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Deliberative Policy (Sub)System: Institutionalising Deliberative Mini-Publics Within the Policy Process

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Abstract

Over the last few decades, growing public dissatisfaction with institutions of representative democracy has become unignorable. Similar problems affecting representative democracy occur within the policy process, as traditional top-down policymaking within the institutions of representative democracy has proven inadequate to include citizens. As a potential solution, some have turned to deliberative mini-publics (DMPs), which are slowly overcoming their experimental phase, and more attention is being placed on their institutionalisation within the political system and policy process. In this article, we are looking to articulate the necessary conditions for the institutionalisation of DMPs within a policy process. In doing so, we articulate six necessary conditions that aim at making DMPs an inclusive and effective member of the policy subsystem.

Keywords

coupling; deliberative democracy; deliberative mini-publics; embeddedness; institutionalisation; policy process

1. Introduction

The persistent erosion of public confidence in, and satisfaction with, the institutions of representative democracy has emerged as one of the defining challenges over recent decades, shaping the debates about the legitimacy and future of democracy. An expanding body of literature seeks to explain the constant decline in global voter turnout, evident even in well-developed democracies, where fewer citizens willing to

take an active part in the hallmark mechanisms of representative democracy (Ipsos, 2023; Solijonov, 2016). Research suggests that declining citizens' confidence in institutions is closely tied to both disillusionment and growing dissatisfaction with governmental and institutional accountability, competence, responsiveness—processes that fuel disengagement and challenge the legitimacy of conventional democratic institutions (Castanho Silva, 2025; van der Meer, 2017). Many citizens feel they have limited access to institutions and little influence on the formulation of public policies, believing that despite casting a vote, they are neither represented nor able to exert substantive impact on the political system (Noel, 2017).

In pursuit of an effective response to the ongoing crisis of democracy, scholars are turning to deliberative mechanisms as a means of bridging the widening gap between citizens and democratic institutions (Dryzek, 2009; Fung, 2009; Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012). A growing body of literature explores the potential of deliberation to address the democratic deficit of the policy process by deepening citizen engagement and creating spaces where their voices can be stated and heard through joint decision-making that involves deliberation of vertically and horizontally located actors (see Ansell et al., 2017; Ansell & Gash, 2008). Advocates of deliberative democracy emphasise its capacity to enhance democratisation, by underlining a talk-centric dimension of democracy (Chambers, 2003; Dryzek, 2009). As John Dryzek argues, "political systems are deliberatively undemocratic to the extent that they minimize opportunities for individuals to reflect freely on their political preferences," adding that "democratic legitimacy resides in the right, ability, and opportunity of those subject to a collective decision to participate in deliberation about the content of that decision" (Dryzek, 2009, p. 1381). Before moving on, it should be noted that we focus on political deliberation with a goal to shape and influence policy processes. Additionally, we will use the terms deliberative democracy and (political) deliberation interchangeably and they should be considered identical.

While many authors turn towards deliberative arenas as a remedy for democratic challenges (Fishkin et al., 2025; Niemeyer, 2011; Rountree et al., 2022), others propose more cautionary accounts of their potential and impact (Beauvais & Warren, 2018; Jacobs & Kaufmann, 2019). The institutional integration of deliberative mini-publics (DMPs) into the broader political system remains relatively under-researched (Hendriks, 2016; Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012). Moreover, a key challenge lies in creating normative-institutional frameworks that, on the one hand, prevent "blind deference" to institutions (Lafont, 2015), while, on the other, preserve the autonomy and effectiveness of DMPs and their benefits (Schmidt, 2024).

This article contributes to addressing this gap by articulating a normative framework for the effective institutionalisation of DMPs, encompassing both the legal and organisational aspects of institutionalisation within a policy process. The framework aims to ensure effective inclusion and institutionalisation of DMPs while keeping the policy process open for other stakeholders, thereby preventing the "blind deference" to any single arena, institution, or actor. We seek to contribute to conceptualising the conditions that enable DMPs to democratise a policy subsystem, focusing particularly on two core variables of democratic quality: inclusiveness and contestation (Coppedge et al., 2008). For this purpose, the spotlight is placed on policymaking. The context for our conceptualisation is a policy subsystem which represents a zone of autonomy, where various dominant and interested sides craft policies related to a particular issue (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009). A policy subsystem is understood here as a part of the policy process, an arena constituted from a group of actors interested in shaping and contesting a specific policy issue, such as environment, healthcare, or any other domain. Such a subsystem gathers various actors, including governmental agencies, interest groups, advocacy coalitions, and, in our case, a DMP.

The justification for developing a set of conditions for the effective and inclusive institutionalisation of DMPs lies both in lessons from practice and notions derived from normative deliberative theory. The article's original contribution is twofold: firstly, the articulation of a normative framework of conditions, and secondly, the exploration of their possible implementation. As related notions of embeddedness and coupling are often conflated with institutionalisation, we first briefly clarify these distinctions.

The *institutionalisation* of deliberative mechanisms within a policy subsystem implies the formal adoption of rules and procedures for deliberation within a system (Bussu et al., 2022), while *embeddedness* is manifested through normative and relational status between DMP and a political system—specifically, how adequately they are integrated into the broader political and administrative environment (Bussu et al., 2022). *Coupling*, meanwhile, involves "processes of convergence, mutual influence and mutual adjustment" such that "each part would consider reasons and proposals generated in other parts" (Mansbridge et al., 2012, p. 23). Our focus is primarily on the normative aspects of institutionalisation, embeddedness, and coupling, while also addressing their legal and organisational aspects.

The article proceeds as follows. We firstly delineate characteristics of a good deliberative process. Next, drawing on a literature review of illustrative cases, we review the outcomes and mechanisms through which DMPs operate within the policy process. Finally, we articulate the conditions necessary for their effective institutionalisation. Here, institutionalisation is understood in a broad sense—it encompasses not only the formal and legal incorporation of DMPs into the policy system but also their embeddedness and coupling with existing institutions and processes.

2. What Makes a Good Deliberative Process?

In *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*, authors characterise deliberative democracy as follows:

> [Deliberative democracy is] grounded in an ideal in which people come together, on the basis of equal status and mutual respect, to discuss the political issues they face and, on the basis of those discussions, decide on the policies that will then affect their lives. (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 2).

Moreover, it "means mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern" (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 20). This definition emphasises the horizontalisation of decision-making power and the inclusion of those most affected and marginalised (Devaney et al., 2020; Smith, 2003). Walters provides more insights into what political deliberation should look like, defining it as follows:

> [Deliberation means] collective decision-making through a process of dialogue or discourse in which people who make decisions exchange reasonable arguments in the spirit of equality, critical reflection and purification of their respective position with the intention of following and deepening the notion of public good. (Walters, 2018, p. 169)

Both definitions focus on the outcomes of deliberation that reflect the common good and common interest, positioning DMPs as potential candidates for democratising decision-making by enhancing inclusiveness. The underlying notion is that all those who are affected by a policy should be able to participate and

deliberate on the given issue (Habermas, 1996). Accordingly, the main principles of deliberation include equality of participation, mutual respect, and "the unforced force of the better argument" (Habermas, 1996, p. 305). This aligns with the notion of horizontalisation, which requires equal participation. The ideal output of this process is the articulation of a form of *meta-consensus*—a "shared recognition of the legitimacy of a set of values, while not requiring agreement on the ranking of these values" (Niemeyer & Dryzek, 2007, p. 504).

While deliberative processes can take different forms and unfold across various arenas, this article focuses on one specific form: DMPs. These are defined as "participatory institutions that bring together an inclusive group of ordinary citizens who discuss a public issue together in order to exert public influence" (Vrydagh, 2023, p. 3). DMPs are recognised as valuable tools for enhancing inclusiveness, as they ensure that every participant has an equal opportunity to contribute and express their views. Inclusiveness is reflected in the representation of diverse opinions and demographics, the encouragement of alternative forms of communication, and the provision of robust support for participants' learning processes. By empowering marginalised groups and insisting that contributions be justified with respect to broader societal needs, DMPs sustain a continuous focus on the common good as the ultimate outcome of deliberation.

The proliferation of DMPs at various governance levels during the "deliberative turn" offers valuable insights into their impacts and benefits (Ilić et al., 2024; Markov et al., 2024). Research highlights the multifaceted benefits of deliberative mechanisms, ranging from individual-level impact on citizens to systemic policy impact, including enhanced participation and citizens' knowledge (Đorđević & Vasiljević, 2022; Fiket et al., 2022); improved inclusiveness and contributions from diverse groups; empowerment of citizens and reduction in polarisation and social tension (EuComMeet, 2022); more authentic decisions (Barabas, 2004); greater satisfaction with policymaking and stronger support for representative institutions (Parés et al., 2015); more just and inclusive policy outcomes (Muradova & Arceneaux, 2022; Young, 1996); and enhanced responsiveness, democratic representation, and legitimacy in governance (Beauvais & Warren, 2018; Germann et al., 2022). These deliberative mechanisms are easily scalable and applicable to different contexts (Huening et al., 2022), with effects extending beyond direct participants to the broader community, by strengthening perceptions of democracy and political processes (Boulianne, 2018). However, the challenge remains: ensuring that these outputs are effectively integrated into wider political discourse and decision-making (Felicetti et al., 2015; Goodin & Dryzek, 2006).

3. Deliberative (Sub)Systems: Looking Beyond One-Off Events

Much of the deliberative scholarship focuses on *how* deliberative process should look, typically examining "either a single episode of deliberation, as in one-time group discussions, or on a continuing series with the same group or in the same type of institution" (Thompson, 2008, p. 513). Authors like Dryzek, however, stress the consequential character of deliberative process, arguing that DMPs "must have an impact on collective decisions or social outcomes" (Dryzek, 2009, p. 1382). Building on wider, systemic consequences of deliberative process, Parkinson and Mansbridge (2012) suggest "that it is necessary to go beyond the study of individual institutions and processes to examine their interaction in the system as a whole" (p. 2). This requires acknowledging the complexity of a decision-making system—comprising NGOs, interest groups, media, government agencies, and bureaucracy—and exploring how the deliberative processes fit in and interact with these stakeholders. By conceptualising and examining the relations between different

deliberative and non-deliberative actors within a system, scholars assess the quality and character of their interactions (Mansbridge et al., 2012). Although not all parts of a system must be deliberative, they should complement one another and serve as corrective factors to deliberative arenas. Thus, "a systemic approach" entails judging the democratic quality of the system as a whole, in addition to its individual components: "We need to ask not only what good deliberation would be both in general and in particular settings, but also what a good deliberative system would entail" (Mansbridge et al., 2012, pp. 4–5).

This is where the coupling of DMPs with other institutional arenas of the policy subsystem becomes central. The key question is how such coupling should occur: loose coupling (with a DMP outside of the system) guarantees autonomy but risks limited efficacy and impact; whereas tight coupling often risks co-optation by other institutional actors (Hendriks, 2016). While some authors suggest loose coupling as the ideal model, others argue for a more nuanced approach that calibrates coupling to political circumstances (Hendriks, 2016).

3.1. Overview of Coupling and Institutionalisation in Theory and Practice

Numerous theoretical proposals and implemented models address the coupling and institutionalisation of DMPs within political systems. For instance, Elstub argues in favour of associational democracy where secondary associations—sites of deliberation—would have a more prominent role, enhancing social pluralism, decentralisation, and inclusion (Elstub, 2007). Gastil and Wright (2018) propose a sortition body within a bicameral legislative system with two equally powerful chambers: one composed of elected representatives and the other a "sortition assembly" of randomly selected citizens. Members of the sortition assembly would serve multi-year terms, receive extensive training, have professional support, and be well remunerated (Gastil & Wright, 2018). Other authors emphasise context-specific institutional arrangements. Lewanski (2013) outlines the Tuscan laboratory (not a typical DMP, but more of a participatory model with deliberation as its important element), as an ad hoc independent authority established by regional government authority of Tuscany trough Law no. 69 (full name of the law is Rules on the Promotion of Participation in the Formulation of Regional and Local Policies) which helped develop citizen trust and promote participation in shaping regional and local policies through co-creation. Hartz-Karp and Briand (2009) draw on several examples of sustained deliberative practice, including Danish consensus conferences, municipal government in Hampton (Virginia), participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre (Brazil), and Grama Sabhas in Kerala (India).

The OECD provides an excellent overview several models for institutionalising DMPs, outlining various coupling models and their respective benefits and weaknesses.

The first model focuses on *parliamentary integration*, combining a permanent citizens' assembly with one-off citizens' panels. One of the most notable examples of institutionalisation within a legislative system comes from Belgium, where the regional parliament of the German-speaking community in Ostbelgien unanimously approved a law in 2019 establishing three new democratic institutions under a citizen dialogue process (OECD, 2021): the Permanent Citizens' Council, the Citizens' Panels, and the Secretariat. The Permanent Citizens' Council is comprised of 24 citizens chosen by lottery for a 1.5-year mandate, with one-third of its members rotating every six months. This body oversees agenda-setting by initiating up to three Citizens' Panels per term, determines their size and duration, and oversees the implementation of their recommendations in parliament. The Citizens' Panels, each with 25 to 50 randomly selected citizens,

deliberate at least three times over a three-month period. They foster citizen engagement through two main channels: by providing space for their direct engagement through the panels on the one hand; and by enabling groups of at least 100 citizens, parliamentary groups, or the government to submit proposals to the Permanent Citizens' Council on the other (OECD, 2021). A Secretariat comprised of full-time officials provides institutional support by managing lotteries, assisting the Council, and organising the Panels (OECD, 2021). This case has demonstrated a strong policy impact, though its success depends on strong all-party political support, a clear separation of roles, and regular rotation of and robust support structures.

Another model, implemented in regional French-speaking parliaments in Belgium, introduces *deliberative committees* where 45 randomly selected residents deliberate alongside 15 MPs at the request of a petition initiated by at least 1,000 citizens (for more on the design, see OECD, 2021). These committees foster mutual trust between citizens and MPs but require a clear division of roles and political neutrality, which again underlines the importance of context when opting for a model.

Next model *combines the deliberative process with direct democracy*, usually in the form of a *referendum*. In the United States, the Citizens' Initiative Review convenes a representative group of citizens to evaluate ballot initiatives and produce a deliberative 1–2-page report along with a summary on ballot options (OECD, 2021). While highly useful in countering misinformation and providing citizens with a refined outlook on available options, its impact is limited by a lack of proactiveness in agenda-setting and the binary structure of referendums. Expanding its agenda-setting powers—e.g., via "preferendums"—could thus strengthen its deliberative role (OECD, 2021).

Standing advisory panels, such as the Toronto Planning Review Panel, are another possible model where citizens meet regularly to inform urban planning decisions. This model promotes expertise-building and organisational continuity, though it also requires institutional buy-in and consistent engagement (OECD, 2021).

Similarly, *sequenced deliberation* models, such as Bogotá's Itinerant Citizens' Assembly (Colombia), embedded DMPs into successive stages of the policy cycle, from agenda-setting to proposal development and policy evaluation (OECD, 2021). Integrating DMPs in this way brings numerous benefits, from enhancing adaptability to complex solutions, to broadening participation and inclusiveness, while also being intensive (OECD, 2021).

In the *citizen-initiated processes* model, such as the one in Vorarlberg (Austria), citizens can directly trigger a deliberative process, granting broad citizen control of agenda-setting. However, this does come with a risk of underuse due to limited awareness or clear criteria for initiation (OECD, 2021).

By contrast, there is a model in which *deliberation is mandated before certain policy decisions*, as in the case of the permanent Citizens' Assembly in Paris—a practice that can strengthen policy uptake but also risks becoming an overly formalised and stifled process (OECD, 2021).

Finally, the deliberative process can be embedded in *local strategic planning*, as in Victoria (Australia), which can help align local policy with citizen preferences. However, this requires long-term commitment from authorities and a broad community engagement strategy (OECD, 2021).

Long-term commitment implies continuous engagement beyond the deliberative process, as successful institutionalisation relies not only on design but also on follow-up. *Monitoring* ensures that deliberative

outputs reflect citizens' needs and influence policies. In higher education reforms under the Bologna Process, wide collaboration of relevant actors enabled robust post-implementation tracking and assessment of impact (Hoareau, 2012). Similarly, the Irish Citizens' Assemblies provided proper monitoring infrastructure in the form of post-deliberation parliamentary committees and regular public reports, creating accountability loops (Farrell & Suiter, 2019). Civic monitoring by academics and CSOs, as in Belgium's G1000 case, can also play this role (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2013). By contrast, the Brexit Citizens' Assembly in the UK lacked formal tracking mechanisms, which led to ambiguity towards its demonstrable impact on the negotiation process (Renwick et al., 2018). This is why it is important to establish clear monitoring practices in order to assess the impact of citizens and institutional responsiveness.

It should be noted that *deliberation need not be limited to randomly selected citizens*. Community engagement processes in Western Australia provide a prime example of including both citizens and other stakeholders, where stakeholders get to learn from the experience of engaging with citizens, with many recommendations taken up (Gregory et al., 2008). Similar participatory forums in Portugal demonstrated the benefits of multi-actor deliberation, but also presented the risks of elite capture (Falanga & Ferrão, 2021).

These cases illustrate the variety of institutionalisation models, which can be differentiated by type, sphere, and scope of their competence, as well as the level and specific institutional setting in which they are situated. They *can be categorised along two dimensions*: the "autonomous-embedded dimension," which focuses on the level of their embeddedness within the existing structure of the system; and the "provisional-final dimension," which reflects the authority of the deliberative outcome, i.e., the type of mandate their decisions entail (Johnson & Gastil, 2015). The *autonomous-embedded dimension* determines "the extent to which the deliberative event(s) are either insulated from or embedded in existing structures of social and political organization" (Johnson & Gastil, 2015, p. 9). Embedded models of institutionalisation can enhance durability and uptake but require significant time and resources (Johnson & Gastil, 2015), while also risking co-optation by political actors. On the other hand, autonomous models preserve citizen empowerment (through tools such as sortition) and high deliberative quality (Johnson & Gastil, 2015) but risk struggling with legitimacy among institutional actors—especially from the public administration sector. The *provisional-final dimension* explores the "extent of authority held by the deliberating group" (Johnson & Gastil, 2015, p. 13): Provisional models require ratification of DMPs' outcomes either by a referendum or by the parliament, whereas the other "final" model of DMPs comes with higher authority as their decisions are final and mandatory, thus directly translated into policy.

One further important categorisation of embeddedness that must be addressed: temporal, spatial, and practical aspects of embeddedness. Temporally, embeddedness implies the continuous implementation of deliberative processes that go beyond one-off events. This means that a DMP is embedded when it becomes a permanent member of a policy cycle, i.e., when it is regularly repeated (Bussu et al., 2022; OECD, 2020). Spatially, embeddedness extends deliberation across all policy arenas rather than isolating it in a single niche (Bussu et al., 2022; Edelenbos et al., 2008). Finally, practically, it involves informal actors and norms as well as formalised DMPs (Bussu et al., 2022; Elstub & Escobar, 2019).

3.2. The Shortcomings of DMPs

DMPs are not without their shortcomings and challenges, nor is the process of their institutionalisation. Their claim to be broadly representative has been brought into question by scholars, pointing to various biases and challenges such as small sample sizes, self-selection, and biases in sortition (Spada & Peixoto, 2025). It is not just the representative character of DMPs that is put into question; doubts have also been raised about their efficacy. Cases such as the constitutional deliberation in Iceland (Landemore, 2015) and the Citizens' Assembly in Flanders (Van Crombrugge, 2020) demonstrate how deliberative projects and initiatives can easily be disregarded by the political elites and representatives, and by the general population. Finally, even when perceived as influential, DMPs may be vulnerable to co-optation by the political elites or special interests, particularly when embedded and tightly coupled (Hendriks, 2016).

In response to such risks, authors like Lafont and Urbinati suggest assigning DMPs a more limited role—corresponding to mechanisms such as the Citizens' Initiative Review or the Deliberative Poll (Lafont & Urbinati, 2024). Having these shortcomings in mind, the next section aims to articulate the necessary conditions for institutionalising DMPs as effective and inclusive arenas within a policy subsystem.

4. Conceptualising the Conditions for an Inclusive Policy Subsystem

The ongoing trend of increased experimentation with deliberative tools and mechanisms across governance levels raises a critical inquiry: What are the (pre)conditions for the successful institutionalisation of DMPs? Drawing on the variety of practical cases mentioned above, as well as on normative deliberative theory, this section outlines six essential conditions for the institutionalisation of DMPs that would enable them to function as an effective and inclusive arena within policy subsystems.

Our conceptualisation of conditions builds on the premise of enhancing the consequential nature of DMPs. Thus, we situate these conditions in the complex, interdependent framework of various elements that underpin both democratisation and the effective impact of deliberative practices (Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012). The underlying principles guiding the articulated conditions are two constant variables of democracy that we intend to enhance—*inclusiveness* and *contestation* (Coppedge et al., 2008)—and which ought to be advanced by DMPs in the process of policy subsystem democratisation. However, no set of conditions for integrating DMPs can fully satisfy all essential principles—legitimacy, inclusiveness, deliberative quality, and effective policy impact, due to their inherent tensions (Johnson & Gastil, 2015). As already mentioned, the justification for articulating this set of conditions lies in lessons from practice and notions derived from normative deliberative theory. The original contribution of this article is in the normative framework of a set of conditions, but also in the form of the potential implementation of these conditions. The conditions proposed in our conceptualisation are applicable across all levels of governance and inspired by successful institutionalisation cases, such as the National Public Policy Conferences in Brazil. In this federal-level case, the policy articulation process was organised bottom-up, with all levels interacting and shaping the policy formulation within DMPs (Pogrebinschi & Samuels, 2014).

This conceptualisation is based on the underlying principle that decisions made within a DMP must be consequential. To achieve meaningful policy influence, DMPs must first be recognised as regular members of their respective policy subsystems, capable of shaping both policy definition and outcomes within these

contexts. Accordingly, based on the discussion of normative deliberative notions and a set of illustrative cases, we propose *six essential conditions* (see also Figure 1):

1. Initiating a deliberative process through citizen initiative to increase the democratic legitimacy of the DMP (*agenda-setting power*);
2. Creating an *inclusive DMP design* that corresponds to the specific social and political context;
3. Ensuring internal inclusiveness through the *quality of deliberation*;
4. Articulating a set of policy recommendations and a policy and problem definition as a form of *advisory meta-consensus*, serving as a possible framework for inclusion of other stakeholders;
5. *Joint monitoring* of all relevant stakeholders of the policy process;
6. A multi-stakeholder consultation with the aim of articulating viable policy options and solutions (final *policy vetting*).

This model proposes embedding the DMPs at two stages within the policy subsystem: firstly, at the very beginning of the policy-making process, where the representative DMP serves as a provisional mechanism that defines the policy problem and provides the initial set of policy recommendations, and secondly, at the final stage of the policy-making process, where it gathers all relevant stakeholders in a form of multi-stakeholder consultation providing them with the power to influence the final formulation of a public policy.
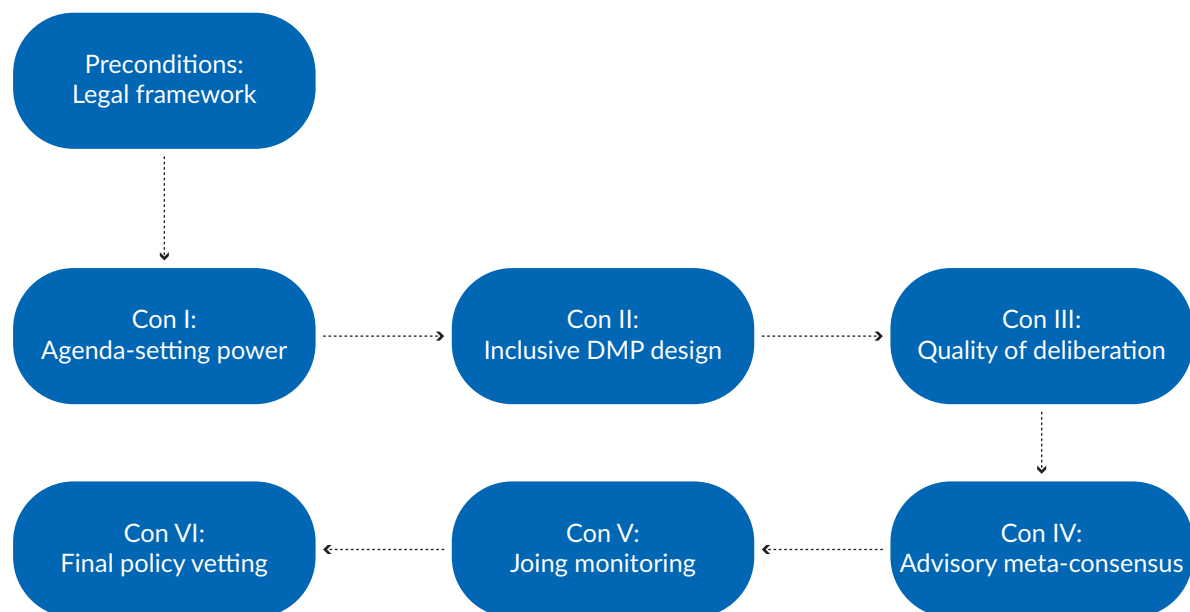
Figure 1. Normative framework of conditions for institutionalisation of DMPs.

Before turning to the conditions, it is important to highlight and briefly discuss one key *precondition*: the legal status of DMPs as a regulator of deliberative practice, but also of co-design processes. Institutionalisation of deliberation requires a guarantee that could take the form of either a constitutional right to deliberation and participation, as in South Africa's 1996 Constitution (Section 59) obliging the National Assembly to create mechanisms for public consultation and engagement (Nyati, 2010); or in the form of enabling legislation, i.e., introducing laws that regulate deliberation and its conditions and delegate who is responsible for implementing it, such as the Tuscan Laboratory case regulated by Law no. 69 (Lewanski, 2013) or the Citizens' Assembly in Flanders regulated by the Citizens' Assembly Bill

(Van Crombrugge, 2020). Whatever the case, introducing a clear legal framework delineates the various arenas and their remit, as well as their administrative procedures of engagement (Setälä, 2017). Moreover, *co-design* expands beyond minor procedural adjustments—there is a need for a legal framework that will empower a co-design process beyond mere deliberation, as it will be evident in Condition VI, enabling citizens to engage with all the relevant stakeholders on an equal footing, actively shape rules, processes, and structures of deliberation, and fundamentally affect the policy and structural frameworks as active democratic agents (Vike et al., 2025). This reflects Hendriks' (2016) argument that structures of coupling, along with the policies, should be tailored to specific contexts, and engaging citizens can be a way to do it.

4.1. Condition I: Agenda-Setting Power

To ensure inclusiveness, a mechanism that allows citizens to initiate deliberation on any policy, alongside other stakeholders, is necessary. The Citizens' Assembly in Flanders provides a useful example where citizen initiatives have been introduced as an instrument for enhancing the inclusiveness and legitimacy of a policy process, even though final proposals were rejected by representatives (Van Crombrugge, 2020). Providing citizens with agenda-setting powers through such mechanisms strengthens legitimacy and mitigates critiques of "lottocracy" as insufficiently representative (Lafont & Urbinati, 2024). In order to be perceived as inclusive and enhance legitimacy, a deliberative process needs to ensure that agenda-setting ability is provided to the citizens, not just other stakeholders like government agencies or interest groups. Evidence suggests that citizen-initiated policy processes can enhance democratic legitimacy, even when there is no deliberative component (Esaiasson et al., 2012; Riduan, 2024). Building upon the abovementioned principle of co-design, this condition represents the first step emphasising citizens' transformative role in shaping the policy process and policy subsystem.

4.2. Condition II: Inclusive DMP Design

Limitations in representativeness are often central in the critiques of sortition when it comes to DMPs. As briefly addressed, sortition has been heavily criticised by some authors who claim that it does not provide representativeness to the DMP, nor does it guarantee public support for final DMP outcomes (Lafont & Urbinati, 2024; Spada & Peixoto, 2025). In their critique, Spada and Peixoto outline an important suggestion for adjusting the DMP in terms of representativeness by arguing for the use of stratified random sampling tailored to the policy and social context, with an aim to target specific problems of inclusion or assert a weaker non-domination claim (Spada & Peixoto, 2025). This approach ensures enhanced inclusiveness of the policy process by mitigating and tackling policy-specific exclusion, especially in terms of marginalised social groups and actors. Along these lines, from a design standpoint, effective DMPs must incorporate key elements such as stratified random sortition to ensure participation of groups specifically affected by a given policy, while empowering the marginalised social groups via representative and stratified sampling (Gastil & Wright, 2018; Smith, 2009; Young, 1996). Thus, inclusive design must be context- and policy-specific, while using stratified random sampling techniques to secure both diversity and equity.

4.3. Condition III: Quality of Deliberation

Inclusiveness must be matched by high deliberative quality. Ideally, deliberation should strive towards achieving the aforementioned qualities of a good deliberative process that can be assessed and measured

using various tools—such as participants' surveys, interviews, independent expert assessments, as well as standardised instruments for tracking deliberation quality such as the Discourse Quality Index (Bächtiger et al., 2022). Achieving democratic legitimacy through representability and inclusiveness is essential, as it signals to other stakeholders within the policy subsystem that DMPs offer an opportunity, or a tool, to align their preferences with those of their constituency (Niessen & Reuchamps, 2020). The importance of both external and internal inclusiveness has often been described as crucial for DMPs to become a more inclusive arena, but also to bring the benefits usually associated with deliberative processes (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2014; Felicetti et al., 2015). As discussed earlier in the overview of various models and cases of DMP implementation, as well as in regard to challenges and failures of deliberative processes, it is clear that failure in ensuring inclusiveness can seriously damage the legitimacy and purpose of DMPs. Additionally, DMPs should deliver sound policy recommendations, thereby capitalising on their epistemic advantage (Estlund, 2008). Failures in quality—such as vague or infeasible recommendations—can undermine credibility, generate substantial animosity, and provoke policymakers' resistance towards DMPs, as seen in the G1000 forums in the Netherlands (Michels & Binnema, 2018). Whether a DMP at this stage will be autonomous or embedded will depend mainly on the political context. While embeddedness can enhance influence, autonomous DMP models may be preferable in environments with a reasonable risk of co-optation of the deliberative process by dominant stakeholders, such as political elites or public administration. Moreover, autonomous models are preferable in the first phase, as they offer greater space for authentic expression of political will and higher deliberative quality.

4.4. Condition IV: Advisory Meta-Consensus

DMPs should articulate policy recommendations that set a broad policy framework for the rest of the policy subsystem in the form of a wide set of policy recommendations, without opting out for any of those recommendations (values). In deliberative terms, this corresponds to the notion of *meta-consensus*, defined as "shared recognition of the legitimacy of a set of values, while not requiring agreement on the ranking these values" (Niemeyer & Dryzek, 2007, p. 504). In other words, a broad policy framework should be set, and other stakeholders should be aware of it. By establishing the framework, the remaining actors of the policy subsystem(s) are *advised* to operate within defined limits, while still having the opportunity to introduce new aspects or policies if they can adequately justify them. The framing and policy problem definition are crucial here for all stakeholders, as the problem definition often sets the tone for the policy process and shapes a salient political issue (Stone, 2002). Consequently, DMPs must be integrated into the existing institutions and governance system; otherwise, there is a risk of implementing DMPs as a parallel institution, which could result in outcomes of the deliberative process that are disconnected from actual implemented policies (Parry & Curato, 2024). For this stage, we suggest a provisional model of the DMP, serving primarily to open a debate rather than close it, while ensuring that other relevant stakeholders are permitted to articulate their interests, problem definitions, and policy proposals, thereby enhancing the overall inclusiveness of the policy process and fostering a shared sense of ownership. At the same time, all relevant policy actors (from bureaucracy to experts and lobbyist) must consider the outcomes of the deliberative process and the will of the ordinary citizens. To facilitate this, the public should be informed on the process through follow-up reports and materials explaining the outcomes, as well as through proper media coverage.

4.5. Condition V: Joint Monitoring

Effective institutionalisation requires oversight and monitoring mechanisms to track policy development and guard against co-optation, which is becoming a focal point in democracy studies. Keane's concept of "monitory democracy" emphasises the importance of democratic oversight (Keane, 2011). Since the risks of co-optation of both the deliberative and the policy process are significant, monitoring mechanisms could include both the traditional watchdogs and an independent commission representing the DMP that will make sure to track the activities of relevant stakeholders, their proposals, as well as changes to policy formulation within an official government body. To some degree, this coincides with the role of DMPs assigned by Lafont and Urbinati (2024)—namely, the role of filtering out manipulative information while also informing citizens and helping them keep track of policy proposals. Moreover, some authors have already suggested bodies such as a committee for monitoring and evaluation, which "checks whether practices and procedures are appropriate to reach the democratic tenets of the community or whether they have to be adapted, e.g., due to unintended effects, changing circumstances or reconsidered preferences" (Geissel, 2023, p. 192). While monitoring and oversight cannot capture all subsystem activities, as the process is complex and involves numerous consultations and negotiations behind closed doors, various actors and arenas can support this role—from selected DMP participants or special committees within public administration, to media and civil society that remain essential for disseminating deliberative outputs and fostering accountability. Even though there is a healthy amount of scepticism towards media's effect on deliberation (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004), both mainstream media and new internet forms remain the main tool for disseminating the results, not only of deliberation, but also of the whole policy process (Setälä, 2017).

4.6. Condition VI: Final Policy Vetting

Before the policy is officially adopted and implemented, it is essential to establish a vetting process where citizens should also have a say on the final policy formulation. In other words, citizens should have a chance to contest the formulated policies, if deemed necessary. This co-designing stage allows deliberation between citizens and other relevant stakeholders, which can contribute to ensuring that policies are adjusted to the context. Numerous studies have proven that a co-design mechanism can lead to policies that reflect the risks, true needs, and are culturally more tuned to the local communities (Jallad et al., 2021; Okop et al., 2023). Moreover, earlier in the article, we mentioned the potential benefits, but also the challenges of engaging ordinary citizens and other stakeholders. We believe that this stage could be appropriate to facilitate such form of deliberation, while specific approaches may vary depending on the context, saliency of the issue, level of governance at which the policy is to be implemented, etc. One possible model of such co-design mechanism could involve a multi-stakeholder consultation, defined as "a new form of partnership governance structure that brings different actors such as civil society, governments, international bodies, media, and academic or research institutions for sharing experience, information, technologies, and financial resources working toward a common solution" (Momen, 2019, p. 1). In our case, it also involves citizens. This kind of arena could be tasked with negotiating and finalising policy formulation. Similar to the permanent standing Citizens' Council in Ostbelgien, the multi-stakeholder consultation could consist of representatives of the previous DMPs, with the only difference being the selection of the DMP participants (the deliberative benefits of the multi-stakeholder consultations have already been explored, see Pek et al., 2023). In this model, the participants of the multi-stakeholder consultation would be selected from the first DMP taking

place at the beginning of the policy process. Regardless of the format, it is crucial to incorporate a (meta)consensus phase for citizens or participants of DMPs. Here, we advise an embedded deliberative model in the form of multi-stakeholder consultation during which the final draft of the policy is amended and confirmed prior to official adoption. Since the goal of deliberation is not necessarily consensus-oriented, we should at least strive towards meta-consensus in the form of a final set of recommendations (Niemeyer & Dryzek, 2007) that could be placed in front of the decision-makers later, or on a referendum ballot, thus combining direct and deliberative democracy to strengthen legitimacy.

When it comes to the three aspects of embeddedness that we mentioned earlier—temporal, spatial, and practical—we will briefly outline how our model fares with them. Our model addresses a temporal embeddedness, as we argue for a model where DMPs are a permanent member of a policy cycle, i.e., a deliberative process is recurring within a policy subsystem. From the spatial aspect, deliberation should happen where decisions are being made, and it should be connected to final decision-making, whether via multi-stakeholder consultation (consensus conference) or referendum. Finally, on the practical aspect, we underline the importance of engaging valuable informal actors who can contribute, empowering various sites and arenas of deliberation, including institutionalised DMPs, as well as encouraging a democratic culture and values where deliberation thrives outside and inside the limits of any policy subsystem. Ultimately, while this framework articulates a general normative model, the length limitations of this article prevent us from addressing all the possible variations that specific contexts may require, so one should keep in mind the design possibilities and adaptations that could complement our general normative design to suit specific issues or political contexts. As Hendriks (2016) elaborates on the way the coupling should be done, coupling strategies must adapt to political realities, and the final decision on designing an institutionalisation framework, which depends greatly on various contextual factors, should therefore be adapted to the specificities of any given case.

5. Concluding Remarks

In this article we addressed the challenge of articulating a normative-institutional framework that avoids institutional "blind deference" but also ensures all the benefits of the deliberative process to the political system. In other words, inspired by the normative theory of deliberative democracy and a set of illustrative cases, we articulated a set of conditions that aim to ensure that DMPs are institutionalised within a policy process in such a way that they are an equal, legitimate, and effective member of a policy-subsystem. Our conceptualisation envisions a DMP that can impact every phase of the policy process—from agenda-setting to policy implementation. In such a conceptualisation, the conditional framework allows designing a policy process that enables inclusiveness through citizens' agenda-setting power; inclusive design and deliberation; and advisory meta-consensus, but also contestation through monitoring and various forms of multi-stakeholder consultations. However, we recognise that no framework can fully resolve the tensions between contestation and inclusiveness; moreover, no general normative framework can be applied in the same way in every case, so we urge for context-specific adjustments of our framework. Finally, we contend that, having in mind these cautionary reminders, our normative framework of deliberative institutionalisation offers a more democratised and inclusive policy process where DMPs represent empowered sites of deliberation.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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