

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Municipal Bureaucratic Drivers of Mini-Publics: A Case Study of Municipalities in the Tokyo Area

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This article examines why and how municipal bureaucracies engage with mini-public participation across policy stages. Examining these questions through a comparative analysis of municipalities that have repeatedly implemented mini-public initiatives in the Tokyo metropolitan area, this article finds that municipal officials share policy norms favoring broader citizen engagement and the use of mini-publics as information-gathering devices. However, they prefer approaches that emphasize the expression of diverse opinions over collective judgment through voting. This preference for maintaining discretion in policy formation suggests the coexistence and tension between moral responsibility and cherry-picking. This study also finds that mini-public initiatives play distinct roles across policy stages: planning-oriented initiatives emphasize co-production, whereas evaluation-oriented initiatives are more closely tied to political agendas. In the latter, reforming the status quo and compelling stakeholders through citizen voice are additional drivers of municipal bureaucracies' adoption of mini-public initiatives. These findings suggest that local governance actors may use mini-public processes as policy symbols to influence public service providers and stakeholders, or to legitimize the administration, its policies, and its projects. Given these characteristics, ensuring accountability and strengthening citizens' authority over agenda-setting will be essential for safeguarding democratic integrity.

Keywords: citizen participation; mini-publics; deliberative democracy; municipal bureaucracy; urban governance

Introduction

Research on the initiation of deliberative mini-publics and citizens' assemblies (Vrydagh 2023) has focused on distinguishing top-down approaches led by political actors from bottom-up approaches driven by civil society, and on examining the specific characteristics of each type (Bussu & Fleuß 2023; Lafont 2023). Regardless of the initial impetus for mini-public initiatives, however, the likelihood of their continued implementation increases when local government bureaucracies recognize them as an effective policy instrument. Clarifying the mechanisms that drive the routinization of mini-public participation in local governments—even in the absence of legal mandates (Shipan & Volden 2008)—would yield new theoretical insights into the relationship between mini-public engagement and local government bureaucracies acting as governance actors.

When analyzing top-down mini-public initiatives, many researchers focus on political parties' policy ideologies (Ramis-Moyano et al. 2025; Niessen 2023). Researchers have also examined the influence of populist parties and

politicians on these initiatives (Oross & Tap 2021; Jacobs 2023; Macq & Jacquet 2023). Furthermore, scholars have analyzed voter attitudes toward them; Goldberg and Bächtiger (2022) demonstrate that residents characterized as 'disaffected citizens' support granting deliberative citizen forums authority that extends beyond a merely advisory role. However, whether politicians or civil society organizations champion mini-publics, it is the bureaucracy that embeds them within municipalities. Policy diffusion studies suggest that bureaucratic channels play an important role in the diffusion of policies across cities (Walker 1969). Analyzing the attitudes and behavioral characteristics of local government bureaucracies toward mini-public initiatives is essential for understanding their expansion and routinization in municipalities—particularly in countries where bureaucracies wield significant influence over policy governance, such as those classified as 'Neo-Weberian States' (Pollitt & Bouckaert 2017).

Local authorities can use mini-public engagement across a series of policy stages, ranging from agenda setting and policy option formulation to evaluation and monitoring (Elstub & Escobar 2019). This raises the question of whether the strategies local governance actors use to employ mini-public initiatives vary by policy stage. Discussions of elected politicians' adoption of these

initiatives have focused on their interests (Nissen 2023), such as acquiring intellectual resources for decision-making—akin to ‘marketing tests for policy proposals’ (Goodin 2008)—and gaining popularity. Regarding local bureaucracies, studies have examined the role of politically appointed ‘deliberative public servants’ (Bottin & Mazeaud 2023) in managing citizens’ assemblies; reports from France—where civic participation procedures have become deeply embedded in local government—highlight the phenomenon of the ‘bureaucratization of citizen participation’ (Gourgues, Mazeaud, & Nonjon 2022) in the actions of civic participation specialist officials. However, few studies have analyzed the dynamics of governance actors surrounding mini-public initiatives, with a specific focus on differences across policy stages.

This study addresses three research questions:

1. How do local governance actors, centered on these bureaucrats, engage with mini-public participation across policy stages?
2. What strategies do they employ?
3. What are the underlying reasons for these actions?

By addressing these questions, this study will shed light on local bureaucracy’s underlying attitudes toward mini-publics. It will further contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between mini-public engagement and local government governance by examining these questions through a comparative analysis of municipalities that have repeatedly implemented mini-public initiatives in the Tokyo metropolitan area.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Previous research on the policy process has noted that advisory bodies are subject to various forms of control by their conveners—aimed at securing legitimacy for decisions and mobilizing support. Brown (1955) notes that the significant contribution such bodies make to government authorities is to reaffirm that a proposed policy enjoys sufficient support. Howlett (2011) identifies the selection of members as a means of steering policy formation by institutionalizing actors’ access to decision-making and controlling the knowledge referenced in those decisions. However, Goodin (2008) points out that mini-publics do not necessarily fit a legitimacy-gaining strategy, because the random-selection mechanisms for participant recruitment make it difficult for governance actors to select participants whose policy preferences are close to their own. Direct co-option strategies cannot fully explain local bureaucrats’ motivation for implementing mini-publics. Public administration scholars have increasingly viewed Japan through the framework of the ‘Neo-Weberian State,’ regarding bureaucratic autonomy (Kikuchi 2022; Agata et al. 2024). One reason for this is that, compared to other nations, Japan’s bureaucracy features few positions filled through patronage—that is, political appointments linked to elected officials (Kikuchi 2023). Even high-ranking officials, such as division directors and department heads, are largely products of a closed career system that recruits talent internally. It

is difficult to ascribe municipal officials’ drive to engage in mini-publics solely to serving politicians’ electoral interests. Moreover, very few municipalities adopt open recruitment for specialists in civic participation. The efforts of such participation-specialist officers cannot explain the spread of mini-public initiatives among local governments in Japan.

To examine the mechanisms driving the diffusion and adoption of mini-public participation in local governments, this study focuses on three key aspects: The first is the organizational culture perspective. The values held by governance actors have been a focal point in discursive policy analysis and mini-public research (Dryzek & Tucker 2008; Dryzek et al. 2009; Dryzek 2010). Japanese municipalities experienced a ‘participatory turn’ in the 1990s; thus, it is necessary to investigate whether organizational norms favorable to citizen participation have taken root within municipal bureaucracies and provide the ‘logic of appropriateness’ (March & Olsen 1989) referred to in the New Institutionalism framework (Peters 2019).

The second aspect is the functionalist perspective (Nissen 2023). From the standpoints of policy learning and organizational management, previous studies imply that mini-publics can guide governance actors in anticipating and understanding the views of lay citizens and enhance overall policy effectiveness with these resources (Fung 2006) because ‘considered judgments’ (Lafont 2017) can be formed through learning and deliberation—supported by facilitation—even regarding issues that initially attract little public attention. Mini-publics can function as policy tools for ‘fire-alarm oversight’ (McCubbins & Schwarz 1984), providing mayors and policy management divisions with information about public service providers and implementation status. By leveraging the articulated voices and ‘living knowledge’ (Masuhara et al. 2016) of citizens, these actors can intervene with service departments or project stakeholders.

The third perspective concerns the symbolic nature of mini-public initiatives. Governance actors can use policy symbols not only to foster cohesion and solidarity within the political community but also to enhance their own legitimacy (Boussaguet & Faucher 2025). The negative bias inherent in ‘the politics of blame avoidance’ (Weaver 1986; Pierson 1996) and the ‘blame game’ (Hood 2011) directs participants’ attention in the policy process toward negative aspects such as failure or inefficiency. For political actors, making conflicts and disputes visible is an important strategy for mobilizing political resources (Schattschneider 1960). Policy evaluation research has pointed out that one factor leading to the termination of policies and programs is the revelation of programmatic inefficiencies (DeLeon 1983). Establishing a forum that highlights problems within a specific service delivery system can serve as a venue for securing legitimacy for policy actors seeking to prompt streamlining or abolition of the program in question.

These three perspectives provide the analytical framework for examining this study’s three research questions. To complement the preceding analysis of local

government governance actors—conducted from the perspectives of organizational culture, functionalism, and symbolism—the mayors' policy ideologies were also examined using party affiliation as a proxy variable. Under the National Constitution, all Japanese municipalities use the directly elected mayor system. The Deliberative Polling regarding national energy strategy—conducted in 2012 following the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant accident of March 2011—marked a turning point for deliberative democracy in Japan. However, the national Deliberative Polling initiative did not continue following the change of government from the Democratic Party of Japan to the Liberal Democratic Party (Mikami 2019; Sone 2022). This discontinuity suggests that political parties' ideology may influence support for deliberative initiatives in Japan.

Research Methods

I participated in the Japan Mini-Public Research Forum, a member of the Democracy R&D network, and helped develop the Japanese mini-public literature database (JMPRF, 2026). Leveraging this resource, this study examines a literature review of mini-public participation in the Tokyo region. Using the Citizens' Discussion Meeting Promotion Network (CDPN) Dataset—specifically the Citizen Deliberation Meeting List (July 2007–December 2015)—along with official municipal websites and the literature review, I examined municipal initiatives that randomly selected participants from the Basic Resident Register to establish discussion forums. The Nationwide Ordinance Database of the Kagoshima University Judicial Policy Education Research Center (2026) helped to identify municipal bylaws related to mini-public measures.

For reasons discussed in the next chapter, this study focuses on municipalities in the Tokyo metropolis, Kanagawa, and Saitama prefectures. The three criteria were early adoption and continuity; institutionalization; and use for multiple policy purposes. Based on these, I selected seven case-study cities: Mitaka; Tama; Shinjuku; Higashimurayama in Tokyo; Chigasaki in Kanagawa; and Wako and Yoshikawa in Saitama. These municipalities adopted random-selection-based deliberative initiatives before the 2011 fiscal year and repeatedly implemented them. Conducting a comparative study may help identify issues that could be overlooked in a single-case study of a success story (Spada & Ryan 2017). The characteristics of early adopters have been an important research topic in diffusion studies (Rogers 1962). Because Japanese municipalities generally rotate personnel every three to five years, more than a decade of mini-public experience means that activities have transferred across multiple generations of officials. This early adaptation and longevity helps illuminate municipalities' institutional philosophy toward mini-public initiatives. Institutionalizing mini-publics is a challenge for stabilizing democracy (Pateman 2012; Elstub & Khoban 2023). 'Institutionalization' is a somewhat vague term, as Unegbu and Dupopont (2026) note, but specifying these measures in local ordinances, regulations, or guidelines may indicate their integration into the policy process. Using them for multiple purposes

is an exploratory criterion to avoid limiting focus to municipal planning stages.

Governance actors' discourses on the functions of mini-publics in the policymaking process constitute an essential research question (Niessen 2019). Staff from seven selected cities were interviewed: the Division Manager and an Assistant Manager from the Policy Planning and Management Division of Mitaka City (January 2022); the Division Manager and a Senior Staff Member from the Planning Division of Tama City (December 2020); two Senior Staff Members from the Planning Policy Division of Shinjuku City (October 2023); former Section Chief and Division Manager of the Policy Planning Division of Higashimurayama City (August 2021); the Assistant Manager of the Citizen Autonomy Promotion Division of Chigasaki City (October 2022); the Manager, an Assistant Manager, and a staff member for the Policy Division of Wako City (November 2022); and the former Section Chief and Division Manager of the Citizen Participation Promotion Division of Yoshikawa City (March 2023). Fourteen officers participated. Participants were asked about the background and purposes of adopting mini-public initiatives in their cities, as well as their perceived outcomes. The former mayors of Mitaka (Keiko Kiyohara, May 2019), Shinjuku (Hiroko Nakayama, October 2016), and Wako City (Takehiro Matsumoto, March 2015) were also interviewed. Responses were also gathered from representatives from a private consulting firm—the Director of the Consensus Design Office, Mitsubishi UFJ Research and Consulting (November 2021)—and a civil society organization—the CEO of the Citizens' Discussion Meeting Promotion Network (November 2021)—both of which support mini-public initiatives in these cities. They were asked about the background of their involvement with the local governments they had supported and their observations regarding the conduct of these city officials. Respondents' consent was obtained via email, including local government officials and individuals from private companies and civic groups, to disclose bureau names while maintaining individual confidentiality.

In gathering information for the study, I further drew on participatory observation as a facilitator in Tama City's citizen learning and deliberation workshop on revising the city's public facilities realignment plan with randomly selected citizens (2019), a steering committee member in Shinjuku City's Citizen Deliberation Meeting for the city's implementation plan (2011), a chair in Wako City's Large-scale Projects Examination Panel (2009–2010), and as a reviewer in Project Screenings in Wako City (2012 & 2014). I also conducted a field visit to a Citizen Deliberation Meeting in Chigasaki City (September 2022). All of these had randomly selected participants from the Basic Resident Register.

As a complement to the interview survey, this study conducted an open-ended survey of policy management divisions in Tokyo municipalities from September 2021 to November 2022. Excluding Machida City—the preliminary survey site—and the municipalities of Mitaka, Tama, Shinjuku, and Higashimurayama—subject to interviews—40 municipalities whose participation measures recruited

citizens through random sampling from the Basic Resident Register were emailed. Thirty-one responded, yielding a response rate of 77.5%. Using this information, I examined the purposes for adopting mini-public initiatives and their perceived outcomes, interpreting and coding the free-form responses.

The Local Government Election Results Database (2025), managed by the Japan Research Institute for Local Government, was used to verify the political party affiliations declared to municipal election administration commissions at the time of their elections. This database is one of the most comprehensive sources of data on local elections in Japan.

Mini-Publics Development in Japan and Case Overview

For Japanese municipalities, the period from the late 1990s to the early 2000s marked an expansion of civic participation and collaboration. Chapter VI of the Administrative Procedure Act (1993) stipulated public comment procedures for national authorities. It also stipulated in Article 46 that ‘local governments are to endeavor to take necessary measures to secure fairness and improve transparency of administrative operations, in accordance with the purport of the provisions of this Act.’ Municipalities across Japan began to enact bylaws for administrative procedures, including public comment procedures. In 1998, the National Diet enacted the Law to Promote Specified Nonprofit Activities, granting legal personality to civic organizations. Collaboration between local governments and citizens became a key agenda item for municipalities (Tsubogo 2014), and many began to stipulate civic engagement and collaboration in local ordinances (Yanagi 2024). The subsequent phase saw the expansion of mini-public participation. The Consensus Conference method was implemented as an academic research initiative in the late 1990s (Wakamatsu 1999), followed by similar initiatives organized by local governments. The OECD’s Deliberative Democracy Database (OECD 2023) reports over 160 cases of mini-public participation implemented by Japanese municipalities.

One of the first random-selection-based deliberative methods to gain traction across Japan was the ‘Citizen Deliberation Meeting’, or CDM. The CDM is a simplified, smaller-scale version of the Planning Cell model (OECD, 2020). In 2006, Mitaka City in Tokyo—in collaboration with the local young business leaders’ group, Junior Chamber International (JCI) Mitaka—conducted Japan’s first official CDM to formulate municipal plans. Subsequently, Fujisawa City in Kanagawa Prefecture, neighboring Tokyo, conducted Deliberative Polling in 2009 and 2010 to formulate its comprehensive plan. It was the first endeavor by a Japanese municipality to conduct Deliberative Polling, with the support of the Center for Deliberative Polling at Keio University (Sone 2022). In 2009, Fujimi City in Saitama Prefecture, located just north of Tokyo, conducted a ‘project screening’ focused on public service projects. Fujimi was the first municipality in Japan where randomly selected citizens served as citizen jurors to review projects and vote in a public forum on whether

to abolish, improve efficiency, continue, or expand them. KOSO NIPPON, a member organization of the Democracy R&D network, devised this screening method. Historically, municipalities in Tokyo, Kanagawa, and Saitama have served as testing grounds for mini-public experiments, and some have now launched climate citizens’ assemblies (Kainuma et al., 2024). Therefore, this study investigates municipalities in Tokyo, Kanagawa, and Saitama, and selected the following seven cities.

Mitaka City in Tokyo, as noted above, started CDM in 2006. The initiative was organized by a steering committee comprising JCI Mitaka and the City Hall Policy Management Division, under a partnership agreement grounded in the Local Autonomy Ordinance. JCI Mitaka had lobbied the mayor to begin CDM. Since then, partnership agreements and organizing committees with JCI Mitaka, local business groups, and civil society networks have managed nine of these CDMs, and the process continues under the next mayor. The steering committees prepare agendas, design deliberation programs, and provide reports following each CDM, including the city’s responses to citizen proposals. In Japan, some municipalities use open recruitment from residents to fill approximately 10–20% of positions on official advisory councils. Drawing on the experiences of these CDMs, Mitaka City refined its public recruitment process; in 2010, it implemented a list of candidates for advisory councils, inviting 1,000 randomly selected residents to register (Ichijo 2024). Those citizens who consent to serve are appointed as advisory council members when existing terms expire.

Tama City became the second municipality in Tokyo to conduct a CDM. In September 2007, the city office held a CDM on the public library plan, drawing participants from a random sample of 1,000 citizens. The JCI Tama had requested the initiative in 2006. The steering committee comprised JCI Tama, civil society groups, and officials from the Board of Education, which oversees the public library and the Planning Division. The committee issued the proposal report in December 2007, and the Board of Education responded in March 2009. Subsequently, Tama City expanded random-selection-based workshops to the comprehensive plan, the urban master plan, and the city hall reconstruction, among other initiatives. Articles 21 and 26 of the Local Autonomy Ordinance (2004) stipulate citizen participation in planning and evaluation. To meet the mayor’s 2010 election campaign pledge, experts and self-nominated citizens joined project screenings in 2010–2011. Since 2012, Tama City has organized the Citizens’ Forum for Evaluation by random invitation without a scoring method.

Shinjuku City held its first CDM in June 2010 to draft the Local Autonomy Ordinance under the mayor’s leadership. The organizing committee, chaired by the CEO of the Citizens’ Discussion Meeting Promotion Network (CDPN), included self-nominated residents, council members/politicians, officials, and experts. The second CDM in 2011 addressed the implementation plan. Participants, guided by a steering committee comprising Planning Policy Division (PMD) staff, CDPN members, and myself, evaluated projects for necessity,

urgency, and adequacy, and decided whether to expand, maintain, reduce, or abolish them. The PMD selected projects for assessment based on mayoral election pledges, concerns about external evaluations that the city office had consulted the previous year, high costs, resident survey priorities, and issues linked to the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake (Nagano 2014). The nonprofit organization Machipot supported these two CDMs. Under the next mayor, Shinjuku City held a third CDM in 2016 and a fourth in 2017, supported by Mitsubishi UFJ Research and Consulting (MURC). In 2018 and 2022, Shinjuku City organized open review workshops for the Autonomy Ordinance, combining random selection and self-nomination. MURC again managed the program, structuring discussions to generate proposals for administrative improvement and community strengthening.

Higashimurayama City held its first CDM in 2010 to draft the Local Autonomy Ordinance. The mayor had pledged to enact the ordinance during his campaigns, and the city assembly approved it in 2013 after passing a procedural bylaw in March 2010 establishing the Advisory Council for Promoting Citizen Participation. City staff observed Shinjuku's CDM in June 2010, and the advisory council considered seven participation methods, including CDM. The first CDM in December 2010 drew on input from advisory council members, including a young business leader familiar with CDMs in Mitaka and other cities. In 2011–2012, the Citizens' Conference for Local Autonomy Ordinance Formulation convened 120 participants, randomly selected from 5,000 citizens aged 16+, to formulate the Local Autonomy Ordinance. Facilitators contracted by the city office managed 18 workshops and preparatory sessions. In 2011, based on the mayor's campaign pledge, the city introduced the Higashimurayama Version of the General Shareholders' Meeting, in which the mayor presented the city's issues, finances, and policy outcomes. Randomly selected participants discussed and reported group views. In 2017, the Basic Policy Code on Citizen Participation stipulated CDM as a planning method under the Autonomy Ordinance (Article 12). The city office held additional random-selection-based workshops for the comprehensive plan in 2014 and 2019.

Chigasaki City in Kanagawa has held CDMs almost every year since 2009 in collaboration with the JCI Chigasaki and Bunkyo University (Yamada 2023). The local JCI organization and Bunkyo University members formed the organizing committee, while the city provided funding. Organizing committees manage agendas, deliberation programs, and official reports, while the city office proposes themes. The Citizens' Autonomy Promotion Division solicits proposals from city divisions, designates them as references for municipal planning, and submits them to the steering committee. The interviewee noted that divisions typically offered several topics each year, with staff from the proposing division joining the committee to prepare details. Chigasaki City enacted the Citizen Participation Ordinance in 2013, but it listed CDMs only as 'other methods deemed appropriate by the mayor' (Article 8).

Wako City in Saitama has pursued random-selection-based deliberative participation, including the 2009

CDM for the city's comprehensive plan, the Large-scale Projects Examination Panel (2009–2010), Project Screenings (2012, 2014), and the 2019 Citizen Workshop for the new comprehensive plan. The consulting firm Deloitte Tohmatsu LLC, which the city contracted, proposed the 2009 CDM. The Large-scale Projects Examination Panel, based on the mayor's first-term campaign pledge, included myself and nine citizens randomly selected from the Residential Registry. Members reviewed seven public facility construction plans designated by the city, taking into account costs and the mayor's political considerations. After each project manager's explanations and Q&A, citizens submitted review papers, shared views, and compiled evaluation points. The panel synthesized assessments and priorities into a report, which was submitted to the mayor, followed by public consultation procedures. Project screening in 2012 fulfilled another of the mayor's first-term campaign pledges. From 1,000 randomly invited residents, respondents served as citizen judges alongside experts and voted for abolition, efficiency improvement, continuation, or expansion, with the majority opinion decisive. In 2019, the citizen workshop invited participants through random selection and accepted self-nominations.

Yoshikawa City held CDMs in 2010 and 2011 to draft its comprehensive plan. In March 2011, the mayor proposed amending the Citizen Participation Ordinance (2005) to add provisions for CDMs. Article 28 requires that 'city executive institutions shall conduct citizen deliberation meetings when they wish to hear unbiased opinions and proposals on matters from citizens,' while Article 29-1 mandates that 'city executive institutions shall, when selecting participants for citizen deliberation meetings, invite applicants for participation from among citizens randomly selected by the Basic Resident Registry.' In 2010, the city hall partnered with Net Yoshikawa, a civic group active in planning the Citizen Exchange Center of Yoshikawa City, to implement a CDM. The organizing committee included Net Yoshikawa, the Citizen Participation Promotion Division, and the Policy Planning Office (PPO). Net Yoshikawa submitted a CDM proposal and, with PPO, visited other municipalities before forming the committee. Since 2011, however, no CDMs have been held.

Table 1 summarizes when and which deliberative methods the case-study cities implemented during the planning and evaluation phases, along with the institutional frameworks that underpinned these activities. Four of seven (Mitaka, Tama, Shinjuku, and Chigasaki) continued to implement mini-public participation even after changes in their mayors. Except for Yoshikawa City, six cities used mini-public participation, even though they did not mandate it in their ordinances. Because previous research points to a correlation with party ideology, mayors' party affiliations at the time their municipalities conducted mini-public initiatives were also examined. However, all mayors in the selected cases were registered as independents. Therefore, the analysis did not identify any systematic relationship between party affiliation and the implementation of mini-publics.

Table 1: Overview of case studies.

Municipality	Activities with Mini-Public Initiative	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Institutional Framework
Mitaka	Planning Evaluation (Mayor)	M	M	M		M	M	M		M	M			M	M			Partnership Agreement for CDM Local Autonomy Ordinance (2005)
Tama	Planning	Keiko Kiyohara (2003–2019, Ind.)																Takashi Kawamura (2019–present, Ind.)
	Evaluation		M	W	W		W	W	W	W	W	W	W	W	W	W	W	
Shinjuku	Planning	Sachiko Watanabe (2002–2010, Ind.)																Partnership Agreement for CDM Local Autonomy Ordinance (2004)
	Evaluation																	
Hiagshi Murayama	Planning					M						W	W	W	W		W	Local Autonomy Ordinance (2010)
	Evaluation						M							W				
Chigasaki	Planning	Hiroko Nakayama (2002–2014, Ind.)																Local Autonomy Ordinance (2013) Basic Policy Code on Citizen Participation (2017)
	Evaluation																	
Wako	Planning	Hisashi Watanabe (2007–present, Ind.)																Partnership Agreement for CDM Citizen Participation Ordinance (2013)
	Evaluation																	
Yoshikawa	Planning	Nobuaki Hattori (2003–2018, Ind.)																Citizen Participation Ordinance (2003)
	Evaluation																	
Yoshikawa	Planning	Takehiro Matsumoto (2009–2021, Ind.)																Partnership Agreement for CDM Citizen Participation Ordinance (2011 revision)
	Evaluation																	

Abbreviations: M (Citizen Deliberation Meeting), P (Citizen Panel), S (Project Screening), W (Citizen Workshop), and 'Ind.' (Independent).

Note: M', P', S', or W means the city conducted that type of random selection-based deliberative participation during that fiscal year.

Findings

Three major findings were identified; the first finding concerns the bureaucratic norm of citizen participation. A common theme in the statements made by municipal officials during interviews was that they expect mini-public participation to engage individuals who have had little prior experience participating in the city's policy processes—aside from voting in elections—and to bring their diverse needs into municipal policy formulation. The small-scale, open-ended survey used in this study targeted municipalities that employ random-selection-based deliberative participation and revealed that, regarding the objectives for implementing their initiatives, 42% of respondents cited 'gathering perspectives from citizens with limited opportunities to engage in municipal governance.' Similarly, 26% of respondents cited 'collecting input from a broad spectrum of citizens.' These observations suggest that municipal officials share policy norms favoring broader citizen engagement and the use of mini-publics as information-gathering devices. These participation norms can help secure budgetary support and facilitate interdepartmental coordination for mini-public initiatives.

A second finding concerns a duality in bureaucracies' preferences: a drive for openness—seeking to break away from fixed participant pools and incorporate a wide range of opinions—and a drive for discretion—seeking to avoid the binding nature of the resulting recommendations. The Planning Cell method (Dienel 2009), which served as a reference for mini-public practices in Japan, visualizes participant views through dot voting. CDMs also initially employed this multiple-voting method. However, the municipalities studied have increasingly adopted deliberative initiatives based on random sampling that use a citizen workshop format, prioritizing the articulation of diverse opinions rather than multiple-voting methods. In the evaluation phase, there was a noticeable shift from scoring-based assessment methods to citizen workshop formats that prioritize participants' opinions in Tama and Shinjuku. While securing the expression and recording of minority opinions in public forums may be a catalyst to stimulate public debate (Lafont 2023), adopting an approach that emphasizes articulating views—rather than arriving at decisions based on numerical scores or majority votes—allows the local bureaucracy and governance actors to retain discretion in accepting proposals generated through mini-public participation. This shift enables local officials to draw upon citizen input while retaining flexibility in policy decisions.

The third finding concerns the difference between the planning and evaluation phases. Previous studies have argued that the use of mini-publics in review activities is limited (Beauvais & Warren 2019); however, Tokyo-region municipalities frequently adopt them for evaluation. During the planning phase, 'co-commissioning' and 'co-designing' (Nabatchi et al. 2017) for CDMs in Mitaka, Tama, Shinjuku, Chigasaki, and Yoshikawa were conducted with partnership agreements or consultative agenda-setting processes between city governments and civil society organizations. By contrast, during the evaluation phase, local governments did not consult civil society

organizations on the agenda-setting process. The elected mayor and policy management departments selected the subjects for deliberation. Wako's Large-scale Projects Examination Panel and Project Screenings started from the mayor's campaign pledge; Higashimurayama's review forums originated in the mayor's campaign pledges; Shinjuku's 2011 CDM evaluated projects based on the mayoral pledge. These initiatives all use a scoring method to articulate citizen views. These findings suggest that mini-public initiatives play distinct roles across policy stages: planning-oriented initiatives emphasize co-production (Loeffler & Martin 2024), whereas evaluation-oriented initiatives are more closely tied to political agendas in which governance actors steer evaluation targets.

Discussion

Support for mini-publics is rooted in broader participatory norms in municipal bureaucracy. However, there were observed practices that suggest an avoidance of policy constraints in mini-public designs. By adopting methods that prioritize opinion expression over decisions based on scores or majority votes, the administration retains flexibility in accepting proposals generated through citizen participation. The drive for discretion within local government bureaucracies is inherently ambiguous: it encompasses both moral responsibility (Finer 1941)—acting responsibly as a professional—and the tendency to cherry-pick specific inputs (Font et al. 2018; Elstub & Khoban 2023). During my interview, a Mitaka City senior official stated that citizen participation 'has an aspect of finding seeds for policies and measures' and that 'it is not like a referendum, where you present a yes or no answer. It is a place for citizens to articulate their ideas. It is the city government's job to select and develop them for better governance'. This reflects a sense of responsible conduct. Such norms guiding policy officials were a crucial factor for mini-public endeavors. However, organizational inertia cannot be overlooked. In the Japanese public comment procedures introduced in local governments during the 1990s, municipalities commonly issue notices under the heading 'solicitation of opinions' in vague terms. These public consultation approaches differ from UK procedures, where the government clearly presents the specific subjects and key issues for consultation. Such a public consultation system—characterized by bureaucratic discretion in adopting citizen input—was already in place before the advent of mini-public participation. These findings suggest that municipal bureaucrats may draw on familiar, established administrative practices when implementing mini-public participation.

Given that municipal bureaucracies prefer a broad articulation of views to collective judgment in mini-public participatory processes, why do they opt for majority voting and scoring—methods that succinctly capture the attitudes of lay citizens—during the evaluation phase? Visualizing the degree of support through numerical scores helps establish the legitimacy of their administration or policies; this constitutes a form of democratic oversight that extends beyond voting in elections and thus holds democratic validity. At the same time, expressing the

outcomes of citizens' deliberative judgment as scores serves as a 'fire alarm' for policy programs, signaling the severity of issues facing a given initiative. Making the level of opposition visible in this manner provides policy management divisions—which aim to streamline and rationalize programs—with the legitimacy to compel service implementation units to make improvements or abolish programs. Whether or not the convenors are consciously aware of it, visualizing lay citizen attitudes through scoring and majority voting can be understood as a rational strategy for governance actors seeking to use mini-public evaluations as a catalyst for reforming existing programs and compelling the vested interests surrounding them. Previous research has paid limited attention to this aspect of the relationship between mini-public initiatives and the municipal bureaucracy as a governance actor.

Based on the gathered survey responses, local governance actors might use mini-publics to enhance their political legitimacy even during the evaluation phase. These findings should not be interpreted as evidence that local officials intentionally pursue authoritarian control; rather, they suggest that existing administrative routines and representative institutions shape how mini-public initiatives are used. However, if city bureaucracies fail to implement procedures to ensure accountability, the negative aspects of populism could emerge. Populism studies identify the creation of a 'sense of direct connection and identification' with political leaders as a key element (Müller 2016). While the exhilaration participants in mini-publics experience likely stems from the satisfaction of serving the public good, governance actors could see this exhilaration as a political asset. Moreover, whether local governance actors, such as the mayor and the policy management division, are aware of it or not, these findings suggest an indirect influence exercised through agenda-setting during the evaluation phase. Although these municipalities operate within democratic institutions, governance actors' agenda steering resonates with the concept of 'Consultative Authoritarianism' proposed by Pierre and Peters (2020). Recognizing and addressing these risks will be essential for future mini-public initiatives. In addition to increasing transparency in policymaking processes, institutionalizing citizens' authority over policy agenda-setting presents another challenge (Crosby et al. 1986; Elstub & Escobar 2025). Several cities surrounding Tokyo have ordinances allowing citizens to submit policy proposals to the mayor by collecting signatures; Article 11 of Chigasaki City's citizen participation ordinance (2013) requires the support of at least five individuals, while Article 9 of Wako City's ordinance (2014) requires at least ten. To foster democratic urban governance, it is necessary to amend these bylaws to grant citizens the authority to propose the establishment of mini-publics and to set deliberation agendas in the planning and evaluation phases.

Conclusion

Exploring the attitudes and strategies of municipal bureaucracies, as governance actors, toward mini-public initiatives contributes to our understanding of

the global 'Deliberative Wave' (OECD 2020). Through a comparative analysis of municipalities that have repeatedly implemented mini-public initiatives in the Tokyo metropolitan area, this study identifies the municipal bureaucratic drivers behind the expansion and routinization of mini-public participation: an organizational culture that encourages engagement from those with little prior experience in the municipal policy process and a functionalist approach within bureaucracies that seeks to elicit diverse citizen needs and use that information in city halls' policymaking. However, they preferred approaches that emphasize the expression of diverse opinions over collective judgment through voting. This preference for maintaining discretion in policy formation suggests the coexistence and tension between moral responsibility and cherry-picking. This study also highlights a divergence in strategies for securing support: collaborative governance in the planning phase versus an evaluation (assessment and review) phase aimed at demonstrating achievements—either by visualizing support or by implementing rationalization measures backed by scored citizen opinion. In the latter, mayors and policy management departments selected the evaluation subjects, intentionally or unintentionally, which could constitute an indirect steering exercised through agenda-setting. These insights imply that reforming the status quo and compelling stakeholders through citizen voice are additional drivers of municipal bureaucracies' adoption of mini-public initiatives. These findings also suggest that local governance actors may use mini-public processes as policy symbols to influence public service providers and stakeholders, or to legitimize the administration, its policies, and its projects. Given these characteristics, a process for ensuring their accountability and citizens' authority to set the agenda will be essential to safeguarding democratic integrity.

Appendix

The list of interviews and participatory observations is available from <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.28188836>.

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The author served as chair of the Large-scale Projects Examination Panel (2009–2010) and a reviewer in Project Screenings in Wako City (2012 & 2014), as a steering committee member of Shinjuku City's Citizen Deliberation Meeting for the implementation plan under the comprehensive plan (2011), and as facilitator of a citizen learning and deliberation workshop to revise Tama City's public facilities realignment plan (2019). The author serves as vice-chair of Tama City's Autonomy Promotion Committee (2024–present) and as a member of the Higashimurayama City Comprehensive Plan Council (2026–present). The author has not received any research funding from these city offices.

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