

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# What's in a Name? The Conceptual Fuzziness of Institutionalization and Embeddedness of Deliberative Mini-Publics

Precious Unegbu and Claire Dupont

Despite growing interest in deliberative mini-publics (DMPs), the literature on their institutionalization and embeddedness suffers from conceptual ambiguity and lacks clear definitional frameworks. This study addresses these limitations through a systematic review of 75 studies. We synthesize existing conceptualizations, disentangle 'institutionalization' and 'embeddedness', and propose a novel conceptual framework to guide the identification of institutionalized and embedded deliberative mini-publics.

**Keywords:** institutionalization; embeddedness; deliberative mini-publics; mechanisms-indicators framework

## 1. Introduction

Modern democracies face declining public engagement, distrust in government institutions, and a crisis of legitimacy (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2023; Olsen & Trezn, 2014). Efforts to innovate democracies have been put forward in theory and practice, including increasing and changing the means of public participation, and developing new means of knowledge exchange (Dupont et al., 2024). Deliberative democratic approaches—particularly deliberative mini-publics (DMPs)—have gained attention for their potential to revitalize democracy (Michels, 2011).

DMPs consist of randomly or quasi-randomly selected citizens who engage in informed deliberation with experts, witnesses, and advocates under structured facilitation. They aim to represent a microcosm of the wider population, unlike self-selecting initiatives like participatory budgeting. After deliberations, mini-publics present their informed opinions and recommendations to policymakers, civil society, and the public (Goodin & Dryzek, 2006).

Proponents argue that DMPs enhance the reflexivity and responsiveness of policymaking, reduce social inequalities by directly empowering citizens, bridge the gap between citizens and elites, and mitigate democratic distrust and dissatisfaction (Bua, 2017; Dean et al., 2022; Niessen & Reuchamps, 2022). Yet, their uncertain juridical and institutional status often leaves them *ad hoc*, consultative, limited in policy influence, and vulnerable to manipulation by commissioning bodies (Bua, 2017; Khoban, 2023; Courant, 2022).

To ensure meaningful policy impact and mitigate manipulation risks, scholars, activists, and political leaders have called for 'institutionalizing' or 'embedding' deliberative mini-publics (Chambers & Warren, 2023; Macq & Jacquet, 2023). However, the pathway to institutionalization and embeddedness remains unclear due to inconsistent definitions. Some studies define institutionalization as establishing regular, recurring use of deliberative mini-publics (Ainscough & Willis, 2024; Courant, 2021), while others emphasize formal integration into existing democratic institutions, such as parliaments or government agencies (Bussu et al., 2022; Davidson & Stark, 2011).

This lack of consensus extends to the relationship between these two terms. While some studies use institutionalization and embeddedness interchangeably (Burks, 2024; Smith, 2020), others draw distinctions between them (Bussu et al., 2022; Pfeffer, 2024). This conceptual fuzziness prevents the development of a comprehensive framework, making it difficult to determine when a mini-public is being institutionalized versus when it has achieved embeddedness (Smith & Wales, 2000).

This study makes two contributions to the literature: First, we systematically review the existing literature on the institutionalization and embeddedness of DMPs, mapping the current definitions of these concepts. Second, drawing on this analysis, we propose a conceptual framework that defines institutionalization and embeddedness, identifies their key dimensions, and highlights promising avenues for future research. We were guided by the following research questions:

1. How does the existing literature define the 'institutionalization' and 'embeddedness' of deliberative mini-publics?

2. How can 'institutionalization' and 'embeddedness' be better defined and differentiated for future research?

Our review differs from earlier syntheses of deliberative mini-publics' long-term impact and integration. While existing work, such as that by Jacquet and van der Does (2021a, 2021b), examines various consequences of DMPs including structural changes and normalization in policymaking, these studies do not systematically separate institutionalization from embeddedness. Our novel contribution is this systematic conceptual separation: institutionalization refers to activities that establish deliberative mini-publics, while embeddedness refers to indicators that they are integrated into democratic systems.

Following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines outlined

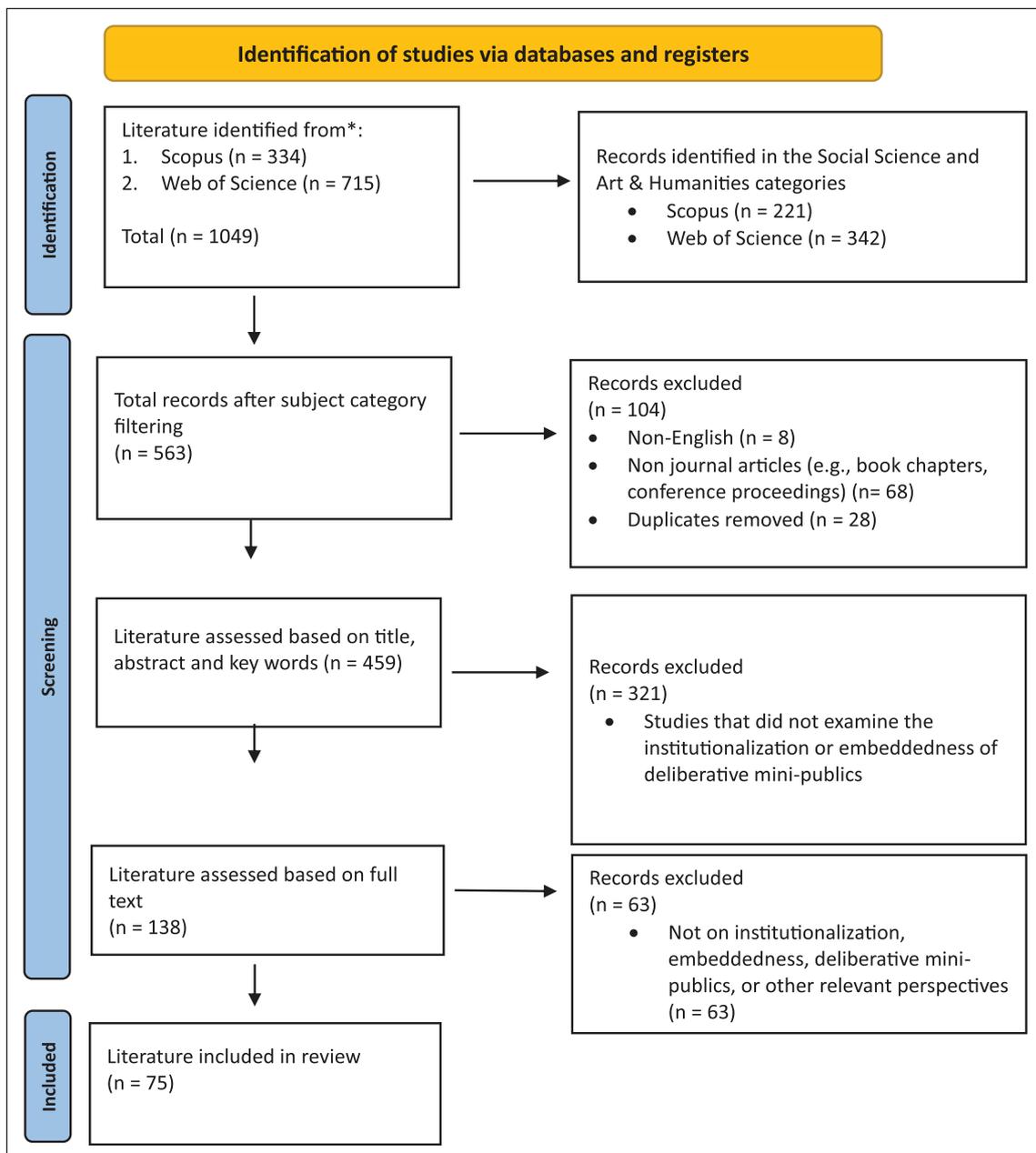
by Page et al., (2021), we analyzed 75 scientific articles from the Social Science and the Arts & Humanities categories of the Web of Science and Scopus.

## 2. Materials and Methods

We followed PRISMA guidelines to ensure transparent reporting and enable replication, as outlined in **Figure 1** (Page et al., 2021).

### 2.1 Search and selection strategy

We searched Scopus and the Web of Science Core Collection databases for studies using the search phrases institutional\* or embed\* combined with variations of mini-public, deliberative democracy, deliberative process, citizen assembly, or participatory governance to capture a broad range of literature (see Supplementary File 1: Appendix. Search operators).



**Figure 1:** PRISMA framework: data collection.

Only journal articles were included. In Web of Science, we searched the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) within the Social Science and the Arts & Humanities categories, focusing on high-impact journals. In Scopus, lacking a comparable index, we included papers in the Social Sciences and the Arts & Humanities areas.

The initial search yielded 563 articles. To ensure comprehensive coverage, we did not impose a publication date range. The last search update was conducted on May 28, 2024. Following common practice, we excluded non-English articles ( $n = 8$ ), non-journal articles ( $n = 68$ ), and duplicates ( $n = 28$ ). We then independently reviewed each remaining article's title, keyword, and abstract, excluding 321 studies that did not examine institutionalization or embeddedness of DMPs as defined by Boswell et al. (2023): Processes combining random selection and deliberation, including citizens' assemblies, citizens' juries, consensus conferences, and deliberative polling. This included studies focusing solely on other participatory methods (citizen science, co-production, co-management, participatory budgeting) without connection to deliberative mini-publics.

Given the emerging nature of the topic, the integration of empirical and theoretical papers enabled a comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge while responding to Thompson's (2008) call for better integration between theoretical and empirical investigations of deliberative democracy. We classified studies as empirical if they collected and analyzed primary or secondary data about DMPs through systematic data collection methods. This includes studies using interviews, surveys or other quantitative datasets, ethnographic observations, and document analysis. Studies were classified as theoretical if they primarily developed conceptual frameworks, normative arguments, or theoretical propositions without systematic data collection. One systematic review was classified as theoretical since it aimed to develop conceptual frameworks rather than synthesize empirical findings.

This left 138 articles for full-text review, conducted by the first author with regular consultation and discussion with the second author to ensure consistency in application of inclusion criteria. During this phase, we applied additional exclusion criteria to ensure that the studies demonstrated focus on institutionalization or embeddedness of DMPs. We required that institutionalization or embeddedness of DMPs be a primary research question or occupy at least one full section. This screening excluded an additional 63 studies, yielding a final set of 75 articles for analysis.

## 2.2 Data extraction and analysis

We then began a detailed data extraction process of the 75 articles. First, we coded the studies by characteristics such as publication date, geographical region, units of analysis, discipline (based on the journal's primary disciplinary focus), and methodological approach.

Next, we focused on the conceptualization of 'institutionalization' and 'embeddedness', inductively extracting both explicit definitions and the implicit

uses of these terms across all 75 articles. To establish a robust analytical framework, we identified 12 papers that provided the conceptual clarity necessary for coding—specifically, studies that either explicitly differentiated between the two concepts, or used one term distinctly without conflating it with the other. These studies characterize institutionalization as the activities and mechanisms that establish mini-publics in democratic systems, and embeddedness as indicators that mini-publics have become integral and normalized within those systems. We used these conceptually clear papers as the foundation for developing our coding criteria.

Using this distinction from the conceptually clearest studies, we applied a deductive approach, re-reading all 75 studies and categorizing excerpts based on content rather than terminology. We classified descriptions of formal mechanisms, structures, and deliberate actions (such as creating laws, allocating resources, and establishing procedures) as 'institutionalization', and descriptions of cultural integration, normative acceptance, and relational aspects (such as trust, behavioral changes, and normalized practices) as 'embeddedness'. This analytical approach allowed us to move beyond terminological inconsistencies in the literature to focus on underlying conceptual distinctions.

This inductive-deductive approach follows the best practices in qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) and aligns with methods used in other systematic literature reviews (e.g., Witting et al., 2023). The first author independently conducted coding to ensure consistency and coherence, with repeated discussions and refinements with the co-author to minimize interpretative bias and ensure clarity and uniformity in theme identification.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Field synthesis: characteristics of the article sample

#### Timeline

Most literature on the institutionalization and embeddedness of DMPs spans from 2000 to 2024, with the majority (84%) published between 2016 and 2024.

#### Geographical focus

Most empirical studies focused on Western democracies—particularly Europe (72%)—and the majority of theoretical papers (78%) had no specific geographical focus (Table 1 summarizes the distribution).

#### Analytical perspective

As shown in Table 2, the reviewed studies show considerable diversity in the analytical perspective—that is, the specific focal point or lens through which they examine DMPs. While all studies focus on DMPs per our inclusion criteria, they vary in whether they analyze the process in isolation or in connection with the wider democratic system.

Forty-seven percent of empirical studies analyze the deliberative processes themselves, while the remainder examine mini-publics in their broader democratic

**Table 1:** Geographical focus.

Geographical focus	Empirical (n = 43)	%	Theoretical (n = 32)	%
Europe	31	72%	1	3%
United Kingdom	5	12%	–	–
The Americas	3	7%	–	–
Australia	1	2%	–	–
South Korea	1	2%	–	–
Canada	–	–	1	3%
Transnational	–	–	2	6%
Combination of regions	2	5%	3	9%
No geographical focus	–	–	25	78%

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

**Table 2:** Analytical perspective.

Analytical perspective	Empirical (n = 43)	%	Theoretical (n = 32)	%
Deliberative mini-publics	20	47%	4	13%
Government/executive	9	21%	–	–
Parliament	6	14%	2	6%
Legislation	3	7%	–	–
Public	3	7%	–	–
Independent advisory bodies	1	2%	–	–
Independent government agencies	–	–	1	3%
Cross country comparison	1	2%	–	–
No specific perspective	–	–	25	78%

context—including interactions with the government (21%), parliaments (14%), or the public (7%). Most theoretical studies (78%) lack a specific analytical perspective, though some focus on deliberative mini-publics (13%), or explore their integration with parliaments (6%) or government agencies (3%).

#### Discipline

As detailed in **Table 3**, political science dominates the field, accounting for 79% of the reviewed studies. Public administration follows with 13%. The remaining studies are distributed across policy science (4%), philosophy (1%), and law (3%).

#### Methodological approach

This review covers 32 theoretical and 43 empirical studies. The theoretical studies primarily focused on developing, analyzing, and refining theories rather than analyzing empirical data. Most empirical papers used qualitative methods (74%), followed by quantitative (19%) and mixed-methods (7%): see **Table 4**.

**Table 3:** Discipline.

Discipline	Empirical (n = 43)	Theoretical (n = 32)	Total (n = 75)	%
Political science	30	29	59	79%
Public administration	8	2	10	13%
Policy science	3	–	3	4%
Philosophy	–	1	1	1%
Law	2	–	2	3%

**Table 4:** Methodological Approach.

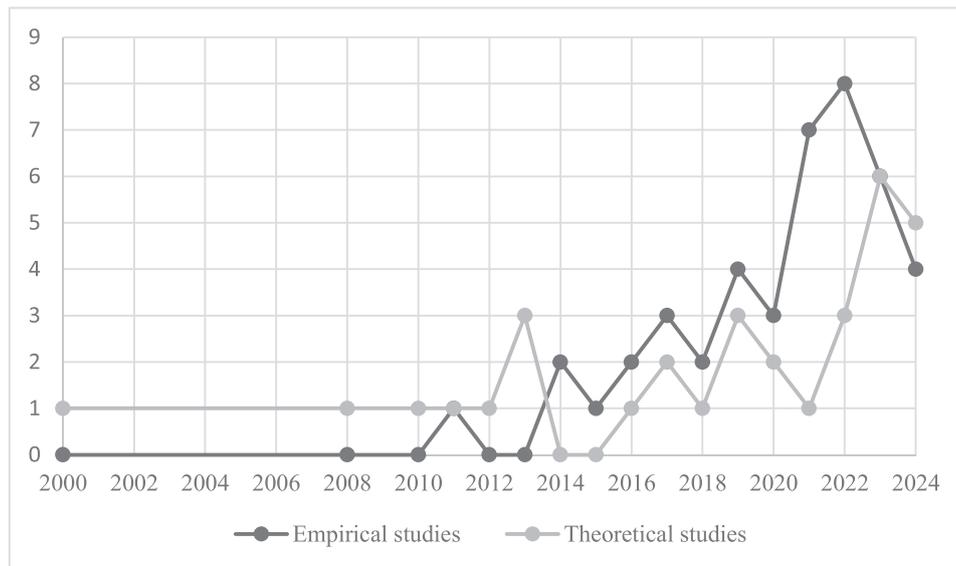
Methodological approach	Number	Percentage
<b>Theoretical</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>43%</b>
<b>Empirical</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>57%</b>
· Qualitative	32	74%
· Multiple data sources	21	66%
· Interviews only	8	25%
· Documents/reports only	3	9%
· Quantitative	8	19%
· Mixed methods	3	7%

### 3.2 Definitions of the 'institutionalization' and 'embeddedness' of deliberative mini-publics

As shown in **Figure 2**, 'institutionalization' and 'embeddedness' are increasingly discussed in the literature on DMPs. However, clear definitions remain rare (Bussu et al., 2022). Only 17 of the 75 reviewed studies explicitly define these terms. This ambiguity is compounded by authors emphasizing different aspects of these concepts: some focus on the design of the mini-public (Smith & Wales, 2000), while others emphasize its integration within political systems (Courant, 2022). Furthermore, some scholars treat these terms as distinct concepts (Bussu et al., 2022), while others use the terms interchangeably (Blanco et al., 2022).

First, several scholars equate both concepts with perfecting the internal aspects of the deliberative initiative (Dean et al., 2022; Smith & Wales, 2000). These studies focus on establishing rules and norms for practical elements such as participant selection and event size to ensure inclusivity and high-quality deliberation. From this perspective, the legitimacy of the mini-public depends on how effectively these internal elements are established and managed (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015).

Second, other authors stress formalization. While Courant (2022) uses 'institutionalization', Farrell & Field (2022) prefer 'embeddedness', and Blanco et al. (2022) use these terms interchangeably; all highlight the importance of establishing mini-publics as permanent, regular, and legally supported. Such formalization minimizes government interference (Van Crombrugge, 2020), bolsters the legitimacy of the process, and fosters a culture of deliberative decision-making and accountability (Sorensen, 2013).



**Figure 2:** Timeline.

Third, a growing strand highlights strong links or ‘coupling’ between mini-publics and state institutions. Terminology varies again: ‘institutionalization’ (Hendriks & Kay, 2019), ‘embeddedness’ (Ainscough & Willis, 2024), ‘institutional embeddedness’ (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2016), ‘institutional coupling’ (Hendriks & Kay, 2019). Coupling may involve assigning formal roles in legislative scrutiny, integrating mini-publics into parliaments (Setälä, 2017), or creating hybrid bicameral systems where mini-publics operate alongside elected chambers (Vandamme, 2023). Scholars argue that such integration enhances perceived legitimacy and public support (Ainscough & Willis, 2024; Blanco et al., 2022), promotes long-term policy orientations (Setälä, 2024), and ensures recommendations impact decision-making (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2016).

A fourth strand focuses on ‘scaling up’ or connecting mini-publics to civil society and the broader public. This approach emphasizes involving civil society actors in the governance of mini-publics, engaging the media to disseminate information about the process (Boswell et al., 2023), or employing mini-publics as deliberative spaces before referendums (Chambers & Warren, 2023). Involving civil society actors amplifies marginalized voices (Ercan & Hendriks, 2013), aligns deliberations with public priorities (Della Porta & Felicetti, 2022), and increases policymaking impact (Bua, 2017). Connections with the public foster accountability (Olsen & Trenz, 2014), inform decision-making (Setälä, 2017), and build trust and legitimacy in the mini-public and the democratic process (Mendonça & Cunha, 2014).

The above definitions reveal three key points. First, scholars often use ‘institutionalization’ and ‘embeddedness’ interchangeably (Blanco et al., 2022; Meijer et al., 2017). Second, even when scholars employ only one term, their definitions rarely differ in substance. Third, most accounts imply that establishment mechanisms like internal design or legal formalization foster integration indicators such as deliberative culture or public trust. Yet, they seldom treat these stages as distinct analytical concepts.

Consequently, these conceptualizations lack a clear and internally consistent framework for empirical research, limiting the development of robust research designs and accumulation of streamlined knowledge. In what follows, we disentangle the two concepts and lay out testable dimensions for each.

## 4. Toward Conceptual Clarity: A Proposed Conceptual Framework for ‘Institutionalization’ and ‘Embeddedness’

### 4.1 Disentangling institutionalization and embeddedness

#### 4.1.1 What the twelve papers say

Twelve studies in our sample—two that clearly separate the terms and 10 that use only one—allow us to distinguish *institutionalization* from *embeddedness*. Nine papers describe institutionalization as concrete activities and mechanisms for establishing mini-publics. Courant (2022) describes it as activities for integrating DMPs within political systems—making them proper institutions with a clearly defined design, place, and power. Macq and Jacquet (2023) focus on specific establishment mechanisms such as creating permanent institutions through law, attaching the mini-public to parliament, and securing political commitment to translate recommendations into measures. Escobar (2022) speaks of incorporating new processes into existing systems and developing new institutions within those systems. Other authors similarly echo this focus on formalization and integration (Bussu et al., 2022; Courant, 2021; Davidson & Stark, 2011; Hennig et al., 2024). Collectively, these definitions treat institutionalization as deliberate activities and formal mechanisms that transform temporary experiments into established democratic structures.

Embeddedness, in contrast, is described in five studies as an indication that DMPs have become integral, normalized, and rooted within democratic systems. Bussu et al. (2022) describe a normative status where the mini-public relates productively to other institutions

and is hard to abolish. Escobar (2022) highlights culture change in public administration. Suiter et al. (2020) argue that a mini-public can be considered embedded when it produces lasting spillover effects, notably, durable gains in non-participating citizens’ policy knowledge and empathy. For Pfeffer (2024), embeddedness means that mini-publics achieve a ‘normatively productive role’—that is, they become a key instrument for addressing systemic democratic deficits such as policy deadlock or weak responsiveness. Dean et al. (2022) argue that mini-publics are embedded when they complement, rather than displace, other democratic activities, such as civil society actors’ roles as knowledge brokers and government partners.

**4.1.2 Rationale for our reclassification—mechanisms vs. indicators**

Building on the insights from the 12 papers outlined above, we systematically reclassified all 75 studies based on content rather than terminology. This approach reveals conceptual ambiguity in how these terms are applied across the literature. **Table 5** illustrates this problem: studies often use ‘embeddedness’ while describing establishment mechanisms, or ‘institutionalization’ while identifying integration indicators. For example, Burks (2024) uses ‘embeddedness’ while describing convening and tasking mini-publics with formal roles, which are establishment mechanisms. Conversely, Blanco et al. (2022) employ ‘institutionalization’ while describing behavioral changes among decision-makers, which are indicators of achieved integration rather than establishment mechanisms.

**4.2 Defining institutionalization and embeddedness**

Given the still-limited evidence base documented by Jacquet and van der Does (2021a, 2021b), we present the following definitions and dimensions as a foundation for empirical analysis.

Based on our analysis, we propose clear definitions: **Institutionalization** comprises the deliberate activities and mechanisms—such as enacting laws or allocating budgets—that establish deliberative mini-publics within democratic systems. **Embeddedness** represents the indicators—such as behavioral shifts or cultural acceptance—that deliberative mini-publics have become integral and normalized within democratic systems.

**4.2.1 Temporal pathway between institutionalization and embeddedness**

Although evidence is still limited, several studies point to a conditional pathway in which deliberate mechanisms of institutionalization can pave the way for embeddedness, but do not guarantee it. Design choices ensuring inclusivity, citizen control, and equality of voice often foster public trust in mini-publics (Doyle & Walsh, 2022; Farrell & Field, 2022), while stability and predictability appear necessary for deliberative civic cultures to take root (Courant, 2021). Conversely, institutionalization may lead to dis-embeddedness when processes bypass civil society oversight or wield little policy impact (Bussu et al., 2022).

Embeddedness may also reinforce institutionalization through feedback effects, as normalized mini-publics become easier to re-establish and scale. Courant (2021) demonstrates this dynamic in Ireland, where the repeated use of DMPs created public and political expectations

**Table 5:** Illustrative excerpts showing divergence between author terminology and our mechanism/indicator coding.

Our reclassification	Source (year)	Author’s own label(s)	One-line extraction (trimmed)
<b>Institutionalization</b>	(Burks, 2024)	Embeddedness, institutional embeddedness	‘Convened by government and tasked with producing constitutional material ... given a formal role’
<b>Institutionalization</b>	(Hendriks & Kay, 2019)	Institutionally couple	‘Institutionally couple a citizens’ forum to a parliamentary committee...’
<b>Institutionalization</b>	(Doberstein, 2019)	Venue coupling	‘Transmission of ideas and recommendations from the mini-public to other venues’
<b>Institutionalization</b>	(Ainscough & Willis, 2024)	Embedded/Embedding	‘The next step for climate DMPs is to embed and routinize their use in existing policymaking institutions.’
<b>Embeddedness</b>	(Blanco et al., 2022)	Institutionalization	‘Participatory governance is institutionalized to the extent that it shapes the behavior of decision-makers and citizens’
<b>Embeddedness</b>	(Hennig et al., 2024)	Institutionalization	‘Would cement participation and democracy into the machinery of government ... bring a “pluralizing influence” to bear on decision makers.’
<b>Embeddedness</b>	(Hendriks, 2016)	Coupling	‘Elites ... begin to appreciate the value of citizens’ input; some even champion the process’
<b>Embeddedness</b>	(Elstub et al., 2021)	Institutional links	‘Make the parliament more hospitable to participatory and deliberative values’

*Note:* This table illustrates how authors’ terminology often diverges from the substance of their descriptions, highlighting the conceptual ambiguity our framework addresses.

that such processes would be repeated in the future. This normalization subsequently generated calls for additional citizens' assemblies from both politicians and the public, illustrating how embeddedness can drive further institutionalization.

We flag these temporal pathways as hypothesized relationships requiring further empirical testing rather than established causal claims.

### 4.3 Dimensions of institutionalization and embeddedness

#### 4.3.1 Emergent themes from thematic analysis

**Table 6** lists the nine themes that emerged from our inductive-deductive coding of the 75 studies (see § 2.2 for the full procedures and reliability checks). Each theme satisfies Braun and Clarke's (2012) criteria for robust thematic analysis, including maintaining a singular focus, avoiding overlap, and directly addressing our research questions.

#### 4.3.2 Dimensions derived from the themes

Building directly on the themes in **Table 6**, we formulate nine provisional dimensions that together characterize the institutionalization and embeddedness of DMPs (see **Figure 3**). These dimensions are therefore grounded in literature rather than imposed *a priori*.

#### *Dimensions of institutionalization*

**Dimension 1: Demographic reflection and deliberative quality.** We propose that the institutionalization of mini-publics requires specific design features that enhance both demographic reflection and deliberative capacity (Van Crombrugge, 2020). Random sampling or stratified sampling should be the standard practice for achieving a participant composition that reflects the broader population, as demonstrated in several Western European

cases (Doyle & Walsh, 2022; Ercan et al., 2019) and long endorsed in normative work (Offe, 2011; Smith & Wales, 2000).

We further expect deliberative quality to improve when participants have meaningful agency over the agenda. This might involve allowing participants to invite external experts (Van Crombrugge, 2020), broaden discussion topics (Doyle & Walsh, 2022), or set their own priorities (Ercan & Hendriks, 2013; Van Crombrugge, 2020). However, as Michels and Binnema (2019) caution, unlimited autonomy can yield vague and impractical proposals, potentially reducing the mini-public's influence on policymaking.

Additional design features that are likely to foster deliberative quality include generous deliberation time, balanced briefing materials, expert input, and real-time fact-checking (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2016; Courant, 2021). Optimizing group size is also essential but requires balancing competing considerations: while some authors defend larger assemblies for their diversity and heterogeneity (Smith & Wales, 2000), others argue that smaller assemblies may guarantee more equitable participation (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2016; Offe, 2011). Finally, skilled facilitators play a crucial role in balancing participation, fostering respectful dialogue, and effectively synthesizing participants' viewpoints (Smith & Wales, 2000).

**Dimension 2: Adequate resources and specialized skills.** We propose that the institutionalization of mini-publics requires dedicated resources and specialized expertise (Hendriks & Kay, 2019; Smith, 2013). This includes dedicated funding to cover participant compensation, expert facilitation, and logistical support. Developing specialized skills involves investing in staff training on the principles and practices of mini-publics

**Table 6:** Emergent themes.

Themes	Explanation
<b>Institutionalization</b>	
Demographic reflection and deliberative quality	Developing and implementing design protocols for participant selection and deliberation methods.
Regularity and predictability	Establishing regular scheduling protocols for convening mini-publics.
Resources and skills	Securing financial resources, developing skilled staff capacity, and creating specialized roles to support deliberative processes.
Formal recognition and integration	Implementing formal laws and regulations, developing reflexive laws, and integrating mini-publics within government institutions.
Public awareness and engagement	Fostering involvement and building engagement of civil society actors and the public.
<b>Embeddedness</b>	
Productive connections	Development of mutually beneficial relationships between the DMP and its environment.
Cultural shifts	Evidence of enhanced trust, understanding, accountability, legitimacy perceptions, and behavioral change.
Power shifts	Horizontalization of power dynamics between elites and citizens.
Rootedness	Normalization of DMPs within society.

to build expertise in deliberative governance (Hendriks & Kay, 2019). Additionally, creating new roles specifically dedicated to the organization, facilitation, and administration of mini-publics can further support their institutionalization (Elstubb et al., 2021). We acknowledge that resources and skills might impact other dimensions. For instance, adequate participant compensation may be essential for achieving demographic reflection by enabling participation across socioeconomic groups. However, we distinguish resources and skills as a separate dimension because their allocation represents formal institutional commitment to deliberative processes, which transcends any single design choice.

**Dimension 3: Regularity and predictability.** We propose that institutionalizing mini-publics requires moving beyond *ad hoc*, one-off events toward regular and predictable meetings. This could mean convening mini-publics at fixed intervals (quarterly or annually), or reliably assembling them in response to specific political events, such as before referendums or constitutional amendments (Farrell & Field, 2022; Van Crombrugge, 2020). We treat regularity and predictability as distinct because they represent the temporal dimension of institutionalization. While formal legal backing may be necessary to guarantee that mini-publics are not one-off events, such temporal patterning can also occur independently of legislative mandates or other formal design features (Van Crombrugge, 2020). A one-off political decision to convene a mini-public can set a precedent for continued use of these processes in the future (Courant, 2021; Van Crombrugge, 2020).

Importantly, regularity and predictability concern the timing of deliberative processes, not their membership structures. Regular assemblies may involve rotating participants with each iteration or maintaining a fixed membership for a period of time (Hennig et al., 2024; Jäske, 2019). Although the question of rotation versus fixed terms for randomly selected citizens remains a subject of scholarly debate (Hennig et al., 2024; Khoban, 2023), our focus here is on the regularity of the assembly process itself rather than its membership structure.

**Dimension 4: Formal recognition and integration.** We propose that institutionalization requires formal recognition and integration within existing decision-making spaces. Formal recognition may involve 'hard' mechanisms, such as laws or regulations (Blanco et al., 2022; Macq & Jacquet, 2023), or 'soft' mechanisms like reflexive laws or normative codes which foster self-regulation and set standards for participants, organizers, and policymakers (Sørensen, 2013). We acknowledge that formal legal backing may establish regularity and predictability. For instance, ensuring that a mini-public is always convened before a referendum or constitutional amendment may require supporting legislation. However, legislation can also anchor one-off processes—such as the 2004 British Columbia Citizens' Assembly, which was legally integrated in a referendum process, yet designed as a single event (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2016). Our emphasis here is on the *strength of institutional anchoring* rather than the temporal patterns it may generate.

Integrating mini-publics into legislative and executive branches may foster their institutionalization (Dean et al., 2020; Skelcher & Torfing, 2010; Wells et al., 2021), especially when supported by government initiation or support (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2016). Legislative integration may involve establishing standalone citizens' councils with independent mandates (Vandamme, 2023), creating mixed parliamentary committees with both mini-public participants and elected officials (Hendriks & Kay, 2019), or forming political parties to represent mini-public interests in parliament (Junius et al., 2023). The strongest form of integration is the 'hybrid bicameral' model, where mini-publics serve as a sortition-based parliamentary chamber alongside, or in place of, the senate (Courant, 2021; Hennig et al., 2024). In the executive, mini-publics may be integrated into government administration, policymaking processes, advisory bodies, or independent agencies (Ainscough & Willis, 2024; Doberstein, 2019; Smith, 2020; Värttö, 2021).

Direct attachment to the legislative or executive increases the likelihood that mini-public recommendations reach policymakers (Jäske, 2019). However, even without direct attachment, influence may still occur when parliamentary debate or approval is required (Courant, 2021), or when policymakers commit to implementing recommendations or publicly justifying deviations (Courant, 2022; Durrant & Cohen, 2023; Setälä, 2017).

**Dimension 5: Public awareness and engagement.** We propose that institutionalization requires connecting deliberative mini-publics to the broader public, including civil society actors and non-participating citizens. This can be fostered by creating structured pathways for civil society actors to advocate for mini-public initiation (Ainscough & Willis, 2024), co-design its mandate (Boswell et al., 2023), and monitor implementation (Blanco et al., 2022; Ercan & Hendriks, 2013). Civil society involvement bridges the gap between the mini-public and the broader public, ensuring representation of non-participating citizens' perspectives (Mendonça & Cunha, 2014) and enhancing public understanding of deliberative outcomes (Smith, 2013).

Media engagement—through livestreaming deliberations, reporting outcomes, or providing explanatory commentary—can widen awareness and stimulate public debate (Devillers et al., 2021; Mendonça et al., 2024; Olsen & Trenz, 2014). Dissemination through official websites and social media can further widen reach and facilitate real-time interaction (Doyle & Walsh, 2022; Hendriks & Kay, 2019). Nonetheless, some insulation from lobbying, partisan framing, or sensational media coverage remains essential to protect participants' capacity for open-minded deliberation (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2016; Olsen & Trenz, 2014).

Furthermore, we expect that integrating mini-publics with direct democratic tools like citizen initiatives and referendums fosters their institutionalization. Allowing citizens to request a mini-public or influence the agenda of an ongoing process by gathering signatures creates formal pathways for public engagement (Courant, 2022; Van Crombrugge, 2020). Linking deliberations

to referendums—either before the referendum to shape the question, or after the referendum to interpret the result—can serve as a bridge between deliberative and direct democratic logics (Hendriks & Wagenaar, 2023). Additionally, developing multistage approaches that combine several rounds of deliberation in mini-publics with multiple referendums may help achieve this integration (McKay, 2019). In some contexts, allowing public financial contributions can further strengthen citizens' perceived ownership and engagement with the process (Jacquet & Reuchamps, 2018).

*Dimensions of embeddedness*

**Dimension 6: Productive connections.** We hypothesize that a mini-public is embedded when it demonstrates productive connections with surrounding institutions, meaning that they support, and are supported by other institutions within the broader democratic system (Bussu et al., 2022). Mere connection is insufficient; the mini-public ideally enhances democratic systems by bolstering the legitimacy of institutions it interacts with, improving their responsiveness to citizen concerns and helping resolve political deadlocks through informed deliberation (Hendriks & Kay, 2019; Pfeffer, 2024; Smith, 2013). The institutional context also enhances the effectiveness of the mini-public by raising its profile and credibility (Hendriks, 2016; Niessen, 2019).

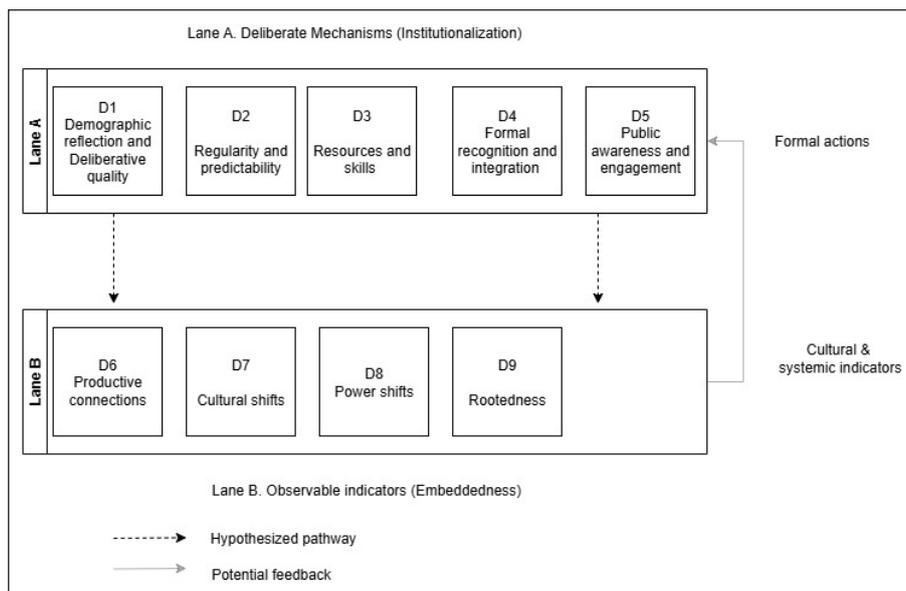
**Dimension 7: Cultural shifts.** We expect embeddedness to manifest as observable cultural shifts among policymakers and citizens. Evidence of embeddedness here may include increased valuation, stronger trust in mini-publics, greater willingness to treat their recommendations as authoritative (Ainscough & Willis, 2024; Courant, 2022; Escobar, 2022), and more openness to diverse perspectives—including those that challenge existing assumptions or policies (Ercan & Hendriks, 2013).

Embeddedness may also be evident in observable changes in the behavior and attitudes of policymakers (Blanco et al., 2022) and the general public (Suiter et al., 2020). For policymakers, this might involve heightened receptiveness to deliberative and participatory approaches (Elstub et al., 2021; Sørensen, 2013), public championing of mini-publics, and greater willingness to translate their outputs into formal decision-making (Escobar, 2022). Policy priorities may also shift toward more future-oriented policies (Setälä, 2024), and a stronger emphasis may be placed on transparent public justification (Abizadeh, 2021; Durrant & Cohen, 2023; Sorensen, 2013).

In the public sphere, embeddedness may manifest as lasting public awareness, trust and understanding of DMPs (Doyle & Walsh, 2022), or a lasting 'spillover' effect that equips non-participants with skills for inter- and intrapersonal deliberation such as factual knowledge, critical thinking, respectful communication, and empathy toward different viewpoints (Suiter et al., 2020). These broader public effects suggest deeper societal anchoring of deliberative practices that may serve as cultural markers of embeddedness.

**Dimension 8: Power shifts.** We propose that embeddedness involves fundamental power shifts between elites and citizens (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2023; Khoban, 2023). In this state, the principle that anyone can participate in politics supplants merit-based elitism, where political influence depends on social status (Khoban, 2023). Indicators include a declining ability of elites to instrumentalize or manipulate DMPs, and a rising capacity of citizens to challenge elite dominance and shape collective agendas (Courant, 2022; Hammond, 2021).

**Dimension 9: Rootedness.** We expect that a mature sign of embeddedness is rootedness—a point where DMPs achieve a 'common-sense' status in public life (Bussu et al., 2022). In this condition, mini-publics are no longer experimental innovations requiring justification; instead,



**Figure 3:** Two-lane framework. Lane A depicts deliberate mechanisms of institutionalization; Lane B depicts observable indicators of embeddedness. Arrows indicate hypothesized temporal relationships and potential feedback loops.

they function as routine components of policymaking, comparable to elections or referendums (Van Crombrugge, 2020). Indicators of rootedness may include widespread and recurring use across policy domains, legislative cycles, or administrative levels, such that abolishing or bypassing them becomes politically improbable (Boswell et al., 2023; Michels & Binnema, 2019; Bussu et al., 2022).

#### 4.3.3 Trade-offs between the dimensions

The dimensions outlined above rarely move in unison; in practice, advancing one can undermine another. For example, while livestreaming debates can strengthen transparency, it may also invite performative speech and strategic positioning, thereby lowering the deliberative quality sought in Dimension 1. Similarly, rapid power shifts from elites to randomly selected citizens can provoke institutional push-back, jeopardizing reciprocal inter-institutional support. These trade-offs suggest that institutionalization and embeddedness are best studied as a dynamic equilibrium: gains along one dimension may require compensatory safeguards on another.

## 5. Conclusion and Discussion: Informing Future Research

This study asked (1) how existing scholarship defines the institutionalization and embeddedness of deliberative mini-publics and (2) how these two concepts can be better differentiated for future research. By systematically reviewing 75 peer-reviewed papers, we demonstrate that these concepts have been used inconsistently and often interchangeably. Our analysis shows that institutionalization is best understood as deliberate activities and mechanisms designed to bring mini-publics into the heart of democratic decision-making, whereas embeddedness describes indicators that mini-publics have become normalized, resilient, and valued components of a political system.

This review makes three theoretical contributions. First, it proposes clear definitions of institutionalization and embeddedness and identifies key dimensions for each, thereby resolving long-standing ambiguities in the mini-publics' literature and meeting Thompson's (2008) call for conceptual clarity in the field. Second, the article advances a two-lane analytical framework: five establishment mechanisms (demographic reflection, regularity and predictability, resources and skills, formal recognition and integration, and public awareness and engagement) are paired with four integration indicators (productive connections, cultural shifts, power shifts, and rootedness). Although still untested, the framework offers a heuristic for descriptive mapping and for generating causal hypotheses about how establishment mechanisms might foster integration indicators. Third, the framework hypothesizes a dynamic temporal continuum. While most earlier work selects a single vantage point—formal legislation (Macq & Jacquet, 2023), public scaling (Suiter et al., 2020), culture change (Escobar, 2022), or legitimacy (Devillers et al., 2021)—our model suggests that these perspectives may form successive stages in the same evolutionary process.

Our framework builds on Bussu et al.'s (2022) distinction between institutionalization and embeddedness by proposing specific dimension sets for each concept. While prior syntheses such as Jacquet and van der Does' (2021a, 2021b) have examined structural change and the normalization of deliberative mini-publics in the policy process, they do not systematically distinguish institutionalization from embeddedness. Our systematic separation of these concepts provides the analytical clarity needed to understand not just the consequences of mini-publics, but how they become established and when they are successfully integrated into democratic systems.

The framework also speaks directly to practice. By identifying concrete establishment mechanisms, it furnishes designers with a checklist for moving from one-off experiments to durable institutions through, for example, securing stable funding or mandating government responses to citizen recommendations. At the same time, the embeddedness indicators offer benchmarks for evaluating impact. Policymakers and civil society sponsors cannot merely ask whether a mini-public exists but whether it is reshaping political culture and recalibrating power relationships.

Despite its broad scope, the review has limitations. We focus exclusively on mini-publics and therefore omit allied innovations such as participatory budgeting or collaborative governance networks where institutionalization and embeddedness are equally salient. While the two-lane framework may be transferable, future work should test which dimensions travel intact and which require adaptation. Language and publication bias may have excluded relevant work in gray literature and non-Anglophone contexts. A geographical skew toward Western Europe and Anglophone countries raises questions about generalizability to the Global South or post-authoritarian settings. Additionally, our search strategy focused on studies explicitly using the terminologies 'institutionalization' and 'embeddedness', potentially excluding research examining similar processes under different labels (e.g., 'institutional impact', 'structural changes'). Furthermore, our reliance on 12 'conceptually clear' papers to develop our analytical framework may have introduced definitional bias. We addressed this by systematically applying our framework across all 75 studies but acknowledge that alternative approaches to distinguishing institutionalization and embeddedness might yield different dimensional structures. Additionally, while our framework proposes conditional pathways and feedback mechanisms, we acknowledge that the relationships between institutionalization and embeddedness are likely non-linear, potentially involving threshold effects, tipping points, and complex feedback loops that our current conceptualization may not fully capture. Finally, the nine dimensions proposed here should be understood as working hypotheses which, while informed by insights from 43 empirical studies, still require systematic testing and refinement.

Future research could proceed along seven lines. First, more empirical studies are needed to test the various dimensions of institutionalization and embeddedness,

particularly embeddedness indicators. Second, longitudinal and experimental research designs are needed to test the causal pathways that link establishment mechanisms to integration indicators. Third, future scholarship should map the inevitable trade-offs—for example, transparency tools that may weaken deliberative quality or strong government links that may erode public trust—so that institutionalization and embeddedness are analyzed not as perfectly aligned goals but as dimensions that sometimes pull in opposite directions. Fourth, research should broaden institutional horizons by examining the integration of mini-publics in courts, administrative bodies (Bottin & Mazeaud, 2023), and transnational bodies. Fifth, comparative work on civil society perceptions of institutionalizing mini-publics should explore whether they regard these forums as complementary channels that amplify their voices or as competing venues that might diminish their advocacy role. Sixth, future research should test whether our framework applies to related participatory phenomena beyond mini-publics. Seventh, tracking feedback effects—for instance, whether embeddedness lowers the political cost of more institutionalization—would clarify whether these processes reinforce each other over time and strengthen democracy. Extending these inquiries to diverse political cultures and situating them in longer historical arcs will round out the evidence base.

#### Additional File

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Supplementary File 1:** Appendix. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.1757.s1>

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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