

Institutionalizing Democratic Innovations in Poland: Mapping the Evolution of Citizens' Assemblies Through Rules of Procedure

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Abstract

Institutions play a crucial role in organizing, systematizing, and simplifying public life, enabling the planning of activities and structuring the behavior of individuals. In Poland, various institutionalized and formalized instruments of civic engagement are commonly used at the local level, particularly in municipalities (Kołomycew, 2023). However, since 2013, there has been a surge in democratic innovations, such as participatory budgeting and, since 2016, citizens' assemblies (CAs), which serve as deliberative instruments of a quasi-decisive nature (Gerwin, 2018; Podgórska-Rykała, 2020; Pospieszna & Pietrzyk-Reeves, 2024; Ufel, 2022). This article explores the process of institutionalizing CAs in Poland by analyzing the evolution and content of their Rules of Procedure (RoPs). We focus on Poland due to its unique position as one of the first Central and Eastern European countries to join the deliberative wave (Carson & Gerwin, 2018; OECD, 2020). Using a triangulated theoretical approach that draws from neo-institutionalism, structuration theory, and critical institutionalism, this article investigates how formalization, practice, and political creativity interact in shaping this democratic innovation. The study is based on a comparative analysis of 10 local climate assemblies organized between 2016 and 2023. Its findings suggest that while RoPs serve as formalizing scripts, they also reflect evolving practices and localized reinterpretations that expand the civic potential of CAs.

Keywords

citizens' assemblies; democratic innovations; institutionalization; Poland

1. Introduction

In recent decades, democratic innovations have gained global prominence as tools for revitalizing representative democracy. Among them, citizens' assemblies (CAs)—forums where randomly selected and demographically diverse citizens engage in structured discussions on complex public issues—have gained prominence as influential democratic innovations (Dryzek et al., 2019; Fishkin, 1995; Niemeyer, 2014). Grounded in deliberative democratic theory, these assemblies exemplify the principles of inclusivity, informed dialogue, and reasoned decision-making (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Habermas, 1984). Designed to address the shortcomings of traditional electoral institutions, CAs offer not only epistemic and civic benefits for participants (Curato et al., 2017; Grönlund et al., 2014) but also the potential to enhance legitimacy, transparency, and public trust in decision-making (OECD, 2021; Smith, 2021). While many CAs remain one-off consultative initiatives, recent scholarship and policy developments call for their institutionalization to ensure their sustained democratic impact (Dean et al., 2023; OECD, 2021).

The institutionalization of deliberative mini-publics is often demonstrated through the creation of permanent or regularly recurring assemblies, legal frameworks, or integration into formal policy-making processes (Macq & Jacquet, 2023; OECD, 2021). However, institutionalization is increasingly understood as a continuum, ranging from one-off experiments to routinized and embedded practices. It involves not only formal rules or legislative acts, but also softer forms of stabilization, such as administrative standardization, civic norms, and evolving procedural blueprints (Curato & Böker, 2016; Elstub & Escobar, 2019). In other words, it is a multi-dimensional process involving formalization, routinization, and symbolic embedding within governance structures. Thus, drawing on neo-institutionalist and structuration theory (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Giddens, 1984; March & Olsen, 1984), as well as critical institutionalism (Cleaver & de Koning, 2015), this article adopts a dynamic understanding of institutionalization—not as the endpoint of innovation, but as an iterative process shaped by civic practice, local adaptation, and creative reinterpretation.

One key mechanism through which CAs can become more structured is the development and use of Rules of Procedure (RoPs)—internal regulatory documents specifying participant selection, deliberation format, expert involvement, decision-making thresholds, and implementation commitments. Scholars focused particularly on the legal, legislative, and political aspects of institutional changes have often analyzed RoPs since they are an invaluable source of knowledge on the dynamics of internal norms and practices within political organizations (Palonen & Wiesner, 2016; Sellheim, 2023). Furthermore, deep insight into the procedural rules of different political bodies has prompted researchers to draw conclusions related to the inter-institutional balance of power (Kreppel, 2003; McKelvey & Ordeshook, 1984), politicization and rationalization of practices (Brack & Costa, 2018), or even the relationship between institutions and the public (Cox, 2000; Saalfeld & Dobmeier, 2012). This article argues that RoPs serve as a crucial—though often overlooked—tool for embedding deliberative practices into local governance structures. They enable coordination among multiple stakeholders, reduce procedural uncertainty, and create expectations of continuity and accountability—even in the absence of national or local legal frameworks. We expect to find that beyond stabilizing the institutional form of CAs, RoPs also evolve over time, shaped by practice, adaptation, and organizational learning. In this sense, they are not only instruments of formalization but also sites of procedural experimentation. This article, therefore, asks: *How do RoPs indicate the institutionalization of CAs as democratic innovations? To what extent do RoPs reflect learning, adaptation, and professionalization in the organization of CAs?*

In order to answer these questions, we focus on Poland. In Poland, CAs have become a growing phenomenon at the local level, despite their absence from national legislation and the lack of formalized institutional frameworks. Since 2016, 14 assemblies have been organized in cities including Gdańsk, Warsaw, Poznań, and Kraków, with most focusing on climate-related issues, such as air quality, urban greenery, and transport (Podgórska-Rykała & Pospieszna, 2024; Pospieszna et al., 2025). By focusing on the Polish context, this study contributes to the emerging literature on democratic innovations in Central and Eastern Europe—a region where participatory instruments are gaining traction but remain under-researched (Gherghina et al., 2019, 2020; Paulis & Pospieszna, 2024).

This article draws on a qualitative analysis of all available RoPs from CAs held in Poland between 2016 and 2023. These documents were collected from public sources and through direct outreach to organizers, then thematically coded to trace patterns of procedural design, variation, and institutional development. We also incorporate participant observations from two assemblies. To further explore institutionalization in practice, we conducted a focused case comparison of the Kraków and Rzeszów CAs, organized in the same year by the same coordinator. This comparison allows us to examine how institutional learning unfolds through both formal rule-setting and adaptive practice.

Our findings suggest that while Polish CAs remain outside formal legal frameworks, their RoPs are increasingly standardized and reflective of international best practices. This points to a form of soft institutionalization rooted in civic experimentation and negotiated legitimacy, in which RoPs function not only as regulatory tools, but also as evolving sites of democratic learning and procedural innovation.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the relevant literature on democratic innovations and the institutionalization of CAs. Section 3 presents our methodological approach. In Section 4, we analyze the content and evolution of RoPs in Polish CAs. Section 5 focuses on a comparative analysis of two recent local CAs in order to explore institutional learning in practice. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of our findings for broader debates on democratic innovations and institutionalization.

2. Institutionalizing CAs: Theoretical Perspectives

Democratic innovations have gained considerable attention in recent decades as institutional responses to growing dissatisfaction with representative democracy. These innovations aim to deepen citizen participation, enhance inclusiveness, and strengthen the legitimacy of political decisions. One of the most prominent types of democratic innovations is CAs, which are a type of deliberative mini-publics composed of randomly selected citizens who engage in structured discussions on complex public issues (Dryzek et al., 2019; Fishkin, 1995; Niemeyer, 2014). Rooted in deliberative democratic theory, CAs operationalize ideals of inclusive, informed, and reasoned deliberation among free and equal citizens (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Habermas, 1984). Research has shown that when properly designed, CAs can foster cognitive gains, social trust, and civic empowerment while offering a meaningful supplement to traditional democratic processes (Curato et al., 2017; Grönlund et al., 2014; OECD, 2020; Smith, 2021). Such well-designed deliberative processes have been well in line with a new mode of governance, namely, network governance (Kronsell & Backstrand, 2010). Scholars indicate that the shift from government to governance is one of the most important characteristics of modern policy-making, where decisions are taken collectively with a broad participation of different actors (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2010).

Despite their normative appeal and growing popularity, particularly at the local level, most CAs remain *ad hoc* and operate without formal ties to existing democratic institutions (Dean et al., 2023; OECD, 2020). They often address single issues, involve limited segments of the population, and lack binding legal status, limiting their long-term impact on public policy. Scholars and practitioners have thus advocated for the institutionalization of CAs as a means to increase their effectiveness and legitimacy (Macq & Jacquet, 2023; OECD, 2021). Institutionalized CAs, such as permanent citizens' councils or standing advisory panels, are integrated into legislative or administrative processes, providing continuous input into decision-making. Examples include the Paris Citizens' Assembly and permanent deliberative bodies in Australia, Belgium, and France, which demonstrate the capacity of mini-publics to contribute to policy design, participatory budgeting, and referenda (Niessen & Reuchamps, 2022; OECD, 2021).

Institutionalization, however, remains a contested concept. Traditionally, it has been defined as the process by which experimental or innovative practices become stable, repeatable, and embedded in organizational or political systems (March & Olsen, 1984). In the case of CAs, institutionalization is often equated with legal anchoring or the creation of permanent structures (Macq & Jacquet, 2023; Niessen & Reuchamps, 2022). However, such a narrow focus overlooks the broader spectrum of institutional development. The institutionalization of deliberative processes can occur through the formalization of practices, the routinization of procedures, and the embedding of deliberation within governance systems (Abers, 2019; Elstub & Escobar, 2019; OECD, 2021). For instance, the adoption of standard operating procedures or recurring use of CAs at municipal levels can signal progress toward institutionalization even without national legal codification.

In contexts such as Poland, where CAs are not formally recognized by national or local law and are instead framed as a form of social consultation (Firek, 2024; Gąsiorowska, 2023b), focusing on their RoPs provides a valuable lens to assess institutionalization. RoPs function as the organizational "constitutions" of CAs, codifying procedural norms, roles, and stages of deliberation. They not only structure internal dynamics but can also mediate the relationship between CAs and existing political institutions (Curato & Böker, 2016; Elstub & Escobar, 2019). The codification of RoPs reflects growing internal complexity and a drive for procedural stability, offering a shared normative framework for organizers across diverse local contexts (Bastiaensen & Stearns, 2022; Cleaver & de Koning, 2015; Macq & Jacquet, 2023).

From a neo-institutionalist perspective, RoPs can serve as instruments of formalization. They transform experimental deliberative practices into recognizable and legitimate institutional forms by standardizing procedures, clarifying responsibilities, and ensuring continuity (Courant, 2018; Shepsle & Weingast, 1984). Core design elements—such as demographic representativeness, informed deliberation, and voting thresholds for recommendations—have become procedural backbones of CAs (Pogrebinschi, 2021; Smith, 2009). At the same time, neo-institutionalists deriving from the sociology of action observe that institutions do not restrict human agency. Instead, they may be self-reproductive through collective action (Di Maggio & Powell, 1991). There are many examples of studies in which scholars present the constitutive function of formally established bodies (Moe, 1987; Shepsle & Weingast, 1987).

Therefore, institutionalization need not result in rigidity or stagnation. Recent research emphasizes that even permanent CAs can emerge through experimentation, learning, and negotiation between civil society and public authorities (Courant, 2018; Macq & Jacquet, 2023). This view aligns with structuration theory (Giddens,

1984), particularly as articulated by Barley and Tolbert (1997). They conceptualize institutionalization as an iterative process in which human action reproduces well-known scripts, which then become actively shaped and transformed. In this framework, RoPs act as scripts that are constantly adapted by actors in practice. They evolve over time from informal guides to formal documents embedding good practices promoted by international organizations such as the OECD. Importantly, following structurationist logic, these rules are not static; they are continuously reinterpreted, modified, and contextualized on the basis of local needs and actors' feedback. Because of this, CAs can constantly evolve over time in ways that reflect broader democratic governance ideals, such as a flexible approach to shared challenges, sensitivity to the interests of diverse stakeholders, and a commitment to solidarity and the common good (Bang & Esmark, 2009).

Critical institutionalism expands this understanding by highlighting the embedded, contested, and creative dimensions of institutional development (Berk et al., 2013; Cleaver & de Koning, 2015). Rather than viewing institutions as coherent systems, critical institutionalism emphasizes their emergence through negotiation, bricolage, and layered adaptation that, in turn, may influence the balance of power between political actors (Pilon, 2021). Applied to RoPs, this perspective may help reveal new relationships not only between the CAs' participants but also between the CAs and "older" institutions.

This theoretical framework reconciles tensions in the literature regarding the potential trade-offs of institutionalization. While some warn that institutionalization risks diluting the grassroots character of CAs or enabling co-optation (Pierri, 2023; Pogrebinschi, 2021), others argue that institutionalization and innovation can co-evolve. When institutional forms remain adaptable and open-ended, they allow deliberative democracy to deepen and expand (Berk et al., 2013; Streeck & Thelen, 2005). In this spirit, we believe that the evolution of RoPs toward greater clarity, inclusiveness, and accessibility can demonstrate that procedural development is not merely administrative, but a key component of social institutionalization.

To conclude, institutionalization is a multidimensional and dynamic process that can be meaningfully analyzed through the lens of RoPs. By drawing on neo-institutionalist, structurationist, and critical institutionalist perspectives, we can better understand how democratic innovations like CAs move from the margins to the mainstream of democratic governance, especially in contexts where legal or political support remains limited.

3. Research Design

As we mentioned in Section 2, RoPs can serve not only as a source of knowledge on the procedural aspects of institutional functioning. Scholars who focus on EU studies often treat them as a starting point for the qualitative description of internal institutional development that frequently goes hand in hand with such processes as politicization, rationalization, or empowerment (Brack & Costa, 2018; Kreppel, 2003). A RoP can even be the subject of textual analysis conducted in order to explore hidden conflicts of competences between EU institutions (Palonen & Wiesner, 2016). Furthermore, legislative-oriented researchers find RoPs valuable because they are extremely useful in mapping trends in formal bodies (Johnson, 2003) and drawing cross-country comparisons between generally accepted practices (Serban, 2022). Sometimes, the examination of RoPs may be quite helpful in disentangling complex issues that lie behind the controversial behavior of members of international organizations (Sellheim, 2023). Therefore, although the complicated and formal language of RoPs may sometimes be difficult to follow, they are a key source of information

regarding the deep and multifaceted processes that take place in institutions, organizations, and agencies. In this vein, we decided to focus on the RoPs of Polish CAs treated as a source of indicators of their growing internal institutionalization.

In Poland, cooperation between civil society and public administration is regulated under the Public Benefit and Voluntary Work Act of 24th April 2003. According to this Act, in areas such as social integration, health, environment, and culture, public authorities are required to cooperate with the civil society organization sector (Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2003, art. 4). Social consultations are one of the possible mechanisms through which this cooperation takes place (art. 5, para. 2). Since we focus on local CAs, it is necessary to mention that, according to art. 6 of the Local Governance Act from 8th March 1995, municipalities have their own executive and legislative powers in policies that are not restricted to the state (Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 1995) and, according to many municipal statutes (local “constitutions”), they can shape these policies in cooperation with residents using social consultations that can take the form of CAs. The problem is that neither national nor local acts specify their internal structure, functions, or the role they should play in Polish civil society. This means that CAs’ RoPs are the only document that codifies good practices and informal norms governing the organization of CAs in Poland and is usually prepared by the organizers of CAs. Alternatively, we can call it “the constitution” of a CA, which can be treated as the first step in institutionalizing deliberative processes that, as we argued, are still not well rooted in Poland. Thus, the primary source material consists of the official RoPs that regulate the organization and structure of each CA. These documents were critically examined in order to explore general trends in the development of crucial structural elements of Polish CAs. Therefore, our focus is not a comparison, but rather an analytical description of the institutionalization process over time, including the identification of continuous and evolving practices. We draw on a comparative qualitative analysis of almost all (i.e., 10 RoPs) local CAs that took place between 2016 (when the first local CA was organized in Gdańsk) and 2023 (when the last—as for April 2025—local CA was organized in Rzeszów). We excluded: (a) national CAs from the analysis because local CAs are the most frequently organized type of CA, and also, their scope was too broad to be compared to local CAs, and (b) two CAs that were organized in Łódź because, according to some authors, they did not conform to all the good practices for CAs published by the OECD (Szymaniak-Arnesen, 2024).

The analysis of RoPs proceeded in three stages. First, we labelled the formal properties of each RoP, including document structure, length, and formatting. Second, we analyzed the substantive properties across three dimensions: deliberative procedures (e.g., educational phase and voting mechanisms), actor roles (e.g., facilitators, experts, and monitoring bodies), and decision-making rules (e.g., thresholds for binding recommendations). Third, we synthesized the similarities and differences across the cases to identify common design elements and contextual variations. Given that our initial set of substantive categories was expanded with emergent themes identified during the analysis, we employed a combined deductive-inductive approach (Denscombe, 2008; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2011).

This methodological orientation enables us to trace the evolving patterns of institutional design across Polish CAs and to explore the extent to which RoPs function as instruments of formalization and sites of procedural innovation. All RoP documents were collected from publicly available sources or obtained directly from the organizing institutions. For an overview of the cases included and the coding framework applied, see the Supplementary File.

To further explore how the institutionalization of CAs unfolds in practice, we also employed an in-depth analysis to focus on the learning dynamics between two CAs. We chose two recent Polish CAs—Kraków II and Rzeszów—organized in the same year by the same coordinating NGO. Drawing on our conceptual framework, we view this learning process not as a simple replication but as a multi-dimensional mechanism of institutionalization, one that blends active formalization (neo-institutionalism), iteration (structuration), and creative adaptation (critical institutionalism). By examining what was retained, revised, or rejected between the two cases, we hope to illuminate how CAs evolve not only through codified rules but also through reflective practice, contextual responsiveness, and organizational learning. To gain a comprehensive understanding of both cases, our research team supplemented the document and material analysis with participant observations during the Kraków II Citizens' Assembly in 2021 and the Rzeszów Citizens' Assembly in 2023. This immersive involvement provided practical insights that enriched our analysis and allowed us to compare the RoPs of these CAs with firsthand experience.

4. Institutionalizing CAs Through Rules

To trace the institutionalization of CAs in Poland, we begin with Section 4.1, which analyzes their RoPs as key instruments of formalization. We distinguish between their formal properties—such as document structure, length, and formatting—and their substantive properties, which include the procedural norms and actor roles codified within them. This dual lens allows us to examine not only how RoPs stabilize the institutional form of assemblies but also whether they evolve through practice, adaptation, and learning. In Section 4.2, we explore how institutionalization unfolds in practice by focusing on the learning dynamics between two recent Polish CAs, namely Kraków II and Rzeszów.

4.1. Formal and Substantive Properties of the RoPs

Our analysis reveals several important trends in the formal evolution of the RoPs for CAs in Poland. In the early phase of the development of CAs, prior to 2019, the RoPs were not even a stand-alone document. For example, in the case of all three Gdańsk CAs, the RoPs were appended to the Mayor's Ordinance, while in Lublin, "guidelines" were distributed in the form of role-specific handbooks for panelists and experts. From 2019 onwards, we observe a shift: RoPs began to be issued as stand-alone documents by the organizers of CAs, signaling a new phase of formalization.

This shift was accompanied by increased internal complexity. Post-2019, RoPs typically included explicit definitions of actors and procedures, as well as references to internationally recognized good practices, most notably those proposed by the OECD (2020) and later elaborated by the Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies (KNOCA; Carrick, 2020; OECD, 2020). This alignment likely served a dual purpose, namely, to objectify the deliberative process for public audiences and to substitute for the absence of national legal recognition by anchoring legitimacy in internationally accepted standards.

A notable change occurred in the treatment of participant selection procedures: early RoPs (2016–2018) offered detailed descriptions of the random selection (Gąsiorowska, 2023a), which proved difficult to communicate clearly in public-facing documents. Another trend involves the use of appendices. Starting in 2023, RoPs began to include annexes outlining good practices, reflecting a broader move toward simplification and increased accessibility. These structural adjustments mark an evolution in how RoPs

function: from technical guides for organizers to communicative instruments for broader audiences. We return to this point in the next sub-section.

Our analysis of the substantive content of the RoPs reveals two broad categories of procedural elements: (a) *Gold standards*: defined as rules that appear in at least six out of the ten RoPs analyzed (recognizing that the first CA was of a more experimental nature and that the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated specific procedural adaptations, we consider the recurrence of a rule in six or more RoPs as indicative of its establishment as a gold standard), and (b) *Novelties*: defined as rules that appear in no more than two RoPs. These categories allow us to distinguish between procedural consolidation and experimentation.

One finding from the first set is that several procedural elements qualify as *gold standards* of the RoPs in the Polish context. These include the presence of a guiding question, demographic criteria for the selection of participants, including a minimum age requirement, a binding threshold for recommendations, public access to the educational phase, confidentiality of the deliberative phase, the duration of the CA, defined roles and rights for key actors in the process, and the public release of a final report. These elements map directly onto the OECD's core principles for effective CAs, as outlined in Table 1. The table confirms that these principles are a good matrix for a comparative analysis of CAs-related documents, since they reflect the multidimensionality of the proper design of the CAs and the basic democratic values to which the organizers should refer.

Table 1. Alignment of the properties of the RoPs of Polish local climate assemblies with OECD good practices and KNOCA evaluation framework.

Properties Analysed	RoPs	OECD good practices for deliberative processes	KNOCA evaluation framework
Purpose	Guiding question of a CA Specific questions	The objective should be outlined as a clear task linked to a defined public problem	Remit and framing Process design integrity
Accountability	Binding nature of the CA's recommendations	There should be an influence on public decisions	Pathways to impact Impact on policymakers and government
Transparency	Educational part of the CA is available to the public	Process and all materials should be publicly available in a timely manner	Not explicitly included
Representativeness	Description of the draw (random sampling) Demographic criteria Number of panelists from each district Minimum age of panelists	Participants should reflect a microcosm of the general public through stratified random sampling	Representativeness of recruitment process Demographic diversity
Inclusiveness	Choice of stakeholders Time allocated for stakeholders' speeches Formulation of recommendations by stakeholders Remuneration for panelists	Inclusion of under-represented groups should be considered Support through remuneration and other means	Stakeholder involvement Diversity of political views and activity

Table 1. (Cont.) Alignment of the properties of the RoPs of Polish local climate assemblies with OECD good practices and KNOCA evaluation framework.

Properties Analysed	RoPs	OECD good practices for deliberative processes	KNOCA evaluation framework
Information	Remuneration for experts Time allocated for experts' speeches Fact-checkers Rights of panelists to verify information Rights of panelists to invite additional experts/stakeholders Rights of panelists to organize additional meetings or extend sessions	Participants should access a wide range of accurate, relevant, and accessible evidence and expertise	Quality, accessibility, and balance of evidence Member engagement with evidence
Group deliberation	Facilitators/moderators Reserve group Final wording of recommendations Probationary voting	Participants should engage in structured deliberation with skilled facilitation	Approach to facilitation Quality and inclusiveness of deliberation
Time	Length of a CA	Participants should meet for a sufficient duration to allow informed deliberation	Not explicitly included
Integrity	Composition and rights of the coordinating team Composition and rights of the monitoring team Observers Arbitration	The process should be coordinated by an independent team with oversight mechanisms	Planning and organization Process design integrity
Privacy	Confidentiality of deliberative sessions	Small group discussion should be private Not explicitly included	Not explicitly included
Evaluation	Final report	An internal evaluation should assess achievements and areas for improvement	Not explicitly included

Notes: Based on the authors' own data collection and interpretation of the RoPs of Polish local climate assemblies, in reference to the OECD's *Good Practice Principles for Deliberative Processes for Public Decision-Making* (OECD, 2021), and the KNOCA *Impact Evaluation Framework* (Carrick, 2020).

The strong and consistent presence of these elements in Polish RoPs signals a degree of convergence around an emerging "institutional spine." While some of this convergence may be strategic—serving to bolster legitimacy in the absence of formal legal status—the consistency across cases suggests a deeper process of institutional consolidation.

The second set of findings relates to *novelties*, which we categorize into three types: *protective*, *enhancing*, and *integrative*. These context-specific adjustments reflect the creative and localized dimensions of institutionalization, in line with critical institutionalist understandings outlined in the theoretical section. *Protective novelties* aim to safeguard participants and reinforce the integrity of the deliberative process. Examples include: the right of panelists to request the dismissal of a facilitator or a moderator (Wrocław and Poznań CAs); the use of arbitration procedures (Wrocław, Poznań, and Kraków I CAs); the inclusion of fact-checkers (Gdańsk and Lublin CAs); the recording of monitoring team meetings (Poznań CA); and the rule that observers can attend only the educational part (Poznań CA). It should be noted that these provisions were introduced to enhance transparency and shield participants from potential manipulation and misinformation. The limited continuation in the later RoPs may indicate that certain protections have become normalized and are now embedded informally in facilitator practices, or that they have been absorbed into more general procedural frameworks. For instance, the right to dismiss a facilitator may now fall under the broader mechanisms of feedback and accountability. Accordingly, the introduction of a fact-checker was replaced by another *gold standard*. These context-specific adjustments reflect the creative and situated dimensions of institutionalization, namely, the right of panelists to request that the organizers verify information that seems unreliable.

Enhancing novelties emerged when Polish CAs were still developing, but at the same time, their organizers obtained valuable experience learning from each other. These include: the introduction of “witnesses” with lived experience (Poznań CA); appeal procedures for both observer selection and final vote outcomes (Poznań CA); additional criteria for defining binding recommendations based on participant attitudes (Poznań CA); alternative forms of compensation such as vouchers (Kraków II CA); and formal approval of RoPs by monitoring teams (Kraków II CA). These adaptations varied in purpose—some intended to enhance the legitimacy of CAs, while others addressed the increasing procedural complexity of CAs. Their absence in later RoPs suggests they were not treated as sufficiently useful or were absorbed into existing *gold standard* rules (e.g., the role of “witnesses” falling under stakeholder rights). This finding aligns with a broader trend toward simplification, which we explore in the next sub-section. Nevertheless, the mere existence of this type of novelty contradicts the claim that institutionalization narrows down the scope for creativity and experimentation. On the contrary, a stable set of core rules appears to facilitate ongoing procedural experimentation and innovation.

Finally, *integrative novelties* began to appear in CAs from 2021, when citizens’ assemblies were “blooming” and had already established *gold standards* of deliberation in Poland. By this stage, organizers had tested and refined various models of sampling, facilitation, and communication. As institutions mature, they tend to formalize their relations with existing structures, hence the emergence of rules regulating interactions with municipal authorities. These include mayoral approval of monitoring team composition (Kraków I CA); provision of photo services by the City Hall (Rzeszów CA); and mayoral convening of monitoring meetings (Rzeszów CA). Though still recent and difficult to assess for long-term continuity, these provisions suggest a new phase of institutionalization, in which CAs not only consolidate internal procedures but also define their role within the broader governance ecosystem. This reflects the ongoing professionalization of Polish CAs, discussed further in the next sub-section.

4.2. Case Study: Institutional Learning in Practice—Kraków and Rzeszów CAs

While the comparative analysis of RoPs reveals broader patterns of formalization and procedural adaptation, these documents do not emerge in a vacuum. They are developed, tested, and revised by actors who operate within real-world constraints, accumulate practical knowledge, and engage in iterative refinement. To further explore how institutionalization unfolds in practice, this section shifts the focus to the learning dynamics between two recent Polish CAs, Kraków II and Rzeszów. We selected these cases because they are the most recent among the eight Polish CAs analyzed and therefore relatively well-grounded in political and organizational practice; they were both conducted in the same year—Krakow in the spring and Rzeszów in the autumn—allowing us to examine the potential learning effects between the two processes; and both were organized by the same NGO, the Fundacja Pole Dialogu, offering an ideal setting to assess whether and how procedural adaptations were transferred across cases. In addition, our research team conducted participant observations in both processes, allowing us to combine document analysis with practical insights.

The Kraków Assembly on Transport was organized by two NGOs—Foundation Pole Dialogu and Optimum Pareto Foundation—selected through a competitive public tender by Kraków City Office. The assembly sought to answer the question: How can the City of Kraków and its citizens advance activities for sustainable transport? The process began with three consultative meetings between 12th and 25th January 2023, followed by educational sessions on 4th–5th March, deliberative meetings on 18th–19th March, and final voting on 1st April. In total, 43 recommendations received over 80% support from the panelists and were submitted to the mayor. The Rzeszów panel on climate, organized later that year, was centered on the question: How can Rzeszów achieve climate-neutrality by 2030? It followed a similar structure, with educational and initial deliberation sessions on 21st–22nd October, further deliberation and recommendation refinement on 4th–5th November, and final voting on 18th November. Ultimately, 51 recommendations obtained at least 80% of votes and the mayor confirmed that he would implement them according to his initial declaration.

Given the above, the question arises as to what Rzeszów has learned from Kraków. At first sight, both RoPs are quite similar in terms of the same *gold standards* that we listed in the previous sub-section. However, several new provisions in the Rzeszów RoP suggest adopting selective adaptation—or “institutional learning”—from Kraków. These include both refinements to existing rules (*sharpening*) and the expansion of the procedural scope (*opening*). *Sharpening* rules included the addition of appendices summarizing OECD good practices; lowering the minimum panelist age from 18 to 15 (it is important to note that a reduction in the minimum age was first introduced during the 2020 Warsaw Citizens’ Assembly, reflecting a broader trend towards increased youth participation in deliberative processes); the rule that stakeholders cannot act as experts; allowing panelists to submit recommendations during the deliberation meetings; permitting experts to waive their honoraria; and requiring final recommendations to be published within 14 days of the final voting. These refinements suggest growing sophistication and responsiveness to practical challenges. For example, excluding stakeholders from expert roles may address perceived conflicts of interest, while the expanded submission window for recommendations may promote inclusion. The relocation of OECD good practices to the appended materials illustrates a trend toward simplifying core RoPs documents. Another possible explanation is that the Rzeszów RoPs seem to be tailored to the general public. Given that OECD good practices may not be widely understood by those unfamiliar with the CAs, the authors of the RoPs might have deemed it sufficient to mention these practices without elaboration. Individuals seeking more

detailed information could refer to the appended materials. Furthermore, as CAs become an integral part of Poland's political landscape, the necessity to consistently reference their foundational principles in RoPs may have diminished.

Opening rules introduced in Rzeszów further reflect deeper integration with public institutions. These include: designating the City Hall representatives as observers; co-organizing expert recruitment with the City Hall; resolving unspecified matters through collaboration between the coordinating team and the City Hall; and making RoP validity contingent on approval by the monitoring team.

What was not learned, which procedural elements from Kraków CA were omitted in Rzeszów, and why? Despite this evidence of institutional learning, certain provisions from the Kraków CA were not carried forward to Rzeszów. These include: a preamble in the RoP (originally adopted in Kraków I CA); a paragraph defining the role of the operator/organizer; using the term “compensation” for the participant honoraria; issuing vouchers as a form of payment; and requiring breaches of the RoP to be documented in the final report and published on the CA's website.

Several factors may explain these omissions. The absence of a preamble could reflect efforts to streamline RoPs and prioritize accessibility over symbolic formality. The omission of the operator's role may align with organizational restructuring: unlike Kraków, where the organizer also managed facilitation, the Rzeszów CA separated the technical and deliberative functions. This functional differentiation signifies a more professionalized model, with discrete roles and responsibilities. The decision not to use the term “compensation” or adopt voucher payments may be ideological, distancing the CA process from market logic or transactional connotations. Similarly, dropping the requirement to publicize RoP breaches may reflect an emphasis on conflict resolution over punitive transparency. Based on our field observations, RoP breaches are rare, and any irregularities are typically addressed proactively by the monitoring team, rendering formal reporting mechanisms largely redundant.

Beyond adaptations from Kraków, the Rzeszów RoP introduced three original rules not seen in earlier cases: City Hall providing photographic services; selection of stakeholders is made by the operator in cooperation with the City Hall; and the mayor convening the monitoring team's first meeting. These changes mark a further stage of institutional integration. Many CAs' RoPs now explicitly reference cooperation with municipal authorities, including the City Hall or the mayor, in many areas. The Rzeszów CA provides a clear example: the City Hall was not only an observer or a body providing feedback on recommendations, but an active partner engaged in practical tasks, such as contributing to the final selection of Stakeholders or providing photographic services. This shift reflects a broader trend of increasing political integration, whereby traditional public institutions become more directly involved in the organizational infrastructure of CAs. Another observable tendency is the growing professionalization of the organization of CAs. Technical responsibilities, such as logistics, documentation, or communication, are increasingly outsourced to external entities selected through public tenders. In contrast, responsibility for safeguarding deliberative quality is retained by dedicated coordinating teams, allowing them to focus more fully on the substance and integrity of the process. The last trend that we observed is related to the formal presentation and user interface of RoPs. As noted in previous sections, recent RoPs have become simpler and more accessible. This shift is evident in three key changes: (a) specialized or technical information is often moved to the appendices; (b) the rules are shorter and more concise; and (c) the rules that are now widely accepted or taken for

granted are omitted. Additionally, some RoPs, such as those of Rzeszów CA, include visually engaging features, such as colorful graphics and clearly marked section headings.

Our analysis of the RoPs reveals that they are a valuable source of insight into the institutionalization of CAs. Specifically: the form and content of the RoP documents may be useful indicators of the institutional evolution of the CAs; RoPs play a dual role: on the one hand they formalize and legitimize informal norms that are taken for granted by the CA participants, while on the other hand they function as flexible tools for introducing innovative changes to the process of deliberation; and comparing RoPs across successive CAs offers valuable insights into how organizers learn from and adapt procedures and organizational strategies over time. Another crucial observation is the importance of the OECD's good practices for institutionalizing deliberative innovations that have still not been well recognized in the legal orders of Central and Eastern European countries, such as Poland. They function as the "institutional spine" of these CAs and, even more importantly, they are a normative axis around which these CAs build their institutional identity. From our research experience on different CAs, we know that depending on the organizers, context, time, and place where a CA took place, different organizational solutions were applied, but they were all based on the hard core of a good climate assembly, which is observable in the RoPs under consideration. Consequently, their clear and firm presence in the RoPs means they are the lowest common denominator among theorists and practitioners of deliberative democracy.

The comparative analysis of the Kraków II (2021) and Rzeszów (2023) assemblies further illustrates the dynamic nature of institutionalization. The Kraków II assembly demonstrated a high degree of procedural refinement, with RoPs incorporating lessons from previous assemblies and emphasizing transparency and participant engagement. In contrast, the Rzeszów assembly, while adhering to established norms, introduced adaptations to accommodate local contexts and challenges. These cases exemplify how CAs evolve through iterative learning, balancing the formalization of procedures with the need for contextual responsiveness and innovation.

5. Conclusion

This article set out to investigate how the institutionalization of CAs unfolds in the Polish context through the lens of their RoPs. The central research questions asked how RoPs function as instruments of institutionalization and whether they reflect learning, adaptation, and professionalization over time. This topic was selected in response to the growing popularity of CAs in Central and Eastern Europe and the relative lack of scholarly focus on how their institutional features evolve. We drew on a triangulated theoretical framework—including neo-institutionalism (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; March & Olsen, 1984), structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), and critical institutionalism (Cleaver & de Koning, 2015)—and a combination of document analysis and field observations to explore how RoPs help stabilize, legitimize, and innovate deliberative practices in a legal and political vacuum.

Our findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of institutionalization. We show that RoPs are not merely static tools of procedural codification, but evolving documents that formalize good practices while enabling flexible adaptation (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Elstub & Escobar, 2019). They function both as scripts of institutional stability and sites for procedural experimentation, aligning with Giddens' (1984) notion of structuration as recursive interplay between structure and agency. The presence of *gold standards* across

RoPs illustrates institutional convergence, while context-specific novelties highlight ongoing institutional bricolage (Cleaver & de Koning, 2015). This dual character of RoPs reinforces the idea that institutionalization, particularly in the realm of democratic innovations, is dynamic and negotiated.

As discussed in Section 2, scholars remain divided on the consequences of institutionalization. While some highlight benefits such as predictability and legitimacy (Bastiaensen & Stearns, 2022; Berk & Galvan, 2009), others caution against co-optation and ossification (Consejero & Herranz, 2023; Streeck & Thelen, 2005). Our empirical evidence supports a more optimistic view: a comparative case study of the Kraków II and Rzeszów assemblies illustrates that institutionalization does not preclude experimentation. Instead, it often fosters “institutional creativity,” especially when rules are adapted to local contexts or reflect accumulated learning. This supports the view, developed in Section 2, that institutionalization is not a fixed end-state but a dynamic, recursive process shaped by civic practice and political engagement (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Cleaver & de Koning, 2015). Among the strengths of this study is its original methodological design, combining document analysis with participant observation and case comparison. This has enabled us to access both the textual and experiential dimensions of institutional change. However, we also acknowledge the limitations: our sample was restricted to local CAs in Poland, excluding national or less standardized assemblies. Additionally, while we tracked procedural patterns, the political outcomes of CAs and their implementation impact were beyond the scope of this article.

Nevertheless, the results have broader significance. First, the Polish case reveals how RoPs function as a flexible mechanism of institutionalization in contexts where legal anchoring is weak or absent. Second, the OECD good practices appear to operate as a form of transnational standardization: an “institutional spine” across decentralized CAs. Third, we observe signs of increasing engagement between CAs and public institutions, indicating the rise of an “inside-outside” dynamic (Stephenson, 2016) that may ultimately embed deliberative practices in wider governance structures.

In practical terms, our findings suggest that RoPs can help improve democratic legitimacy and operational coherence, especially when tailored to include diverse audiences and stakeholders. As such, they can serve as templates not only for organizers but also for policy-makers seeking to institutionalize deliberative mechanisms. Going forward, further research should examine whether similar trends are observable in other Central and Eastern European countries and whether RoPs are being localized or harmonized in global comparative frameworks.

Contrary to fears that institutionalization may constrain deliberative innovation, our analysis shows that it can provide a stable yet flexible foundation for further development. When approached reflexively, it can deepen the democratic potential of CAs by grounding them in both shared standards and responsive practice. The Polish experience suggests that even in legally fragmented contexts, it is possible to develop a resilient and evolving infrastructure for democratic deliberation.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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