
Supplementary Material

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

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Journal of Deliberative Democracy

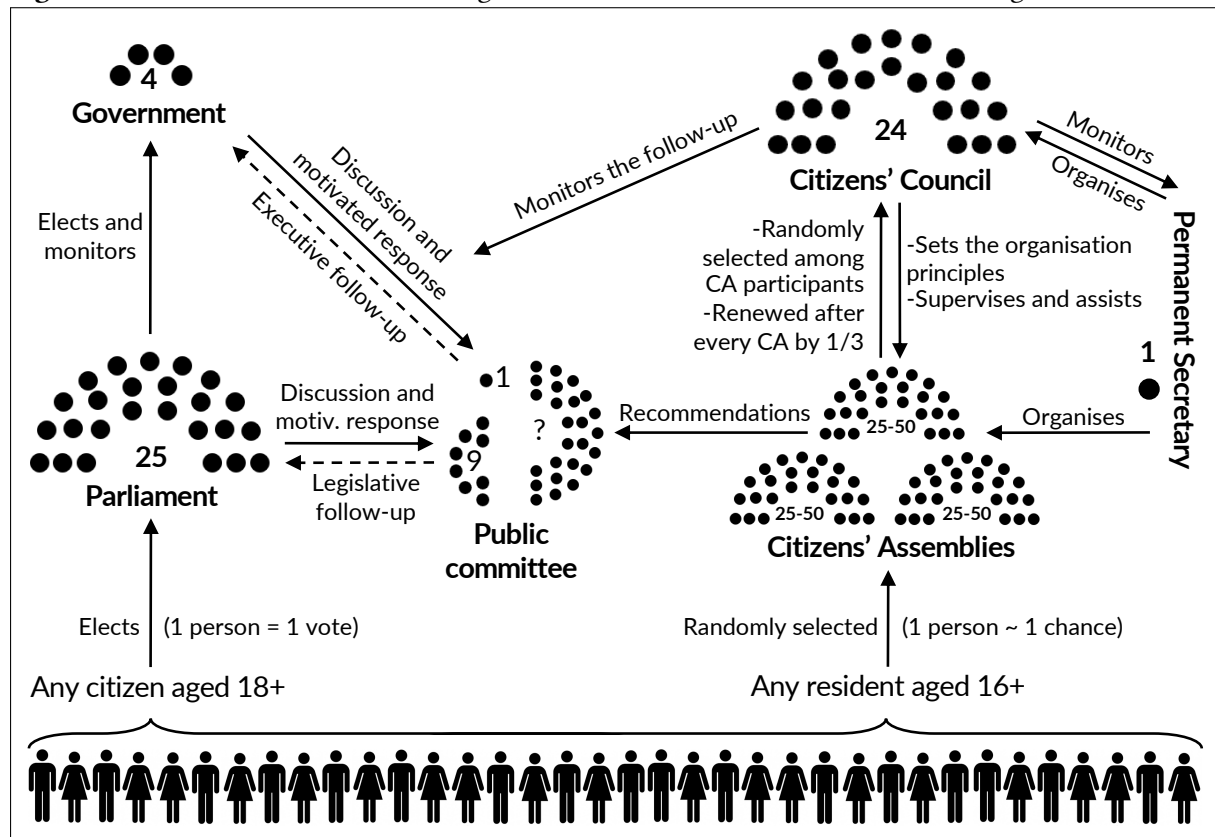
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Appendix 1. Description of the Functioning of the Permanent Citizens' Dialogue after the Reform

The functioning of the Permanent Citizens' Dialogue (PCD) rests on three main institutions: the Citizens' Council, the Citizens' Assemblies and the Permanent Secretary, which interact with each other as well as with Parliament and Government, as illustrated in Figure A1 and described below.

Figure A1. Institutions and Functioning of the Reformed Permanent Citizens' Dialogue



Citizens' Council – 'Bürgererrat'

The Citizens' Council is the permanent component of the PCD. Made of 24 members who are drawn by lot from among members of former Citizens' Assemblies and who serve for about three years (rotated by one-third after every Citizens' Assembly), the Citizens' Council has a threefold function: (i) to organise the Citizens' Assemblies, (ii) to monitor the follow-up of the recommendations from the Citizens' Assemblies and (iii) to supervise the work of the Permanent Secretary.

First, the Citizens' Council has an agenda-setting function that translates into the right to regularly organise a Citizens' Assembly made of randomly selected citizens (see below). It determines the number of Citizens' Assemblies (max. five per legislative term, i.e., about one per year). Once a decision is made to organise such an Assembly, it is the Council that decides the question to be answered by the Assembly. This topic must concern a policy that falls within the competence of the German-speaking community. However, with the prior authorisation of the Parliament's Bureau (where all parliamentary groups are represented), the Citizens' Council may also choose a subject that goes beyond the competence of the Community – knowing that a debate of principle or vision will then follow rather than a deliberation on immediate political measures to be taken. The topics chosen

must also be in conformity with human rights and fundamental freedoms. While the Citizens' Council decides on the topic, suggestions may be made in advance by Parliament (through the Bureau), by citizens or by two of its members. Each suggestion must include an explanation of the topic as well as a justification of its relevance to a Citizens' Assembly. Once per legislative term, the Citizens' Council must pick a topic that was submitted by Parliament. Beyond determining the topic, the Citizens' Council also decides how the Citizens' Assembly should be organised. In doing so, it defines the number of members (between 25 and 50) as well as the provisional time, duration, location, programme and budget. It also appoints the moderator(s) of the deliberations and sets up an advisory committee that composes the documentation made available to the Citizens' Assembly. It suggests experts and stakeholders for hearings, and it determines the modalities of evaluation.

The second function of the Citizens' Council is to monitor the political follow-up given to the recommendations made by the Citizens' Assemblies. When their work is concluded, Citizens' Assemblies summarise their recommendations and discuss them with the parliamentary committee and minister in charge in three public meetings. In the first ('presentation') meeting, citizens present and elaborate on their recommendations; in the second ('feedback') meeting around four to six weeks later, the Parliamentarians and the Minister give their view on the recommendations and explain if they will be implemented. If they refuse to implement a recommendation, they have to justify this separately. One year after the second meeting, a third ('implementation') meeting takes place for communicating on the actual follow-up given to the recommendations. During this year, the Citizens' Council monitors progress through sitting in on relevant committee meetings and submitting questions to Ministers and Parliamentarians. Thereafter, the Citizens' Council may keep asking for additional updates on the follow-up.

Finally, the third function of the Citizens' Council is to supervise the work of the Permanent Secretary. To this end, it may give guidelines for the tasks to be carried out by the Secretary. More generally, the Citizens' Council itself regulates all aspects of its functioning – in respect of the dispositions of the decree. Among these dispositions, it is specified in particular that (i) the Council appoints among its members (alternating genders whenever possible) a chair – for one year – whose function is purely organisational; (ii) decisions are taken by consensus and, if a consensus cannot be reached, decisions shall be taken by a two-thirds majority of those present; (iii) to make a decision, at least a majority of its members must be present (except for meetings where the topic of a Citizens' Assembly is chosen, then two-thirds must be present); and (iv) there are attendance fees and an allowance for travel expenses.

Citizens' Assemblies – 'Bürgerversammlungen'

Citizens' Assemblies are the second main body of the model. Their primary function is to deliberate on matters submitted to them by the Citizens' Council and to formulate policy recommendations on this basis. Since a Citizens' Assembly deliberates on only one subject, this is the non-permanent component of the PCD.

A Citizens' Assembly is composed of 25–50 members drawn by lot on the basis of a stratification that diversifies the participants on the basis of their age, gender, geographical origin and socio-economic context. The draw is based on the population register. Participation is voluntary. If a designated member withdraws before the start of the deliberations of the Citizens' Assembly, they shall be replaced by a substitute drawn by lot according to the same procedures. Once deliberations have begun, members who resign may no longer be replaced. The decree provides that to be drawn

by lot, citizens must meet four conditions: (i) be listed in the population register or in the register of foreigners of a municipality of the German-speaking region, (ii) be at least 16 years old, (iii) not be in the situation where a conviction or decision has been made to remove or suspend their voting rights for voters for parliamentary elections and (iv) not hold a political or public mandate, position or function, at any level of governance, listed in the decree.

The functioning of the Citizens' Assemblies follows the procedures laid down by the Citizens' Council and is facilitated by one or more moderator(s) appointed by the Council (see above). With regard to decision-making, the decree specifies that the consensus should be aimed at and, if this proves impossible, a decision is taken by a four-fifths majority provided that at least four-fifths of the members are present. When needed, minority opinions are attached as an annex to the opinion containing the final recommendations. The attendance fee for participants in a Citizens' Assembly is identical to that for the Citizens' Council.

The primary function of a Citizens' Assembly is to deliberate on the topic determined by the Citizens' Council and to issue one or more policy recommendations on this basis. Their second function is to discuss the final recommendations with Parliamentarians in a joint committee on three occasions (see above). Each of the three joint meetings is foreseen by the decree and therefore mandatory. The same goes for the justification that needs to be provided to the members of the Citizens' Assembly if one of its recommendations is followed neither by a parliamentary nor by a governmental measure. Beyond this justification, however, the Parliamentarians and the Minister(s)-in-charge are legally not bound to any kind of follow-up. This is in line with Belgian jurisprudence that has established based on Articles 33 and 42 of the Constitution that MPs are sovereign in their decisions and should rely on popular opinion only to a consultative extent.

Permanent Secretary – 'Ständiges Sekretariat'

The third and final body of the PCD is the Permanent Secretary whose function is to provide 'administrative and organisational support' for the other two bodies. The Permanent Secretary is appointed by the Secretary General of the Parliament and is a member of the parliamentary administration. The Permanent Secretary attends the sessions of the Citizens' Council in an advisory capacity and prepares and implements its decisions. For the organisation of Citizens' Assemblies, the Secretary takes care of all administrative and logistical aspects and regularly informs the Citizens' Council of the political follow-up given to the recommendations of the Citizens' Assemblies. It is also responsible for the financial management of the PCD. To this end, the Secretary develops a budget proposal, which it submits to the Citizens' Council, which adopts it and sends it to the Bureau of Parliament. Once this budget has been approved by the Citizens' Council and the Bureau of Parliament, the Secretary manages the budget under the control of the Council.

Appendix 2. Citizens' Assemblies and Follow-up as of 2026

Topic	Citizens' Assembly	Joint committee meetings		
		Presentation	Feedback	Implementation
Institution of the PCD on 25 February 2019				
Health care: 'How to improve the conditions of staff and patients?'	Mar.–Sep. 2020	Dec. 2020	Mar. 2021	Mar. 2022
Inclusive education: 'What changes are needed in the education sector to make inclusion a win-win situation for everyone?'	Mar.–May 2021	Jun. 2021	Oct. 2021	Oct. 2022
Housing: 'How can politics create sustainable and affordable housing for everyone?'	Oct. 2021–Feb. 2022	Mar. 2022	Jun. 2022	Oct. 2023
Digital skills: 'How can politics ensure that all Eastb elgians have access to the digital world and can find their way around it?'	Sep.–Nov. 2022	Dec. 2022	Feb. 2023	Mar. 2024
Immigrant integration: 'How to integrate people with a migration background in Eastbelgium?'	Apr.–Jun. 2023	Jun. 2023	Nov. 2023	Feb. 2025
Reform of the PCD on 22 April 2024				
Pupils' skills: 'How can emotional skills be taught in Eastb elgian schools so that pupils are fit for the future?'	Sep.–Nov. 2024	Dec. 2024	Jan. 2025	Nov. 2025
Elderly people: 'How can our politicians ensure that life in old age in Eastbelgium is attractive and enriching?'	Sep.–Nov. 2025	Dec. 2025	Mar. 2026	
Spatial planning: 'How to plan and build responsibly to preserve infrastructure, nature and local cohesion.'	Sep.–Nov. 2026	Dec. 2026		

Appendix 3. Methodology of the Analyses of the Reform Process

The analysis of the reform of the PCD presented in the article was based on four types of empirical materials, which we analysed in the following ways.

First, we consulted the two main legal documents that implemented the reform: (i) the ‘Decree of April 22 2024 amending the decree of February 25 2019 introducing a PCD in the German-speaking community’ (Parl. Doc. 2023–24, 311, 1–3), and (ii) the ‘Decision of April 22 2024 modifying the internal orders of the Parliament of the German-speaking community to regulate the parliamentary functioning concerning the Citizens’ Dialogue in the German-speaking community’ (Parl. Doc. 2023–24, 312, 1–3). We compared these texts with the original decree and elaborated a coordinated version ourselves. On this basis, we listed each change that was introduced.

Second, we consulted the parliamentary motivation and discussion preceding the adoption of the two former documents (Parl. Doc. 2023–24, Report no. 72 of 22 April 2024). For each identified change, we documented the official justifications given by Parliament.

Third, we consulted the minutes of the Citizens’ Council meetings in which the reform was discussed (11 February 2023, 17 March 2023 and 08 May 2023). We then compared the opinions and justifications given by the Citizens’ Council to the official ones given by Parliament to identify common and diverging positions (of which there were few).

Fourth, to go beyond this document analysis, we conducted semi-structured interviews with two key administrators: the Secretary General of Parliament and the Permanent Secretary of the PCD. While the former was charged by the Bureau of Parliament with summarising the various reform proposals brought up by different actors throughout the reform process, the latter accompanied the Citizens’ Council, which provided feedback on each of the proposed reform aspects. The objective of these interviews was to get a better understanding of the motivations for each reformed aspect of the PCD, as well as of the positions of the different actors involved in the reform process. The interviews were voice-recorded and transcribed. For each reformed aspect, the official motivations of Parliament and the Citizens’ Council were compared and complemented with the views from behind the scenes provided by the two administrators.

Taken together, the joint analysis of the empirical materials above allowed us to reconstruct the reform process and document the main motivations provided by the key actors for each reformed aspect of the PCD. It should be acknowledged that what we analysed were the official motivations as provided by the actors themselves – through official documents for Parliament and the Citizens’ Council and through interviews for the administrators. Beyond having had the impression that the interviewees were open and sincere in their discussion of the reform drivers, we also examined the plausibility of each provided motivation ourselves – taking into consideration the interests and stakes of all actors involved.

Finally, regarding our positionality as authors, we should note that we were part of the expert group mandated by the Parliament of the German-speaking Community to make a design proposal for the initial PCD model. Furthermore, our research group was charged with the scientific evaluation of the process for the first eight Citizens’ Assemblies. These consultations did not involve any form of personal remuneration, and while our familiarity with the process and its actors helped us to gain in-depth insights into the functioning, we had to ensure that this familiarity did not hamper our reflexivity. In particular, we paid attention not to take provided information for granted, cross-verified indications whenever possible, and discussed the findings and interpretations with peers.
