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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Addressing Self-Exclusion in Upscaled Mini-Publics: Evidence from CoFE's European Citizens' Panels

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This article examines how institutional design shapes patterns of self-exclusion in upscaled mini-publics, focusing on the European Citizens' Panels (ECPs) of the Conference on the Future of Europe (2021–2022). When mini-publics are scaled to regional or transnational levels, structural inequalities related to education, gender, and social background are often amplified – especially when citizens are asked to deliberate on complex or unfamiliar issues. The analysis distinguishes between two types of self-exclusion: *deferential*, when participants internalize social hierarchies about who is entitled to speak; and *epistemic*, when they refrain from contributing due to a perceived lack of knowledge. These dynamics disproportionately affect subordinated groups, such as women, young people, and the less formally educated. Drawing on deliberative democratic theory and qualitative analysis of the ECPs, the article shows that self-exclusion is not inevitable but shaped by specific design choices. Overly technical materials and abrupt topic allocation can increase epistemic insecurity, whereas gradual and inclusive facilitation can reduce it. The article concludes that fostering epistemic inclusion requires targeted design interventions – most notably, preparatory training that offers accessible, modular content to help less confident participants process the issues at stake and feel entitled to deliberate on them.

Keywords: Upscaled Mini-publics; Epistemic Injustice; Self-Exclusion; European Citizens' Panels; Inclusiveness

Since the 1990s, the empirical turn in deliberative democracy has led to the proliferation of participatory experiments such as mini-publics (Elstub 2010; see also Dryzek & Niemeyer 2010; Palumbo 2024). Mini-publics are descriptively representative channels of citizen participation that use intersubjective communication to produce considered recommendations on a range of issues. Mini-publics are intended to give participating citizens a sense of ownership (Geissel 2023) and to serve as 'trusted information proxies' for the wider public in increasingly complex societies (MacKenzie & Warren 2012). Recently, scholars and practitioners have focused on upscaling these forums to regional, transnational, and global levels (Dryzek et al. 2011; Dryzek & Niemeyer 2024; Vlerick 2020).[1]

As mini-publics move beyond the national scale, they face new challenges (Nicolaïdis 2024; Verhasselt 2024). Among these, the challenge of exclusion has received little sustained attention. By *exclusion*, I refer both to *exclusion by others* – when participants' contributions are dismissed, ignored, or undervalued by fellow participants – and to *self-exclusion*, which occurs when individuals refrain from speaking despite a desire to participate. These dynamics are especially salient in upscaled mini-publics, where linguistic, educational, and socioeconomic diversity often magnifies underlying structural inequalities. This is particularly evident when assemblies address highly technical topics – such as genome editing, AI, climate transition, or transnational education policy – which disproportionately disadvantage participants with less formal education or limited access to expert knowledge.

To understand how these forms of exclusion interact and compound in upscaled settings, this article analyzes two specific forms of self-exclusion. *Deferential self-exclusion* occurs when participants internalize social hierarchies of voice and authority, perceiving themselves as less entitled to speak. *Epistemic self-exclusion* occurs when participants feel unqualified to contribute due to perceived knowledge gaps.

This article argues that these forms of self-exclusion are not merely psychological or cultural phenomena. Rather, they are often shaped – and potentially mitigated – by deliberative design. Procedural choices – such as assigning participants unfamiliar topics, relying heavily on technical briefings, or emphasizing argument-based reasoning – can deepen self-exclusion by reproducing epistemic hierarchies. Conversely, inclusive design features such as gradual facilitation, small-group formats, and agenda co-setting can help build discursive confidence and reduce perceived competence thresholds. By developing this argument, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how upscaled mini-publics can achieve the goal of 'deliberation for all' (Curato et al. 2017) by ensuring not only descriptive diversity, but also enabling a meaningful voice for all participants (Berger & Charles 2014).

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To substantiate this argument, the article adopts an abductive methodology within normative political theory, combining conceptual analysis with empirical observation (Boswell 2021; Boswell et al. 2019). It draws on a case study of the European Citizens' Panels (ECPs) of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE, 2021–2022) – an ambitious transnational deliberative experiment convened by the EU. In this context, uncorrected structural asymmetries contributed to the self-exclusion of large segments of participants, particularly women and less-educated citizens. This limited the inclusiveness and epistemic quality of the deliberation. This case study illustrates how self-exclusion emerges and how it can be countered through improved deliberative design.

The article proceeds as follows. First, it examines how epistemic exclusion is intensified in transnational or upscaled mini-publics, where participant diversity intersects with structural inequalities. Next, it turns to the phenomenon of self-exclusion, exploring how participants from subordinated groups may internalize epistemic hierarchies and withdraw from deliberation even in formally inclusive settings. Particular attention is paid to how specific elements of deliberative design can either exacerbate or mitigate this dynamic by shaping participants' sense of epistemic legitimacy. Building on this conceptual framework, the analysis uses a case study of the CoFE's ECPs to show how design features influenced discursive participation. In conclusion, the article advocates for providing more accessible information and implementing targeted confidence-building measures for participants who are most likely to feel unqualified or unheard when engaging with complex policy issues.

Epistemic Exclusion from Others in Upscaled Mini-Publics

Consider the following fictional scenario: A global citizens' assembly convenes online to deliberate on the challenges of artificial intelligence (see Stilgoe 2024). One hundred randomly selected citizens represent the diversity of the global population. In line with the OECD's 'Good Practice Principles for Deliberative Processes for Public Decision Making', all participants receive the same preparatory materials (OECD 2020: 118). Among them, Niels – a 55-year-old white Swedish communications manager – receives the same information as Makeda, a 25-year-old black Ethiopian mother who left school at the age of 12. How might the socioeconomic and cultural gap between them affect: (1) the credibility that Niels and his colleagues give to Makeda's contributions and (2) Makeda's own willingness to engage in a discussion in which she feels less informed?

This vignette illustrates two epistemic challenges that arise when deliberative forums are upscaled within highly diverse and heterogeneous publics: exclusion by others and self-exclusion. This section addresses the first challenge, which concerns the ways in which certain participants' contributions may be undervalued or overlooked by fellow deliberators. When the topic of a mini-public aligns more closely with the experiences, discursive styles, or perceived expertise of socially dominant groups, those groups may be more readily granted epistemic authority in the discussion. This dynamic can manifest as unequal speaking time, selective attentiveness, or implicit deference to participants who are perceived as more competent. In the vignette, for example, Niels is heard more often and taken more seriously than Makeda, not because he is more knowledgeable, but because his contributions are perceived as more intelligible or authoritative. Conversely, because Makeda may lack the right words to express her opinion on a subject she has never had the opportunity to really think about, '(her) word already warrants a low prima facie credibility judgment owing to its low intelligibility' (Fricker 2007: 159).

The challenge of epistemic exclusion in deliberative mini-publics has recently been examined in depth by Eva Schmidt (2024). Drawing on Iris Marion Young's concept of 'internal exclusion' (Young 2020) and Miranda Fricker's theory of 'epistemic injustice' (Fricker 2007), Schmidt argues that mini-publics, despite their democratic design, can reinforce existing power asymmetries. As deliberative bodies intended to be descriptively representative of the broader public, mini-publics risk replicating societal inequalities – privileging those with greater educational and rhetorical resources while marginalizing others (see also Beauvais 2021; Sanders 1997; Young 2000).

According to Schmidt (2024), mini-publics can perpetuate epistemic exclusion through three key mechanisms. First, without active facilitation, they may reinforce socially constructed inequalities in rhetorical skill and persuasion. Second, if agenda-setting is not open-ended, mini-publics may silence subordinated groups by prioritizing issues deemed more legitimate by dominant participants. Third, if group composition does not correct for existing hermeneutical inequalities by overrepresenting subordinated voices, these forums may further erode the credibility and trustworthiness of marginalized perspectives.

Beyond these mechanisms, Christopher Hookway (2010) identifies a fourth channel of exclusion: the participatory logic of deliberative contexts. By ranking contributions based on their epistemic value – privileging those that enhance the 'better argument' – mini-publics may discourage participation from individuals who engage by asking questions or brainstorming rather than making substantive claims (Hookway 2010: 159).

That being said, deliberative studies literature has long been attentive to the reproduction of social-discursive asymmetries in deliberative interactions (Bohman 1997; Curato et al. 2019; Hall 2007; Karpowitz et al. 2012; Young 2000). For example, scholars and practitioners are well aware that a purely rational exchange of reasons based on the strength of the better argument is likely to exclude marginalized populations, especially women, racialized people, and young participants (see Fraser 1990; Sanders 1997; Williams 2000; Young 2001). Additionally, active facilitation ensures that participants who may be given less epistemic credibility and reliability by others are still given an equal opportunity to express their opinions and ideas (Afsahi 2021; Beauvais 2018; Landwehr 2014). Furthermore, allowing participants to choose the agenda limits the risk that marginalized groups will suffer testimonial injustice by having their experiences and interests muted by more socially dominant interests. Finally, the exclusionary factor

of an emphasis on rational and rhetorically persuasive arguments has been addressed by scholars who have sought to balance rational argumentation with more flexible forms of discourse (see Steiner et al. 2004), more 'emphasis on outcomes rather than process', and more attention to 'overcoming "real world" constraints on the realization of normative ideals' (Bächtiger et al. 2010: 33). Admittedly, not all of these mechanisms may yet be working optimally, as Schmidt (2024) helpfully points out. But more significantly, they may not be sufficient to address a more pervasive form of exclusion that is understudied in the literature – namely, *self*-exclusion.

Self-Exclusion in Upscaled Mini-Publics: Deferential and Epistemic

Self-exclusion

Self-exclusion in participatory settings is a complex phenomenon that differs from mere non-engagement in deliberation. Abstention from participation – such as not logging into an online participatory platform, systematically turning off one's webcam during online deliberation phases, or fumbling with one's phone during breakout sessions – often stems from a lack of interest rather than a deliberate withdrawal. In such cases, silence is not self-exclusion, but a lack of meaningful incentives to express one's opinions or contribute to the collective discussion.

Self-exclusion, by contrast, occurs when someone *wants* to engage in deliberation but *refrains* from doing so. Consciously or unconsciously, they adopt an observational role rather than voicing their opinions or defending their interests. This process is rooted in internalized social norms that shape behavior and constrain agency (Bourdieu 1991; Butler 2007; Butler 2021). A participant who has internalized power structures in her everyday life may be induced to self-regulate her silence within mini-publics. Even without explicit exclusion, the presence of dominant voices creates a sense of self-discipline that reinforces discursive hierarchies. This self-discipline, according to Bourdieu, is observable in public deliberation in the form of embarrassed or broken speech and silence as 'the only form of expression that is left, very often, to the dominated' (Bourdieu 2016: 44).

Butler's theory of performativity further explains how self-exclusion is enacted. According to her, public discourse continually reinforces norms about who has the right to speak (Butler 2021). Those who are historically positioned as lacking authority – due to gender, race, class, or other social markers – may unconsciously reproduce this status through silence. Indeed, speaking itself can feel risky, exposing individuals to potential rejection or delegitimization. This explains why, even in an inclusive setting, a participant may still perceive a precarious position, fearing epistemic dismissal or subtle sanction (Young 1996). Silence, then, is not simply the absence of speech, but a discursive effect of power, where mechanisms designed to promote inclusion may paradoxically reinforce self-exclusion. Accordingly, the notion of 'self-exclusion' follows the line of demarcation between legitimate and illegitimate speech, the only difference being that the judgment is made by oneself about oneself.

Although we currently lack sufficient data and systematic qualitative studies of participants who remain silent in deliberative settings, I propose examining the central, or 'radial', category of structural self-exclusion (Collier & Mahon 1993) by analytically distinguishing between two of its subcategories: deferential self-exclusion and epistemic self-exclusion. While these forms frequently intersect in practice, disaggregating them helps clarify the distinct mechanisms through which structural inequalities manifest in deliberation. **Table 1** summarizes the key features of each subcategory.

Table 1: Definitions and empirical characteristics of self-exclusion in mini-publics.

Structural Self-Exclusion	
Definition	**Empirical Characteristics**
When a participant is willing to engage but does not, due to internalized social norms that constrain their behavior.	· The participant formally has the opportunity to engage but remains silent. · Social norms are internalized, making the participant feel more comfortable as an observer. · The participant is not explicitly excluded by others but perceives limitations on their entitlement to participate.

Deferential Self-Exclusion		**Epistemic Self-Exclusion**	
Definition	**Empirical Characteristics**	**Definition**	**Empirical Characteristics**
When a participant refrains from speaking because they feel illegitimate in expressing their opinion or defending their interests, *regardless of their actual competence.*	· Individuals from socially dominated groups – e.g., women, young people, manual workers – refrain from expressing their opinions and delegate the framing of the deliberation to individuals from the dominant group. · More common in heterogeneous deliberative groups with unaddressed power inequalities.	When a participant refrains from speaking because they believe they *lack valuable knowledge* on the issue being discussed.	· Participants believe they lack valuable input, often making a rational decision to stay silent. · Undermines the representativeness and inclusiveness of mini-publics, as discussions become dominated by those with greater knowledge.

Deferential self-exclusion

When a participant self-excludes for *deferential* reasons, she believes that she does not have the legitimacy to express her opinion or defend her interests, regardless of her actual skills and competence in the matter at hand. The mechanism of deferential self-exclusion is related to exclusion by others because it involves a process of internalizing the socio-culturally constructed hierarchy that implies that a young person should defer to an older person, a woman should defer to a man, a racialized person should defer to the ethnically dominant group, etc.

The likelihood of deferential self-exclusion increases not only with the heterogeneity of a large-scale mini-public's composition, but also with the interaction between that diversity and unaddressed power inequalities. To be descriptively representative of the global public, a mini-public must include members of both the most dominant and the most subordinated groups. However, doing so increases the likelihood that the subordinated group will exclude itself from the deliberations unless affirmative measures are taken to mitigate expressive inequalities between the groups.

One way to mitigate deferential self-exclusion is to invite the upscaled mini-public to deliberate on an issue that primarily concerns the subordinated groups – so that the structural inequality is mitigated by the greater competence of the subordinated groups on the issue at hand. Another way to mitigate deferential self-exclusion is to promote and valorize good deliberative attitudes, rather than competence-based deliberation, through active facilitation.

Afsoun Afsahi, for example, argues that techniques such as 'deliberative worth exercises' and 'simulated representation' (Afsahi 2021: 1052) can help to address the expressive inequalities between men and women during deliberative breakout sessions. The 'deliberative worth exercise' technique consists of valorizing positive deliberative behaviors by explicitly promoting participants who have the most disclosed good deliberative qualities, such as collaborative spirit, ability to listen to others and take their opinions seriously, engaging in respectful and empathic exchanges, etc. As for the technique of 'simulated representation', it involves the practice of empathetic role-playing, wherein all participants are assigned the task of performing the opinions of other participants to represent them in collective discussions, irrespective of their personal stance. These facilitation techniques promote the fair participation of all individuals and ensure that all opinions are represented equally, regardless of whether they are held by a member of a dominant or dominated group.

Epistemic self-exclusion

A complementary way to mitigate deferential self-exclusion is to address *epistemic* self-exclusion. By epistemic self-exclusion, I refer to those participants who remain silent in deliberations not so much because they do not feel entitled to express their opinions, but because they believe they have nothing of value to say about the issue at hand. In this case, the silent person feels that the cost–benefit balance of speaking is tilted against her – or, more altruistically, against the group. If I do not know anything about cars, and I am part of a group discussing the pros and cons of an electric engine, I might decide that it is better for me not to risk talking nonsense and being ridiculed by more competent participants. I might also decide that it is better *for the group* to let the more knowledgeable participants express their ideas and opinions on the topic, so that the overall competence of the group is enhanced by the skills of the most knowledgeable participants.

Whether for personal or altruistic reasons, epistemic self-exclusion is problematic because it critically limits two dimensions of the normative raison d'être of mini-publics – namely, their representativeness and their inclusiveness. First, mini-publics are supposedly more representative of the public than, say, elected assemblies of professional politicians because they virtually allow all ordinary citizens to speak without intermediaries (Landemore 2020). But if they only reflect the opinions of those whose greater knowledge and access to information gives them a competitive advantage in forming the considered opinions of the mini-public, then the opinions of those who are invisible in public have little chance of being made visible and audible through deliberative democratic innovations.

Second, mini-publics are supposed to be highly inclusive because of the equalizing effect of sortition (Rancière 2006; Sintomer 2023). In contrast to elections, which tend to give power to those with the highest social, economic, and cultural capital, (stratified) sorting allows Makeda and Niels to meet at the same time in the same space to theoretically deliberate on an equal footing. But if all participants are considered equal simply because of their supposed ordinariness, it is hard to imagine how the sociocultural divisions that divide the public into dominant and subordinated groups can stop at the threshold of the mini-public. If we focus on epistemic injustice, it is hard to see how the divide that separates those who know more and are heard more from those who know less and are heard less in the public sphere would disappear in mini-publics. In other words, if 'individuals with lower cognitive abilities are more likely to self-exclude from political processes' (Veri 2024: 3; see also Bohman 1997), why should these same citizens not self-exclude from the discursive process of a mini-public? If the mini-public is intended to 'mirror' (Fishkin 2009) the public, why should citizens 'with lower cognitive abilities' not self-exclude from deliberations in mini-publics – assuming nothing is done to affirmatively mitigate the disempowering factor of being less knowledgeable?

Among the affirmative measures that can be used to mitigate the disempowering factor of lack of knowledge, inclusive facilitation might, at first glance, be seen as a promising option. If the facilitator emphasizes empathic and collaborative attitudes rather than knowledge- or competence-based deliberation, it may be that less knowledgeable participants engage more in deliberation. However, caution is needed when interpreting participants' decisions to remain silent. While deferential self-exclusion stems from the passive internalization of social norms

that discourage disadvantaged groups from speaking up, it does not follow that all silent participants are passively self-excluding. Silence can also be a rational choice. A participant may deliberately withhold their opinion until they feel sufficiently informed – first, to form a considered judgment, and second, to articulate it meaningfully in discussion. While shaped by structural inequalities,[2] self-exclusion in some cases can reflect agency rather than mere constraint.

Accordingly, not every silent participant would talk more if they were more actively or inclusively engaged by a facilitator trained in innovative techniques. It is also plausible that some citizens may feel it appropriate to articulate their perspective only if they have a substantial or enlightened perspective on the issue at hand. These individuals self-exclude due to epistemic concerns, perceiving a lack of sufficient information to articulate or substantiate their viewpoint. Regardless of the extent to which they are invited or not to share their views, they are unlikely to engage in the exchange of ideas as long as they feel they lack the basic information necessary to engage in meaningful deliberation. Moreover, as demonstrated in the case study section, those who self-exclude for epistemic reasons can perceive active facilitation as ineffective or even uncomfortable. A participant who feels uninformed but is repeatedly urged to speak may either respond with 'I don't know' or say something superficial – simply to fill the silence or appease the facilitator.

Conversely, while providing informational materials prior to deliberation is essential to ensure the quality of deliberation, it is likely that this measure will have a negligible impact on ameliorating the group's initial epistemic injustice if *all* citizens are only provided with the *same* non-targeted materials intended for a counterfactual equal group of 'ordinary' citizens. If the same group receives the same documentation on, say, the current state of international regulation of AI, but one part of the group is already familiar with the terms 'regulations', 'international law', 'AI', 'copyrights', or 'cyber espionage', while the other part of the group rarely uses digital tools to search for specialized information on the Internet, the documentation is unlikely to mitigate the initial informational injustice. As a result, without effective mitigation, less knowledgeable groups are likely to continue to self-exclude from deliberation on epistemic grounds.

Self-Exclusion within the CoFE's European Citizens' Panels

In this section, I illustrate my theoretical claims – that self-exclusion in upscaled mini-publics is a contingent effect of institutional design, which can either reinforce or mitigate internalized hierarchies and epistemic insecurity – with an empirical analysis of an upscaled citizen panel. I use my case study of the European Citizens' Panels (ECPs) of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE) (reference hidden) as a paradigmatic example of the risks of epistemic self-exclusion in the context of upscaled mini-publics. Because this mini-public (1) was supposed to reflect the very heterogeneous public of the EU and (2) revolved around highly technical, dense and complex issues, it generated situations of both deferential and epistemic self-exclusion on the part of the youngest participants, women, and the least educated and informed participants.

Methodology

My case study aimed to generate in-depth, interpretive insights into participants' experiences with self-exclusion in a transnational deliberative process. Rather than seeking statistical generalizability, the study sought to understand how participants navigated and made sense of their roles in the ECPs' various deliberation settings (see Talpin 2013; Talpin 2019). To that end, I employed an abductive methodological approach to citizens' assemblies (Boswell 2021; Boswell et al. 2019; Landemore 2021 and forthcoming). The abductive approach emphasizes the iterative and exploratory interplay between theory and empirical data. It allows the researcher to refine conceptual frameworks and generate new insights by engaging deeply with the complexity of real-world practices. This methodology is particularly well suited to the study of participatory and deliberative democratic initiatives, as it integrates theoretical concerns with empirical observation. By capitalizing on unexpected findings or puzzling observations, the abductive approach not only tests established theories, but also provides the flexibility to adapt them in light of new empirical evidence, ensuring relevance to practical challenges.

The empirical focus of this study is the ECPs, one of the core components of the 2021–2022 CoFE (Alemanno 2022; Ballangé 2023; Bailly 2023; Crum 2023; Oleart 2023). CoFE was a participatory initiative launched by the European Union to involve citizens in deliberations about the EU's future policy directions and democratic development. The ECPs brought together 800 randomly selected citizens from across EU member states to deliberate on key issues such as climate change, democracy, social justice, and migration. Designed to be inclusive and multilingual, the panels were supported by expert input and facilitation, and fed into a broader deliberative system that included a multilingual online platform and a conference plenary.

My study of the CoFE's ECPs was conducted between September 2021 and November 2022 and consisted of three phases. See the Appendix for a table providing an overview of the empirical research phases and data collection. The first part of the case study consisted of examining the information provided by the CoFE's sponsors and organizers (institutional documents, public statements, etc.) and analyzing citizen participation and engagement on the CoFE's digital platform.

The second part of the case study consisted of direct non-participant observation of six ECPs, namely the three panels on 'Democracy and the Rule of Law' (Strasbourg, online, and Florence), two of the three panels on 'Stronger Economy, Social Justice, Jobs, Education, Culture, Sport, Digital Transformation' (Strasbourg and online) and one panel on 'Europe in the World and Migration' (Strasbourg). The panels lasted three days, from Friday afternoon to

Sunday noon. Each brought together 200 randomly selected citizens from across the EU. During this second phase of the study, engaged in informal conversations with participants during designated breaks and social events, allowing for a more immersive understanding of participants' attitudes and comfort levels outside formal deliberation. Alongside these interactions, I systematically observed both breakout sessions and informal settings, with particular attention to the age and gender balance in participation, the deliberative stages and topics where such balance shifted, and the behavior of participants who remained mostly silent in formal settings but appeared more engaged during informal exchanges.

The third part of the case study consisted of unstructured and informal oral and written exchanges with EU officials (from the three main EU institutions), organizational staff (facilitators, employees of the companies hired by the Commission to design the panels), experts, and journalists, as well as in-depth semi-structured recursive interviews with a few citizen participants. During this phase, I formally interviewed ten participants and supplemented this with numerous informal exchanges with other citizens during the panels. See Appendix for a table of the profile of interviewees. The interviews were conducted online in French (with mostly young and less educated citizens) and English. The interviewees were first asked to informally share their feelings toward European issues and their level of familiarity and/or interest in the topics raised during the panels. They were then asked for their feedback on the specific experiment of CoFE in terms of facilitation, management of expertise and access to quality information prior to deliberation. These interviews took place three times – the first time 1 month after the first deliberative session in Strasbourg, the second 1 month after the last deliberative session, and the third 1 year after the entire CoFE experiment. This longitudinal element provided nuanced insights into participants' evolving perceptions and experiences.

To analyze and compare the data from interviews, observations, and documents, I employed an abductively guided thematic analysis. In the case of observational data, this was complemented by a discourse-sensitive interpretation of participant silences and interactional dynamics. This approach enabled me to iteratively refine a typology of self-exclusion while remaining grounded in the lived complexity of deliberative practice. Specifically, prior to the start of CoFE in the fall of 2021, I compiled a document outlining the theoretical hypotheses derived from an intensive literature review. See the Appendix for an exhaustive overview of these hypotheses. Once all empirical data had been collected – approximately 1 year after drafting that initial document – I systematically confronted the data with my preliminary hypotheses and developed my claims through that comparison. Given my focus on the multifaceted phenomenon of self-exclusion, I paid particular attention to the linguistic and interactional forms of silence displayed by participants during the deliberations, in order to construct a typology that maps its different manifestations. Finally, to ensure the reliability and validity of my analysis, the theoretical hypotheses and their empirical revision were thoroughly discussed with other researchers (Miles & Huberman 1994). This triangulation process helped reduce bias and mitigate the influence of prior analytical assumptions.

As expected with other reports on mini-publics, some hypotheses happened to be supported by the data – for example, the likelihood that women tend to deliberate less than men – while others were more surprising – for example, the fact that too active facilitation had little effect on epistemic self-exclusion. I will now expand on these findings and discuss them in relation to theoretical arguments raised in normative deliberative theory.

Discussion – 'I don't know anything about it so what should I say about it?'

Inclusiveness and representativeness of European citizens were the more vocal objectives of CoFE. All the framing documents mentioned that all European citizens – regardless of their geographical origin, age, education, skills, and competences – should feel equally involved in the discussions on the future of Europe. Moreover, the organizers were interested in consulting broad public opinion in order to gain insight into the attitudes, behaviors and preferences of European citizens. However, this decision to allocate citizens randomly rather than based their deep interest or competence in this or that area has not been without consequences for the ability of all to express their views equally and confidently Consistent with Marlène Gerber's observations of the 2009 transnational deliberative poll 'Europolis' (Gerber 2015), several of my interviewees reported that women, young people, and less-educated participants tended to speak substantially less than men during ECPs' breakout sessions. These perceptions were corroborated by my observations across multiple sessions, as well as by regular exchanges with other observers of the process, including fellow researchers, facilitators, and institutional stakeholders. These observers noted similar participation gaps independently. These findings align with a Kantar survey of citizens' participation on the CoFE digital platform, launched a few months before the ECPs. The survey found that only 16% of the platform's contributors were women, 9% were under the age of 25, 5% were manual workers (3% unemployed), and 6% had only basic or secondary education (Kantar Public 2022: 18).

Deferential self-exclusion within CoFE's ECPs

When examining deferential self-exclusion in a transnational mini-public like the ECP, it is necessary to take into account the high heterogeneity of the participants' profiles in terms of social, economic, and educational backgrounds. Not only was the age gap in the ECP wider than in many other experiments, since participants were selected from the age of 16, but it also brought together citizens with very unequal socioeconomic conditions. What is more, participants were asked to engage not only with their fellow citizens, but also with people from 26 other EU member states. This expectation to talk to 'strangers' was particularly challenging for the youngest citizens. As one young French participant said:

> *I was so scared! Because it was written in all the emails that there would be (...) at least 200 people. And that, just that, like 200 people of different nationalities, it scared me so much, because I'm used to speaking French to French people, but speaking English to Italians and Poles scared me.*

This sense of unfamiliarity, combined with the great socioeconomic disparities among the panelists and the fact that these 'ordinary citizens' were being convened to deliberate in the impressive premises of the European Parliament, was intimidating to many of the citizens I met. To the extent that, for example, the young French citizen mentioned above told me: *It's not my place at all, something like that.*

The discrepancy between the overemphasized 'ordinariness' of the participants and the extreme unfamiliarity of the ECP's dispositive led the most socioeconomically vulnerable citizens to experience the kind of alienation Bourdieu describes when public deliberation actualizes and exacerbates latent divisions between members of dominant and dominated groups (Bourdieu 1991; Bourdieu 2016). As a result, at least in the first deliberative session in Strasbourg, participants from more vulnerable groups tended to defer to others to express their views, even when these views did not align with their personal interests or experiences. Young people, and the less educated tended to engage in deliberation much less than their more educated male counterparts[3] (see also Gerber 2015). When asked about this, participants shared reflections such as: *I wouldn't have had the right arguments to defend my perspectives anyway* (male participant, 20); *I preferred to observe rather than speak* (ibid.); or *I wasn't good enough to speak on a topic I hadn't chosen* because *I didn't have enough information to have an opinion on the question* (former mine worker over 50). One participant explained, *I preferred to let people who knew more about it talk more about it* (female participant, 30). Another young female participant reflected on her experience: *At the time, I didn't really like it. I was a bit afraid to speak, so I stuttered a lot. When I spoke in the breakout sessions, I really couldn't express myself at all. So, I'm just a little ashamed of that.*

In line with Afsahi's findings (Afsahi 2021), I was able to observe that inclusive facilitation could alleviate the phenomenon of self-exclusion *to some extent* – at least when self-exclusion was mainly due to the internalization of social hierarchies. For instance, the youngest group of my interviewees said they appreciated that the group discussions were led by the facilitator in a gradual manner. This allowed them to first discuss general topics as a warm-up exercise before moving on to more specific and technical issues. Furthermore, throughout the three sessions I observed, women and young people began interacting more during breakout sessions. This could be interpreted as a sign that active facilitation made them feel more legitimate and confident over time.

However, experiences with facilitation also included challenges. A recurring issue was first the lack of continuity. Facilitators often changed from one weekend to the next and sometimes even between breakout sessions on the same day. This disrupted the rapport and trust that participants had begun to establish, forcing them to reexplain prior agreements and adapt to different facilitation styles. For example, some facilitators were more empathetic and engaged, while others were more procedural and distant. These changes undermined the consistency and cumulative nature of the deliberations. Second, some participants pointed out the stressful experiences they had with active facilitation. A young participant, for example, acknowledged both the very gentle way in which her facilitator encouraged her to speak up and the shame she felt when she wanted to please her without having anything articulated to say: *She often asked me to participate. And so the only times I did participate, I panicked so much that I didn't say what I wanted.* In contrast to Afsahi's experiment, which consisted mainly of testing ways of regulating power relations in deliberation within the context of an *already familiar group* of students talking about non-technical issues, the ECPs gathered very distant citizens around highly sophisticated issues about which they knew almost nothing. This knowledge gap within a very heterogeneous transnational mini-public was, in my opinion, the most important explanation for cases of self-exclusion.

Epistemic self-exclusion within CoFE's ECPs

Epistemic self-exclusion occurs when a person does not believe they have enough knowledge or valuable information to articulate an opinion that is useful to the group. This type of self-exclusion is more likely to occur in large mini-publics dealing with technical issues or unfamiliar topics. Not surprisingly, epistemic self-exclusion was a massive phenomenon during the ECPs, where 'ordinary citizens' were asked to deliberate on very abstract topics such as social justice, the rule of law, the EU's place in the world, without being provided with basic facts about the EU's legislative and political functioning. As a 16-year-old female participant said:

> *If I were well versed in the subjects, or even if I had a little more confidence in these subjects, I could speak up and really say what I think. (...) But I didn't have enough knowledge to really say everything I thought, or to speak up on half the topics.*

In addition, participants could not choose their panel – which ranged from economics, sports, and digital technologies to democracy, migration, health, and climate change – before the deliberative sessions began, nor could they choose the subcategories of their panels during the deliberative sessions. My interviews showed that design fostered epistemic self-exclusion, as it tended to exclude those of the participants who felt unfamiliar with their topic, and those whose range of skills and information was narrower due to limited access to education and quality information. As one young participant observed: *Naturally* (sic)*, those who were already familiar with politics participated much more than the others.* According to another 25-year-old male participant:

> *We had to discuss subjects that we didn't really know much about. If we are randomly thrown into subjects that don't concern us at all, it will be difficult to get involved and therefore to really express our own opinion. There are just going to be a lot of people who are going to follow the majority, or just follow ideas like that, which they pick up on the fly, but which in the end won't really be their own ideas. Or they're just going to say nothing because they have nothing to say, and that's a shame.*

The direct consequence of the knowledge gap experienced by many citizens during the ECPs was a sense of meaninglessness in their own participation, which active and inclusive facilitation could do little to address. As one retired male participant put it:

> *The less you know about something, the less comfortable you feel discussing it. Our facilitator asked some of us 'why don't you contribute?' and one replied 'I don't know anything about it, so what should I say?'. The context that people have with certain questions is very important. Otherwise, they don't want to discuss it. Because they are not interested or because they feel uncomfortable because of their lack of knowledge.*

This feeling was exacerbated by the fact that, in contrast to the format of the Global Assembly, participants were not provided with a comprehensive and extensive learning period prior to the deliberative phase. They only received a dozen-page 'Basic Information – Framing Document' that reproduced the ideas mentioned on the digital platform without any meaningful context or explanation. This 'Basic Information – Framing Document' document was so indigest that citizens who were not accustomed to reading technical documents skimmed it, while others simply forgot about it. A female postgraduate participant complained that little effort was made to include less-educated citizens in preparing the panels:

> *I found that the documents were quite heavy, quite complex. It was very long. I thought that the organizers didn't make much effort to simplify the technical jargon. (...) Maybe because these are things that are supposed to be obvious, but which clearly for me were not. (...) I found it a bit painful. And for people, in particular the young fringe of the population, which is perhaps not very politically committed, (...) I think that it is a reading which must have been painful.*

Mitigating self-exclusion in upscaled mini-publics through targeted affirmative training

The lack of prior knowledge about European politics was predictable.[4] From there, what could have been done better to mitigate epistemic inequalities between more knowledgeable and less knowledgeable participants, to limit the self-exclusion of the latter?

At the very least, providing all participants with a kind of 'survival kit' (as one of the interviewees called it) would have helped them to better understand the European institutional design. This information material could have consisted of an introduction to (a) the main institutions and their role in the decision-making process, (b) the legislative process in order to know where their recommendations could fit in, and (c) the areas in which the EU is and is not competent. This information should be made available to citizens well in advance of the first meeting, in a short, clear and dynamic format.

Another complementary option would be to offer participants from less advantaged groups the opportunity to better prepare through short videos or infographics to inform them about EU policies in a more dynamic way. Since not all participants have the same way of learning or access to information, and since not all start from the same level of knowledge, providing the same standard information to all may not do much to compensate for initial inequalities in access to information. Instead, the least knowledgeable participants should be provided with affirmative training that is targeted and tailored to empower them during deliberation. Based on what citizens expressed during formal and informal exchanges, I would suggest short, animated videos like those created by the online platform 'Kurzgesagt', which specializes in introducing complex topics in an accessible and holistic way, using lively and eye-catching vector illustrations and animations.

However, this targeted affirmative training should be designed in such a way that it does not make deliberation even more burdensome for those with the least capital and capacity. As Vincent Jacquet has shown, most people who decline an invitation to participate in a citizens' assembly justify their decision by preferring to spend their time in the private sphere (Jacquet 2017: 652–653; see also Neblo et al. 2010). This is particularly true for the categories of participants that would primarily be targeted by affirmative training, that is, young mothers, caregivers, manual workers, self-employed artisans, etc. For family and/or professional reasons, these categories of people have less time to devote to the preparation of a mini-public deliberation, but they are also the ones who are statistically most likely to experiment a feeling of 'self-disqualification because of perceived lack of political competence and expertise regarding the discussed topics' (Jacquet 2017).

With this in mind, I suggest that targeted affirmative training should: (a) be offered on a voluntary basis and presented as an empowering rather than educational option, (b) use online devices to avoid wasting time on transportation, and (c) be structured into several short and dynamic supports that participants could consult on demand when they have time for it – for example, during commuting or household chores.

Conclusion

This article has examined the challenge of self-exclusion in upscaled mini-publics, drawing on evidence from the European Citizens' Panels of the Conference on the Future of Europe. Although these forums aim to

promote inclusiveness, equality, and representativeness by scaling up deliberative democratic ideals, the analysis reveals a persistent barrier: citizens from less advantaged socioeconomic or educational backgrounds are more likely to withdraw from deliberation on expressive and epistemic grounds. This dynamic undermines both the inclusiveness of the process and the representativeness of its outcomes, as certain voices remain unheard.

As demonstrated by the ECPs, participants who perceive themselves as lacking sufficient knowledge often refrain from contributing, while more confident or knowledgeable individuals dominate discussions. However, these patterns of self-exclusion are not inevitable; they are shaped and sometimes exacerbated by specific features of mini-public design. Assigning unfamiliar topics or using overly technical preparatory materials, for example, can intensify epistemic insecurity, while gradual and inclusive facilitation can foster a sense of legitimacy and participation.

To improve the epistemic inclusiveness of mini-publics, the article further advocates targeted design interventions, such as accessible preparatory training. Citizens who wish to do so should have the opportunity to engage with clear, concise, and interactive resources, such as multi-episode videos explaining the key technical, legal, and ethical dimensions of an issue. This would allow participants with less prior knowledge to better understand the issues at stake and the political weight of their recommendations. Beyond this concrete suggestion, future designs of upscaled mini-publics must address self-exclusion as a central concern, rather than treating it as a background risk of exclusion by others.

Appendix 1: Overview of Empirical Research Phases and Data Collection During My Case Study

Phase	Timeframe	Activities	Data collected
Phase 1: Documentary analysis	June to September 2021	Review of official CoFE and ECP documents; exploration of the digital multilingual platform	Institutional communication materials (e.g., the Framing Document – Basic Information, the Panels' Guide, the Document for Facilitator & Note Takers Briefing etc.), public reports (e.g., Kantar's report on participation in the multilingual platform), public statements (e.g., the Executive Boar's letter to participants, speeches by President of the European Commission von der Leyen etc.), website content, and participation statistics.
Phase 2: Direct observation	September 2021 to February 2022	Non-participant observation of 6 ECP sessions (3 in Strasbourg, 2 online, 1 in Florence); informal conversations with participants	Fieldnotes from breakout sessions and plenaries (≈ 200 pages) and notes from informal oral interactions.
Phase 3: Interviews	October 2021 to November 2022 (longitudinal)	10 semi-structured interviews with citizen participants; informal exchanges with organizers, facilitators, EU officials, experts	Interview transcripts and notes from informal oral and written exchanges (source: phone calls and emails).

Appendix 2: Profile of Interviewees

Gender	**Men**	**6**
	Women	**4**
Age	16–29	5
	30–59	2
	60+	2
Nationality	French	5
	Other EU nationalities (German, Portuguese, Polish, and Dutch)	5
Socioeconomic background	High	2
	Middle	5
	Low	3
Level of education	None or primary	1
	Secondary	3
	Undergraduate	3
	Graduated	3

Appendix 3: Initial Hypotheses Document (September 2021)

The following hypotheses were developed before the empirical study of the European Citizens' Panels (ECPs) began. Generated through an intensive literature review and preliminary theoretical reflection, these hypotheses helped guide the early phases of the research design. The hypotheses were not intended as definitive predictions but rather as provisional theoretical expectations to be tested, challenged, and refined through an abductive approach.

1. **Topic-dependent dynamics**: The intensity and nature of conflict during deliberations will vary by topic. I expect more civil, normative deliberation in panels on climate and procedural issues (e.g., Panel 3) and more polarized, emotionally charged dynamics in panels on migration or foreign affairs (e.g., Panel 4).
2. **Perceived superficiality**: Citizens may perceive the process as 'surface-level democratization', suspecting that their input will ultimately be ignored.
3. **Frustration with deliberative design**: Participants may find the facilitation and preparatory materials insufficiently informative, particularly the 'blank page' opening exercise.
4. **Top-down dynamics**: Despite claims of citizen-led deliberation, facilitation and expert guidance will dominate, leaving citizens unsure of how or when to intervene.
5. **Multilingualism trade-offs**: While reducing the pressure to speak English, multilingualism may create a communicative chaos and lead to national or linguistic clustering.
6. **Unequal participation**: As in other mini-publics, more confident and privileged participants will dominate the deliberation. Meanwhile, women, youth, and less-educated participants may feel fictitiously included.
7. **Lack of initial training**: Without preparatory training, those less familiar with EU issues may feel epistemically illegitimate and remain silent.
8. **Self-selection bias**: Although participants are selected by lottery, they may be disproportionately drawn from individuals who are already connected to or predisposed to the EU.
9. **Initial enthusiasm, growing frustration**: Participants start out curious and open but grow frustrated over time. I expect to capture these insights outside of formal settings.
10. **Low expectations of impact**: Participants will join despite their skepticism about institutional uptake, being motivated more by interest than by belief in their ability to influence.
11. **Intergenerational Tensions**: Disagreements may emerge, with younger participants criticizing older ones for harming their future and older participants responding with accusations of immaturity.
12. **East-West divides**: Citizens from Eastern Europe will likely hold more conservative positions than those from Western and Southern Europe.
13. **Return to representation**: Citizens may become disillusioned with participatory democracy and prefer expert-led representation to direct involvement.
14. **Mutual distrust**: Experts may fear citizen empowerment, and citizens may distrust experts' motives. Facilitators may try to control the content of proposals.
15. **Limited media coverage**: The panels will receive little media attention, reducing their visibility and perceived legitimacy.
16. **Consensus versus contestation**: Although facilitators may aim for consensus, debates may escalate into open conflict over divisive issues.

Notes

[1] At the European regional level, examples include the European Citizens' Panels (ECP) of the Conference on the Future of Europe (2021–2022) (Alemanno 2022; Bailly 2023; Crum 2023; Fabbrini 2022; García-Guitián & Bouza Garcia 2024), the second generation of European Citizens' Panels on Food Waste (2023), Virtual Words (2023), Tackling Hatred in Society (2024), and the Democratic Odyssey project led by the European University Institute of Florence (2024) (Nicolädis 2024). At the global level, we find the Global Citizens' Dialogueon Genome Editing (2020; Dryzek et al. 2020; Nicol et al. 2023), the Global Assembly on the Ecological and Climate Crisis (2021; McKinney 2024), or the Global Citizens' Dialogueon the Future of the Internet (2020).

[2] There are undeniably structural dynamics at play in believing, rightly or wrongly, that one should have an informed opinion before expressing it. Members of dominated groups, especially women, may have internalized socially constructed epistemic biases to such an extent that they have a higher threshold of knowledge expectations than members of dominant groups in order to feel entitled to express their opinions.

[3] These observations are based on detailed field notes and systematic tracking of speaker participation during selected sessions. For instance, during the initial deliberation session in Strasbourg, I noted that 25 out of 30 participants were men over the course of an hour-long discussion. These patterns were consistent across multiple sessions, though they decreased over time. These patterns were also corroborated through peer debriefings with other observers.

[4] This issue is highlighted in Eurobarometer 63 (2005), which asked respondents: 'How much do you feel you know about the European Union, its policies, and its institutions?' A majority (51%) reported knowing relatively little about the EU, while only 2% said they knew 'a great deal'. Notably, 19% admitted to knowing 'nothing at all'.

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