

REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD

Reforming Institutionalised Citizen Deliberation: An Update on the Permanent Citizens' Dialogue in Eastbelgium

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Parliaments around the world start associating deliberative citizen participation with their decision-making and, to render the association more system(at)ic, some even go so far as to institutionalise processes of citizen deliberation. With the installation of the Permanent Citizens' Dialogue in Eastbelgium in 2019, the Parliament of the German-speaking Community in Belgium was one of the first to take this step. Five years later, it was also one of the first to reform an institutionalised model of citizen deliberation. In this article, we revisit this reform, analyse its motivations and discuss its implications for the institutionalisation of citizen deliberation.

Keywords: deliberative democracy; citizen deliberation; institutionalisation; institutional reform; Belgium; Ostbelgien

Introduction: Institutionalising Citizen Deliberation

An increasing number of Parliaments around the world are complementing their policy-making processes with the input of deliberative forms of citizen participation, and some even go so far as to institutionalise deliberative citizen participation by associating it with parliamentary work on a regular basis (OECD, 2021). The formats of institutionalisation vary – from permanent citizen councils that organise citizen deliberation processes advising Parliament (Niessen & Reuchamps, 2022) to parliamentary committees composed of both ordinary citizens and elected politicians that deliberate jointly (Vrydagh et al., 2021), to cyclical citizen assemblies that progressively narrow down policy priorities and preferences (Latorre & Rey, 2022). The common idea behind these processes of institutionalisation, however, is to render citizen deliberation more system(at)ic, reach a larger number of people and increase the chance of political follow-up, which short-lived one-off initiatives often lack (Courant, 2022; Fiket, Drasko & Allegretti, 2026; Mansbridge et al., 2012).

A precursor in the field of institutionalised citizen deliberation is the 'Permanent Citizens' Dialogue in Eastbelgium' (PCD) – '*Permanenter Bürgerdialog in Ostbelgien*' – which was installed by the Parliament of the German-speaking Community in Belgium in February

2019. The pioneering nature of the case does not only come with the fact that it was one of the first of its kind but also with three characteristics that we believe to be central for institutionalisation. First, the PCD is *citizen steered* in that a permanent Citizens' Council selects the topics that will be discussed by Citizens' Assemblies, and neither the initiation nor the topic choice requires political approval. Second, the PCD is *directly connected* to the regular parliamentary work in that the Citizens' Assemblies present their recommendations to the parliamentary committee in charge and receive mandatory feedback on whether recommendations will be implemented and why. Finally, the PCD enjoys both *policy broadness* and *policy depth* because it takes place within a parliamentary assembly that, by virtue of the Belgian federal state structure, has law-making powers in a wide range of policy fields. Due to its distinctiveness in these respects and despite its relative recency, the case has attracted the interest of a range of scholarship, looking into the drivers of its creation (Macq & Jacquet, 2023), the constitutional scope (Clarenne, 2023; Stangherlin, 2020), the operation (Niessen & Reuchamps, 2022), the independence (Junius, 2025) and the follow-up (Gebauer, Sautter & Reuchamps, 2024).

Taking stock of the experiences that the PCD gained in the first five years of its existence, the Parliament of the German-speaking Community decided in 2024 to conduct a first reform of the model. In this article, we revisit this reform as the first substantial adaptation of a process of citizen deliberation that was institutionalised in Parliament and, after a couple of years of operation, is amended to further embed it into parliamentary work. As '*Reflections from the Field*', the article makes two contributions. First, it documents each reformed aspect

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and analyses the motivations that led to its adaptation. Second, it discusses the main drivers of this reform – political interests, functional alignment and ideological considerations – and their consequences for the core institutionalisation characteristics of the case – citizen steering, institutional embedding and policy scope. Those interested in a full description of the functioning of the PCD after the reform will find such an updated account in Appendix 1.

Reform Process

The PCD in Eastbelgium has been installed by the Parliament of the German-speaking community of Belgium on 25 February 2019. To anchor the process institutionally and specify its operation, the Parliament adopted a decree, which is a federal sub-state law in Belgium (for an analysis of the adoption process, see Niessen & Reuchamps, 2022). Over the following five years, five Citizens' Assemblies were organised. On 22 April 2024, the Parliament amended the original decree and transferred some of its dispositions into the standing orders of Parliament. After this reform, three more Citizens' Assemblies were held as of 2026 (for an overview of the Citizens' Assemblies, see Appendix 2).

Since the very conception of the PCD, the Parliament had foreseen that the model might need to be reformed after a couple of years based on its first experiences – given the novel and partly experimental character of the PCD, as indicated in the motivation of the initial decree.¹ To this end, a seminar was first organised in June 2022, in which the Citizens' Council, the parliamentary administration, the different political groups and the scientific observers of the process could share their thoughts on the functioning of the PCD to date, as well as on potential aspects to be reformed. Based on these exchanges, but also based on opinions issued by the *Council of State*² and the *Data Protection Authority*³ on different participatory processes in Belgium, the Secretary General of Parliament made a first summary of potential reforms. After discussion by the Bureau of Parliament, in which all political groups are represented, the reform proposals were submitted to the Citizens' Council for feedback. Based on this feedback, the reform decree proposal was finalised by the Bureau and unanimously adopted by Parliament on 22 April 2024. The reform involves nine substantial and three formal changes, whose motivations we analyse below. For details on the collected empirical material and the method of analysis, see Appendix 3.

Substantial Changes

Four types of substantial changes were made to the operation of the PCD. They are discussed below and summarised in Table 1.

Workload and alignment with parliamentary work

Three substantial adaptations of the PCD were aimed at reducing the workload it brings about for both Parliament and the Citizens' Council but also at better aligning the PCD cycle and the regular work cycle of Parliament. First,

while it was initially foreseen that the Citizens' Council could organise one to three Citizens' Assemblies per year, this number is now capped at five Citizens' Assemblies per legislative term (which, for a five-year term, corresponds to about one Citizens' Assembly per year). Second, the Citizens' Council is asked to 'ideally' choose the Citizens' Assembly topics so that the same parliamentary committee is not concerned twice in a row. Third, and in response to the first change mentioned above, since there is no longer a fixed amount of Citizens' Assemblies per year from which citizens can be sampled into the Citizens' Council, the membership duration in the Citizens' Council is increased from 18 months originally to the time it takes to hold three Citizens' Assemblies (i.e. about three years). Instead of rotating one-third of Citizens' Council members every six months, one-third is now rotated after every Citizens' Assembly.

These changes have been undertaken because both Parliament and the Citizens' Council deemed it not feasible to reasonably organise more than one Citizens' Assembly a year. While the workings of the first Assembly were delayed and therefore took place over almost a year, the second, third and fourth Assemblies were organised in overlapping years (see Appendix 2). This meant that the Citizens' Council had to prepare and follow up on different Assemblies at the same time, which resulted in long and packed monthly meetings. This was especially intense for the ordinary citizens who give of their free time to meet on Saturday mornings, not to talk about the Permanent Secretary, who had to organise the different processes in parallel. But the workload was also intense for the Members of Parliament (MPs) and clerks of the parliamentary committees who had to organise additional evening meetings to follow up on the Assemblies' recommendations. In this respect, it is noteworthy that the Parliament of the German-speaking Community is of relatively modest size with 25 MPs and an administration of ± 40 full-time equivalents, but also that most MPs (except the president and senator) have other part-time jobs besides their parliamentary mandate. It was thus decided to have only one Citizens' Assembly per year and to organise it in the early fall so that its regular work concludes before Parliament gets into the usually intense end-of-year budget meetings and so that the follow-up committee meetings conclude before the end of the parliamentary year in June.

Sortition modalities

Two more substantial adaptations of the PCD concern the sortition modalities. First, while the original decree left it for the Citizens' Council to specify the sortition strata and proportions as long as they ensured an equal representation of gender, age, socio-economic background and residence areas, the decree now specifies in detail which strata and proportions to fill (gender with two categories, age with three categories, education with four categories and residence areas with two categories). Second, the incompatibilities with membership in the Citizens' Assemblies no longer include members of the judiciary.

Table 1 Substantial changes made to the institutions and functioning in 2024.

Reformed aspect	Original disposition	Change
(1) Workload and alignment with parliamentary work		
Number of Citizens' Assemblies	Min. 1, max. 3 per year.	Max. 5 per legislative term of 5 years.
Committee rotation	Not bound by any obligation.	Two consecutive assemblies should not concern the same parliamentary committee.
Mandate duration of the Citizens' Council	18 months, with one-third of the members being rotated every 6 months.	For the duration of 3 Citizens' Assemblies, with one-third of the members being rotated after every Citizens' Assembly.
(2) Sortition		
Modalities of the sortition for Citizens' Assemblies	To be determined by the Citizens' Council, ensuring at least an equal representation of gender, age, socio-economic background and residence.	Two rounds of sortition, the second of which is sortitioned exclusively by gender, age, education and residence.
Incompatibilities for Citizens' Assembly membership	Were not eligible: (i) members of European, national, regional, community, provincial or municipality parliaments/councils or executives; (ii) members of the judiciary; (iii) representative mandate-holders of the state, region, community, province or municipality; (iv) office-holders under direct supervision of the community Parliament and Government; and (v) office-holders of community institutions of public interest.	Have become eligible: members of the judiciary.
(3) Topic selection		
Topic suggestions to the Citizens' Council	Could be introduced by (i) two members, (ii) a parliamentary group (max. 3), (iii) the government (max. 3) and (iv) 100 citizens.	Parliamentary groups and the government can no longer present suggestions. Instead, Parliament itself presents at least three topics per legislative term. Citizen suggestions no longer require the support of 99 fellow citizens.
Topic choices by the Citizens' Council	Not bound by any obligation other than to fall within the competences of the Community.	Per legislative term, one topic proposed by Parliament must be chosen.
Topic specification	Both the topic and the specific question to be addressed by a Citizens' Assembly are determined by the Citizens' Council.	If deemed appropriate, the Citizens' Council can let the Citizens' Assembly specify the specific question to be addressed within the chosen topic.
(4) Chairing		
Chair of the Citizens' Council	Elected by and among the Citizens' Council while alternating men and women.	Elected by and among the Citizens' Council while alternating by genders when there are candidates to do so.

The specification of strata and proportions was made in response to remarks by the *Data Protection Authority*, which remarked that citizens should know in advance in which way the personal data they share will be used. The possibility to foresee additional strata was removed because it was deemed too difficult to diversely fill other strata in a polity as small as the German-speaking Community (with about 80,000 inhabitants) considering the diversity of people who so far replied positively to the invitation to participate. The lifting of the incompatibility for members of the judiciary, finally, goes back to the personal complaint of a judge who considered the exclusion non-grounded in the absence of a manifest conflict of interest. This was deemed legitimate by the MPs.

Topic selection

Three further substantial adaptations concern the topic selection. First, while topic suggestions to the Citizens' Council could originally come from (i) two members, (ii) a parliamentary group, (iii) the government or (iv) 100 citizens, it is now Parliament itself and no longer parliamentary groups or the government who can present topics. Furthermore, citizen suggestions no longer require the support of 99 fellow citizens. Second, the Citizens' Council is now obliged to take at least one topic per legislative term that has been submitted by Parliament. Third, the specification of the question that must be addressed by a Citizens' Assembly within a given topic can now be delegated from the Citizens' Council to the Citizens' Assembly.

The first of these changes responds to the frustration of certain MPs that the Citizens' Council did only take topics that were suggested by citizens, while considering a topic that was suggested by a political group or the government provides the opportunity to provide citizen feedback on a topic that politicians wanted to take forward concretely. To avoid the issue that the Citizens' Council could feel politically coloured if it selected the topic of a certain political group or the government, it was decided that 'political' topic suggestions henceforth come from Parliament, in the form of propositions elaborated by its Bureau, where all political groups are represented. The second adaptation, that citizen suggestions no longer require the signature of 99 other citizens, was made because hardly any suggestion reached that quorum. Third, the possibility to let Citizens' Assemblies specify the question that is to be addressed within the topic chosen by the Citizens' Council, in turn, was introduced because the Citizens' Council sometimes found it difficult to narrow down topics in the absence of detailed expertise on the topic but also because Citizens' Assembly members sometimes wanted to take slightly different turns in their debates after having heard a first set of expert witnesses.

Chair of the Citizens' Council

A final substantive adaptation of the PCD concerns the chair of the Citizens' Council. Whereas the president previously had to be elected by and among Council members, as well as mandatorily alternating between women and men, the decree now foresees that alternation takes place between genders insofar as there are sufficient candidates to do so. This change was introduced because the Citizens' Council had once felt forced to elect a president without the person being particularly motivated to take up the task, while another motivated member could not be elected because the predecessor was of the same gender. Furthermore, the binary nature of the original stipulation was not perceived as timely anymore considering non-binary genders. It was thus agreed to rotate the presidency between any gender whenever possible, without obligation in the absence of willing candidates.

Changes to Conform with Jurisprudence and Data Protection

In addition to the above, three formal changes were made to conform with the jurisprudence of the *Council of State* as well as with requirements of the *Data Protection Authority*. First, the procedure that details how the recommendations of Citizens' Assemblies are presented to and followed up by Parliament was withdrawn from the decree and instead integrated into the standing orders of Parliament. This transfer was operated in the first place because the *Council of State* had judged that the internal operation of parliamentary procedures should not figure in any legal act like a decree because such acts are always elaborated in collaboration with the government, which violates the sovereignty of Parliament over its own operation.⁴

Beyond conforming with this principle, transferring the follow-up procedure on Citizens' Assembly

recommendations to the standing orders of Parliament had the consequence that this procedure can no longer be challenged in court, because standing orders of Parliament are not among the legal measures that one can invoke in a Belgian court. While this does not figure among the motivations of the reform decree and was also not discussed during the reform process, the issue has been signalled by legal scholars who examined the constitutionality of the PCD decree. According to Stangherlin (2020) and Clarenne (2023), one might indeed question to which extent the obligation of justification, which Parliament has foreseen whenever a Citizens' Assembly recommendation is not followed, is compatible with Article 33 of the Belgian Constitution ('All powers emanate from the Nation. These powers are exercised in the manner laid down by the Constitution'). In the absence of decision-making prerogatives for any other institution than Parliament and government in the Constitution, considering the strong representative spirit of its preparatory works, and based on the jurisprudence of the *Council of State* which excludes any imperative mandate for MPs based on Article 42 of the Constitution ('The members of the two Houses represent the Nation, and not only those who elected them'), MPs cannot be bound by Citizens' Assembly recommendations in any manner. What remains unclear, however, is whether the obligation of Parliament to justify itself when it does not follow recommendations does constitute an anti-constitutional influence or not. Whatever the answer to this question, the transfer of the follow-up procedure into the standing orders of Parliament – even if meant as a purely formal adaptation – has the side effect of no longer being open to challenge in court even if it was anti-constitutional.

A second formal change to the PCD decree consists in specifying the legal responsibility of decisions made by the Citizens' Council. Since the latter has no legal personality, the decree now specifies that any legal obligation that results from decisions made by the Citizens' Council in its organisation of the Citizens' Assemblies is taken by Parliament.

Finally, several amendments to the PCD decree were made to specify the time horizon within which personal data collected are kept and when they are deleted. These specifications were made in response to the aforementioned opinions of the *Data Protection Authority*.

Conclusion: Reforming Institutionalised Citizen Deliberation

Existing scholarship has shown that processes of citizen deliberation are introduced and institutionalised in response to a variety of factors related to the (i) interests, (ii) ideas and (iii) institutional incentives of political decision-makers (for a summary, see Niessen, 2023). When looking with this framework at one of the first reform cases of institutionalised citizen deliberation, the PCD, several lessons can be drawn – for its three central characteristics of institutionalisation in particular: citizen steering, institutional embedding and policy scope.

Regarding the reform 'process', politicians were in the driver's seat since they legally had the final word on the revision of the decree. The direction of the reform, however, was inspired by the administrators in charge and adjusted in consultation with the members of the Citizens' Council. The latter is new compared to the original institutionalisation process and can at least partly be attributed to the permanency of the Citizens' Council, which gave citizens an organ that was deemed structured, durable and, hence, legitimate enough to be formally integrated in the reform discussion.

For the 'content' of the reform, the three types of drivers identified by existing scholarship for the institutionalisation of citizen deliberation appear also important for reforms – but in different ways and extents. First, functional institutional considerations played a major role in institutional embedding in that the operation of the PCD was aligned with the ordinary work cycle of Parliament: making sure that the number of Citizens' Assemblies remains manageable for the administration and parliamentary committees and that the organisation and follow-up do not overlap with periods of intense parliamentary work or vacation. As a consequence, the mandate in the Citizens' Council was increased from 18 months to three years, which creates a certain tension with deliberative ideals (e.g. rotation and accessibility). Second, political interests played a strategic role in politicians' decision to oblige the Citizens' Council to organise one Citizens' Assembly per term on a topic of its choice – thereby slightly limiting the previously pure citizen steering of the model. Although justified by the desire of Parliament to receive feedback from the PCD on a political priority, it remains an increase in politicians' power over agenda-setting. The policy scope itself remained unchanged. Third, to make sure this increase in power is not captured by one political party or ideology, it was decided that topic suggestions have to come from the Bureau of Parliament, where all political parties are represented. Ideological considerations were thus also part of the reform drivers, albeit driven by political interests.

The present '*Reflections from the Field*' speak to both the literature on deliberative democracy and deliberative practice by showing that institutionalising processes of citizen deliberation goes beyond the adoption of legal texts describing the operation. Indeed, while policy scopes are *a priori* stable, institutional embedding and citizen steering are not. For institutional embedding, Parliaments visibly need to align processes of citizen deliberation and their ordinary functioning with each other. Citizen steering, in turn, appears to be a permanent source of debate – regarding agenda-setting in the present case – but other types of debates (e.g. on follow-up or process guidance) are imaginable in other moments and cases.

Notes

¹ Parl. Doc. 2018–19/284.1, p. 3.

² Opinions no. 66.277/1 of 2 July 2019, no. 66.341/3 of 10 July 2019 and no. 66.344/3 of 11 July 2019.

³ Opinions no. 124/2020 of 27 November 2020, no. 145/2021 of 10 September 2021, no. 15/2022 of 21 January 2022 and no. 160/2022 of 19 July 2022.

⁴ Opinion 68.041/AG of 29 December 2020.

Additional File

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

- **Appendices.** Appendix 1 to 3. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.2051.s1>

Competing Interests

The authors were part of the expert group mandated by the Parliament of the German-speaking Community to make a design proposal for the initial model. Subsequently, their research group was charged with the scientific evaluation of the process. These consultations did not involve any form of personal remuneration and were conducted as independent researchers.

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