

## Does Federalism Facilitate Permanent Minipublics?

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### Abstract

Deliberative minipublics have been flourishing across the globe, but most have been conducted as one-off experiments. Only in a few cases has their use been codified in formal decisions or positive law. Notable examples include the state of Oregon in the United States, the German-speaking community in Belgium, and the city of Aachen in Germany. Strikingly, many of these cases emerge from federal, multilevel, or otherwise highly decentralised systems. This raises the questions: is multilevel governance more likely to produce recurring legally embedded minipublics, and does institutionalisation differ across levels of governance? More specifically, we investigate whether federal arrangements make it more likely that minipublics will be repeated and formally embedded, and how the mode of institutionalisation differs across contexts. We begin by outlining a conceptual framework to clarify what counts as a permanent minipublic. We then advance a preliminary, exploratory theoretical expectation linking institutional permanence to federal and multilevel governance. Our findings suggest that while federal and multilevel systems are indeed more likely to host permanent minipublics, they do so in distinct ways—varying not only in where minipublics are embedded (local vs. regional), but also in how they are codified and the democratic functions they are designed to perform.

### Keywords

democratic innovations; federalism; minipublics; multi-level governance

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, deliberative minipublics—assemblies of randomly selected citizens brought together to deliberate on public issues—have proliferated across democratic systems. From climate assemblies in France to citizen juries in the United States, these forums have become emblematic of democratic renewal and innovation (OECD, 2020). Yet for all their visibility, most minipublics remain *ad hoc*. Convened for a single occasion, they typically lack legal standing and formal ties to enduring political institutions. This “leaves the door open to arbitrary and opportunistic use of these democratic innovations” (Courant, 2022, p. 163). The system integration of minipublics—embedding them in laws, charters, or recurring procedures—remains the exception rather than the norm. Yet, to address the current crisis of representative democracy, it is crucial to explore ways to institutionalise deliberation (Offe, 2011).

This article investigates the conditions under which minipublics make the leap from democratic experiments to enduring features of the institutional landscape. Literature offers a range of explanations for their emergence and entrenchment. Some scholars emphasise macro-political drivers, including declining trust in representative institutions and increasing demands for participatory forms of governance (Macq & Jacquet, 2023). Others focus on strategic motivations, highlighting how political elites deploy minipublics to navigate contentious reforms or enhance democratic legitimacy (C. M. Hendriks & Lees-Marshment, 2019). More recently, a review of the OECD (2020) report and dataset reveals a clear pattern: institutionalised minipublics most often emerge within multi-level governance systems—spanning local, regional, and national tiers. The most prominent examples—including the German-speaking community of Belgium, the city of Aachen in Germany, and the state of Oregon in the United States—are all situated within federal or multi-level systems. These contexts seem especially conducive to democratic experimentation and the formal incorporation of minipublics into public decision-making. However, examples of ongoing attempts to render the minipublic permanent can also be found in cities such as Paris, Milan, and Madrid, situated in less decentralised multi-level polities. In France, the High Council of the Military Function (HCMF), established in 1969, is a permanent body randomly selected among members of the military. According to Courant (2022, p. 167), the HCMF is “the oldest, most durable, and also the first permanent and systemic DMP [deliberative minipublic] in history.” However, the HCMF reflects the composition of the French armed forces and not that of the society. Therefore, it does not meet the criterion of inclusiveness typically emphasised by advocates of deliberative minipublics (Farrell et al., 2019, p. 5). In any case, setting aside the peculiar case of the HCMF, these examples demonstrate that such minipublics are rarely institutionalised at the national level. Instead, they tend to take root within subnational or regional units, suggesting that the governance level itself may be an additional critical factor shaping the prospects for institutionalisation.

This observation motivates an exploratory inquiry: How do multilevel governance arrangements—particularly federal versus unitary systems—relate to the recurrence and legal embedding of minipublics across governance tiers? Our objective is to chart the institutional distribution of minipublic designs, examining whether particular governance contexts cultivate conditions more favourable to their sustained adoption and legal entrenchment.

This question is normatively significant. If certain institutional arrangements increase the likelihood of minipublics becoming permanent, then these bodies need not remain isolated innovations. Instead, they can evolve into routine components of democratic governance, helping to bridge the gap between representative institutions and participatory demands.

To answer this question, this article proceeds as follows. First, we develop a conceptual framework that defines what a “permanent” minipublic is. We then develop an initial exploratory theoretical expectation linking institutional permanence to federal governance. Our empirical approach adopts a deliberately circumscribed scope: we rely primarily on the OECD (2020) database, which represents the most comprehensive systematic inventory currently available. This methodological choice necessarily excludes minipublics operating in non-OECD contexts—settings that encompass a significant proportion of the world’s federal systems—thereby constraining our analytical reach. Given these inherent limitations, we position our investigation as exploratory in nature, treating all empirical findings as provisional and contextually bounded rather than generalizable. Throughout this dataset, we use multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) followed by cluster analysis to empirically identify distinct typologies of permanent minipublics. Our findings show that while federal and multilevel systems are indeed more likely to host permanent minipublics, they do so in systematically different ways—varying not only in where minipublics are embedded (local vs. regional) but also in how they are codified and what roles they are designed to perform.

## 2. Recurrent vs. Institutionalised Minipublics

Deliberative minipublics are small representative groups of citizens mainly selected by sortition to deliberate on public policy issues. Common forms include citizens’ juries, consensus conferences, planning cells, and citizens’ assemblies. Their design typically incorporates balanced information, expert input, facilitated discussion, and the formulation of collective recommendations (e.g., Carson & Hartz-Karp, 2005; Farrell et al., 2019; Niemeyer et al., 2024).

Articulating a clear and comprehensive definition of a minipublic remains a conceptually intricate challenge. Literature in deliberative democracy has approached minipublics from multiple angles: their format (e.g., Elstub & Escobar, 2019; Smith, 2009; Veri, 2023), their internal deliberative processes (e.g., Geißel & Joas, 2013), and their intended functions within the broader polity (e.g., F. Hendriks & Wagenaar, 2023).

However, most studies adopt a normative lens, focusing on what minipublics should be, while empirical questions—such as how they evolve, recur, or become embedded in political systems—receive less attention. This gap matters because understanding minipublics as real-world practices, not just democratic ideals, reveals their systemic roles and long-term impact.

To illustrate, Ireland’s Citizens’ Assemblies (Farrell et al., 2013) offer a model of institutional integration. These topic-specific politically embedded bodies deliberate on issues like abortion or climate change, with recommendations debated in the Oireachtas (Irish Parliament) and subject to national referendums. This recurring pathway delivers deliberative depth without permanently transferring power, addressing critics’ concerns about a “lottocratic mentality”—the risk that random selection sidelines the broader public (Lafont & Urbinati, 2024). Whether this fully resolves such critiques is a normative question beyond this article’s scope. Instead, we trace how minipublics, whether one-off or serial, loosely convened or legally entrenched, evolve and embed (or not) in diverse political systems. This empirical focus opens a new line of inquiry into their real-world integration, informing how democratic innovations can be designed for lasting impact.

In this light, the twin processes of *recurrence* (the tendency to reconvene or replicate) and *integration* (the absorption into formal decision-making architectures) become central to understanding how and why some minipublics endure while others remain episodic experiments. Moreover, these processes map directly onto our framework's core dimensions of *permanence* and *institutionalisation*. Although these terms may appear synonymous at first glance, they in fact capture distinct attributes. As argued here, they represent two separate dimensions that, when cross-tabulated, form a matrix capable of revealing the varying roles minipublics can assume within democratic governance systems.

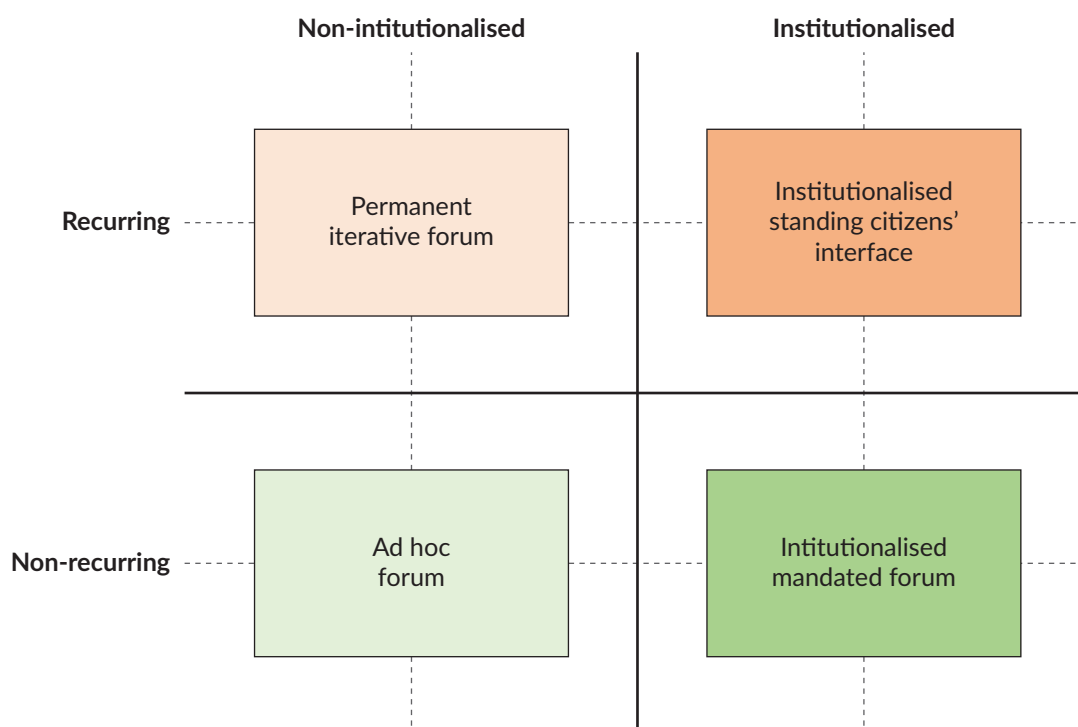
*Permanence* is often intended to mean recurrence or continuity of a deliberative process over time. It captures whether a minipublic is convened on a one-off basis or embedded in a cycle of regular activity. Importantly, recurrence can exist even in the absence of full institutional integration. For example, the citizens' panel in the Swiss Canton of Geneva—mandated to write a “Notice Citoyenne” to inform voters about the content of a referendum and to highlight the main arguments in favour and against it—is intended to become a recurring body. In fact, it was initiated by the cantonal executive, in collaboration with the University of Geneva (see [www.demoscan.ch](http://www.demoscan.ch)) as a pilot in 2021 and was repeated in 2024 (Canton of Geneva, 2024). Similarly, the *conselho de cidadãos* in Lisbon was launched by the city council as part of a participatory governance initiative (Lisboa Participa, n.d.). To this date, this minipublic has been organised four times, in 2022, 2023, 2024, and 2025. While both are legal in the sense of being formally authorised by public authorities, neither is grounded in a legal framework that explicitly defines their institutional role, authority, or integration within the broader governance architecture. For now, therefore, the attempts to render these minipublics permanent do not equate to institutionalisation.

*Institutionalisation*, by contrast, concerns the extent to which a minipublic is explicitly embedded within a political system's legal or constitutional framework—particularly in terms of its function, authority, and continuity. This dimension is best understood as a spectrum. At the robust end are cases where constitutions, laws, or decrees explicitly codify not just their existence, but their governance function. For instance, the Belgian federal law provides a formal basis for using sortition to select lay citizens from the National Register, who can then be invited to participate in citizens' panels or mixed commissions that comprise both parliament and citizens (Belgian Official Journal, 2023). Similarly, in the German-speaking community of Belgium (Ostbelgien), a regional decree integrates the permanent citizens' council directly into the legislative process (Macq & Jacquet, 2023; Ostbelgien, 2019). At the weak end of the spectrum, we find ambiguous forms of institutionalisation—arrangements established primarily to support executive power or only vaguely defined within legislation. A clear example is provided by the Australian state of Victoria: the Local Government Act 2020 (Vic), Section 55(2)(g), mandates the use of “deliberative engagement practices,” but does not specify what form these should take, nor does the Act define the governance role of any resulting minipublic (Victoria State Government, 2024). In such a case, the legal basis for deliberation is present, but its institutional specification remains vague. Another example is the creation of minipublics that are embedded within broader executive actions. For instance, the Milan Permanent Citizens' Assembly on Climate is incorporated into the city's regulatory framework and linked to the Air and Climate Plan (Comune di Milano, n.d.). As in the cases of Geneva and Lisbon mentioned above, the case of Milan functions primarily as an instrument of the executive, rather than as an independent institutional body.

These variations highlight that legal existence is not synonymous with institutionalisation, while having a recurring citizens' assembly is not necessarily an indication of institutionalisation. A minipublic may be legally

established without being institutionally defined in terms of function, permanence, or integration into political decision-making. Distinguishing between these dimensions is essential to create new taxonomical frameworks that are more indicative of the political function of this democratic innovation.

The intersection of recurrence and institutionalisation yields a conceptual framework that better captures the evolving functions of minipublics within democratic systems. As Figure 1 illustrates, these two dimensions are not merely descriptive attributes but can be considered as generative axes that shape distinct functional archetypes of citizen deliberation.



**Figure 1.** Taxonomical framework on occurrence and institutionalisation.

In the lower-left quadrant, we find ad hoc forums—minipublics convened episodically and lacking formal integration into the institutional framework, such as the Swiss Citizens' Assembly on Health Costs in 2025 (Swiss Citizens' Assembly, 2025). These probably remain the most common and least structured form, often used for pilot initiatives, academic experiments, or symbolic consultations. Moving vertically, when recurrence is introduced without full legal codification, we encounter *permanent iterative forums*—bodies that reassemble over time, often by executive decision, but without a clearly specified institutional role, such as citizens' assemblies in Milan whose mandates fell within specific executive needs. These forums reflect a procedural commitment to deliberation but operate outside a legally defined governance architecture.

By contrast, the horizontal movement towards institutionalisation signals a shift from deliberative experimentation to systemic incorporation. In the lower right quadrant, *mandated forums* are convened through legal instruments or policy directives, but may be non-recurring. An example is the 2011 Constitutional Council of Iceland, which was mandated by a resolution of parliament (Constitutional Council of Iceland, 2011). Their authority is derived from statute or regulation, even if their existence is temporally bounded. At the upper right, we encounter the most robust configuration: *institutionalised standing citizens'*

*interfaces*—recurring bodies with institutional recognition and specified governance functions, such as the Ostbelgien model. These are not just procedurally stable but also normatively grounded within the polity, acting as continuous deliberative interfaces between citizens and formal political decision-making.

This framework thus reveals how recurrence and institutionalisation jointly structure not only the durability of minipublics but also their democratic function, and institutional engagement.

### 3. Overview of Factors Determining the Emergence of Minipublics

#### 3.1. Contextual and Agent-Based Dynamics

The emergence of deliberative minipublics does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, they appear to be shaped by a configuration of contextual, political, infrastructural, institutional, and normative dynamics that converge under particular conditions:

- *Contextual element (crisis and legitimacy framing)*: A widely cited circumstantial reading lies in the contemporary crisis of liberal representative democracy. Amid rising political disaffection, declining trust in political elites, and the erosion of intermediary institutions, citizens increasingly demand more direct and responsive forms of engagement (Macq & Jacquet, 2023). Deliberative minipublics have emerged as potential (though partial) correctives to this legitimacy gap, offering structured and informed arenas for lay citizen participation. In contexts where populist or illiberal tendencies challenge democratic norms—as emblematic in Central and Eastern Europe—minipublics have also served as institutional counterweights to political centralisation and elite capture (Česnulaitytė, 2024).
- *Global norm diffusion*: Transnational promotion has played a potentially catalytic role. International organisations such as the OECD have actively promoted deliberative practices by codifying standards and disseminating best practices (OECD, 2020). Networks like Democracy R&D and DemocracyNext have facilitated peer learning across jurisdictions, providing models, toolkits, and support structures. As deliberative procedures become professionalised and legitimised through these global channels, their uptake becomes more plausible within institutional reform agendas.
- *Strategic utilisation*: Institutionalisation is also strategic. Political leaders may initially use minipublics for instrumental purposes—defusing conflict, delaying controversial reforms, or bolstering their legitimacy—only to institutionalise them later as part of broader governance reforms. While some critics argue this instrumentalisation may compromise deliberative ideals, it also demonstrates the adaptability of minipublics to existing political incentives (C. M. Hendriks & Lees-Marshment, 2019). Institutionalisation thus often reflects a symbiotic alignment between deliberative logic and elite strategy.
- *Enabling infrastructures*: Recent debate foregrounds the infrastructural conditions under which episodic exercises become institutionalised. The OECD (2020) highlights several elements viewed as essential or conducive to institutionalisation: strong cross-party political support, broad public and media backing, and the availability of skilled practical capacity. Central to this process, however, is the existence of a supportive legal and regulatory framework, coupled with a context-appropriate institutional design. Such a framework can help ensure that citizens’ assemblies are not merely ad hoc experiments, but may become embedded within the formal rules, procedures, and governance structures of the political system. Adapting the design to the specific level and branch of government

further ensures that assemblies fit their administrative, legal, and cultural environment, thereby potentially enhancing their legitimacy and durability.

### **3.2. Federal and Multilevel Opportunity Structures**

Taken together, crisis framing, elite strategy, norm diffusion, and enabling infrastructure shape the immediate environments in which minipublics emerge and sometimes take root. Yet these elements are often dynamic, contingent on particular agents or conjunctural circumstances. They help explain when and why actors experiment, but they do not alone specify the structural elements that facilitate iterative innovation and consolidation.

In this respect, local-level governance arrangements are frequently invoked to explain why certain jurisdictions more readily pilot and entrench democratic experimentation because physical proximity between citizens and elected officials creates ideal conditions for participatory democracy (Goss, 2001; Michels & de Graaf, 2010). These local peculiarities are reinforced by research indicating that smaller municipalities tend to perform better with informal networking and ensure higher responsiveness compared to larger jurisdictions (Lowndes & Sullivan, 2008). Yet, Falanga (2024) challenges the idea that “closer is automatically more democratic.” As argued, local innovations work only within a web of multi-level institutions, networks, and global forces; treated in isolation, they can reinforce inequalities or be hijacked by local elites (Falanga, 2024).

This multi-scalar perspective aligns with traditional understandings of federal states, where subnational governments function as decentralised “laboratories of democracy.” These laboratories serve dual purposes: they reduce the political and reputational risks of policy experimentation while creating channels for successful institutional innovations to diffuse across jurisdictions (Karch, 2007; Oates, 1999; Strumpf, 2002). From this viewpoint, federalism provides multiple entry points for democratic experimentation, including deliberative innovations such as citizens’ assemblies.

However, contemporary scholarship challenges the assumption that all federal arrangements are inherently flexible or innovation-friendly (Grumbach, 2022). The United States exemplifies this complexity—while subnational divergence has indeed enabled democratic experimentation, it has simultaneously facilitated democratic erosion. Partisan nationalisation and strategic state-level actions have undermined participatory processes, revealing federalism’s fundamental ambivalence: the same institutional structures can either host deliberative minipublics that enhance citizen engagement or enable exclusionary reforms that restrict democratic participation (Grumbach, 2022).

Crucially, we must resist overgeneralising American patterns to all federal systems. Federal countries characterised by a cooperative political culture, multiparty systems, and consensus-oriented executives—such as Germany and Switzerland—operate under markedly different dynamics than the competitive, polarised environment that dominates contemporary US politics. Comparative analyses reveal that multilevel governance combines adaptive capacity with procedural complexity rather than delivering uniform flexibility (Benz, 2013). These systems operate as negotiation frameworks with distinct modes: confrontational dynamics that produce deadlock, bargaining processes that yield compromises and package deals, and argumentative exchanges that generate consensus—all shaped by institutional design and procedural differentiation.



Building on Benz's insights, we reconceptualize federalism not as a generic innovation enhancer but as a structured opportunity field. Its configurational properties—including variations in competence allocation, coordination forums, party linkages, symmetry/asymmetry arrangements, and procedural rigidity—fundamentally condition the type, scope, and trajectory of democratic experimentation (Watts, 2010). This governance complexity can indeed foster local democratic innovation, as political engagement unfolds within interconnected networks and power relations spanning local, national, and global scales (Falanga, 2024). Under favourable conditions, isolated experimental trials can evolve into systematically embedded democratic practices (Strumpf, 2002).

This pathway is clearly exemplified by the Ostbelgien case, where local political elites have leveraged their autonomy to institutionalise citizen deliberation through legal instruments and administrative mandates (Macq & Jacquet, 2023).

In summary, a federal system provides fertile ground for minipublics: by institutionalising socio-political interdependencies across tiers of government and creates the conditions in which democratic innovations can take root. Within these interdependencies, three key mechanisms can be identified that enable their multi-scalar embedding:

- *Multiple Access Points*—as multiple legislative, judicial, and intergovernmental venues—which allows for close links between authorities and citizens (e.g., Tuschhoff, 1999) and expands the autonomy of subnational units (e.g., cantons), which can experiment with minipublics independently of national consensus, allowing local innovations to emerge.
- *Policy Diffusion* mechanisms, through which the policies in one unit are influenced by the policies of other units. Within a federal context, a subnational unit can operate as a “democratic laboratory,” trialling novel democratic experiments without producing risk to the rest of the country. If successful, these experiments can produce emulation effects (Karch, 2007).
- Federalism exemplifies *Embedded Pluralism*, structurally aligning with deliberative democracy. Drawing on Tuschhoff (1999), federalism introduces compounded representation, wherein citizens are simultaneously represented individually and through subnational units. This dual-layered system, while highlighting asymmetries, fosters power-sharing, diversity accommodation, and conflict management arrangements and promotes deliberative norms by systematically incorporating diverse interests into democratic processes, thus making federalism particularly compatible with the principles of deliberative democracy (Watts, 2010).

#### 4. Case Selection and Analytical Framework

To investigate the patterns of minipublic institutionalisation and their association with structural factors like federalism, we utilize the OECD (2020) dataset of deliberative processes, and retain only entries the OECD itself classifies as *institutionalised*—that is, processes mandated by a public authority, embedded in law or regulation so that they recur automatically, and requiring a formal government response. Collapsing repeated sittings produces 27 distinct institutionalised types recorded up to December 2020. Because the OECD file ends there, we add 11 further types singled out by Smith and Abbas (2025); each of these meets the same institutionalisation criteria (formal legal basis, scheduled or trigger-based recurrence response



obligation) and was re-coded by us with the OECD variable set and cross-checked in Participedia. We also added the citizens' panels in the Canton of Geneva held in 2021 and 2024.

Finally, we manually reassessed all 39 cases against the institutionalisation level of each case accordingly to our institutionalisation framework described above (for more details see the Supplementary File). Specifically, we differentiate between robust and weak institutionalisation: robust refers to cases where minipublics are explicitly formalised in legal or regulatory frameworks (e.g., embedded in legislation or municipal statutes), while weak institutionalisation includes cases where the mandate is vague, informal, or relies on discretionary executive authority—such as the Australian local citizens' juries or the Milan Permanent Citizens' Assembly on Climate, which are initiated and maintained through executive action but lack legal permanence.

To systematically classify and compare the design features of minipublics, we use nominal coding for the following three core variables:

1. *Level of government*: coded as 1 = local, 2 = regional, 3 = national
2. *Institutionalisation*: coded as 0 = weak, 1 = robust
3. *Recurrence*: coded as 0 = one-off, 1 = recurring

We adopt nominal coding rather than ordinal or continuous scales because the categories involved represent qualitatively distinct types, not measurable degrees of intensity or quantity. For example, "local," "regional," and "national" refer to different governance tiers, not points along a continuous spectrum. Similarly, institutionalisation is treated as a binary status, as the gap between legal embedding and executive discretion is not meaningfully linear. This categorical approach allows for clearer typological differentiation and is methodologically suited to our goal of detecting discrete patterns in how minipublics are institutionalised across contexts.

These coded variables serve as the foundation for an MCA, followed by hierarchical clustering on principal component (HCPC) to identify common configurations in minipublic design by using the R package FactoMineR (Lê et al., 2008). Finally, we explore the relationship between these configurations and Federalism, testing statistical associations using Fisher's Exact Test.

## 5. Results

The analysis begins with the MCA to reduce the dimensionality of the categorical dataset while preserving the underlying structure. The MCA identifies two main components that together explain a substantial share of the variation across minipublic designs. Specifically, the first principal component accounts for 41.7% of the total variance, while the second explains an additional 28.3%, bringing the cumulative explained variance to 70.0%. A third component adds only marginal explanatory power (17.6%) and is therefore excluded from further interpretation. Given the high level of variance captured by the first two dimensions, we proceed to apply clustering using the reduced two-dimensional MCA space.

We then conduct an HCPC to identify meaningful groupings of cases based on their institutional features. The clustering reveals four distinct clusters, each characterised by a unique configuration of recurrence, level of government, and institutionalisation. Table 1 displays the results of the HCPC, showing that the level of

government is the strongest driver of cluster differentiation ( $\chi^2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), followed by recurrence ( $p < 0.001$ ) and institutionalisation ( $p < 0.001$ ). These associations confirm that territorial level, regularity, and legal embeddedness play significant roles in shaping the typologies of deliberative forums.

**Table 1.** HCPC results.

Cluster	Key over-represented categories (v.test)	% Federal states	N federal cases	N total cases	Key features
1	Recurrence = 0 (+4.03), Local = 1 (+2.73), Institutionalisation = 0 (+2.29)	77.8%	7	9	Non-recurring; local; non-institutionalised
2	Local = 3 (+4.95), Recurrence = 0 (+2.04)	20.0%	2	10	National; non-recurring
3	Recurrence = 1 (+3.35), Local = 1 (+3.18), Institutionalisation = 0 (+2.66)	18.2%	2	11	Recurring; local; non-institutionalised
4	Institutionalisation = 1 (+3.99), Local = 2 (+3.76), Recurrence = 1 (+2.89)	66.7%	6	9	Institutionalised; regional; recurring

Notes: Federal cases: 17 of 39 (43.6%); federal countries represented: 7 of 14 (50%) among countries with at least one minipublic in the sample; this proportion exceeds the share of federal countries within the broader OECD membership, indirectly suggesting a greater propensity of federal countries to host institutionalised minipublics;  $\chi^2$ : Institutionalisation, recurrence, level of governance  $p < 0.001$ .

The clustering analysis reveals four distinct models of deliberative forums, each reflecting a unique combination of institutionalisation, recurrence, and territorial scope. These models are not only statistically distinct but also carry meaningful implications for how democratic innovation is structured and sustained across different governance systems. The HCPC and chi-square tests reveal four meaningful configurations of deliberative innovation, each with a statistically distinct profile:

- *Cluster 1—Ad hoc local experiments*: This cluster gathers forums that are both local and non-institutionalised, but also ad hoc—assembled once, often without plans for repetition. These are likely small-scale experiments, pilot deliberations, or consultative exercises tied to specific issues or moments in time. Despite their modest scope and limited duration, these forums are disproportionately found in federal systems, with nearly 78% of the cases occurring in federations. This may reflect the autonomy granted to sub-national entities in federal countries, where municipalities or regions are freer to initiate participatory experiments without central oversight. It also underscores a certain fragmentation of innovation, where decentralised authority enables a diversity of formats, including short-lived ones.
- *Cluster 2—Ad hoc national assemblies*: This cluster includes deliberative bodies that operate at the national level but are convened only once and lack formal legal grounding. These are typically high-profile national assemblies—sometimes attached to major reform processes, public debates, or government consultations—but without clear continuation or embeddedness in policy processes. Though national in scope, their non-institutional and ad hoc nature makes them politically contingent and highly dependent on elite initiative. Their presence is not strongly linked to federalism: only

around 20% of cases are federal, suggesting that unitary states may be just as likely to deploy these symbolic or strategic participatory events at the national level.

- *Cluster 3—Permanent iterative local forums*: This cluster captures deliberative practices that are deeply embedded at the local level and recur over time but lack formal institutionalisation. Statistically, they are characterised by strong recurrence and a clear local focus. These might include town-level citizens' panels or regularly convened community assemblies, initiated by local authorities or civil society but not codified into law. Despite their absence of legal status, they exhibit a degree of continuity and procedural maturity. Interestingly, they are less common in federal systems, with only 18% of cases situated in such contexts. This suggests that unitary or centralised systems may provide fertile ground for recurring local-level experimentation, possibly due to more uniform governance structures or central encouragement of local initiatives.
- *Cluster 4—Institutionalise regional citizens' interfaces*: It stands apart as the only group where institutionalisation is prominent, and it effectively covers the universe of recurring regional-level assemblies in our corpus. These are recurring forums with a strong regional anchoring and a degree of legal or procedural formalisation. They may be embedded in regional charters, statutes, or supported by explicit mandates from subnational legislatures. Their recurrence suggests ongoing investment in participatory structures, while their institutionalisation implies political and administrative backing. Not surprisingly, they are prevalent in federal systems, where regional governance bodies often have the capacity—and sometimes the mandate—to develop deliberative infrastructures. Nearly 67% of cases in this cluster are federal, reinforcing the idea that institutionalisation at the regional level is facilitated by federal architectures.

The association of federalism with both Cluster 1 (ad hoc, local, non-recurring) and Cluster 4 (recurring, institutionalised, regional) illustrates divergent trajectories from our exploratory expectation enabled by the same structural autonomy. In this respect, we can cautiously speculate that the federal system supplies multiple access points that generate a wide variance, from low-cost experimentation (Cluster 1) to high-cost regional institutionalisation (Cluster 4).

## 6. Fisher Test Results

To examine how federalism relates to the emergence and configuration of deliberative minipublics, we conducted a Fisher's Exact Test to compare cluster membership across federal and non-federal countries (Table 2). This allows us to assess whether certain types of minipublics—distinguished by their recurrence, level of government, and institutionalisation—are more likely to occur in federal systems versus unitary ones.

The results suggest that federalism tends to coincide with two divergent trajectories of deliberative innovation: on the one hand, they are more conducive to ad hoc and experimental formats, such as those captured in Cluster 1, where forums are local, short-lived, and lack institutional anchoring. On the other hand, federalism also supports the development of more structured and recurring regional-level forums, as represented in Cluster 4. This duality underscores that structural autonomy can generate both high institutionalisation *and* high experimental churn. This is not a fixed outcome; it really depends on specific local or regional conditions like political will, a robust civic culture, and available resources. However, the flexibility given to states or cantons allows regional actors to champion deliberative processes even if the national government is not particularly engaged. A prime illustration is the Canton of Geneva's Notice

**Table 2.** Fisher's Exact Test on cluster differences across federal and non-federal countries.

Cluster pair	p-value	Interpretation
1 vs 2	0.023*	<i>Statistically significant difference</i> , suggesting that although these clusters are relatively similar, they may differ subtly in composition (e.g., level of government or recurrence).
1 vs 3	0.021*	<i>Statistically significant difference</i> , indicating that Cluster 3 (recurring local forums) is meaningfully distinct from Cluster 1 (ad hoc local forums), especially in recurrence.
1 vs 4	1.000	<i>No statistical difference</i> , indicating that Cluster 1 (ad hoc, local) and Cluster 4 (regional, institutionalised) are <i>not significantly distinct</i> , which may be due to small sample sizes or overlapping profiles in one variable.
2 vs 3	1.000	<i>No significant difference</i> , suggesting Cluster 2 (ad hoc, national) and Cluster 3 (recurring, local) may not be strongly differentiated across the included variables.
2 vs 4	0.07^	<i>Marginally significant</i> , suggesting a potential difference between Cluster 2 (ad hoc national) and Cluster 4 (regional, recurring, strongly institutionalised).
3 vs 4	0.065^	<i>Marginally significant</i> . This p-value suggests a potential difference between Cluster 3 (regional, recurring, weakly institutionalised) and Cluster 4 (regional, recurring, strongly institutionalised).

Notes: \*  $p < 0.05$ ; ^  $p < 0.1$ .

Citoyenne initiative. Building on an initial ad hoc pilot in 2021, this minipublic format—inspired by the Citizens' Initiative Review (CIR) Oregon model—is now a sustained effort, organised by the cantonal government in 2024 with the intent to repeat it in the following years, in order to improve the clarity of political information for citizens ahead of cantonal referendums.

In contrast, unitary systems dominate at the extremes of the deliberative spectrum. On one end, we find Cluster 3, composed of recurring but non-institutionalised local forums, such as community panels or municipal citizens' juries that operate regularly but without formal legal status. On the other end lies Cluster 2, defined by national-level, ad hoc forums—typically high-profile, one-off assemblies commissioned by governments in response to crises, reform agendas, or political pressures. These formats, while opposite in scope and continuity, are both prevalent in unitary contexts. This suggests a bifurcated model: unitary systems either allow municipalities to sustain participatory practices informally or they mobilise symbolic national exercises without necessarily institutionalising them. In either case, the pattern is one of discretionary rather than systemic embedding of minipublics.

The distinction between recurring and institutionalised practices, then, is not solely a function of governance structure. Rather, it reflects how different systems operationalise their institutional configurations—how autonomy, incentives, and administrative capacity are translated into participatory design. Federalism, in this regard, may enable innovation, but it does not determine its form.

Finally, while some pairwise comparisons do not reach conventional thresholds of statistical significance, several fall into the range of marginal difference ( $p$  values between 0.05 and 0.10). In the context of small- $n$ , categorical data, these results remain analytically meaningful. They point to underlying patterns that, though not conclusive, merit attention—particularly when considered alongside descriptive and theoretical insights.

## 7. Discussion

The OECD (2020) outlines three main routes through which deliberative minipublics can become institutionalised. The first involves the creation of permanent or ongoing structures for citizen deliberation, such as standing assemblies embedded in law or regulation (Route 1). The second route is the establishment of trigger mechanisms, where public authorities are required to initiate deliberation under specific conditions (Route 2). The third route is demand-driven, allowing citizens or civil society actors to activate deliberative processes on specific issues (Route 3). These routes offer a valuable framework for understanding how public deliberation becomes integrated into democratic systems, and our exploratory analysis provides empirical insights into how structural features of a political system—specifically federal versus unitary systems—shape their manifestation.

Our empirical analysis suggests that these institutionalisation routes take different forms depending on whether the political system is federal or unitary. Federal systems tend to support both Route 1 and Route 3, often through experimentation and decentralised innovation at the subnational level. Unitary systems, in contrast, lean more heavily on Route 2, where deliberative practices are initiated by national governments, or on informal adaptations of Route 1, particularly at the municipal level. Our Cluster 4, which includes recurring, legally institutionalised regional forums, is most clearly aligned with Route 1. These cases—found almost exclusively in federal systems—exemplify the advantages of multiple access points (Tuschhoff, 1999), reframed here as an opportunity structure rather than an automatic causal force. In federal contexts, subnational units possess legislative autonomy that can be mobilised to institutionalise deliberative practices independently of national approval. This decentralised authority creates opportunities for regional embedding of deliberation through legal mandates, recurring administrative procedures, or political commitments. These regional minipublics are not simply consultative; they are systemically embedded mechanisms of participatory governance. Their concentration in federal systems strongly supports our theoretical proposition that federalism, by distributing authority, enables subnational entities to act as “democratic laboratories” for deliberative reform (Karch, 2007).

By contrast, Cluster 1—ad hoc local-level forums—corresponds most closely to Route 3. Their existence illustrates a different facet of federalism: its capacity to facilitate low-risk democratic experimentation (Karch, 2007). This aligns with the multiple access points mechanism, highlighting how the existence of numerous autonomous decision-making centres allows for initial, often singular, deliberative endeavours. A single unit (e.g., a city or canton) can pilot a deliberative process, and if successful, it may be replicated or emulated by others. While these forums often lack permanence, their plurality and density reflect a dynamic of decentralised learning, in which innovation spreads not through national directive but via inter-jurisdictional observation and adaptation.

Taken together, the multiple-access-points feature yields twin dynamics: autonomous institutionalisation, where selected pilots crystallise into codified regional forums, and laboratory experimentation, where most processes remain provisional yet feed a repertoire of templates. Crucially, these pathways are neither universal across federal legislation nor absent from unitary contexts. With a small sample and some unitary representation, our findings remain exploratory rather than determinative. The unitary route, by contrast, tends to oscillate between top-down symbolic activation (Route 2) and bottom-up municipal practices (informal Route 1). Without the same degree of decentralised legislative power, deliberative innovation in

unitary systems often relies on discretionary initiative—either from national governments responding to political pressures or from local authorities operating within constrained institutional parameters. Cluster 2 captures recurring but non-institutionalised local forums, such as community panels or citizens' juries sustained through administrative routine or civil society partnership. These practices represent an informal, bottom-up variant of Route 1, emerging within more centralised governance systems. Municipal actors in unitary states often find ways to replicate deliberative processes, even without legislative support, suggesting that institutionalisation can also proceed through practice and norm-building rather than formal rules. Cluster 2, meanwhile, reflects the top-down logic of Route 2. These are national-level, ad hoc assemblies—such as the French *Grand débat national*—convened by national governments, often in response to crises, reform agendas, or political pressure. They are highly visible and often well-resourced, but rarely recurring. In unitary contexts, where decision-making is more centralised, these forums tend to be elite-activated rather than citizen-initiated, and their continuity depends heavily on political will. This pattern underscores the centralizing tendencies in unitary systems, where the “access points” for significant deliberative initiatives are often concentrated at the national executive level, making “trigger mechanisms” (Route 2) a more prominent pathway than grassroots, self-sustaining institutionalisation.

Federalism and unitarism do not determine whether deliberation happens, but they seem to influence how, where, and on what terms it becomes institutionalised. Federal systems tend to externalise institutionalisation to the regional level, fostering formal but uneven adoption through mechanisms of multiple access points and decentralised policy diffusion. Unitary systems concentrate activation power at the national level but may foster informal local practices through administrative discretion.

Understanding these differences is essential for designing context-appropriate strategies to embed deliberative minipublics. While each system offers viable routes forward, their success depends on a shared set of enabling conditions—legal clarity, financial stability, and sustained political commitment. Without these, even the most promising designs risk remaining peripheral. But when aligned with the institutional logics of the state, these routes can deliver durable, scalable innovations that make citizen deliberation a more permanent fixture of democratic life.

This said, while our study offers fresh insights into how governance structures shape the institutionalisation of deliberative minipublics, several considerations suggest fruitful directions for future research. First, our empirical universe relies on the OECD's 2020 minipublics database—a rich but now somewhat dated resource—that we have completed by relying on a more recent overview by Smith and Abbas (2025). Indeed, although the OECD database provides extensive coverage of experiments up to that point, it does not yet reflect the very latest initiatives or those emerging outside OECD membership.

Second, the modest number of cases available naturally limits the statistical power of our quantitative tests. Some of the associations we observe using Fisher's Exact Test approach conventional significance thresholds, indicating that our findings would be even more robust if confirmed in larger or refreshed samples. Future studies might therefore seek to incorporate additional years of data or supplementary case sources to reinforce these early patterns.

Our decision to focus primarily on structural governance features—specifically, whether a system is federal or unitary—was driven in part by the constraints of our current case count. With only a modest number of

observations, we avoided overloading the model with additional covariates. However, we recognize that political and societal dynamics—such as the intensity of party competition, the framing and amplification provided by media outlets, the degree of stakeholder mobilisation, and the organisational strength of civil society—are likely crucial to both the emergence and longevity of deliberative forums. Once a more extensive dataset can be assembled, integrating these contextual variables through mixed-methods case studies or multivariate statistical models would allow future research to generate a richer, more nuanced understanding of why some minipublics mature into enduring institutions while others remain isolated pilots.

Finally, our cross-sectional design provides a valuable snapshot of recurrence and institutionalisation at a single point in time, but cannot trace the longitudinal trajectories of individual assemblies. A panel or time-series approach could reveal whether ad hoc pilots grow into standing bodies, how legal mandates strengthen (or weaken) over successive cycles, and which factors drive these transformations. By updating the dataset, increasing sample size, incorporating richer political covariates, and adopting longitudinal methods, future research can build on our framework to deepen and refine our understanding of the institutional dynamics of deliberative minipublics.

## 8. Conclusion

Our analysis reveals that territorial architecture shapes the institutional form that deliberative minipublics can realistically assume. Federal systems occupy both ends of the spectrum: they host both highly formalised, recurring regional forums as well as numerous low-stakes, short-lived local experiments. Unitary states, by contrast, tend to channel participation either upward into one-off symbolic national assemblies or downward into iterative municipal panels. This duality suggests that a federal structure does not inherently foster deliberative innovation. Rather, it is the tier of government with the appropriate combination of authority, resources, and incentives that ultimately determines whether a citizens' assembly becomes a durable democratic interface or fades after a single outing.

These insights must be read with care. Our evidence relies on only 39 institutionalised cases, primarily drawn from OECD countries, which limits statistical power and omits many experiments in the Global South. Because the data captures a single temporal snapshot, we cannot yet trace how today's ad-hoc pilots might evolve over time, nor can we assess the influence of political dynamics such as party competition, civil-society mobilisation, or administrative capacity that were intentionally bracketed out of our parsimonious model.

These caveats point directly to the next steps of research. While a larger and more systematic dataset is necessary to produce generalisable results and causal inference, future research could still investigate the role of political parties, civil society advocacy, and administrative capacity in shaping minipublic trajectories, but also a possible impact of further institutional variables, such as the form of government (presidential vs. parliamentary), the presence of direct democratic tools such as referendums (see Kübler et al., 2025), and the electoral system (majoritarian vs. proportional representation). A comparative process-tracing of emblematic cases such as Belgium and Oregon could further illuminate causal pathways. A parallel line of investigation would be to examine the life cycles of minipublics, exploring the conditions under which an ad hoc experiment might, or might not, evolve into recurring and institutionalised experiments.



In short, minipublics are no longer democratic curiosities; in many contexts, they are edging towards routine governance. Yet their consolidation remains contingent, not inevitable. By uncovering the institutional logics that enable or constrain their permanence, this study offers reformers a clearer map of where deliberative democracy is most likely to take root—and reminds scholars how much we still have to learn about the conditions that sustain its growth.

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### Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

### Supplementary Material

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

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