

The Politicisation of Deliberative Mini-Publics: Democratic Risks, Mitigation, and Benefits

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Abstract

Deliberative mini-publics, which assemble a randomly sampled group of citizens to deliberate on policy solutions to pressing public problems, are often presented as potential instruments to reconnect citizens with democratic decision-making. Some have argued that if such innovations are to have a positive democratic role, they need to foster deliberation and contestation beyond the mini-public itself. Others, however, highlight how opening the mini-public up to the “maxi-public” comes with its own risks, such as a loss of legitimacy and pressure on mini-public participants. This article argues that the concept of *politicisation* can make a meaningful contribution to the study of the relationship between mini-publics and maxi-publics, and to more systematic theorisation of the normative benefits and drawbacks of opening mini-publics to public contestation. We adopt a broad understanding of politicisation, defined as the processes by which issues gain political significance through contestation by rival actors in society, and provide an analytical framework that examines the ways that intermediaries can politicise mini-publics at different stages of the process, with varying risks and benefits linked to democratic legitimacy and accountability. We also advance suggestions on how the risks linked with politicisation can be mitigated and associated benefits enhanced through specific mini-public design features.

Keywords

accountability; institutional design; legitimacy; mini-publics; politicisation

1. Introduction

Deliberative mini-publics are an increasingly common form of democratic innovation, typically used by public authorities to inform policy processes. They involve assembling a randomly sampled group of citizens

to deliberate on matters of public importance and generate recommendations, whilst also providing an arena for constituents to become more deeply engaged in political processes. While a first wave of scholarship championed these innovations for the role they can play in addressing the ongoing representative disconnect (Fishkin, 2018; Niemeyer, 2011), recent contributions also highlight the conditions under which mini-publics might enhance democratic principles of representativeness and accountability (Lafont, 2017). Some have argued that if such innovations are to play a positive democratic role, they need to foster deliberation beyond the mini-public itself (Setälä, 2017). Others, however, highlight how opening the mini-public to the “maxi-public” can come with its own risks, including perceived loss of legitimacy due to potential lobbying of participants by external actors (Bobbio, 2017; Pettit, 2004).

Building on this literature, this article argues that the concept of *politicisation* can make a meaningful contribution to the study of the relationship between mini-publics and maxi-publics, and to more systematic theorisation of the normative benefits and drawbacks of such links. We adopt a broad understanding of politicisation, defined as the processes by which issues gain political significance through contestation by rival actors in society. A growing body of scholarship illuminates some of the political dynamics of mini-publics, including the various political and strategic justifications and motivations of those initiating them (Long, 2026; Moseley et al., 2025; Sandover et al., 2021), the political ends of civil society groups advocating them (Boswell et al., 2023; Smith, 2022), and the politics of implementing mini-public recommendations (Lewis et al., 2023). However, there has been relatively little in-depth theorisation of the concept of politicisation in this specific context, and few attempts to conceptualise the topic in ways that can aid systematic empirical enquiry.

In this article, we establish a dialogue between the political science literature on politicisation and democratic innovations studies, creating an analytical framework that can be applied to study the role of politicisation in the relationship between mini-publics and maxi-publics. We examine the ways in which different intermediaries can politicise different dimensions of mini-publics at different stages of the process, with varying effects on democratic legitimacy and accountability. While politicisation could carry risks in terms of eroding public trust in these institutions (for example, due to perceived political interference or the use of mini-publics to serve particular ends), we argue that such risks can be mitigated with specific mini-public design features. Under the right conditions, politicisation may help inform citizens about a range of potential perspectives and provide them with collective choices to arbitrate between (Hay, 2007; Lafont, 2017), improving public legitimacy and accountability.

Our article proceeds as follows. Section 2 discusses literature on mini-maxi public links, specifically the bridging and politicising role played by intermediaries between these two levels. We then discuss normative assessments of the democratic consequences of opening mini-publics to maxi-public contestation, with some scholars viewing a two-way dialogue as essential, and others advocating for greater insulation of deliberative forums. In Section 3, building on contributions from wider political science scholarship, we develop an integrated analytical framework of mini-public politicisation, focused on the conditions under which mini-public politicisation might serve to further the legitimacy and accountability of political decision-making at different stages of the process (pre-, during, and post-deliberation).

2. Linking Mini-Publics and Maxi-Publics: What We Know So Far

2.1. Empirical Studies

Studies have explored the nature and extent of links between mini-publics and maxi-publics, with new research questions centred on how circumscribed deliberative experiments interact with wider systems of representative democracy (Felicetti et al., 2015). One strand of literature considers awareness of mini-publics by non-participating citizens, and related issues linked to their media visibility (Jacobs & Kaufmann, 2021; Jacquet & van der Does, 2021; van der Does & Jacquet, 2021). Studies generally show limited public awareness of mini-publics being conducted (for example, Elstub et al., 2021b, 2025 on the English and Scottish Climate Assemblies). Other mini-publics, including the Irish Citizens Assembly and the French Citizen's Climate Convention (hereafter CCC), have achieved more visibility, but are generally considered outliers (Boswell et al., 2023). Low public awareness also generally goes hand in hand with limited media coverage of these innovations (Boswell et al., 2023; Carrick & Elstub, 2021; Leino et al., 2025; Maia, 2023; Olsen & Trenz, 2014). The typical characteristics of mini-publics—an orientation towards consensus, the careful weighing of reasons, evidence-based decision-making, and the reliance on ordinary people—arguably limit their “newsworthiness” and therefore their public visibility (Bächtiger & Goldberg, 2020; Maia, 2023; Olsen & Trenz, 2014).

Studies of the links between mini-publics and maxi-publics have also focused, beyond the media, on the other actors and institutions that contribute to bridging both spheres, including through political advocacy. In line with Boswell et al. (2023, p. 194), this evidence suggests that mini-publics are not “inherently de-politicising.” Junius (2024), for example, argues that different actors such as policy makers, organisers of mini-publics, and mini-public participants rarely mediate between mini-publics and maxi-publics in a neutral way. Acting as “spokespeople” who communicate mini-public outputs to other parts of the deliberative system, these actors represent, interpret, debate, contest, and promote mini-publics and their outcomes to different constituencies in the wider public sphere. But the arrow of intermediation can also go the other way, with intermediaries bringing outside influences to bear on the mini-public. For instance, experts selected to provide expert testimony can have a politicising effect within a mini-public (Leino et al., 2022; Muradova et al., 2023); while intermediaries such as politicians can shape their design and influence the wider conditions in which they operate.

The empirical literature identifies three broad categories of actors as intermediating between mini- and maxi-publics. First, political representatives, either individual politicians or the political parties they belong to, take varied public viewpoints on mini-publics (Lorenzoni et al., 2025). Their motivations for conducting or supporting mini-publics are often political in nature, for example, as part of a governing strategy to deflect a difficult choice or legitimise a pre-existing course of action. When recommendations are made by mini-public participants, governing actors may use the findings strategically or evade responsibility, depending on the outcomes (Bayley & French, 2008; Hendriks & Lees-Marshment, 2018), with political uptake related to a range of factors such as available resources, legal feasibility, power dynamics, and political context (Lewis et al., 2023; Vrydagh, 2022). Studies also demonstrate the role of political ideology in these processes, with left-wing politicians more likely to commission mini-publics (Shepherd, 2024; Sintomer et al., 2008), support participatory reforms (Heinelt, 2013; Jacquet et al., 2020), and advocate for binding mechanisms (Niessen, 2019; Rangoni et al., 2021).

Second, civil society actors such as non-profit bodies, think tanks, and activist groupings or coalitions also play a politicisation role in linking mini-publics and maxi-publics. Some civil society organisations advocate for them, while interest groups with pre-existing insider influence may resist their initiation and hinder their impact (Boswell et al., 2023; della Porta & Felicetti, 2022; Elstub et al., 2021a). At times, these actors have influenced the initiation of mini-publics, such as *Extinction Rebellion* who vocally campaigned for a national UK climate citizen's assembly and the *Gilets Jaunes* movement in France who influenced the initiation of the CCC (Boswell et al., 2023; Smith, 2022). Coalitions of civil society actors have also organised mini-publics themselves to exert their own political pressure, such as, for example, the German National Citizen's Assembly on Climate (Boswell et al., 2023; Smith, 2022). Think tanks, such as Demos in the UK (Levin et al., 2024), have also championed the use of democratic innovations including mini-publics.

Mini-public spokespeople, such as organisers, different types of champions, or participants themselves, also perform a bridging role. One example is the MP representing the Agora Party in Brussels, a single-issue party devoted to advancing the Brussels Citizens Assembly (Junius, 2024). In interpreting the recommendations and promoting them within a political and policy process, this actor engages in public negotiation, persuasion, and compromise in their mediating role. In other cases (Boswell et al., 2016), parliamentary committee chairs have acted as champions, linking mini-publics with mass publics as well as with empowered political sites. Given their proximity to the deliberations, mini-public participants themselves can also play a role in communicating the outputs of mini-publics via the media and encouraging wider debate on the issues (Junius, 2024). In the UK Climate Assembly, for example, some members took part in a televised documentary (Boswell et al., 2023) and engaged with the media more broadly.

In summary, mini-publics often come about as part of a process of political pressure and bargaining; motivations for conducting them may reflect political or strategic priorities; and various pressure groups advocate or resist them. While public visibility and media coverage of these experiments remain relatively limited to date, various agents often do engage in wider public deliberation and contestation about specific mini-publics, which can generate additional media attention and contribute to wider public awareness.

2.2. Normative Assessments

There is an ongoing debate about the extent to which public contestation of mini-public processes and outputs is beneficial (or not) to their democratic legitimacy and accountability. Some argue for increased openness. Olsen and Trenz (2014), for instance, suggest that it is only when actors in the wider maxi-public can scrutinise and debate the arguments, claims, and recommendations of mini-publics that these institutions acquire legitimacy. Lafont (2017) defends a similar perspective. While she is critical of the policy-making role of mini-publics, she recognises their potential in promoting deliberation in the wider public sphere. Rummens (2012, p. 32) makes related arguments, stressing that: "only the visibility of the political stage, in which interest groups, civil society organizations and political parties publicly contest decisions, gives the wider public of citizens adequate access to what is at stake in the decision-making process." In a similar vein, Curato and Böker (2016) argue that, to fulfil their democratic role, mini-publics should be *deliberation-making* in the sense of encouraging wider public discussions about the issues being debated in the mini-public. This is achieved by key intermediaries transferring knowledge and synthesising common positions from mini-publics to wider publics for deliberation.

However, other scholars highlight how opening up mini-publics to contestation within the wider public sphere may come with distinct risks. Bobbio notes that deliberative arenas such as mini-publics are often constructed to be artificial spaces, “safe from social conflicts and political struggles,” and “free from the bad influence of politics” (Bobbio, 2017, p. 614). Deliberation is at times viewed as democratising precisely because it reduces the influence of electoral interests and promotes consideration of the common good at arm’s length from government (Pettit, 2004). In line with this, some argue that mini-publics should be relatively insulated from wider public opinion, as well as partisan and other vested interests. Studies have shown how deliberative democracy practitioners and communication strategists often work to avoid the undesirable “influence,” or pressure, of external actors on participants (Courant & Baeckelandt, 2025; Mendy et al., 2025; Oleart, 2023). This position is shared by influential bodies such as the OECD (2020), which stresses the importance of participant privacy. While organisers understand the need to enhance the public visibility and transparency of deliberative processes, they often seek to discourage the intervention of civil society or other groups that may be perceived as “political” by the wider public.

As noted by Oleart (2023), such views are associated with an “antipolitical imaginary” of deliberative democracy which stands in opposition to an agonistic conception of the public sphere in which value is placed on creating spaces for conflict and contestation (Mouffe, 1999, 2005). However, as Oleart (2023) also argues, other visions of deliberative democracy, specifically those informed by the systemic turn, are much more compatible with agonistic conceptions of democracy. This is because deliberative systems approaches envisage deliberation as occurring in different sorts of spaces throughout the public sphere—not merely in those “invited” spaces such as mini-publics that are purposefully constructed for such ends. Our analytical framework considers what a more politicised imaginary of mini-publics might look like, one in which mini-public deliberations are allowed to spill over to wider publics, and where mini-publics themselves are not entirely insulated from outside forces. Politicisation by intermediary actors can create greater public and media interest, which itself could bring potential democratic benefits. At the same time, we acknowledge that politicisation also carries risks. Our framework seeks to make first steps in articulating how the advantages could be realised and the risks managed, and what the trade-offs entailed in greater politicisation might be.

3. The Politicisation of Mini-Publics: An Analytical Framework

In the following paragraphs, we contribute to the debates highlighted in Section 2 above by establishing a dialogue between democratic innovations studies and the political science concept of politicisation. We offer a model which highlights the varying democratic benefits and potential drawbacks at different stages of the mini-public process of opening the mini-public to wider contestation. Our analytical framework develops a more fine-grained analysis of the conditions under which, and ways in which, politicisation might threaten or enhance the legitimacy and accountability of mini-publics, and thus their democratic impact. We elaborate on the phases of a mini-public during which politicisation can occur, the actors involved, and the potential effects of such politicisation, both positive and negative.

3.1. What Is Politicisation?

We define politicisation as the processes by which issues gain political significance for wider citizenries through contestation over these issues by rival actors in society. Here, we build on the wider literature on

politicisation and de-politicisation in political science as well as agonistic democratic theory, which conceptualises “the political.” Following Zürn (2019, pp. 977–978), politicisation can be defined as the process of “transporting an issue or an institution into the sphere of politics—making previously unpolitical matters political...thus presupposing the possibility to make collectively binding decisions on that matter.” Some scholarship focuses predominantly on processes of de-politicisation in the context of a shift towards increasingly technocratic and neoliberal governance in the Global North (for an overview, see Fawcett et al., 2017; Hay, 2015). Such a shift is viewed as *depoliticising* to the extent that it most often involves delegations of authority to non-elected bodies (Central Banks, international organisations and, indeed, mini-publics) and thus removing core policies from the influence of public debate and decision-making (Hay, 2007; Oleart, 2023). From a normative point of view, this scholarship has an intellectual affinity with agonistic democratic theory, which highlights how “the political,” defined as public contestation over rival and sometimes irreconcilable understandings of the common good, should be valued as the fundamental cornerstone of democracy (Mouffe, 1999, 2005).

An empirical social science literature has attempted to operationalise politicisation, using media coverage as a proxy for understanding the extent to which given issues are integrated within public debate (Hutter & Grande, 2014; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019; Zürn, 2019). Here politicisation is seen to involve three different components: “putting the issue on the agenda, some deliberation about the right decision, and the interaction of different positions regarding the choice” (Zürn, 2019; 977–978). This is generally operationalised along all or some of the following variables: issue salience (visibility), actor expansion (range), and actor polarisation (intensity and direction). Coming back to mini-publics, we can therefore assume that greater politicisation would entail more public dialogue about their process, content, and outcomes, particularly through the vehicle of the media, making these issues more salient. It would also involve a greater diversity of actors taking public positions about mini-public debates. Finally, politicisation would engender the expression of stronger and more divergent opinions about mini-publics, or even within mini-publics. As we show in Sections 3.2.1 and following, politicisation can occur at different stages of a mini-public: before, during, or after. In practice, the specific actors involved in the politicisation process, the issues being debated, as well as the benefits and risks entailed may differ according to the stage.

3.2. A Model of Deliberative Mini-Public Politicisation

The politicisation of deliberative mini-publics therefore involves increased contestation by a greater number of intermediaries (actor expansion), who represent a diversity of positions (issue expansion) with potentially stronger—including negative—views (polarisation). In such processes, key intermediaries such as political elites, parties, NGOs, activists, media commentators, and mini-public participants articulate various interests, ideas, and sentiments about a mini-public, its proceedings and its recommendations, engaging in an agonistic debate around meaningful alternatives.

Politicisation raises the stakes of mini-publics: by entering the political realm, the issues covered by mini-publics, and the mini-publics themselves, are elevated, garnering more attention from the media and society at large. Whether this is beneficial or detrimental from a democratic perspective is likely to depend on two main factors: the dimension of the mini-publics being debated (e.g., topics for deliberation, recruitment processes, proposals, and policy impacts), and whether specific design features in the periods before, during, and after the mini-public are in place to mitigate the risks associated with these aspects of

mini-publics being politicised (as outlined in Subsections 3.2.1–3.2.3). Specifically, we take interest in how different forms of politicisation impact two key democratic functions of mini-publics: legitimacy-building and accountability-making.

First, and following Curato and Böker (2016), politicisation may allow mini-publics to be *legitimacy-seeking*, to the extent that various actors may help provide justification for their organisation and gain consent for its decisions beyond the narrow circle of the assembly to the wider public. To this extent, politicisation may provide the wider public with a sense of ownership of and identification with mini-public processes, recommendations, or outcomes. Legitimacy can only be built if intermediaries give those outside of the mini-public cues to engage with, which could lead them to be openly critical, to engage with the substance of the topics considered, or to scrutinise its recommendations. Conversely, and as discussed in more detail in Sections 3.2.1. and following, there are circumstances where mini-public politicisation may also serve to undermine public legitimacy, specifically when the public is led to question the motivation of agenda-setters.

Second, politicisation may enhance the *accountability-building* function of mini-publics by allowing citizens to hold public authorities to account on various political promises. As Lafont (2017, p. 95) argues, such political uses may have a “contestatory” role, which allows political minority groups to use the recommendations of mini-publics to contest the views of consolidated majorities; and a “vigilance” role, which involves the public highlighting when mini-public recommendations effectively mirror majority views, but are not reflected in existing public policy. On the other hand, politicisation may also create risks for accountability—for instance, where politicians use mini-publics to push their own political agendas, or ignore mini-public recommendations entirely, either because of challenges to implementation or because they disagree with these.

We argue that specific design features as well as some features of mini-public institutionalisation, may help realise some of the above-mentioned benefits of politicisation whilst reducing some of the associated risks. Existing scholarship examines the potential of mini-public institutionalisation in developing links between mini-publics and maxi-publics (Boswell et al., 2023; Chwalisz, 2021; Farrell et al., 2019). In some local settings, deliberative innovations such as mini-publics (including citizens’ assemblies or variants of these), deliberative committees, or participatory budgeting have become a permanent feature of political decision-making, with routinised and codified processes replacing their variable ad hoc use. We suggest that some of the genuine risks associated with politicisation highlighted in the literature and outlined in our analytical framework stem from their ad hoc nature. Specifically, when mini-publics are not properly institutionalised, their design might be vulnerable to suspicions of political instrumentalization while their policy impact will be more easily subject to the whims of changing majorities. On the other hand, as we develop in Sections 3.2.1. and following, some of the democratic benefits of politicisation may be conditional on mini-publics being integrated into the normal working of representative institutions, with routinised processes and predictable paths to policy-making having the potential to increase both the legitimacy and accountability of mini-publics.

In the following subsections, we illustrate these arguments focusing on the effects of different actors politicising mini-publics during three main stages of such innovations, and the design features that may minimise risks of such politicisation at these different stages.

3.2.1. Before the Mini-Public

Potential sites of politicisation in the pre-mini-public stage include agenda setting, selection of members of stewardship and advisory committees, and expert selection. In most cases, discussions and negotiations surrounding these issues tend to happen behind closed doors by mini-public organisers or stewardship committees (Smith, 2022). This point is also reinforced by Lafont (Lafont et al., 2026, p. 177), who notes that “the agenda and issues up for discussion are normally set by the authorities who organize them.” While these issues of mini-public design may be the object of contradictory views, with actors putting forward distinct positions concerning specific topics for deliberation or which experts to invite, the number of actors involved in these decisions tends to be limited to the commissioning and/or organising bodies.

This very limited form of politicisation, however, with only a small number of actors exchanging positions without public scrutiny, can create adverse effects. There are legitimacy risks linked to the agenda or expert selection being perceived either by participants, political opponents or the wider public as biased, ideologically oriented or serving the cause of a specific party. For example, participants of the French CCC were suspicious that they would be expected to give popular assent to a carbon tax, which the government had previously failed to implement following pushback from the Gilets Jaunes movement (Giraudet et al., 2022). While politicisation may still occur, public debates may become more focused on the specific actors with power over these decisions, their intentions and their impartiality in such processes, rather than discussing the merits of the deliberation process or its outcomes.

We identify two main design features to mitigate such risks. First, to mitigate perceptions of bias in agenda-setting, a clear, systematic, and public process for selecting ideas to go forward to the mini-public is crucial, including which actors get to input into the process and with what influence. The expert selection process should also be transparent, with a rigorous process for determining the suitability of different candidates for inclusion. Second, suspicions of instrumentalization can be limited by opening the process of agenda-setting and design to a range of actors beyond the commissioners and governance committee, creating dialogue, debate, and wider public deliberation.

Democratizing decision-making processes related to the scope and objectives of mini-publics, as well as expert selection, may help re-focus debates on the policy issues themselves, and away from questions concerning decision-makers’ intentions. Existing examples illustrate how this might be done. In the permanent deliberative committees in Belgium, citizens-at-large can nominate topics for deliberation through a petition process (Chwalisz, 2021). In other cases, public evidence submission processes have been built into mini-publics, thereby integrating both mini- and maxi-public views, e.g., the Irish Constitutional Convention (Suiter et al., 2016) and the French CCC (Smith, 2022). Such practices can help address the critique that mini-publics entail democracy by shortcuts, bypassing the majority of citizens (Lafont, 2019). Mini-public members themselves can also be provided with more influence over the agenda, with previous research suggesting this is something mini-public members desire (Elstub et al., 2021a; Sandover et al., 2021). At the same time, giving too much responsibility for agenda-setting may be burdensome for participants or create unrealistic expectations, suggesting a degree of openness within certain parameters may be required (Boswell, 2021). Finally, civil society groups and elected representatives other than those commissioning the mini-public could have a greater say in choices related to agendas and design.

Opening up these pre-deliberation processes to a wider range of actors may result in greater perceived “input legitimacy” (see Suiter & Reuchamps, 2016) and enhanced accountability. Democratizing topic selection and the choice of experts may help reduce epistemic hierarchies, give civil society greater agency, introduce valued expertise and increase the likelihood of more creative or transformational policy ideas being considered. Lafont and Landemore are both sympathetic to such arguments, expressing support for democratising agenda-setting and giving assembly members more freedom to select experts, including more marginalised voices (Lafont et al., 2026). In relation to elected representatives, involving them in suggesting or deliberating on topics for deliberation may help improve the impact of mini-publics by creating “buy-in” from politicians across the spectrum and increasing their trust in the process. This in turn would create better conditions for the achievement of “output legitimacy,” including the political uptake of recommendations (Suiter & Reuchamps, 2016).

3.2.2. During the Mini-Public

During the mini-public, politicisation will generally entail a greater number of external actors discussing the content of mini-public deliberations and interacting with mini-public participants. This may help build conditions for “contestatory enquiry” and critical exchange, which has been argued to be an important complement to the “appreciative enquiry” approach within deliberative forums (Curato et al., 2013). This wider critical engagement can be fostered in several ways.

First, a well-conceived and properly resourced communications strategy may help overcome some of the hurdles identified earlier with lack of media coverage and consequent lack of wider public engagement. A strategy which personalises the narrative, engages celebrities, and demonstrates the salience of the issues to the public could help in this respect. Second, assembly members themselves could communicate with the wider public, via the media or through localised events, similar to the public hearings used in the British Columbia Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform (Warren & Pearce, 2008) or the spin-off community assemblies during the Global Climate Assembly (Conway-Lamb et al., 2025). Previous examples illustrate a tendency for volunteer spokespeople to emerge over time from mini-public processes, with certain participants effectively engaging the media (for example, in the French CCC; see Smith, 2022). Such exchanges could provide an opportunity for participants to test out their arguments, potentially bringing further insights into the deliberative process, building public awareness, and creating opportunities for critique and challenge, all of which may build wider legitimacy and trust in the process. Third, interaction between participants and political elites during the deliberation process is another site of possible politicisation. Politicians can be involved in an observational capacity or be called to answer participants’ questions. In the Irish Constitutional Convention, politicians were even allocated a proportion of places (Suiter et al., 2016). Witnessing mini-publics first-hand may provide reassurance to politicians about the quality of deliberation and help build legitimacy perceptions, increasing the likelihood of mini-public debates being discussed in elected chambers, and resulting in greater policy impact.

However, pressure being exerted on mini-public participants is one of the main risks of opening the deliberations to additional actors. Exposing the content of deliberations to the press, politicians, or the wider public may undermine a mini-public’s deliberative conditions, creating scope for interest groups or others to exert pressure on participants. Some participants may not wish this level of publicity, especially if they fear backlash from those disagreeing with their positions, and this may negatively impact future recruitment.

Exchanges between citizens and politicians specifically could create problematic power dynamics, with partisan agendas dominating. More broadly, opening up deliberations to politicisation may damage the perceived independence of decision-making processes, and challenge the wider legitimacy of the process.

Certain mini-public design features could help mitigate these risks. Media training for willing mini-public participants and making exchanges with politicians or the wider public entirely optional could create the conditions for a safer and more constructive dialogue between mini-publics and maxi-publics. However, these measures of mitigation are necessarily imperfect. When it comes to the politicisation of mini-public deliberations, there is an inescapable trade-off between, on the one hand, the benefits brought by wider public awareness of mini-public debates and ownership of these processes by the maxi-public and, on the other hand, the drawbacks related to impartiality of the deliberations themselves being negatively affected by such openness. Mini-public organisers will need to arbitrate between the costs and benefits of politicising mini-public deliberations and thus opening up to contestation from the wider public and politicians.

3.2.3. After the Mini-Public

The post-mini-public period is a core moment for politicisation. The publication of the final report provides an important opportunity for mini-public conclusions to be debated more widely in public, via the media. Indeed, evidence suggests that this is often a time when media coverage peaks (Elstub et al., 2021b; Fernández-Martínez et al., 2025). Various actors are typically involved at this point, including mini-public participants, spokespeople, commissioners, advisory committee members, or expert witnesses. Debates about mini-public recommendations sometimes also take place in political decision-making arenas, such as in parliament or governmental committees (Langkjær & Smith, 2023). This is a key moment for connecting deliberative and representative political processes, something which may prompt further media discussion and critical engagement with politicians' positions regarding mini-public recommendations. Elevating mini-public processes to the sphere of representative politics in this way enhances their potential for impact and increases public visibility, helping build legitimacy (Junius, 2024).

Yet there are clear risks linked to politicisation at this stage. When participants or the wider public are disappointed with the responses of politicians, this may create disillusionment or even backlash amongst participants or the public. This is a common issue, given evidence that politicians tend to be more likely to adopt recommendations that align with existing priorities, or those that only minimally challenge existing legislation and budgetary allocations (Boussaguet, 2016; Font et al., 2017; Hendriks, 2013). Politicians might pay lip service to the outcomes of mini-publics when under the watchful gaze of the media and the public, whilst still cherry-picking recommendations. Such risks are likely to be compounded by a wider environment where democratic integrity and accountability are fundamentally lacking, for instance in Hungary, where tools of citizen participation were used to consolidate the Fidesz' autocratic regime (Kovács Szitkay et al., 2026). In this context, public debate may once again focus on the duplicity of public actors and their lack of commitment to the deliberative process, leading to disappointment and anger, ultimately reducing rather than enhancing support, legitimacy and trust. The French CCC offers a striking example of such risks, where high expectations of implementation in light of Macron's promise to consider all of the Convention's proposals "without filters," followed by the cherry-picking of recommendations, led to disillusionment of participants and the wider public (Courant, 2021; Galván Labrador & Zografos, 2024; Smith, 2022).

Measures for mitigating these risks should aim to increase the accountability of policymakers in the post-deliberation phase by creating a duty for politicians to justify the degree of policy uptake of mini-public recommendations. Indeed, feedback processes to participants are increasingly common. In the Scottish Climate Assembly, for example, government was legally required to provide a response to the assembly's final report within six months, alongside other post-assembly follow-up measures including a tabled follow-up response from parliamentary committees (Langkjær & Smith, 2023). Similarly, the Paris permanent Citizens' Assembly has a built-in response requirement for local councillors (Chwalisz, 2021). Wider scrutiny processes can take place in the longer run, with independent bodies monitoring the implementation of recommendations. This may open further dialogue between mini-public participants and politicians, improving accountability for politicians' responsiveness to mini-publics and enhancing perceptions of process and output legitimacy (Farrell et al., 2019).

A final avenue to mitigate these risks is to generate more predictable pathways between mini-publics and policy-making processes. Mini-publics could have greater power to be involved in the process of initiating legislation or identifying topics to be debated in parliament. Permanent mini-publics could consider all constitutional changes before parliamentary votes, as trialled in Ireland (Doyle & Walsh, 2020). Mini-publics could also play a role in defining topics put to wider public referenda, as also used in the Irish context (Farrell et al., 2019), or in communicating advice to citizens taking part in referenda, as in the Citizens' Initiative Review in Oregon (Chwalisz, 2021). With pre-determined pathways between mini-publics and policy processes, politicisation is less likely to focus on debates about the lack of trustworthiness of politicians and more likely to focus on the value of mini-public proposals, thereby improving political legitimacy and accountability.

4. Conclusion

Our analytical framework takes steps to conceptualise the politicisation of mini-publics, shedding light on the actors involved, stages and sites of politicisation, as well as risks and benefits involved. Building on deliberative systems approaches that examine the links between different deliberative sites (Boswell et al., 2016; Felicetti et al., 2015), and literature on politicisation (Oleart, 2023; Zürn, 2019) as well as agonism (Mouffe, 1999, 2005), we raise questions about how politicisation connects mini and maxi-publics and the democratic outcomes of this. While various political dimensions of mini-publics have so far been the object of empirical study (Blanc & Grandchamp, 2022; Boswell et al., 2023; Junius, 2024; Lafont, 2017; Lewis et al., 2023; Rummens, 2012; Vrydagh, 2022), a more explicit focus on politicisation as a substantive topic of enquiry, and its connection to issues of mini-maxi public linkages, opens up new topics of empirical investigation. This includes the role of agents of intermediation in the politicisation of mini-publics, and the effects of public contestation surrounding these. Agents of intermediation may operate from mini to maxi-public (bringing mini-public findings and debates to wider audiences), or from maxi to mini-public (outside influences permeating the mini-publics). There is still much to investigate in relation to the public positioning of various actors in debates involving specific mini-publics, in terms of the content of these positions, the sites or moments at which they are expressed, the audiences they address, and the determinants of variation on these different dimensions. Further empirical research and normative theorising could explore how the degree of politicisation may differ according to mini-public stage (before, during, or after), as well as the specific and cumulative effects of politicization (positive and negative) at these different points. Future scholarship could also examine the positive and negative effects of intermediaries operating from mini to maxi-level, and vice versa.

One risk we have identified is that mini-publics' politicisation can negatively affect the legitimacy of these institutions when public debates focus on topics such as the opportunistic reliance on mini-publics by political elites, agendas being influenced by partisan agendas, or the cherry-picking of recommendations according to pre-formed interests. In such contexts, greater politicisation is likely to reproduce, rather than correct, the ills of contemporary politics, with public debates focusing more on supporting or opposing those who initiate mini-publics rather than discussing the merits of the deliberation process or considering its outcomes. These risks can be mitigated by diffusing common suspicions of instrumentalization, providing avenues for the wider citizenry to influence their development, and promoting greater transparency in their initial design and pathways to policy.

Many of the mitigation measures we advocate would be facilitated by integrating mini-publics within the normal workings of representative institutions, rather than relying on these as ad hoc experiments. Indeed, arguments for permanent mini-public institutions are increasingly being made by deliberative democracy scholars (Abbas & Smith, 2024; Lafont et al., 2026), and a small number of such permanent bodies already exist. Views vary on how tightly or loosely coupled these should be with existing representative institutions. Overly tight coupling can lead to mini-publics being co-opted by politicians to serve political agendas (Abbas & Smith, 2024), thus reducing their added value to mainstream politics. Indeed, some scholars would prefer these bodies to have a more autonomous member-led status (see Landemore in Lafont et al., 2026). However, unless open to processes of further politicisation by a greater range of actors, even institutionalised mini-publics will likely remain disconnected from the broader public, and may perform poorly in terms of legitimacy and accountability. We also recognise that grassroots mini-publics and bottom-up forms of participation initiated by social movements can be very effective, and are often highly politicising, given their relative independence from government (Bua & Bussu, 2023). Future studies of mini-public politicisation should consider mini-publics of different varieties, including those led by different types of bodies and coalitions, those with varying degrees of institutionalisation and those operating at different levels of governance.

Our framework focuses mainly on how agents of intermediation can politicise mini-publics at the interface between mini- and maxi-publics. However, future work could also explore how specific design choices about mini-publics themselves have politicising elements. For instance, choices about the types and modes of discursive exchange valued within mini-publics can favour some participants over others, creating power differentials within these settings. Decisions about the sorts of topics that “are on the table” for discussion, or the kinds of experts selected for inclusion, can be deeply political and reflect the agendas of organisers (Leino et al., 2022). The evidence selected by the experts themselves reflects political choices about what type of knowledge is valued, and whose voices are amplified. These aspects point toward a rich research agenda on mini-public politicisation within the mini-publics themselves as well as beyond them—as emphasised in our framework.

Finally, a focus on politicisation also opens the door to greater methodological diversity in the study of mini-public spill-over effects. The main source of available evidence in this domain tends to be survey data—qualitative data is vastly underrepresented, as highlighted by a systematic review of this literature (van der Does & Jacquet, 2021). Other methods of assessing mini-public impacts include the “congruence” approach, which assesses the extent to which their recommendations are subsequently found in policy documents (Vrydagh, 2022). But there is also a need for more qualitative data on the public discourses and

practices surrounding mini-publics—what Lafont (2017) terms the “political uses” of deliberative innovations. While studies have shed light on the relationship between mini-publics and their wider discursive environment (Boswell et al., 2016; Dodge, 2014; Hendriks, 2005), more systematic data gathering and analysis, specifically focusing on media coverage of mini-publics, including comparative work, would be beneficial. Various methods of textual analysis may be appropriate, from more inductive and qualitative discourse analysis to a range of qualitative and quantitative methods of content analysis.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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