocracy will lead to a permanent misalignment of policies between the mini-public and the citizenry it serves (Lafont 2020: 97). Indeed, the epistocratic ideal of lottocracy, in her view, would preclude any true accountability citizens have over empowered mini-publics (Lafont 2020: 97).

This misalignment or gap between the citizens fortunate enough to be selected and the rest of the public is central to Lafont's arguments, especially as she moves on to critique lottocratic conceptions of democracy (which may or may not be motivated by epistocratic concerns). Intuitively, a high quality of deliberation requires dialogue amongst free and equals, where bias, demagoguery, coercion, and deception are non-existent or substantially reduced; this way, those convinced can endorse the outcome of the decision as their own (Lafont 2014: 45–46). However, the goal of achieving this quality of deliberation may be put at substantial risk if deliberation is expanded to an increasing number of people. The larger the group, the harder it is to ensure quality deliberation, and so the decision-making process, level of rational argumentation, and thus the democratic legitimacy of the entire process, suffers. This has led some deliberative democrats to 'sacrifice' mass deliberation (and participation) in favor of mini-publics, so that quality deliberation is maintained (Lafont 2014: 47–48) amongst this small group.² This is what Lafont calls the 'shortcut view' (Lafont 2014: 43), and it is this view she heavily criticizes.

Continuing on, Lafont argues that the result is that participants in empowered mini-publics become elite in some manner, because the deliberative process (which is not extended to the rest of the public) makes them 'no longer a representative sample of the citizenry at large' (Lafont 2014: 50). Lafont is careful not to lump these citizens in the same group as what we would traditionally call the pre-existing 'political elite' (Lafont 2020: 97), but she argues that the access to information and arguments that they did not previously have makes them substantively different, and *above*, the rest of the citizenry. And then becoming this form of 'pseudo-elite' undercuts one of the main premises that deliberative democrats use in favor of mini-publics, that is, they are institutions where 'the people' can deliberate and reach conclusions by and for themselves instead of letting those elected do it. Because the participants in mini-publics are no longer 'the people', there is no reason for the broader public to endorse the outcomes of the empowered mini-public, hurting the legitimacy of the process by the criterion outlined above (Lafont 2014: 50). Expecting the public to endorse the outcomes of the deliberation without convincing them, therefore, brings us back to *blind deference* (Lafont 2014: 52), and blind deference, of course, cannot rightfully be

considered a project of self-government. Since the whole point of the deliberative process is to lead to changes in the participants' views, Lafont expects that these changes will, over time, aggregate into a massive distance between the non-deliberative public and the mini-public, especially with the reasons for such changes not being given to the public who are simply expected to listen (again, undercutting the justification for democratic legitimacy; Lafont 2014: 54).

In light of all these issues, Lafont proposes an alternative use of mini-publics. Instead of endowing them with final decision-making power, she suggests that they can be used as a 'resource for macro-deliberation' (Lafont 2020: 141); that is, expanded deliberation beyond the institution itself. This 'resource' could serve multiple functions, for example, they could highlight relevant arguments in a nuanced manner to the rest of the public (something which traditional media might not be able to do; Lafont 2020: 141), and/or contest prevailing views and spotlight the need for issue re-examination (Lafont 2020: 147), among others. In her view, this would situatelottocratic institutions like mini-publics as a *facilitator* of deliberation rather than the ultimate decider, contributing to mass participation instead of taking the shortcut route. Finally, Lafont defends judicial review as a democratically legitimate institution that can promote participatory ends by functioning as a 'conversation initiator' (Lafont 2020: 228). She contrasts this to the expertocratic and undemocratic shortcut the courts (in particular, the highest courts/constitutional courts of a jurisdiction) are often portrayed as, arguing that from a holistic perspective, the courts *constitutionalize* political debate via the process of legal contestation over fundamental rights of citizens, which can be initiated by anyone (Lafont 2020: 232). Through this process, a deliberative dialogue can be opened in such a way that, according to her, 'empowers citizens to call on the rest of the citizenry to put on their robes' and justify their policies and rights to each other (Lafont 2020: 240).

To summarize, the first part of Lafont's arguments critiques the epistocratic view of democracy (which can include lottocracy), arguing that supposedly 'democratic' epistocrats' ignorance of the *justifiability of policies* to the public creates a gap between those who create policies and those who are subject to them. Following on, Lafont then argues that this gap is present in lottocracies due to deliberative democrats' need to sacrifice mass participation and 'insulate' (Lafont 2020: 105) lottocratic institutions to preserve deliberative quality, leading to the undemocratic shortcut and blind deference. She then proposes alternate models of lottocratic institutions that are not given final decision-making power (therefore alleviating problems of justifiability), only serving to enhance mass participation in continuing dialogue. She also articulates a unique and original defense of the judiciary as a democratically legitimate way to enhance public deliberation.

'Elite' Citizens?

In the previous section, I did not intend to give a fully detailed overview of Lafont's arguments above due to limited space. However, I will note that many of her other

claims rest on the premises which I have listed above, especially that of the 'elite' citizen representative and blind deference. Therefore, by addressing some of her more foundational claims, I hope to implicitly question some of her other arguments as well.

First, the most important claim to address is the argument that ordinary citizens selected into empowered mini-publics change by virtue of the deliberative process and entering into a position of power. I take issue with this argument because the definition of 'ordinary' appears to be far too narrow and restrictive—she seems to define ordinary as someone who did not go through the proper deliberative process (Lafont 2014: 50–52). But anyone can garner the information they need to become informed and possibly change their judgments through other means of deliberation (social media, classes, reading groups etc.) *without* being in a mini-public. It would be painting with too broad a brushstroke if we were to consider such people unordinary anymore. Of course, one could argue that the combined effect of increased information *and* decision-making power would be sufficient to transform an ordinary citizen into a somewhat elite one (and therefore the citizen who merely became informed would not qualify). The latter condition, however, applies to *all* representative governments. In other words, if one accepts the necessity of at least some political representation as Lafont does (Lafont 2020: 86),³ then the presence of decision-making power is not enough to consider a randomly selected lawmaker 'elite' because the alternative would mean that no representative system is capable of being equal by virtue of the political division of labor.

To give Lafont credit, and as mentioned above, she does differentiate randomly selected citizens in mini-publics from the traditional political elite, at least in her 2020 book (this distinction was less salient in her 2014 paper). Nevertheless, she still posits that randomly selected citizen lawmakers are at least 'above' the rest of the citizenry in some way. I believe she overestimates this gap. While we cannot preclude the possibility that some citizens might behave like elites, it is probable that by virtue of random selection, most citizen lawmakers are uninterested in the machinations political elites are so prone to. In other words, they do not change immediately to become more like political elites (by gaining narcissistic and psychopathic traits, for example (Nai 2019)) *just because* they were randomly selected; if they were, they would have likely entered elite politics in some form or another already.⁴ Indeed, because citizens are so deeply affected by the issues they will deliberate on and will return to ordinary life after (assuming a rotational mini-public), they have every incentive to remain in touch with the broader public throughout the process. The fact that they remain ordinary prevents them from becoming too insulated from the public as they will soon return to *being* that public. Thus, there is reason to believe mini-public participants will account for raw public preferences in their deliberations, which could reassure those not selected that the final output of the deliberations will have considered their opinions. Furthermore, non-participants have an equal chance to be selected and an equal *potential*

to have their views refined by the deliberative process like those who were selected. In actuality, the fact that mini-public participants (even those in an empowered one) are 'like them' can itself bridge the public to the assembly (Lacelle-Webster & Warren 2021; Pow, van Dijk & Marien 2020; Warren & Gastil 2015). Therefore, they have little reason to feel that those selected become untouchable and unattainable 'elites' who remain aloof because it is possible for them to go through the same process, in contrast to, say, the electoral process, in which large groups of the population likely feel that they *never* have any chance of being elected. In other words, as Dmitri Courant puts it:

'...sortition can create an *inclusive equality* between representatives and represented. Indeed, the represented can say to their representatives, "Only chance distinguishes us, so we remain equals." (Courant 2019a: 238) (italics theirs) (see also the idea of 'humility legitimacy' in Courant (2022): 167–168)

It is true, I grant, that mini-public participants may become more salient in the public sphere during the process. This, however, is not by virtue of the deliberative process itself transforming the participants. Rather, reasons such as heavy media publicity, the random selection process actually choosing a statistically 'more-salient-than-average' individual, or even a simple viral moment could give some participants a bit of fame. Yet in both cases, is it not the mini-publics themselves changing their participants into the something 'above'. Further, even with this saliency, it is important to note that it will more than likely be *temporary*, for the fact remains that after the mini-public, participants return to their jobs and lives they previously had. They do not remain professional politicians like elected representatives do.⁵

It is now clear that Lafont's view that randomly selected citizens are no longer 'the people' (Lafont 2014: 50) is questionable and perhaps exaggerated. This brings me to my next point, which is that, given citizen lawmakers remain close to the public, it is not necessarily as hard as Lafont claims to hold them accountable or to have some level of control over them. Indeed, it is not entirely clear why she precludes even slight accountability in empowered mini-publics by virtue of random selection (Lafont 2020: 128), especially since evidence of keeping randomly selected citizens accountable goes back thousands of years. Randomly selected magistrates in Ancient Athens, for example, were 'subject to constant monitoring by the Assembly and courts', forced to render account (*euthynai*) after completing their term in office (Manin 1997: 12). Members of the popular assembly could also call for a vote of no confidence against any magistrate perceived to be incompetent or corrupt (Manin 1997: 13). Here I am not suggesting that the Ancient Athenian model of government or accountability is desirable or ideal; rather, I merely aim to show that we cannot dismiss the prospect of holding public offices accountable solely on the basis of them being randomly selected.

This is not to say that the 'sanction' model of accountability is of no importance; I am in agreement with Lafont that they can theoretically provide an important form of control citizens have over elected officials by compelling representatives to track the interests of their constituents (Lafont 2020: 127–128). Evidence suggests, however, that even elected politicians inaccurately estimate public opinion across the world (Broockman & Skovron 2018; Pilet et al. 2023a; Walgrave et al. 2023), pointing toward weaknesses in the sanction model of accountability (and indeed other selection-based models) in incentivizing officials to understand their constituents better. In this light, it would be wise to consider alternate mechanisms of democratic accountability that transcends electoral selection.

More recent scholarship has argued for moving beyond the definition of accountability as the mere sanctioning and punishment of officials. Mansbridge (2019), for example, explains that accountability in lottocracies can take the shape of *giving an account*, instead of just the threat of punishment, and she notes that the loss of the latter is what authors (like Lafont) decry when speaking of lottocratic models. This narrow way of defining accountability is, however, far too restrictive in her view (Mansbridge 2019: 193; see also Vandamme 2023). Instead, in lottocracies, accountability can take the shape of a more informal and deliberative accountability between members of a randomly selected body, as well as toward the public and the people they represent (Mansbridge 2019), whether through informal discussions launched by individual members of an assembly with the public, or a formal report explaining the decisions they made (among others). In this light, Lafont (and maybe the epistocrats) were inaccurate when characterizing the *actual* behavior of lottocratic assemblies. While the epistocrats (as interpreted by Lafont) might want mini-publics to 'track the truth', which Lafont criticizes as giving them free rein to enact the 'right' policies without justification, these forms of expanded accountability suggest that lottocracies lend themselves well to mutual justification and not just epistocratic aims, contrary to the expectations of both epistocrats and Lafont. In this way, they are not a 'shortcut' bypassing the public, rather, they at the very least attempt to explain their decisions and convince the public of their choices.

With a more inclusive view of accountability⁶ that enables lottocracies to satisfy mutual justification, it thus becomes a greater possibility that non-participants have a reason to endorse the recommendations of a mini-public deliberative process. One might nevertheless object that even if the citizen representatives in empowered mini-publics are not elite, they are nevertheless not 'representatives' because they were never authorized to represent anybody, be it a certain constituency or demographic group (Lafont 2014: 52). In other words, they only represent themselves. However, I do not believe that this is necessarily the case. It is very much possible that citizens understand the importance and weight of the duties they have been selected for and work actively to represent as many views as possible. Indeed, if the

French Citizens' Convention is any indication, where a substantial majority of 65% of the mini-public said they did *not* speak for themselves only (Landemore 2020: 119–120), then it is not utopian to think of lottocratic citizen representation as genuinely representative.⁷ Norms can always develop amongst citizen representatives that they are not deliberating only on their own behalf. In any case, it seems rather strange that electing someone is seen as the *only* way in which decision-makers can be seen as actually representative.

Another counter is that by virtue of being ordinary, citizens are representative even if they may not be aware of it or actively trying to represent a constituency. In this view, it is precisely because they represent themselves and their experiences, that, whether directly or indirectly, they represent the 'common person'. A female factory worker, for example, might be inadvertently speaking for other female factory workers or even other female workers in general by simply speaking about her own experiences, because there surely is some commonality (such as gender discrimination) shared by this demographic. It is hard to say if all elected officials can represent the 'common person' in the exact same way (i.e., by merely speaking of their own experiences) since they might be intrinsically different, inaccurately interpret actual public opinion, and/or subject to incentives (lobbying, etc.) that prevent them from doing so.

Evaluations of Mini-Publics

Case studies in Ireland (Farrell & Suiter 2019: 6–32), France (Giraudet et al. 2022: 12) and Iceland (Landemore 2020: 152) have shown that the wider public has supported by a significant margin the policy recommendations of these mini-publics. However, most mini-publics are not high-profile assemblies (as the Irish, Icelandic, and French cases were) dealing with issues on a national scale, at least presently—while the high support in these cases is reassuring, they cannot be taken as representative of all mini-publics.

Studies evaluating how ordinary citizens view mini-publics and analogous institutions found minimal support for empowered mini-publics (Goldberg & Bächtiger 2023: 245) and a general disapproval for replacing existing institutions of electoral representation with randomly selected mini-publics (Talukder & Pilet 2023). Surely this would put to rest any optimism regarding the democratic legitimacy of empowered mini-publics? I would caution before immediately jumping to this conclusion.

There are a number of reasons why mini-publics do not have large public support as of yet. First, such institutions and their mode of democratic representation are relatively novel, impacting the public's appraisal of them (Goldberg 2023; Pow 2023)—it is understandable that citizens are cautious about transitioning to a lottocratic model not widely adopted in at least the last two centuries. Further, as Talukder and Pilet (2023) found, trust in fellow citizens' competence is key in mediating support for mini-publics. In the current era of great political polarization, such trust is likely to be in short supply (Lee 2022; Vallier 2020), negatively impacting any citizen-centered institution of

democratic decision-making. Note that this reason is not caused by mini-publics themselves, but a result of the current political context mini-publics find themselves dealing with. Trust may also be easily manipulated by external bad actors such as politicians or the media, another extraneous factor that may negatively affect support for mini-publics.

None of this is to say that these survey findings should not be taken seriously. Deliberative democrats must not take support for mini-publics for granted. Nevertheless, this also means that we should not immediately dismiss the legitimacy of empowered mini-publics because it is still possible to actively work to build faith and trust in such an institution, especially given the contingency of support based on factors such as knowledge, visibility, design questions (Goldberg 2023), disaffection with the current system (Goldberg & Bächtiger 2023), and expectations of performance (Pilet et al. 2023b). Support for mini-publics is not guaranteed but neither is immediate and complete opposition. Barring waiting for the collapse of electoral systems in order to find support for mini-publics, then, deliberative democrats should thus expand the gambit of these deliberative institutions to make them more salient, impactful, and participatory—over time, there is potential for people's perceptions of empowered mini-publics to change if they are institutionalized well. But before I outline how empowered mini-publics can do this, let us see Lafont's own proposal.

Lafont's Alternative

In her proposal, Lafont (2020) argues that non-empowered mini-publics can be used for both political and legal contestation and 'give the citizenry good reasons to take a closer look at the mini-publics' arguments and considerations, which could lead them to change their minds on the issues at hand.' (150). Mini-publics could also be used to signal to government representatives that public policies are not aligned with general public opinion (Lafont 2020: 153). There are, however, two problems with this proposed alternative. First, nothing about empowered mini-publics precludes the functions Lafont describes, due to the reasons I explained in the previous sections (i.e., the presence of democratic accountability). Therefore, empowered mini-publics could just as easily serve as the vaunted resource. Second, however useful the ends of Lafont's non-empowered mini-publics' serve, her relegation of mini-publics to only this function means that the final decision making power would nevertheless lie with elected officials and the courts (in the case of legal contestation). This lends itself to all the pre-existing flaws about electoral modes of representation and accountability, some of which I have already explained before. Whether it is the lack of proper deliberation due to interest group manipulation and incentives to favor symbolic and strategic communication over reasoned argumentation (Warren 2008: 54), or the polarized and low-information nature of electoral campaigning (Lacelle-Webster & Warren 2023), electoral models of representation often fail to satisfy the mutual justification criterion, on top of being unrepresentative

and elitist. It is difficult to see the function of non-empowered mini-publics if the conclusions they reach are distorted by the electoral process anyway.⁸ Therefore, there is good reason to think that even with the presence of Lafont's participatory mini-publics, blind deference will nevertheless result, perhaps even more so if those in power decide to reject whatever recommendations the citizens, through their deliberations, arrived on. Indeed, Van Dijk and Lefevere (2023) found that citizens expect even non-binding recommendations of mini-publics to be adopted by a government, without which political support for the institution is lowered. For Lafont's proposal for non-empowered mini-publics to be convincing, a proper explanation of how mutual justification is satisfied under electoral institutions is thus required so that non-empowered mini-publics will actually have a direct and traceable impact on the final decision-making process. If mini-publics are *designed* to have low impact (by subjugating them to electoral institutions), they could discourage the very thing Lafont seeks out: citizen participation (Jacquet 2017)—a self-inflicted wound.

Moving on to the legal contestation/judicial review route: There are obvious merits to judicial review, but I fail to see how it can 'constitutionalize' public debate and truly empower citizens to deliberate democratically if they are merely taking suggestions from non-empowered minipublics on what considered public opinion is (Lafont 2020: 151) (recall that courts often have binding decision-making powers).⁹ Regardless of whether judicial institutions are viewed from the epistocratic lens or not, they are probably the one place in modern democracies where insulation from public debate and deliberation is deemed necessary to make a binding decision, which by definition limits mass democratic participation. Reducing deliberative democracy to such a narrow space could be problematic because it ignores the other, less formalized spaces of contested politics (Chambers 2020), including the role of organized civil society groups (Benhabib 2021) in debating fundamental constitutional principles. As such, Lafont's proposal might end up *suffocating* and depoliticizing deliberative democracy instead (Benhabib 2021).

Lafont (2020) might argue that this view is too 'narrow [a] juricentric perspective that exclusively focuses on the internal workings of courts without paying sufficient attention to the political system within which the courts operate and where they play their specific institutional role.' (225). Building on this, she explains that 'when evaluating the legitimacy of judicial review, it seems important to consider the rationale and the justification for this institutionalized practice as understood by the citizens who are supposed to make use of it.' (Lafont 2020: 226). This seems reasonable; but if it is true, why was this standard not applied to empowered mini-publics as well? Using this standard, one would see empowered mini-publics as inherently connected (not 'above') to the broader citizenry, with the institution not acting in disregard of but in active conversation with the latter (as I have claimed), as Lafont (2020) argues the courts are (via, for example, the filing of *amicus curiae* briefs (238)). And if an empowered court's binding decision,

despite their relative dearth of representativeness and accountability compared to other political institutions, can be considered democratically legitimate (based on this criterion), it seems that a binding decision by an accountable and representative mini-public would also be democratically legitimate, if not more so, based on the exact same criterion. As Lafont (2020) states emphatically:

'Far from expecting citizens to blindly defer to the decisions of judges, the democratic significance of the institution [judicial review] is that it empowers citizens to make effective use of their right to participate in ongoing political struggles for determining the proper scope, content, and limits of their fundamental rights and freedoms—no matter how idiosyncratic their fellow citizens think their interests, views, and values are.' (238)

Based on arguments put forth in this paper, the above statement should also apply to empowered mini-publics as well. Lafont would clearly disagree; but contingent on her own standards, it seems unreasonable and inconsistent to do so. Either her argument needs to be re-evaluated to avoid this inconsistency, or the standard itself must be explained more deeply to show how it is specifically satisfied *only* in the case of judicial review and not in that of empowered mini-publics.

Expanding Deliberation and Engagement Through Mini-Publics

If empowered mini-publics are democratically legitimate and accountable, while non-empowered counterparts are insufficient and possibly detrimental to a more citizen-inclusive mode of democracy, then deliberative democrats should think of empowered mini-publics as a way to catalyze further mass participation and deliberation *beyond* itself. Of course, connecting deliberative mini-publics to the broader democratic system is not a new idea (Rountree & Curato 2023), allowing mini-publics to be seen as 'conduits to public deliberation, instead of ... authoritative forums where political decisions are made'. (75) But here I argue—why not both? After all, merely being seen as a conduit by the public could lead to lower interest and engagement.

Democratic theorists have long argued for the potential spillover effects mini-publics may have (for a review see Goldberg 2023) with the broader public (non-participants), including but not limited to influence on public opinion, citizen mobilization, and legitimation. The empirical research on this nevertheless remains scarce, and what existing research has found is the possibility of *no* or even *negative impacts* of mini-publics (Goldberg 2023), though there is certainly the potential for positive effects as well. The question thus becomes: How can we ensure the effects of mini-publics on the public sphere are positive?

I believe the institutionalization of multiple empowered mini-publics is a good solution. Crucial to the success of these institutions would be their ability to connect with the outside public. As I have argued, empowered mini-publics are perfectly capable of doing so and in fact have incentives

to—but what specific mechanisms can assist with this process? Here, examples from real-life non-empowered mini-publics are instructive. This includes the typical pre-deliberation consultations with non-participants such as those seen in the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly (Fournier et al. 2011: 7–8), Australia's Citizens' Parliament (Sullivan & Hartz-Karp 2013), and France's Great National Debate (Courant 2019b) in what is called a 'learning phase' (Lacelle-Webster & Warren 2021: 9). Yet consultations may not be enough because the subsequent deliberations may still exclude a significant part of the public sphere, such as organized advocacy groups (14). Thus it will likely be necessary for a continuing feedback process *throughout* the deliberation, requiring multiple 'learning phases' in addition to allowing the public to monitor the status and progress of deliberations (for example, streaming the deliberations—as is done in many mini-public models such as the French assemblies, or more deliberative (rather than consultative) sessions with the public or other groups, done in smaller focus group sessions. Organizers could even consider purposely selecting for discourses and views (as opposed to just demographics) during these phases. All these would increase the legitimacy of an empowered mini-public and ideally the wider deliberative system—with a wider spectrum of ideas involved and debated, decisions made would be better justified and therefore endorsed by the broader citizenry.

The media must also play an important role. Of course, traditional news media could present a biased filter that does not necessarily allow people to present themselves on their own terms, if they are even represented at all. Furthermore, the traditional news media is plagued with many problems such as its politicization which undermines trust (Knight Foundation 2019: 38–71) and wrong incentives (Sunstein 1998; Vanderwicken 1995). The motive to attract viewers through clickbait articles and sensationalistic reporting comes at the expense of underheard, nuanced, and reasoned deliberation (Sunstein 1998). Other forms of media like social media may present a slightly more candid version of discourse than the filter of news media (notwithstanding fake news), but social media is nevertheless an unmoderated space uncondusive to reasoned and unmanipulated deliberation. Algorithms on sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit are known for *not* introducing diverse views on one's feed (Cinelli et al. 2021). Social media thus functions more like an echo chamber (Cinelli et al. 2021) than a real deliberative process would. Furthermore, even if opposing views were to be included on social media, it may actually *increase* polarization (Bail et al. 2018), which may indicate that social media is simply uncondusive as a platform to institutionalize deliberative practices necessary for a democratic public sphere (Lacelle-Webster & Warren 2023). Thus the media has been found, on occasion, to foment the *demise* of mini-publics rather than positively contribute to its democratic process, as seen in Australia's failed attempt to create a mini-public and Ontario's Citizens' Assembly (Rountree & Curato 2023: 81).

Nevertheless, empowered mini-publics can stimulate 'meta-deliberation' (Rinke et al. 2013) that can provide

useful feedback to organizers and participants to reflect upon (Magnusson 2020), including from the media. In fact, I believe empowered mini-publics are more likely to do so because they are binding and will therefore attract more interest and attention. By 'raising the stakes', so to speak, empowered mini-publics generate more fervent engagement with the public sphere, potentially creating more feedback loops between the assembly and the public. And with confidence that recommendations from empowered mini-publics will not be sidestepped or ignored (as might be the case with non-binding mini-publics), the public sphere can center around the deliberations knowing there *will* be an outcome. Thus, empowered mini-publics can facilitate a 'public conversation' (Benhabib 1996: 73–74) over the deliberation and the issues it covers.¹⁰

One would expect the use of technology to help manage this. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the pros and cons of using various modes of technology to assist with this, but various proposals have been put forth by scholars. Landmore (2022), for example, recommends multiple, rotating mini-publics deliberating concurrently, maintaining the small population for each assembly. Velikanov and Prosser (2017), on the other hand, recommend bringing huge numbers of people into a single online deliberation space. Regardless, both stress the importance of technology and AI enabling *scale* in deliberation, as well as for the consolidation of ideas and arguments from within and without. Such platforms would crucially allow for multiple issues to be tackled simultaneously, allowing mini-publics to expand in scale and reach, like Belgium's Ostbelgien Model (OECD 2021) but on technological steroids. A system of multiple empowered mini-publics, therefore, each tackling specific issues (or even multiple assemblies per issue), with the use of technology and AI to moderate, consolidate, and include non-participants through several 'learning phases', could prove a useful platform for a genuinely participatory and deliberative model.

Naturally, there will be other considerations to work out for institutionalizing such platforms. This is not the place to propose fully-fleshed out plans—I merely aim to demonstrate that empowered mini-publics too can play this role of expanding deliberation, functioning as a center (but not the only facet of) an 'integrated deliberative system' (Dryzek & Niemeyer 2010; Hendriks 2006). I also do not intend here to argue whether or not empowered mini-publics should completely replace existing electoral institutions (or even referenda). Lafont's argument is directed at those who do, of course, but since her proposals would preclude the use of any empowered mini-public, it is worth pushing back against even if one were to envision the use of empowered mini-publics alongside electoral institutions (each tackling different sets of issues, for example), in which the former could complement the latter well (Lacelle-Webster & Warren 2023; Moore 2016).

Conclusion: Do Not Count Empowered Mini-Publics Out Just Yet

The legitimacy of randomly selected mini-publics will continue to be debated for some time. I pursue the perspective that binding examples of such institutions are

in fact democratically legitimate because the participants of the process remain ordinary citizens throughout, even if they receive information that may change their opinion. The fact that they remain like the rest of the citizenry, and that every member of a polity has a chance of being selected and subject to deliberation, means that there are reasons for the broader public to endorse the recommendations produced. Therefore, the conditions of mutual justification and no blind deference¹¹ are (or can be) fulfilled by empowered mini-publics. I have also critiqued Cristina Lafont's model of participatory deliberative democracy, arguing that it itself is not democratically legitimate by her own criteria and may be self-defeating. I also exposed an inconsistency in which she applies her standards for democratic legitimacy.

I thus argue that empowered mini-publics are a good way to expand deliberation further into the public sphere, a goal which Lafont shared but restricts to non-empowered mini-publics only. Participants in an empowered mini-public will remain connected to the broader public and can use multiple 'learning phases' via consultation and deliberative methods to engage with the public and other stakeholders. The attention drawn to an empowered mini-public would also generate useful 'meta-deliberation' that can be used to improve its processes, although organizers should be careful about the potential delegitimizing effects of the media.

My arguments have hopefully pushed back against criticisms made about empowered mini-publics and offered an alternate justification to mass participation. While there is no doubt that authors like Lafont mean well and raise important points about democratic legitimacy, theorists should not prematurely dismiss these alternate conceptions of democratic decision-making before we really have a chance to realize their potential in revitalizing democratic participation.

Notes

¹ As already mentioned, these real-life examples are *not* binding mini-publics, because they do not yet exist. Nevertheless, I hope to explain that they can demonstrate the democratic *potential* for their empowered counterparts.

² It is important to note that there are various scholars who support both the use of mini-publics and expanded deliberation. For an example, see Landemore's (2022) paper 'Can AI bring deliberative democracy to the masses?'

³ In footnote 28.

⁴ Some citizens with a pre-existing propensity for leadership may certainly gain leadership experience and other skills in the process of deliberation, as evidenced by recent examples. But surely the kind of incentives that guide the development of these skills in lottocracies are very different from the ones that elected political representatives face every day. While further research must be conducted, it is my hypothesis that the kinds of skills and traits randomly selected citizens develop would be substantively different from the skills and traits cultivated in elected political elites,

with a good chance that the former remain much 'closer', so to speak, to the common citizenry even with these newly acquired skills.

⁵ Again, this presumes a rotational mini-public, pointing to the importance of institutional mechanisms that prevent the ossification of power into the hands of a more-or-less permanent few. Further empirical research is needed to ascertain how long any given mini-public should last before it is rotated out.

⁶ In any case, it is not clear that even legislatures selected by lot completely preclude sanction models of accountability (Vandamme 2023). Sortitionist models could therefore lend themselves well to *both* sanction and non-sanction-based models of accountability.

⁷ I am aware that this example is not one of an empowered mini-public, but due to the dearth of actual examples of such institutions, some evidence cited in this paper is bound to not be fully representative. Nevertheless, I hope that such evidence can at least point to the potential of empowered mini-publics should they be instituted. After all, might participants in lottocratic assemblies feel even more bound to the rest of the populace if they were actually given decision-making power?

⁸ In fact, this outcome is even more likely if elected politicians see mini-publics as a threat to their own power and legitimacy, which they often do (Niessen 2023).

⁹ Then again, as Moore (2016) points out, Lafont seems to have little issue with citizens blindly deferring to real experts.

¹⁰ Benhabib argues that modern deliberative democracy can do away with assemblies: 'The fiction of a general deliberative assembly in which the united people expressed their will belongs to the early history of democratic theory; today our guiding model has to be that of a medium of loosely associated, multiple foci of opinion formation and dissemination which affect one another in free and spontaneous processes of communication'. (74) But the increased use of actual assemblies (especially with the help of technology) in recent years shows that it is still possible to combine deliberative assemblies with more informal sources of deliberation outside of them. In fact, the former can serve as a center of the latter.

¹¹ Another perspective is that these two conditions are too difficult to achieve in their ideal, and a middle ground should be pursued (Goodin 2020). I am sympathetic to these claims, although there is also no harm in debating whether institutions can best approximate some seemingly utopian ideals, as I have tried to do. To the extent that reaching the 'ideal' of democracy is always a work in progress, theorists should continue debating ambitious proposals and assess them against high standards for continuous improvement. Nevertheless, I see no reason why empowered mini-publics cannot attain the middle ground either (which Goodin defines as being able to exercise one's own independent judgment in deciding whether to defer to others).

Acknowledgements

I thank the journal's two anonymous peer reviewers for their constructive feedback and suggestions on earlier versions of this manuscript. I am also grateful to Professor H el ene Landemore for her suggestions and encouragement, without which I would not have submitted this paper in the first place.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Lee, S. M. (2024). Empowered Mini-Publics: A Shortcut or Democratically Legitimate? *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*, *20*(1), pp. 1–11. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.1501>

Submitted: 14 August 2023

Accepted: 14 March 2024

Published: 13 May 2024

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