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Citizen Participation as a Leverage Point: A Comparative Case Study of the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly and the East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue

Lukas Baumgartner

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Brandhofgasse 5, 8010 Graz
wegcenter.uni-graz.at

Contact: Lukas Baumgartner
lu.baumgartner1@gmail.com

Author: *Lukas Baumgartner*

Citizen Participation as a Leverage Point: A Comparative Case Study of the Austrian Climate Citizens‘ Assembly and the East-Belgian permanent Citizens‘ Dialogue

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Abstract

With institutional trust declining, the climate crisis accelerating and political polarization on the rise, democratic societies are facing a multitude of crises in the 21st century. Participatory democratic processes such as citizens' councils may assist in facing these current challenges by fostering exchange between citizens, producing citizen-backed recommendations for policymakers and strengthening democratic system resilience. To evaluate the role of different participatory processes in the broader democratic system, this thesis investigates the potential of participatory processes to act upon deep leverage points as postulated by Donella Meadows. In a comparative case study, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted, three with participants from the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly, three with participants of the East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue and one with the administrative spokesperson of the East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue. The results of the interviews were analysed through qualitative coding in MaxQDA and subsequently synthesized into three overarching categories: 'Human agency', 'Mental model shifts through deliberation' and 'System responsiveness and Institutional trust'. These three categories connect to different leverage points within democratic systems. Most notably, participatory processes show the potential to act upon usually hard-to-access deep leverage points, including: 'The mindset or paradigm out of which the system arises', 'The goals of a system', and 'The power to add, change, evolve, or self-organize system structure'. Furthermore, the effects of system structure and institutionalization on participant experiences were explored as the two processes differ substantially in their organizational structure. While the East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue is an institutionalized participatory process, the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly was a one-off event held in 2022. Differences in process structure mainly manifested in the handling of recommendations and general transparency throughout the process, which in turn directly influenced the perceived agency and institutional trust of participants. During the deliberation phase, system structure did not exert a significant effect on participants' experiences, as the effects of deliberative discussions on mental models of participants were mostly similar in both cases. The findings suggest that, if transparency and organizational process design are well executed, participatory processes can help to facilitate broader societal change by acting upon deep leverage points.

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1. Introduction

The 21st century is progressing and challenges for both natural and societal systems are mounting. Climate change is one of the most pressing, with average global temperature reaching 1.1°C above 1850-1900 between 2011 and 2020, resulting in extreme weather climate extremes (Calvin et al., 2023, p. 4-5). Current trajectories indicate that the 1.5°C target will likely be overshot during the 21st century (Calvin et al., 2023, p. 10). Yet, advancing climate change is only one of the many crises humanity is facing today's world of 'polycrisis', forcing societies to respond by mitigating and adapting to impacts (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2023, p. 3).

This multitude of challenges and fields of actions is categorized in part by the 17 sustainable development goals which encompass economic, social and environmental issues (Halkos & Gkampoura, 2021, p. 94). As proposed in the Brundtland report, sustainable development is defined as *'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'* (Brundtlandreport, 1987., p. p.15). Current studies in sustainability science show that global ecosystem health and resilience is being strongly compromised by unsustainable human activities, undermining future generations abilities to meet their needs. To assess earths' ecosystem health and system resilience, the earth system can be divided into nine sub-systems, commonly referred to as planetary boundaries. These indicators include climate change, land system change, freshwater change, ocean acidification, biogeochemical flows, freshwater change, change in biosphere integrity, atmospheric aerosol loading and novel entities. Currently six out nine planetary boundaries are transgressed, with ocean acidification approaching its boundary as well (Richardson et al., 2023, p. 4).

To handle this multitude of crises and steer societies towards a sustainable future, democratic systems need to be resilient, adaptive and capable of producing effective policies to navigate these times of complexity. Yet, in the last decade political populism is again on the rise, challenging European democracies and its institutions (Corbet & Larkin, 2019, p. 2). In addition, voter turnout and political participation is declining across the continent adding further pressure on the political system (Siaroff, 2009, p. 44). This raises the question: How can democratic systems evolve to better manage this multitude complex challenges?

Participatory democratic processes such as citizens' councils may provide one part of the answer. By increasing political efficacy of citizens, supporting informed consensus-based decision making and by fostering exchange between citizens and politicians, they offer a new pathway towards a more resilient and inclusive democratic system. While often a subject of political science, citizens' councils often deliberate on socially and environmentally relevant topics aligned, showing their relevance for sustainability science.

To assess the impact of citizens' councils on participants and its potential role for advancing broader sustainable development within democracies, this thesis conducted a comparative case study of the institutionalized East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue and the Austrian nationwide Climate Citizens' Assembly. These two participatory processes were chosen because of their differences in institutionalization, structure and scale providing an opportunity to examine how these characteristics influence participants' experiences. Semi-structured interviews with participants and an administrative figure were analyzed using a systems thinking approach. The analysis focuses on how citizens' councils interact with Meadows' leverage points and theories of deliberative democracy to assess their impact at both individual and systemic levels. Furthermore, the two citizens' councils of interest differ in their degree of institutionalization. With the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly (CCA) being a one-time event and the East-Belgian Citizens' Dialogue being a permanent democratic institution, it is investigated how this difference in institutionalization affects participants experiences.

To investigate the effects on participants and the broader democratic system, this thesis is structured as follows: Chapter two is comprised of the theoretical framework, introducing key concepts such as Meadow's leverage points, the deliberative system, human agency and mental models. These concepts and how they guided the research design will be summarized in chapter three. In chapter four, the methodological approach is presented in detail, followed by a literature review of both cases in chapter five. The findings of the analyzed interview data will be presented in chapter six, with a subsequent connection back to Meadows' leverage points and the broader democratic system in the discussion in chapter seven. Finally in chapter eight, a conclusion of the findings is presented, focusing on broader implications of participatory processes within democracies and potential further research.

2. Theoretical framework

To assess how participation in a citizens' councils can act upon deep leverage points and influence broader governance structures, a theoretical basis must first be established. In the following section the theoretical frameworks used in this thesis such as the deliberative system, Meadows' leverage points, human agency and mental model are introduced. Before drawing connections from individual changes to systemic changes within complex systems it is helpful to visualize a democratic system as a complex system first. Therefore, we start off with the basic principles of the deliberative system and its parts.

2.1 The deliberative system

There are many definitions of complex systems, varying greatly in depth, length and complexity. As postulated by Rind in 1999, "A complex system is literally one in which

there are multiple interactions between many different components"(Rind, 1999, p. 105). This framing of a complex system can easily be adopted to modern society with institutions, industries, political parties, advocacy groups, social and traditional media outlets and many more components emerging from human interactions on different scales, all together creating a highly entangled system which we today call a democratic society.

How systems thinking can be applied to modern society is laid out by Mansbridge et al. (2012), where the deliberative system was introduced. The deliberative systems view aims to capture democratic quality as an emergent property of the broader system it is nested within. Deliberation happens at many different levels and between different levels of society, which in the end produces democratic legitimacy. As later postulated by Dryzek, six properties make up a deliberative system, they are as follows (Dryzek & Stevenson, 2011, p.3):

- The public space
- The empowered space
- The transmission between the public and empowered space
- The accountability of the empowered space to the public space
- The public examination of the qualities of the system itself
- The decisiveness of the system and its components

These properties can, in systems thinking, be thought of as nodes in a network, with different connections and feedbacks acting between the nodes and within themselves. Building upon this work an adapted illustration of the deliberative system can be found in the following graphic, taken from '*Room for a view'* (Fig. 1).

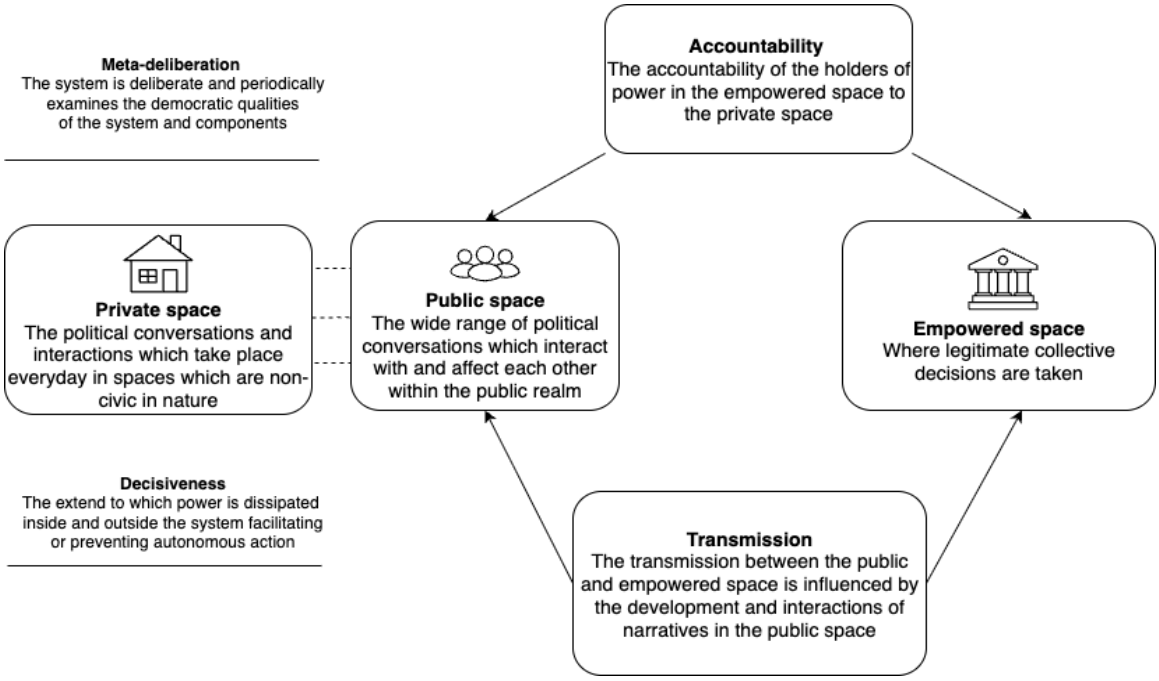


Figure 1: The deliberative system (Room for a view: Burall, 2015, p. 35)

Looking at the illustration, it becomes apparent why a systemic view of democracy is quite intuitive. Empowered space influencing public space and vice versa, different connections and feedbacks connecting the nodes within the democratic system makes a systems perspective compelling. In the following sections the seven components of the deliberative system and their interactions are explained, taken from Burall (Burall, 2015).

The public space is inhabited by actors such as politicians, journalists, activists, academics, interest groups and ordinary citizens. There is broad range of discourse, with different views influencing each other with, ideally, little legal regulations on what can be said in this space. Discourse in the public space may take part online or offline, whereas the age of digitalization brings special challenges to this space regarding filter bubbles, anonymity, bots and polarization.

In the empowered space collective decisions are discussed and subsequently decided upon. This space includes government entities such as parliaments or council chambers. How well the empowered space acts upon the views and needs expressed in the public space contributes to the capacity of the deliberative system.

The influence of the empowered space by the public space generally occurs by narratives and sentiments originating in the public space and subsequently affecting empowered space debates. This process can happen in numerous ways such as protests, cultural movements or political campaigning. Yet, the influence is not one sided as discourse in the empowered also exerts influence on discussions in the public space. Feedback loops emerge between them as a result.

In democratic systems the accountability of the empowered space is established via elections on different governmental levels from municipal to nationwide. According to Dryzek, elections are not only the most common and important accountability mechanism, but also the only direct one between public and empowered space (Dryzek & Stevenson, 2011, p. 3). Other processes which provide accountability of the empowered space are public hearings, courts or parliamentary hearings.

Actions within the private space are happening on a day-to-day basis and can include political topics, yet are non-civic in nature, meaning they do not contribute or influence any political decisions directly. One can think of conversations with friends in a restaurant or at the family table for example. Though they do not directly influence policy, actions within the private space are influenced by events in other spaces and exert indirect influence back on the public and empowered space over time.

The public examination of the qualities of the system itself considers how well the system reflects the discourses and narratives within the different spaces and its constituents. Ideally the system does not only reflect but also change and adapt if necessary. Although Burall remains rather vague about how public examination can be done in a structured manner, to achieve adaption the periodical creation of an empowered space which is

authorized to do examination and possible restructuring of the system and components of the system is suggested.

The decisiveness of the system is defined as the extent to which the deliberative system has the power take decisions within the broader political landscape. An example for decisiveness of a deliberative system are the recommendations which are produced in participatory processes and subsequently not implemented. One can have high quality of deliberation within a process, yet if there is no implementation the decisiveness is low.

This thesis suggests that (institutionalized) citizens' councils as a permanent democratic infrastructure, brings benefits both from a systemic and individual perspective. Systemic improvements are achieved by increasing connectivity between parts of the deliberative system, especially through the new permanent connection between the empowered and public space. On an individual level, positive effects on actors in the system such as participants, politicians and stakeholders include an increase of perceived self-efficacy and mental model revision. These individual and systemic effects and how they interact with Meadows' leverage point framework will be discussed in the next section.

2.2 Leverage points in a system

As previously described, our societal structure we live in today very much resembles many aspects of complex system behaviors. As complex systems often exhibit non-linearity, changes in specific areas of the system have the potential to cause widespread changes throughout the whole system (Kim, 1999, pp. 36–37). These areas can be seen as points of 'leverage'. Donella Meadows laid out 12 of these leverage points in her 1999 essay *'Places to intervene is a system'* (Meadows, 1999.). These places to intervene increase in influence from 'shallow' points of leverage (subsidies, taxes...) to 'deep' leverage points (goals, power structure, paradigms) within complex systems. The different leverage points can be further classified into four thematic categories, as proposed by Abson et al: *parameters, feedbacks, design, intent* (Abson et al., 2017, p. 35). The full list of leverage points in increasing order of effectiveness and their realms of leverage are as follows (Abson et al., 2017, p. 32):

Table 1: Meadows' leverage points

Leverage points	Realm of leverage
12. Constants parameters, numbers (subsidies, taxes, standards)	**Parameters** *The relatively mechanistic characteristics typically targeted by policy makers*
11. The size of buffers and other stabilizing stocks, relative to their flows	
10. The structure of material stocks and flows (such as transport networks, population age structures)	
9. The length of delays, relative to the rate of system change	

8. The strength of negative feedback loops, relative to the impacts they are trying to correct against	**Feedbacks** *The interactions between elements within a system of interest that drive internal dynamics*
7. The gain around driving positive feedback loops	
6. The structure of information flows (who does and does not have access to what kinds of information)	**Design** *The social structures that manage feedbacks and parameters*
5. The rules of the system (such as incentives, punishments constraints)	
4. The power to add, change, evolve, or self-organize system structure	
3. The goals of the system	**Intent** *The underpinning values, goals and world views of actors that shape the emergent direction to which a system is oriented*
2. The mindset or paradigm out of which the system – its goals, structure, rules, delays, parameters - arises	
1.The power to transcend paradigms	

As one goes further down the list, leverage points are increasing in influence but are also increasingly harder to access. It is easier to change subsidy policies than to change the mindset of a whole population. When analyzing current approaches of implementing and improving sustainability practices, many of them concern themselves with shallow leverage points, not addressing the root causes of the systematic problems we face today and therefore being insufficient in impact (Fischer & Riechers, 2019, p. 118).

An example of this is given in Abson et al. (2017, p. 31) where it is stated, that from a conservation biology perspective it is a reasonable thing to ask: *"How do we produce enough food, with minimal aspects on biodiversity, to meet changing diets?",* yet a more impactful question to ask would be: *"How do we change diets to minimize biodiversity impacts?"*. As they argue, this line of questioning would be regarded as 'outside the scope' of the discipline and is therefore mostly not explored. Building upon this, advancing from shallow to deep leverage points is also a venture from causality to teleology as described by the following graphic on the upcoming page from *Fischer & Riechers* (Fig.2).

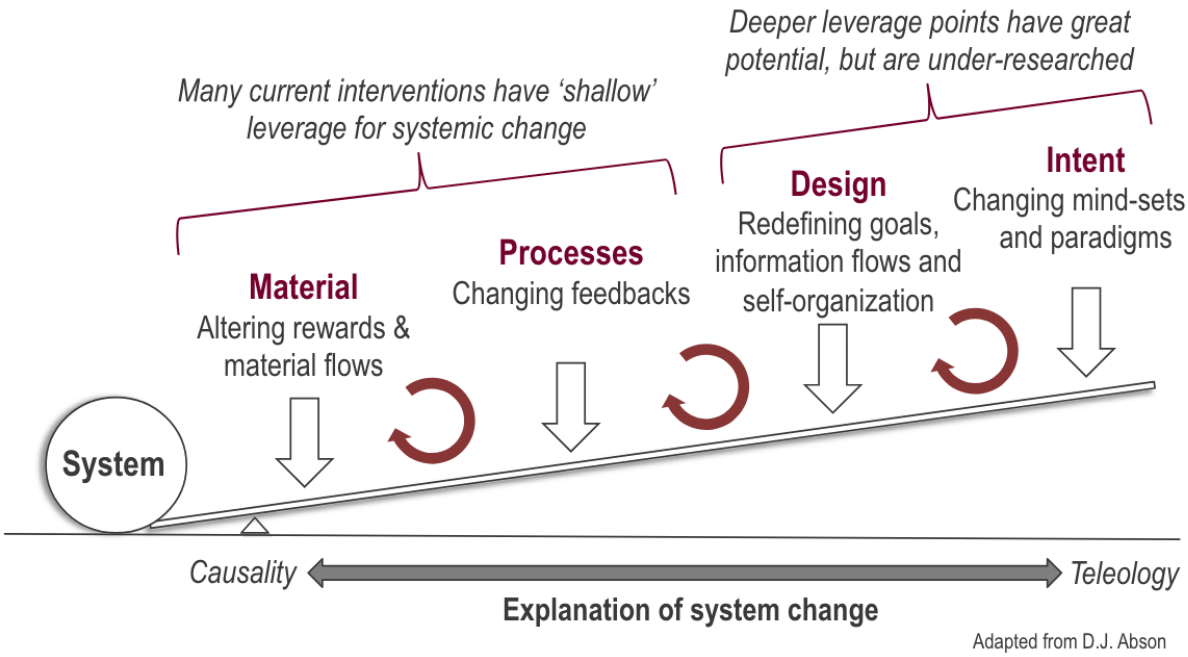


Figure 2: Explanation of system change (A leverage points perspective on sustainability: Fischer & Riechers, 2019, p. 117))

This journey along leverage points from causality to teleology, can also manifest itself in the way one engages with the future, namely by going from forecasting techniques to 'backcasting'. While scientific forecasts are extremely valuable for decision making, 'backcasting' as proposed by Dreborg (1996), allows aiming for far bolder goals, which often fall outside the bounds of what forecasts based on current system state and understanding predicts (Fischer & Riechers, 2019, p.117). Using the 'backcasting' technique, one imagines a future desired state of a system and then the means to reach this desired state are proposed afterwards. A famous example of 'backcasting' occurred in the 1960s when John F. Kennedy decided to put a man on the moon during the 60s, with the means to get there being worked out afterwards(Fischer & Riechers, 2019, p. 117). Similarly, citizens' councils may function as institutionalized spaces within democratic systems, which enable the creation of collaboratively drafted citizen driven visions of the future with strategic pathways to realize them.

Yet, targeting deep leverage points does not have to an exclusive undertaking, as aiming for changes in deep leverage points can have ripple effects in other points of leverage via so called 'chains of leverage' (Fischer & Riechers, 2019, p. 118). An example of such a chain of leverage from deep to shallow in the context of climate change mitigation might look as follows:

'*The goals of the system' (3)* change to 'reduce CO_2 emissions'. This causes changes in '*The rules of the system' (5)* & subsequently in the '*Constants and parameters' (12)* leverage point as well. This could be the case when subsidy policies are overhauled to facilitate green energy implementation, introducing an emissions trading system to encourage companies to invest in clean production measures. A real-world example of

‘leverage chains’ has been observed in a study in Ethiopia. Changes to rules regarding women’s right (relatively deep), has increased their presence in public life (shallow - parameters), which in turn lead to men gradually adjust their attitudes towards women (deep) (Fischer & Riechers, 2019, p. 118).

Another popular way of illustrating how human systems interact is the ‘iceberg model’ relating events – patterns – systemic structures(Kim, 1999, p. 4). The model looks as follows (Fig. 3).

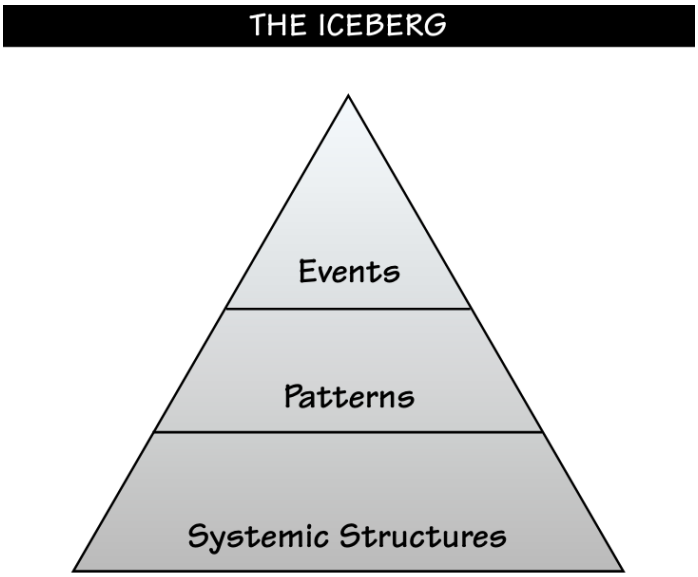


Figure 3: The iceberg model (Introduction to systems thinking: (Kim, 1999, p. 4)

This model illustrates that behind the visible events in the world; there are patterns and systemic structures out of which those events arise. Yet, as they are difficult to detect they are often overlooked. In Meadows’ thinking this would represents the targeting of shallow points of leverage to solve problems, rather than addressing the root causes of said problem.

An expanded version of this iceberg model which incorporated Meadows’ leverage points can be found in Davelaar (Davelaar, 2021, p. 731) and is presented on the next page (Fig. 4).

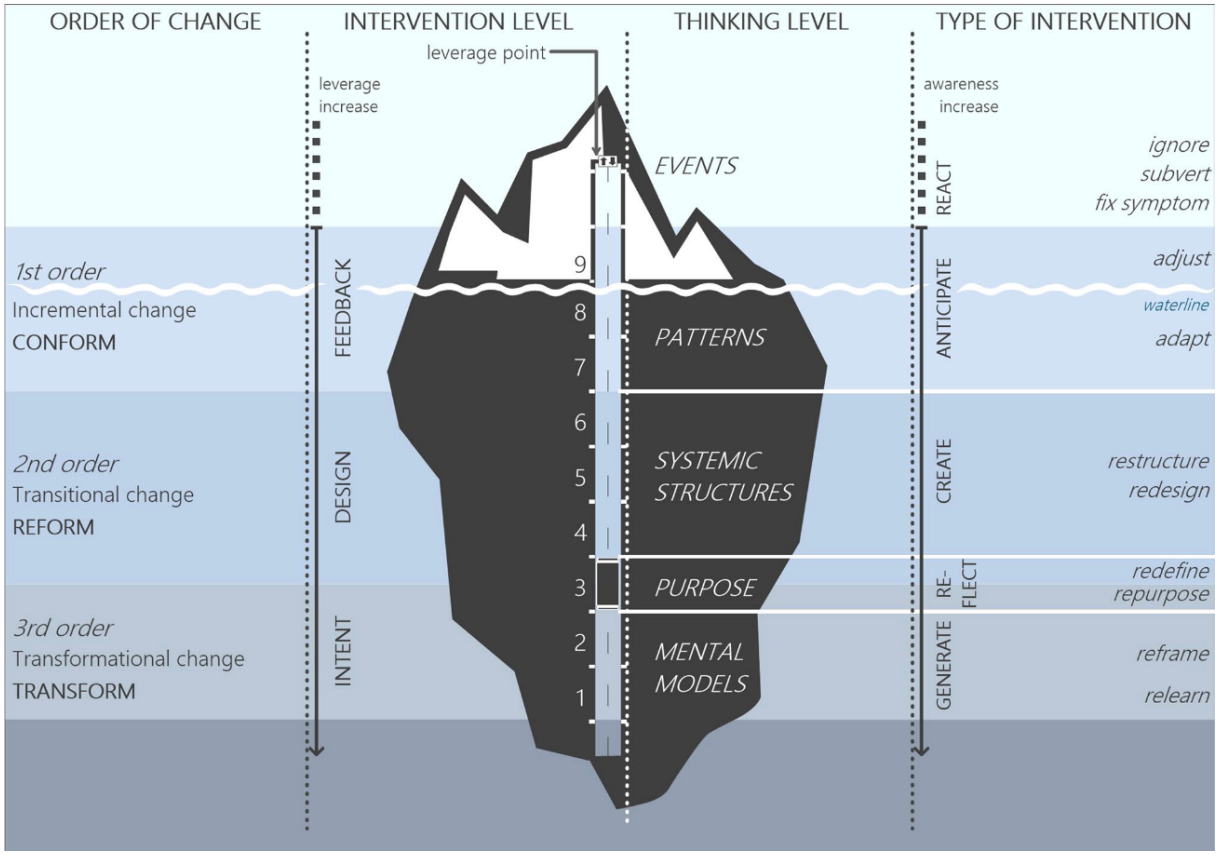


Figure 4: The iceberg model expanded to Meadows' leverage points (Transformation for sustainability: a deep leverage points approach: (Davelaar, 2021, p. 731)

Within human systems observable patterns and events emerge from deeper underlying systemic structures and mental models, drawing on the metaphor of shallow & deep leverage points. Following the logic in this illustration and Meadows herself, truly transformative change of a system can be achieved by targeting leverage points concerned with intent, mindset, paradigms and mental models (Davelaar, 2021, p. 731). Paradigms, so Davelaar argues, must be considered as living mental systems and can therefore be subject to change. This change at a fundamental level is deemed necessary in order to facilitate broader systemic change quoting Leventon et al. (2021) as *"transformation of the individual system is necessary for transformation of the broader systems that the individuals are part of"*.

To access these deep leverage points, a shift in both mental models, perceived agency or both must take place. These concepts are essential for deep transformations and are therefore briefly explained below.

2.3 Mental models

Mental models are the constructs through which people understand their environment and solve problems in it (Otto-Banaszak et al., 2011, p. 218). Out of this internal framework, patterns and structure arise. In a way they provide a 'blueprint' for systemic structures, acting as 'systemic structure generators'(Kim, 1999, p. 5). While different mental models are deeply embedded in humans, they are not static. Given the right

circumstances, namely access to new information, new experiences and exchanges with different mental models shifts are possible (Denzau & North, 1994, pp. 4,7), potentially triggering further systemic change. Circumstances which all occur throughout the participation in a deliberative process.

2.4 Human agency

'Personal agency' is defined in (Bandura, 1989, p. 1175) as *'peoples beliefs about their capabilities to exercise control over events that affect their lives'*. This sense of perceived agency can greatly influence peoples outlook on current or future events. Given an anticipatory scenario, a person with a high sense of efficacy visualizes success scenarios that provide a positive guide for performance, while a person with low perceived efficacy visualizes failure scenarios possibly undermining future performance (Bandura, 1989, p. 1176). In Meadows' systems thinking these are paradigms out of which the system arises. Agency and self-efficacy are essential, especially during challenging endeavors such as driving sustainable development or improving a governance system, as peoples perceived agency determines how long people persevere when faced with obstacles (Bandura, 1989, p. 1176). Individual agency varies greatly between people based on different socio-economic characteristics including gender, age, education, religion, social, economic and political capital (Otto et al., 2020, p. 3). This difference in agency leads to power differences between actors in societies, which can be overcome if enough collective action is taken. Therefore, agency is an essential part of driving bottom-up driven changes in society as it means that 'individually disempowered people can have a strong voice if they act collectively' (Otto et al., 2020, p. 3). Participatory processes can foster perceived self-efficacy, although as will be discussed later, the relationship between agency and participation is closely related to process quality and therefore more nuanced.

In this thesis it is argued that participatory processes have the potential to influence those difficult to access deep leverage points in a variety of way such as the overhaul of existing mental models, increasing human-agency, changing system structure in governance and influencing feedback loops, among others. As transformation in governance (*alterations to the how and what of the decision making practice itself)* is deemed as 'lacking' to date (Bolton, 2022, p. 2429), participatory processes might pose as a valuable addition to current governance structure. In the upcoming section the conceptual framework and research design will be summarized.

3. Conceptual Framework and Research Design

Building on the theoretical framework outlined above, this section provides a summary of the research approach, the research questions and how the theoretical concepts informed the empirical data collection process.

The goal of this thesis is to examine the effects of participatory processes in democratic societies from both a personal and systemic perspective, as well as analyzing interactions between them. To assess the impacts of participating in a citizens' council on a personal level, the theoretical frameworks of human agency and mental models were used as the primary means of analysis (Bandura, 1989; Denzau & North, 1994). More precisely, it was investigated if any changes to perceived self-efficacy followed participation and if any mental model revision occurred during the deliberative discussions. Participants of both the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly and the East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue were interviewed, following a semi-structured interview guideline. The different degree of institutionalization of both councils allowed for an additional research opportunity, as the impacts of structural process design differences on participant experiences and policy outcome could additionally be investigated.

The systemic impacts of the participatory processes in question were analyzed using Meadows' leverage points framework (Meadows, 1999) and deliberative democratic theory of Dryzek and Mansbridge (Dryzek & Stevenson, 2011; Mansbridge et al., 2012). Additionally, an expert interview with the administrative spokesperson of the East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue was conducted. Meadows' leverage point framework was chosen as it allows to bridge individual experiences and changes in deep leverage points to changes in the broader complex democratic system participants are embedded in. Deliberative democratic models were used to further conceptualize democratic systems as complex systems and how an additional node in the form of a citizens' councils affects the current democratic system.

This mixture of frameworks, methodologies and data collection methods manifested itself in the following research questions which served as the foundation for the empirical data collection process:

- How do deliberative citizens' councils influence participants' mental models and their perceived agency?
- How do structural differences between the councils affect participant experiences and policy outcome?
- To what extent can citizen participation influence different leverage points to facilitate change within a democratic system?

The following chapter outlines the methodological approach in greater detail, including data selection, case selection, interview guideline and coding scheme.

4. Methodology

To assess how participatory processes such as the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly and the East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue influence participants' sense of agency, their mental models and self-efficacy a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews was chosen. Furthermore, it is investigated how structural differences between the two processes influence the experiences of participants. To assess these questions, this thesis uses a qualitative comparative case study approach, conducting semi-structured interviews with participants of both councils and one administrative figure from the East-Belgian Citizens' Dialogue as well as a literature review of both cases, which will be covered in section five of the thesis.

The methodology of this thesis can be described as a comparative case study approach. The goal of case studies is to gain knowledge about "the case", what it is, about its workings and how it interacts with the real world environment it is embedded in (Campbell et al., 2018, p. 24). In the case of this study, variables such as structure and transparency influence the workings within the councils which then in turn lead to different impacts on participants and the broader political environment. The goal for this study is to compare the cases, identify differences and similarities, assess factors increasing the impact of both processes and in the end drawing "cross-case" conclusions from applying the same case study methods for both the Austrian and Belgian citizens' councils.

4.1 Qualitative research design: semi-structured interviews

The goal of this study was to assess the different effects deliberative processes exert on participants regarding their perceived human-agency, their mental models and their institutional trust. Furthermore, it is later investigated if any differences in experiences can be linked to differences in process structure and which factors contribute to a positive perception of process quality by participants. The research strategy of qualitative interviews is a suitable method for this thesis as it allows to explore individual interpretations of situations, gather self-interpretation and investigate purpose-means conceptions (Schröder, 2020, p. 291).

To get an overview of the two participatory processes a literature review based on official reports, legal decrees and scientific papers was done to assess similarities and differences between the two cases. The origins, objectives, structure, scale and policy outcomes of the two councils are covered in detail in the upcoming section of the thesis.

The interviews with participants from the Austrian and Belgian councils were held in person, lasted between 15 and 55 minutes and were done between December 2024 and March 2025. The high variation in length was due to different styles of answering the questions, with some interviewees being very concise, while others had great tendencies to diverge from initial questions, yet still offering interesting insights into their experience. Therefore, the interview was not deliberately cut short as details provided carried valuable

amount of context and additional insights. The interview with the foreign relations officer from the Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue, was done online via zoom. All interviews were conducted in German and transcribed in German with WHISPER-AI as well as Restream-AI and subsequently proofread. All interviewees were informed about the purpose of the research and provided verbal consent on tape for the interview to be recorded and transcribed. The translation of interview quotes and codes has overwhelmingly been done manually with vocabulary assistance from Chat-GPT.

The sampling strategy for the interviews followed purposeful sampling, and in more detail the strategy of snowball sampling. This is the case for both the Austrian and Belgian interviews. At first the 'The association of the members of the CCA' was contacted via mail, which is considered purposeful sampling, as members of this association are ex-participants of the Climate Citizens' Assembly and therefore are especially knowledgeable and experienced about participatory processes (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 534). Then after the first interview was done, one of the members recommended and contacted additional members that she was still in touch with, following the snowball strategy (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 535). It is to be mentioned that all interviews were done with members of the 'The association of the members of the CCA' which inherently leads to some bias in the answers to the question. Therefore, it Is important to clarify that the responses of these three members are not to be generalized for all ex-members of the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly, as it is not a quantitative study. The goal of this qualitative research is to show how participants can feel after going through a participatory process and how their experience shaped their view on politics, agency and their views on themselves and their surroundings. Their individual experiences may not reflect an average regarding all other participants as, again, no quantitative methods have been applied in this study.

For the interviews with participants from Belgium, the process started with the foreign relations officer of the permanent Citizens' Dialogue, who was the first Belgian interviewee after the topic of this thesis was proposed to her via e-mail and she agreed to an online interview. The interview was done via zoom. Afterwards, she contacted members of the current citizens' council if someone is willing to do an in-person interview after one of their next meetings in March. Again, this process fits the purposive and snowball sampling strategy (Palinkas et al., 2015, pp. 534–535). Members of the citizens' council also focus, among other tasks, on follow up work after recommendations have been handed over to political actors, so a bias in answers is also to be expected, as they deliberately chose to stay in touch with the political system and therefore might view the process more positively than the average participant, similarly to members of 'The association of the members of the CCA' '. But again, no answers and experiences of members from the citizens' council can be directly translated to or be interpreted as averages in experience from members of the larger citizens' assembly. A separate quantitative survey must be done with a sufficiently large sample size if one wants to make generalized statements.

4.1.1 The interviewees

To keep the interviewees identities anonymous the names of interview participants were exchanged with reference IDs. A table of all interview participants is provided below.

Table 2: Interviewees and their roles in the process

Reference ID	Role in the process	Citizens' council
Interviewee 1	Participant	Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly
Interviewee 2	Participant	Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly
Interviewee 3	Participant	Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly
Interviewee 4	Participant	East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue
Interviewee 5	Participant	East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue
Interviewee 6	Participant	East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue
Interviewee 7	Administrative spokesperson	East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue

4.1.2 Interview guideline

The guideline for the semi-structured interviews was developed, following principles such as open-endedness, being relevant to the research questions and developing follow-up questions in case initial answers were too short or participants diverged from the initial questioning (Mey & Mruck, 2011, pp. 279–280). Following these guidelines the interview questions revolved around the following themes:

- The experience of participants during deliberation and expectations beforehand
- Effects of deliberation on their own opinions and dynamics in deliberation groups over time
- Perceived personal agency and engagement in society before and after the process
- Process structure and how it influenced their experience. Transparency and Handling of recommendations as main areas of focus

The guideline was built to provide a mixture of comparability between the two councils; while investigating what effects the differences in follow up and transparency exert on participants. In the interviews, structure independent questions, such as topics of discussion culture, shifts in opinions and general experiences during the process, were mixed with questions about how they perceived structure and organization of the councils in hindsight and how it influences their feelings towards it. The aim was to find similarities in experience and open ground for comparability while still gaining specific structural insights. The full interview guideline will be provided in the Appendix.

4.1.3 Coding scheme

The coding scheme used to analyze the interviews was based around deductive and inductive coding. The deductive codes in qualitative research can be understood as a start list of core concepts that are assumed to be found in the data (Azungah, 2018, p. 391). These core concepts are based in existing theory. For the work of this thesis, concepts of mental models & human agency found in (Denzau & North, 1994) and (Otto et al., 2020) were expected to occur during the interviews. This assumption was based on prior literature research on participatory democratic processes, which indicated that undergoing a deliberative democratic process has effects on participants perceived-self efficacy as well as being a place of de-polarization, facilitating shifts of preconceived opinions (Knobloch & Gastil, 2014, p. 185) (Fishkin et al., 2024, p. 4). Therefore, *human agency, polarization* and *mental models* are, among others, utilized as deductive codes for data analysis.

Inductive codes on the other hand, can be viewed as patterns of content relevant to the research question, which emerge by going through the interviews and recursively going back and forth between data and literature (Azungah, 2018, p. 391). For this thesis, topics such as: *Media presence, Politics / Politicians and Moderation-Team / Scientific-Advisors* continuously emerged throughout the conversation and were subsequently recognized as adequate codes for this research.

The coding scheme for the interviews with participants from Austrian and Belgian councils were kept the same for both interview sets, to facilitate comparability. The interview with the administrative spokesperson of the Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue was coded differently, as topics discusses in this interview diverged from the previously mentioned questionnaire used for participant interviews. The software used for coding the data was MAXQDA 24. All codes, inductive, deductive, those regarding the administrative interview and their analysis is provided in section six.

In the upcoming section a detailed literature review of both processes will be provided.

5. Literature Review: The Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly & the East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue

In this section a literature review of the two participatory processes of interest is presented. The Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly and the institutionalized East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue are analyzed regarding their origins, objectives, structure, scale and policy outcomes.

5.1 Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly

5.1.1 Origin and objectives.

The Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly *('Klimarat')* originated from a petition on climate change in 2020, with civil society organizations demanding stronger climate action which included, among other things, that climate protection is to be anchored in Austria's constitution (Praprotnik et al., 2022, p. 7). This petition, mostly known in the public as the *'Klimavolksbegehren'*, surpassed the threshold of 100.000 signatures by gathering 380.590 (6 percent of eligible Austrian voters) signatures (Buzogány et al., 2022, p. 14). Therefore, it had to be discussed by the Austrian National Council.

The establishment of a nationwide citizens assembly on the topic of climate change was part of the demands, and on March 26, 2021, the Austrian National Council voted in favor of initiating Austrias' first nationwide deliberative participatory process, giving birth to the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly (Buzogány et al., 2022, p. 14). The coalition government of The People's Party ('ÖVP') and The Greens ('Die Grünen') carried out the initiation of the Climate Citizens' Assembly with support from the opposition party The New Austria and Liberal Forum ('NEOS'), while The Social Democratic Party ('SPÖ') and The Freedom Party ('FPÖ') opposed the resolution, for different reasons each (Praprotnik et al., 2022, p. 7).

The resolution defined the recruitment process as well as the composition of the Citizens' Assembly. The main addressee of the of the resolution was the federal government, but the Federal Ministry for Climate Action, Environment, Energy, Mobility, Innovation and Technology which was led by Leonore Gewessler from The Greens, assumed that given it is their responsibility to convene the assembly, recommendations would have to be handed over to her after the process has finished (Buzogány et al., 2022, p. 14). The subsequent handling of the recommendations however, which were presented to Minister Leonore Gewessler and Minister of Digital and Economic Affairs, Martin Kocher (independent, nominated by the ÖVP) on July 4th, 2022, was not clearly defined in the initial parliamentary resolution (Praprotnik et al., 2022, p. 7).

5.1.2 Structure and scale

The goal any participatory process is to create a 'mini-public', which aims to represent the general public as closely as possible, in respect to demographic and socioeconomic indicators (OECD, 2021, p. 31). To achieve this goal, the BMK has tasked 'Statistics Austria' to select 100 participants and 20 reserve participants to create such a 'mini-public'. The socioeconomic factors in question included: Age, gender, education level, region, place of birth, degree of urbanization and household income (Romana, n.d., p. 4). The selection process, the 'civic lottery, followed established procedures of sample surveys done in the past by 'Statistics Austria' (Romana, n.d., p. 6). Initially, 1003 invitations were sent to households. After assessing the responses, an additional 1000 invitations were distributed, specifically targeting households with socio-economic characteristics that had been underrepresented in the initial response round. (Klimarat-Endbericht, 2022, p. 11).

During the time of the selection process the BMK seemingly underestimated the importance of transparency regarding the selection criteria, so no particular focus was given to procedural transparency, which in turn led to speculation and mistrust regarding the recruitment process for the climate assembly. This prompted 'Statistics Austria' to release a report, detailing their recruitment methodology in retrospect (Buzogány et al., 2022, p. 14).

The duration of the Climate Citizens' Assembly spanned in total 6 weekends distributed over 6 months, with the first session being held on 15.01.2022 and the last one on 12.06.2022. Locations were alternating between Vienna and Salzburg. The participants were given compensation in the form of 100€ per weekend, train tickets to respective locations, as well as board and lodging (Klimarat-Endbericht, 2022, p. 12).

5.1.3 Key topics

The goal of the Austrian climate assembly was to develop recommendations for the Austrian government, which help to achieve climate neutrality in Austria by 2040 (Klimarat-Endbericht, 2022, p. 11). To make the inherently interconnected problem more accessible, five fields of action were introduced, which covered different topics regarding climate change. The participants first received expert lectures on those five fields of actions and later were assigned to 10 different working groups based on these fields of actions to deliberate.

The fields of actions included (Klimarat-Endbericht, 2022, p. 39): *Energy, Mobility, Production & Consumption, Nutrition & Land use and Living*. Both the topics and the groups were predefined from the organizers. Group composition was pre-organized with the intention to preserve the diversity of participants within the groups. The working groups started collaborating and exchange on their results from the third weekend onwards.

During the second half of the process, an online tool *('Der Klimarat fragt Österreich')* was introduced to expand the deliberation process to the wider public. From the 27th of April until 8th of May 2022 the public could vote on topics which the members of the Climate Citizens' Assembly found especially complex or controversial. Also, additional topics could be suggested to be discussed by participants of the council. In total 6000 citizens used this online tool, providing around 830.000 votes and submitting 5000 suggestions (3-Klimarat-Umfrage-Energie-Umfassend-Final, 2022, p. 1). The reduction of animal proteins in diets and the reduction of the speed limit on Austrias highways emerged as especially controversial topics, while the supporting a switch to renewable energies, a ban on destruction of new goods and easier access to climate friendly food was widely supported (Klimarat-Endbericht, 2022, p. 53).

Also starting in the second half of the process, meetings with politicians and a stakeholder advisory board were held. The stakeholder advisory board was constituted as follows (Klimarat-Endbericht, 2022, p. 20):

- Chamber of Labor ('Arbeiterkammer')
- Poverty Conference ('Armutskonferenz')
- Federal Youth Representation ('Bundesjugenvertretung')
- Global Responsibility ('Globale Verantwortung')
- Industrial Association ('Industriellenvereinigung')
- Climate Referendum ('Klimavolksbegehren')
- Chamber of Agriculture ('Landwirtschaftskammer')
- Eco office ('Ökobüro')
- Austrian Trade Union Federation ('Öserreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund')
- Environmental Umbrella Organization ('Umweltdachverband')
- Chamber of Commerce ('Wirtschaftskammer')

In 'impulse-papers' ('Impulspapiere') the different stakeholder groups could present their views regarding the topics discussed by the members of the CCA and exchange with them throughout the process, most notably during a visit on the fourth weekend of deliberation.

5.1.4 Policy outcomes and impact

The final report of the first national Austrian climate assembly included 93 recommendations, as well as seven 'principles for political action' (Fritz & Tomaschek, 2023, p. 32). The 93 recommendations were subdivided into the following general recommendations:

- Introduce a general right for climate protection in the constitution
- Abolish unsustainable subsidies
- Form and expand cross border alliances for climate protection
- Effective CO2 pricing
- Supporting the labor market towards climate protection
- Raising awareness for uncomfortable measures

and five subcategories: Energy, Consumption & Production, Nutrition & Land use, Living, Mobility (Klimarat-Endbericht, 2022, p. 25).

The seven principles for political action were defined as the following (Klimarat-Endbericht, 2022, p. 57):

- Climate protection should not be an individual decision,
- Climate protection should not be a luxury
- Climate protection should leave no one behind,
- Whoever contributes more to climate change should contribute more to protection,
- Climate protection needs global responsibility,
- Climate protection only be achieved together,
- Climate protection needs to stay up to date

Out of the 93 recommendations, 45 of them were new, while 48 were in some form already part of the coalition agreement of the People's Party and Green Party (Buzogány et al., 2022, p. 48). Four out of the 93 recommendations have been successfully implemented as of 04.07.2023, according to the 'Association of the members of the Austrian Citizens' Climate Council'. These include: *Offensive renovation funding, CO2 pricing for building materials, Tax deductibility for bicycles, Private equity: green stock index - government bonds* (Die Empfehlungen, 2022).

In November 2022 an official 130 pages response report to the 93 recommendations has been published by the BMK. A response to every single recommendation has been provided by the ministry, although varying in depth and transparency, as the 'Association of the members of the Austrian Citizens' Climate Council' noted in a meeting with members of the BMK: *'many responses are vague and unbinding, especially the lack of time dimensions for implementation'* (Fritz & Tomaschek, 2023, p. 34). Especially in critical sectors for transformation, such as land-use or obligatory PV-installations on roof-, facade- and industrial-areas, it has been dismissed as not within the jurisdiction of the federal government (Dieter, 2022, p. 54. 84). Additionally, there was no pre-defined follow-up mechanism regarding the handling of recommendations for the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly, which we will later see has led to ambiguity among participants. At the end of the deliberative process, 41% of participants expressed doubts about policymakers making an effort to implement the recommendations of the CCA (Buzogány et al., 2022, p. 14).

The follow up to the implementation of recommendations is mainly being perpetuated by a bottom-up association of ex-members of the Climate Citizens' Assembly, which formed to advance political action after the deliberative process officially finished.

'The association of the members of the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly' then took it into their own hands to divide the recommendations into different areas of responsibility (KR-Empfehlungen-Sortieren-Sheet1, 2022, p.1): *EU, Constitutional, Federal, States,*

Municipalities, Districts, Citizens. This subdivision of recommendations led to some success in the state of Styria and the City of Graz. Although only four recommendations were put into action on a national scale, it was made clear during the interviews, that on state and city level, at least for Styria and the City of Graz, more action inspired by the recommendations made by the council was taken by authorities. This bottom-up follow-up mechanism is being done by members of 'The association of the members of the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly' who are still politically active to this day, three years after the Climate Citizens' Assembly officially ended. While these club members are still engaged, not all the members left the Citizens' Assembly with a positive feeling. In a survey it was revealed that more members showed a decrease in political interest rather than increase at the end of the process (Praprotnik et al., 2022, p. 39).

In the following section, the institutionalized East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue will be covered using similar methodology.

5.2 East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue

5.2.1 Origin and objectives.

The first institutionalized citizens dialog in East Belgium was held on 16th of September 2019, yet the true origins of the citizens dialogue date back to the early 2010s (Niessen & Reuchamps, 2019, p. 15). During this time Belgium experienced prolonged challenges regarding the formation of a coalition government, leaving the country for 541 days without a functioning federal government, resulting in political deadlock (Devillers et al., 2021, p. 4). This substantial government crisis led to the initiation of a grassroots movement, the G-1000, comprised of young scientists and civil organizations (Devillers et al., 2021, p. 4). The goal of this organization was to gather a representative sample of Belgian citizens regarding age & other socioeconomic criteria to assess which topics are of interest to the Belgian population and to formulate corresponding recommendations to address these topics (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015, p. 157).

The G-1000 summit had three distinct phases – public consultation, citizen deliberation, and policy preparation (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015, p. 157). The public consultation phase started of the agenda setting, which was done via an online idea box and a subsequent voting mechanism, as the initiators deemed it important that the topics discussed in later deliberation rounds are the ones most important to the general public (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015, p. 157). This process of topic selection was different to the top-down approach of the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly. In the end three topics were selected for deliberation: social security, welfare in times of economic crisis, and immigration.

On 11 November 2011, 704 citizens gathered around 100 tables in Brussels to discuss and deliberate on the three previously selected topics (Devillers et al., 2021, p. 5). Discussions were facilitated by trained voluntary moderators and translators as 30 of the 100 tables were bilingual (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2014, p. 14). Additionally, two other

participatory events were taking place simultaneously: *G'Home* and *G'Offs*. The *G'Home* was an online discussion, while the *G'Off* invited interested citizens across Belgium to discuss the same issues on a local level, with the event in Brussels being live streamed on the website (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2014,p.14). These two side projects were based on self-selection and therefore did not meet the usual representative criteria for participatory processes, yet they achieved their goal of lowering the threshold for participation throughout the nation, allowing much more people to participate in the process than only those gathered in Brussels (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2014, p. 14).

During the last phase which was called G-32, the policy preparation was done over the course of three weekends by 32 participants, who collaborated with experts to convert the ideas gathered from the G-1000 into specific policies and actions (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015, p. 158). Because of the strong bottom-up approach and self-organization, a disconnect from the political spheres was present, yet the high visibility of the event and active lobbying resulted in deliberative democracy being put on the agenda, which inspired other deliberative processes in- and outside of Belgium (Devillers et al., 2021, p. 5).

Following the G-1000 event, the first steps of establishing the PBD *('Permanenter Bürgerdialog')* were initiated by two local politicians, who shared the presidency of the East-Belgian parliament presidency during the 2014-2019 legislature period (Macq & Jacquet, 2023, pp. 7–8). In 2011, Ferdel Schröder (PFF, Liberal Party) the president of the parliament at the time took part in the G-1000 and was inspire to initiate a similar event in the DG, yet after his death in 2013 the idea did not get realized (Küpper, 2022, p. 23).

In 2016 the then reigning president of the DG parliament Karl-Heinz Lambert (Social Democrats) initiated an educational trip to existing practices of participatory initiatives (Küpper, 2022, p. 23). This gathering of information raised awareness for the potential benefits of public participation among both majority and opposition parties, which lead to the establishment of a pilot participation process in 2017 on the topic of 'childcare' (Macq & Jacquet, 2023, p. 8). 26 citizens formulated recommendations, and the results were later presented to the sitting members of parliament.

Following this well received pilot-project, founding members of the G-1000 project were contacted by the reigning MP of the DG, to discuss a potential continuation and institutionalization of this kind of novel citizen participation. Leading experts in the field worked together to create a permanent participation mechanism tailored for the needs of the DG, resulting in the '*Ostbelgien-Model'*.

Following this, on 25 February 2019, the parliament of East-Belgium unanimously voted in favor of the establishment of permanent citizen dialogue (Küpper, 2022, p. 24). Especially the cross-party political support is deemed essential for successful institutionalization, as longevity of the participatory process is ensured even when government composition changes (OECD, 2020, p. 139).

5.2.2 Structure and scale

The permanent Citizens' Dialogue *('Ostbelgien-Model') is* comprised of 3 main parts: The citizens assembly, the citizens' council, and a permanent secretariat who all fulfill different tasks within the system (Das_Ostbelgische_Modell, 2022. p.7). An illustration of the system is presented below (Fig. 5).

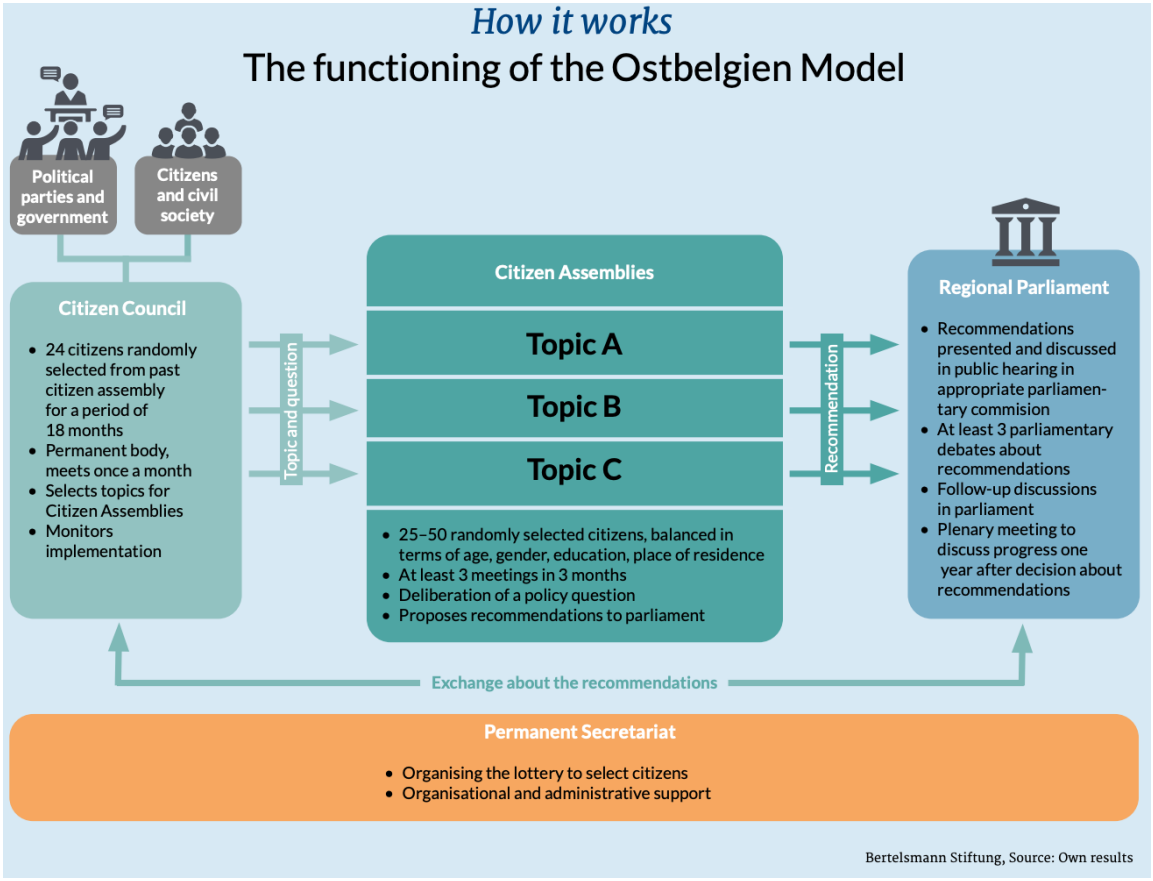


Figure 5: The Ostbelgien Modell (The Ostbelgien Modell: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022, p.7)

Some resemblances to the initial G-1000 process can still be found in the *'Ostbelgien-Model'*. For example, the bottom-up topic selection process. Topics are not chosen by the numbers of votes, instead they are being voted on by the Citizens' Council *('Bürgerrat')*. Any citizen can suggest topics which are then discussed in the Citizens' Council and may be chosen for a Citizens' Assembly *('Bürgerversammlung')* if the topic is deemed suitable. Additionally, a topic can be submitted for discussion by a parliamentary group or if 2 members within the council submit a topic suggestion, although these mechanisms have not been frequently utilized either by parliament or members of the Council yet (Buergerdialog-Dekret, 2019, pp. 4–5).

Previously there has been a (not strongly enforced & hardly ever achieved) limit of a minimum of 100 citizens advocating for a topic, for it to be discussed in the Council. This has been removed in a decree aiming to optimize the process based on the learnings from 2019-2024 (Uebersicht_der_Prozessaenderungen, 2024, p. 4). Furthermore, there have been additional adjustments regarding the topic selection, mainly aiming at enhancing the

connection between parliament and the Citizens' Council. Therefore the Citizens' Council has to discuss at least one suggestion from the parliament per legislature period (Uebersicht_der_Prozessaenderungen, 2024, p. 4).

5.2.2.1 The Citizens' Council ('Bürgerrat')

The citizens' council is composed of 24 members, all of which have previously taken part in a citizens assembly, or are actively part of an ongoing citizen assembly with each member serving up to a maximum of 18 months in the council (Niessen & Reuchamps, 2022, p. 10). The composition of the citizens' council is set as 1/3 active members of an ongoing assembly, 1/3 members of the previous assembly and 1/3 members of the second last assembly. This enables transfer of knowledge and continuous development of the process. Furthermore, the council elects a president who oversees organizational matters such as preparing meetings and leading the discussion. Their term length is limited to a maximum of 6 months and it is mandatory that there is a male/female rotation for each new term (Niessen & Reuchamps, 2022, pp. 9–10).

Responsibilities of the council includes: Organizing Citizens' Assemblies (including dates and, time), number of meetings, selection of topics, moderators, experts, defining the question, monitoring the implementation of recommendations, managing the annual budget, setting up the civic lottery and generally exchanging with the permanent secretary, who is also present during their meetings (Buergerdialog-Dekret, 2019, p. 5)(Küpper, 2022, p. 26). Per council meeting, the members get compensated with a payment of 37.50€ as well as an additional travel compensation based on distance (Buergerdialog-Dekret, 2019, p. 3)

5.2.2.2 Citizens' Assemblies ('Bürgerversammlung')

The citizens' assemblies are the deliberative part of the '*Ostbelgien-Model'.* Here 25-50 people discuss and formulate policy recommendation on topics, previously decided upon by the citizens' council (Buergerdialog-Dekret, 2019, p. 1). The people are selected to be representative in terms of gender, age, geographical origin and other socio-economic characteristics of the general population in the DG If deemed beneficial, the citizens' council may set additional criteria related to the chosen topic to be taken into account for selection (Niessen & Reuchamps, 2022, pp. 11–12).

The resolutions of a citizens' assembly are usually formulated by consensus. If consensus cannot be reached, a resolution may be passed by 4/5 majority, with at least 4/5 of participants being presented during the vote. Citizens who reject the proposal may explain their reasoning in a statement which is attached to the resolution (Buergerdialog-Dekret, 2019, p. 2). Per topic, the assembly meets until policy recommendations have been agreed upon which, so far amounted to 4-5 meetings lasting a full day each. The finalized recommendations are then handed over to the presidium of the parliament who forwards them to the responsible parliamentary fractions (Küpper, 2022, p. 27). The monetary compensation for participants is the same as for the members of the citizens'

council, 37.50€ per meeting and additional travel compensation based on distance (Buergerdialog-Dekret, 2019, p. 3).

5.2.2.3 Permanent Secretary (‘Ständiges Sekretäriat’)

Administrative and organizational support of the council’ and assembly are the main tasks of the permanent secretary (Buergerdialog-Dekret, 2019, p. 4). The role of the permanent secretary can be understood as a connective link between the citizens’ council, the citizens’ assembly and the parliament. Attending and contributing to council’ meetings, writing inquiries regarding political follow up on recommendations and proposing budget plans to the citizens’ council are part of the secretaries work (Niessen & Reuchamps, 2022, p. 15).

Due to the permanent secretary being part of the process since its origin in 2019, it can be assessed that the role of the permanent secretary is an essential one for the workings of the *‘Ostbelgien-Model’*, being connected to and exchanging regularly with all three other parts of the system.

5.2.3 Key topics

Since its implementation in 2019, six different citizens’ assemblies were held. The first five out of the 6 assemblies were held during the same legislature period. Following topics were discussed in the different assemblies during time of writing (*Umsetzung der Empfehlungen-Bericht*, 2024,pp.1-2) (*Schuelerkompetenzen Empfehlungen Handout*, 2024, p. 4):

- Care (2020) – *“Care concerns us all! How can care conditions for staff and patients be improved.”*
- Inclusive Education (2021) – *“Implementing inclusion in schools! What changes are necessary in the education sector to ensure that inclusion benefits everyone.”*
- Affordable Housing (2021-2022) – *“Living space for everyone! How can politics ensure the development of sustainable housing for everyone?”*
- Digitalization (2022) – *“Digital Participation in East-Belgium! How can politics ensure that all people in East-Belgium have access to the digital world and can navigate it confidently?”*
- Integration of Immigrants (2023) – *“Integration of people with a migration background in East-Belgium.”*
- Student Competencies (2024) – *“How can emotional skills be fostered in East-Belgian schools to prepare students for the future?”*

5.2.4 Policy outcomes and impact.

One of the strengths of the *‘Ostbelgien-Model’* is that every aspect of the participatory process is clearly defined from the very beginning, the selection of participants, to the very last step, the implementation or rejection of recommendations. While the assemblies do not formulate legally binding policies, the *“Decree on the introduction of*

the permanent citizens' dialogue" clearly defines rules regarding the handling of recommendations (Buergerdialog-Dekret, 2019, pp. 5–6):

- After recommendations have been finalized and handed over to the parliamentary committee by the presidium, a public hearing is initiated where citizens' assembly members present their recommendations to the committee and ministers
- The committee and ministers work on formulating responses to each recommendation
- Another public hearing is held, where members of the committee and ministers present and explain their responses to the recommendations
- One year after the responses have been presented, another public hearing is held where the status-quo of implementation of recommendation is discussed
- The citizens' council is responsible for the oversight of the handling of recommendations being informed regularly by the permanent secretary about the current state of progress forwarding relevant information to members of the citizens assembly
- These public hearings are also useful for clearing up any potential misunderstandings between politicians and citizens, quoting one member of the citizens' council:

It is observable that the political actors have indeed been inspired by recommendations made by citizens. This is reflected in several implemented or partly implemented recommendations made by the different citizens' assemblies from 2019-2024 (Umsetzung der Empfehlungen-Bericht, 2024, pp. 3–10):

- *Care (2020):* 14 recommendations, 7 implemented / policy inspired by recommendations
- *Inclusive education (2021):* 31 recommendations, 8 implemented / policy inspired by recommendations
- *Affordable Housing (2021-2022):* 45 recommendations, 21 implemented / policy inspired by recommendations
- *Digitalization (2022):* 22 recommendations, 9 implemented / policy inspired by recommendations
- *No official evaluation report available yet for: Integration of Immigrants (2023) & Student Competencies (2024)*

In some cases, recommendations are even directly incorporated into legislation. Following the citizens' assembly on the topic of *"Affordable Housing (2021-2022)",* an adjustment to a decree from 2002 took place on 6th May of 2024, explicitly mentioning the citizens' assembly in the explanatory memorandum (Umsetzung der Empfehlungen-Bericht, 2024, p. 6). Similarly, on 25th March 2024 the government of the DG *('Deutschsprachige Gemeinschaft')* presented its policy statement *"Digital Strategy – Digital Pathways For Our Community",* explicitly mentioning the corresponding citizens' assembly from 2022 and

adopting a number of then proposed recommendations (Umsetzung der Empfehlungen-Bericht, 2024, p. 8).

While not every recommendation can and will be implemented, it is essential that rejected policy proposal are sufficiently explained. In the final reports from the responsible parliamentary fractions detailed and transparent explanations have been provided if recommendations were rejected (Umsetzung der Empfehlungen-Bericht, 2024, p. 2). This has led to an increased political understanding from participants of the permanent Citizens' Dialogue, providing citizens with a feeling of being taken serious by politics (Umsetzung der Empfehlungen-Bericht, 2024, p. 10).

Both cases in question, the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly and the East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue show similarities, especially during the deliberation phase. Yet, they also highlight how differences in process design can vastly influence the outcome, both in terms of policy impact as well as participant perception.

In the following chapter, the results of the six participant interviews and the interview with the administrative spokesperson of the East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue will be presented.

6. Interview results

In this section the findings from the interviews will be presented. The coding scheme for Austrian and Belgian participant interviews was chosen to be identical, to ensure maximum comparability. The code system of the interview with the Belgian administrative was inspired by participant interviews, but additional codes were added due to different topics emerging throughout the interview, and more insights could be gained by altering the questionnaire to dive deeper into administrative topics. The adjustments for the administrative interview will be presented in section 6.3.

In total, 13 code categories were crafted for analysis of participant interviews, 8 for the interview with the administrative spokesperson. Codes which touched on similar topics were then compiled into 3 different overarching categories which facilitate individual and systemic change. The broader themes of impact for the participant interviews are as follows: *Human Agency, Mental Model shifts through deliberation, Perceived system responsiveness and institutional trust*.

Following the same methodology, 8 administrative codes were also compiled into thematic clusters: *Systemic integration of participation, Barries – Tradeoffs – Success Criteria, Internal & External communication*.

In the following section 6.1 themes and codes for participant experiences will be presented and then in section 6.2 Austrian and Belgian results will be compared in terms of their commonalities and differences. The administrative themes will be laid out and analyzed in section 6.3.

6.1 Participant interview findings

The analysis of the six participant interviews was conducted using 13 different codes, using both inductive and deductive approaches. Subsequently the codes were then compiled into three themes which influential regarding systemic and individual change. This section explains the reasoning behind the applied code system and how the overarching themes relate to Meadows' systems thinking. A detailed description on how different leverage points interact with the three different thematic clusters will be presented in the discussion. In the upcoming pages the three thematic groups and how they relate to Meadows' leverage points are presented:

Table 3: Main themes and corresponding leverage points

Themes	Definitions	Leverage point connection
Human Agency	Shifts in participants perceived agency to influence political and societal processes	(4) The power to add, change, evolve, or self-organize system structure (7) The gain around driving positive feedback loops
Mental Model shifts through deliberation	Evolution of beliefs, assumptions, and perspectives through deliberative exposure	(2) The mindset or paradigm out of which the system – its goals, structure, rules, delays, parameters – arises (3) The goals of the system (4) The power to add, change, evolve, or self-organize system structure (8) The strength of negative feedback loops, relative to the impacts they are trying to correct against
Perceived system responsiveness and institutional trust	Views on the current political system, its responsiveness, transparency, and the perceived willingness from politicians to implement citizen-generated recommendations	(4) The power to add, change, evolve, or self-organize system structure (5) The rules of the system (such as incentives, punishments constraints) (6) The structure of information flows (who does and does not have access to what kinds of information) (8) The strength of negative feedback loops, relative to the impacts they are trying to correct against (9) The length of delays, relative to the rate of system change

The codes used for interview analysis, their definitions and which overarching themes they relate to are presented in the following table:

Table 4: Codes used for interview analysis and their corresponding themes

Themes and Codes	Definitions
Human Agency	**Shifts in participants perceived agency to influence political and societal processes**
Perceived Agency	Participants feelings of self-efficacy and empowerment before - during - after the participatory process
Engagement	Political or community engagement before / after the process. Concrete activities & motivation following the deliberation process
Social Circle	Influence on social circle of participants. Reactions from social circle to participation
Mental Model shifts through deliberation	**Evolution of beliefs, assumptions, and perspectives through deliberative exposure**
Mental Models	Participants preexisting views and changes following deliberation
Polarization	Participants' views on polarization within group discussions, perceived polarization in society
Expectations	Expectations before / during / after the process and motivations to join
Discussions & Deliberation	How participants experienced the discussions during the participation process. How discussions changed over time
Moderation team & Scientific advisory team	Impact of moderation and scientific team on the deliberative process and group discussions
Perceived system responsiveness and institutional trust	**Views on the current political system, its responsiveness, transparency, and the perceived willingness from politicians to implement citizen-generated recommendations.**
Implementation & Follow-up	Perceived handling of recommendations by authorities. Follow-up actions taken by participants
Use cases of participation & scale dependency	How participation can be supported in society on different scales
Politics & Politicians	Opinions about politicians, political landscape, participants' experiences of interacting with politics
Media presence	Media coverage of the process and how participants experienced media & public opinion
Transparency	Transparency during the process, how recommendations will be handled, Transparency in feedback to recommendations

In the following sections, the general themes as well as the individual codes they consist of will be explored.

6.1.1 Human Agency

This theme revolves around participatory processes influencing perceived self-efficacy and increasing political and community engagement after undergoing a deliberative process. In more detail, deliberative processes exert impact on participants 'personal agency'. 'Personal agency' is understood as *'people's beliefs about their capabilities to exercise control over events that affect their lives'* (Bandura, 1989, p. 1175) . This potential for empowerment by undergoing a participatory process is valuable, especially during times of dissatisfaction with established predominantly top-down governance structures. Facilitating a feeling that change is possible if individually disempowered people act collectively (*Otto et al., 2020, p. 3)*, allows for citizens to act upon Meadows leverage point number four: '*The power to add, change, evolve, or self-organize system structure'* (Meadows, 1999, p. 4).

A direct example of this empowerment in action is the establishment of the 'Association of the members of the CCA' which is a bottom-up club, consisting of previous members of the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly. They have taken follow-up work around the implementation of recommendations into their own hands after deeming the proposed steps by the government following deliberation to be insufficient.

Another example of participation leading to increased engagement can be found in East-Belgium, where according to the administrative spokesperson of the Citizens Dialogue, five previous members of a citizens' assembly have campaigned to run in the local government election, with one candidate being elected to government. Furthermore, members of the citizens' council mentioned in interviews that their success in doing follow up work after deliberation and subsequently seeing recommendations being treated seriously, acts as a source of motivation which makes them eager to continue their work. In Meadows' systems thinking approach, this relates to leverage point seven *'The gain around driving positive feedback loops*. It is important to point out that the term *'positive feedback loop'* refers to self-amplification in complex systems. It does not mean that feedback which is '*positive'* is innately *'good'*. In some cases, participatory processes may lead to people who were already dissatisfied with the current state of politics even more disenchanted than before joining. Unsatisfactory handling of recommendations, lack of transparency or other process design related flaws can contribute to this. A concrete example of this occurred in the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly, as some people reported a lower interest in political processes compared to before they joined (Praprotnik et al., 2022, p. 39).

Whether these agency shifts are positive or negative depends on the quality of the process and individual experiences, with process quality being frequently related to transparency throughout the interviews, a code which is of special importance and will be discussed later in more detail. A positive impact on perceived agency following deliberative practices is not to be assumed as a given, but it can be fostered through high quality process design. Yet, in some cases such as the 'Association of the members of

the CCA', frustration and dissatisfaction with authorities can also serve as a form of motivation. In the case of this study's analyzed citizen participation processes, the overarching topic of 'human agency' is understood as '*participants' perceived agency to influence political and social processes'*. This theme is compiled of the following codes: *perceived agency, engagement* and *social circle*.

6.1.1.1 Perceived Agency

This code is directly related to the overall theme of 'human agency', interview passages regarding shifts in perceived self-efficacy, empowerment and agency were highlighted with this code. Any differences of perceived agency before in comparison with after participation were of special interest.

Yes, I've simply grown. And I thought to myself, yes, I'll just stand up for myself and what I say. Because before, I was like, "Yeah, no, I'll leave it, it's fine." And now I think, "No, now you're going to say something." And that wasn't me at all before. And now, also through the moderation, I've learned to speak my mind, to speak out loud, and to stand up for it. – Interviewee 2 (Austria)

The code is a deductive code, as the influence of participatory processes and its potential connection to Meadows' leverage points, were identified as fields of interest, prior to conducting the interviews.

6.1.1.2 Engagement

While being thematically very similar to 'perceived agency', the code 'engagement' highlighted concrete political or community-oriented actions interviewees have taken, following participation. The previously mentioned creation of the *'Association of the members of the CCA'* is a prime example of permanent bottom-up citizen engagement emerging from a participatory process, particularly in the absence of a well-organized top-down follow-up mechanism, such as the citizens' council of the permanent Citizens' Dialogue in East-Belgium. One member reasoned for his continued engagement after initial deliberation as follows:

'We have to work on it. Democracy thrives on participation.' – Interviewee 5 (Belgium)

Engagement and agency share considerable thematic similarities, yet concrete actions and the belief in one's capacity to affect change were treated separately during the coding of the interviews. Yet, due to the close thematic connection, some overlap in coding has occurred. As it was of interest during the creation of the questionnaire if any direct engagement followed the participation, this code is a deductive code for the purpose of this study.

6.1.1.3 Social Circle

The code 'social circle' represents participants exchanges with friends, families and partners regarding their participatory experiences. Also, any changes in the interviewees social circle following their participation have been highlighted. The administrative spokesperson for the East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue coined the term

‘Multiplicators’ for participants, as well as politicians who engage in deliberative processes, connecting and bringing learnings done in deliberation to those close to them, ‘multiplying’ the effects. A more detailed dive into the topic of ‘Multiplicators’ will be done in section 6.3 during the analysis of the administrative interview. While this thesis does not bring any insights into the diffusion rate of change from participants to those close to them, interactions with their social circle and their reaction were frequently discussed during conversations.

‘You want to communicate when you learn something new or experience something new.’ – Interviewee 2 (Austria)

‘And there are people who say, "I think it's good that you're getting involved." And then, of course, there are also those who say it's pointless anyway. But you simply try to get them involved. And here and there, you hear that it can be successful’. – Interviewee 6 (Belgium)

As mentioned before, the rate of which change and learning spreads through the social network of participants is not part of this thesis’ aims to answer yet exchange with their social circle regarding their participation has been prepared as a follow up question and is therefore be classified as a deductive code.

6.1.2 Mental Model shifts through deliberation

Mental models are internal frameworks people use to make sense of the world - they are the mental constructs through which people understand their environment and solve problems (Otto-Banaszak et al., 2011, p. 218). Denzau & North (1994, p. 2) describe them as ‘*internal representations that individual cognitive systems create to interpret the environment and the institutions are the external (to the mind) mechanisms individuals create to structure and order the environment’*. These mental models of the world are shaped by experiences, learnings and the environmental in which grow up and live. Exposure to new information and experiences or confirmation of initial categories can either lead to modification or strengthening of initial beliefs (Denzau & North, 1994, p. 7). These mental constructs can be modified and improved firstly via exchanging with other peoples’ ideas and secondly by providing sufficiently good information (Denzau & North, 1994, p. 4,7).

This setting of exchanging with other peoples’ ideas, while being provided with high quality information essentially resembles a well-structured participatory process. Deliberation in well moderated group discussion provide a setting where different mental concepts are enabled to exchange ideas freely, with moderation being responsible for ensuring that all participants get to share their views equally in the group, balancing out different personality and communication types. Scientific advisory teams and initial introductory hearings by experts provide the previously mentioned access to high quality information. This combination creates a setting where preexisting opinions can be revised or modified, which was also highlighted by different interview participants.

I'm the kind of person who naturally wants my opinion to be represented because I think, yes, that's a good thing. And then suddenly, perhaps a contrary opinion comes along. And that was a little hard to swallow at first. There's

someone against me. I've learned a lot about all these things since then. That it's not about personal sensitivities, … that a different opinion is of course perfectly fine. And if there are more opinions than your own, you're not one of the losers in the vote, it's just the political process. And I still find that incredibly valuable for me, even at the ripe old age of mid-sixties. And I like to pass that on in my private life too. – Interviewee 5 (Belgium)

"And it was also cool to hear so many different opinions. It also makes you think. It was very good for me personally to hear that." – Interviewee 3 (Austria)

As highlighted by the quotes above, deliberative experiences can produce shifts and modifications to one's mental constructs and assumptions about others. These shifts in mental models happen at individual level. As mentioned in the first paragraph, institutions can be thought of as external mechanism which individuals create to structure and order their environment. If this logic is continued, with Meadows' leverage point number two being '*The mindset or paradigm out of which the system arises',* number three being '*The goals of a system',* and leverage point number four being '*The power to add, change, evolve, or self-organize system structure'* (Meadows, 1999 , pp. 14–16) and these external system structures (institutions) being a result of internal mental concepts, it may be assumed that through modification and revision of mental models, improvements of existing institutions may be assisted. In other words, changes of ones' goals during mental model revision, may influence broader systems. If actors undergoing this change during deliberation return to the system they are embedded in, assuming there is reflection of their own goals and if those (still) align with the institutional goals which they are part of. As participatory processes foster this type of internal reflection, they may prove helpful in not only aiding individual mental model modification but in turn help to contribute broader structural reform. This example of a deep leverage sparking changes in shallower leverage points, is known as a 'chain of leverage'(Fischer & Riechers, 2019, p. 118). Whether this connection is substantial, and if so, how much and under which circumstances, cannot be answered within the scope of this thesis, yet it is a connection that may allow for expanding changes from internal to external and aid systemic governance improvements. As the administrative spokesperson for the East Belgian Citizens' Dialogue mentioned, participants, politicians and stakeholders are 'Multiplicators' of the process. These and other leverage points which mental models may exert influence on will be explored in detail in the discussion part the thesis.

6.1.2.1 Mental Models

This code, '*mental models',* highlights whenever interviewees mentioned that their own preexisting views or other participants views changed over time during deliberation. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, mental models possess the ability to change, if the right circumstances are present. Typically, communication and the sharing of learnings is easier when people already have shared mental models (Denzau & North, 1994, p. 2). Yet participatory processes such as the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly and East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue, are environments where exactly the opposite is present. Many different preexisting mental models collide and must interact with each other. This process may not be easy for the participants at first, yet over the course of

deliberation, the bridging of ideological gaps was reported by participants. As stated by (Denzau & North, 1994, p. 7), '*mental models form to interpret the environment, typically in ways relevant to some goal(s)'.* Deliberative discussions in participatory processes may assist modification of mental models, by providing a common goal for different preexisting cognitive concepts – *formulating recommendations*.

"It was a really good experience for me to see how different people with different backgrounds and different opinions can ultimately work together and develop recommendations. And I learned, and also took away from it, that yes, it's important that everyone has their say and that everyone should contribute, and that you can achieve a great result from this whole process." – Interviewee 4 (Belgium)

"Well, he was so against it. And then at the end, we met again, and he said, okay, he'll think about it. And I thought, oh, look what those few months have done to him. From a total no to okay, I'll think about it. And I considered that a big step on his part." – Interviewee 2 (Austria)

The idea of deliberative spaces being a place which foster exchange between, and modification of mental models was (like many cognitive assumptions) pre-existing, when conducting the interviews. The framing of the questionnaire and analysis of interview data was heavily shaped by literature review therefore *mental models* is a deductive code in the scope of this thesis.

6.1.2.2 Polarization

The code *'polarization'* marked interview passages where participants expressed their views on polarization within group discussions, as well as their perception of broader societal polarization. Fishkin et al. (Fishkin et al., 2024, p. 3) defined their definition of measuring depolarization through deliberative discussions as *'the means of two parties moving closer together'.* Unlike Fishkin et al., this study is not able to quantify any measure of depolarization. Yet the qualitative individual perceptions of polarization (and depolarization) during deliberation are in line with findings from Fishkin et al., in the sense that group discussions depolarized opinions over the course of deliberation.

"We were much less polarized at the end than at the beginning"- Interviewee 3 (Austria)

"So, in our case, 100 people who surprisingly quickly converge on an opinion that reflects what citizens want" – Interviewee 3 (Austria)

As depolarization and convergence of opinions is directly related to shifts in mental models, some thematic overlap and double coding has taken place during analysis, yet enough explicit mentions of polarization occurred to justify the addition of *'polarization'* to the code system. As the issue of polarization was present as a potential variable during analysis, this code is classified as a deductive code in this thesis.

6.1.2.3 Expectations

Under the *'expectations'* code all themes related to expectations before / during / after joining the participatory process were highlighted, as well as their motivations to join to the process. An interesting finding is, that prior to joining the process, all the interview participants, from both countries, expressed that they had very little, to no expectations.

When asked about their motivation to join, most stated curiosity and interest in the topic as their main motivations. In the following section 5.2 the differences and commonalties between the processes will be explored deeper, yet it was clearly observable during analysis that in the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly, expectations started to rise throughout the course of the process, which did mostly not materialize in the end. As previously mentioned, a deliberative process must be well organized for participants to leave with a sense of empowerment, unfulfilled expectations achieve exactly the opposite and may lead to increased political disinterest or even resentment (Praprotnik et al., 2022, p. 39). This dissatisfaction is most likely linked to the different levels of transparency between the two processes, with the Belgian Citizens' Dialogue being very strong in terms of transparency compared to the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly. The topic of transparency will be discussed in later chapter more thoroughly. Expectations and motivations to join was of interest during the creation of the questionnaire and is therefore treated as a deductive code for the aim of this thesis.

6.1.2.4 Discussions & Deliberation

One of the cornerstones of participatory processes is the deliberation phase, during which group discussions take place. The goal of this code was to capture participants experiences during group discussions, how they perceived group discussion the atmosphere of conversations and how they developed over time. Asked about their deliberative experience, interviewees reported that discussions were intense, with opinions being strongly divided at points, yet always respectful and productive. The large pool of different opinions and background was highlighted by some of the participants.

"No, there weren't really any major, let's say arguments, at all. Yes, okay. There were some controversial debates between different opinions. That was quite interesting … It's not a debate over coffee and cake. It's being pushed through to get it done in time." – Interviewee 5 (Belgium)

Some of the views were very different. And then, through the whole process, we all got a little out of our comfort zone. And then we met in the middle. – Interviewee 2 (Austria)

When analyzing participants individual perception about group dynamics and conversation culture during deliberation, no specific literature was chosen as an analytical foundation, yet as group deliberation is a cornerstone of any participatory process this code is treated as a deductive code in this thesis.

6.1.2.5 Moderation Team & Scientific advisory team

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, group discussions were generally perceived as productive. Regarding the topic of group discussions, participants from both countries explicitly and repeatedly mentioned the moderation & scientific advisory team as essential for their deliberative success. The scientific advisory team laid the factual foundation for discussions by providing participants with introductory talks, slides, literature and other forms of media as preparatory materials. Furthermore, they assisted during group discussions by answering any scientific questions that arose during discussions. With the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly being especially thematically

complex, given its 'five fields of action' (*Energy, Consumption & Production, Nutrition & Land use, Living, Mobility),* the participants expressed their positive impressions of having strong scientific assistance.

"We always had experts on our side, which I really liked. They always shared their knowledge on their specific topics. And if we had questions about a different topic, another expert would join in. I thought that was really cool." – Interviewee 2 (Austria)

With experts laying the factual foundation, the moderation team was concerned with keeping group discussions balanced and grounded. Participants of both councils expressed the great value of the moderation team's effort to create a space where each of the group members could express their opinion evenly, regardless of different personality traits.

"But there are some people who are very present and whose voice fills the entire room, drowning everyone out. And the moderators handled that really well." – Interviewee 2 (Austria)

"The moderator who led the meetings during my phase was very attentive, he made sure that everyone was included, that everyone had a chance to speak, and that everyone was encouraged to speak up, even those who don't like to talk or speak in front of others". – Interviewee 4 (Belgium)

Regarding consensus finding, no specific strategies applied by moderators were mentioned by the participants during group deliberation. Although at the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly, there was a broader consensus finding system revolving around the ability to propose 'serious concerns' about final recommendations. Those serious concern had to be mediated before a recommendation could be taken up in the final set of recommendations, with some recommendations (100 km/h speed limit) not making the final list because of such 'serious concerns'. As no literature served as a basis for the analysis of mediation strategies this code is and inductive code for the scope of this thesis.

6.1.3 Perceived system responsiveness and institutional trust

The theme of 'perceived system responsiveness and institutional trust' reflects participants general views regarding the current political system, its responsiveness, transparency, and the perceived willingness from politicians to implement citizen-generated recommendations. With voter turnout declining throughout the European Union (Addeo et al., 2014, p. 8) and populism rising (Corbet & Larkin, 2019, pp. 219–220), democratic systems are facing increasing pressure. Dissatisfaction can lead citizens to become disenchanted with political processes by not feeling represented by established political parties. Well-organized participatory processes possess the ability to act as a counterforce to this societal development. Counteracting political disenchantment and disinterest was laid out as one the goals of the permanent Citizens' Dialogue in East-Belgium, aside from crafting recommendations for political actors. This was stated earlier in the thesis already, quoting the spokesperson the permanent Citizens' Dialogue as follows:

"The second goal we pursue with the Citizens' Dialogue is to counteract political disenchantment and political disinterest. And this political disenchantment, as we have already examined scientifically, consists primarily of a lack of understanding of political processes and how decisions are made." – Spokesperson of the East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue

This theme consists of the following codes: Implementation and follow-up, Politics & Politicians, Transparency, Use cases of participation & Scale dependency as well as Media presence. These codes together cover a wide range of topics, from individual to systemic perceptions. Some codes such as *transparency* exert their influence on an especially wide range of topics, transcending strict thematic boundaries. It was allocated to this thematic category as transparency regarding process structure before, during, and after deliberation was discussed most thoroughly, though the secondary influence of this institutional transparency on '*Human Agency'* and '*Shifting mental through deliberation*' can be reasonably assumed and should therefore be briefly mentioned here. Leverage points this thematic cluster may influence are: *(9) The length of delays, relative to the rate of system change, (8) The strength of negative feedback loops, relative to impacts they are trying to correct against, (6) The structure of information flows, (5) The rules of the system (such as incentives, punishments, constraints), (4) The power to add, change, evolve, or self-organize system structure*.

6.1.3.1 Implementation & Follow-up

A cornerstone or the final goal if you will, of any participatory process is the formulation of recommendations which are handed over to the respective authorities once the deliberative process has ended. Typically, the "success" of a participatory is measured in the number of recommendations implemented by politicians. As we have seen so far, participatory processes are multifaceted and so is the handling of recommendations. A common thread that emerged throughout the interviews is that seriousness regarding the handling of recommendations and as we will see later in more detail, transparency, are the most important factors when it comes to follow-up work from politicians. It is not that participants demand every recommendation to be implemented, instead serious consideration and straight to the point explanations if recommendations get dismissed are desired. During the interviews it became apparent that in these topics, the institutionalized process of the Belgian Citizens' Dialogue shows a lot of strength and integrity. The mandatory in person meetings with politicians about the status quo of implementation have been highlighted repeatedly and provide an example of well-designed top-down follow up structure. In the case of the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly exactly this follow up work after the deliberation ended has left much to be desired, causing participants to form the previously mentioned bottom-up association (*'Association of the members of the CCA')*. Mostly motivated by a distrust regarding the serious handling of the recommendations and follow-up work from authorities.

"We've been working on it for half a year now and thought, something will come of it. Yes, the handover still must be done with Mrs. Gewessler and Mr. Kocher. Aha. And then? Yes, then it's over, she said. And then I said, yes, then the whole thing is for nothing, right? Because they'll just pigeonhole it. I'm a civil servant

myself. I worked at the post office. I know it gets pigeonholed. As a whole. And then we said, well, that's not going to happen."- Interviewee 1(Austria)

More detailed analysis on the differences between the two councils, the perceived handling of recommendations by participants and how this affected participants institutional trust will be presented in section 5.2. For the scope of this thesis the code '*implementation & follow up'* is deemed deductive, as extensive literature research has identified the topic of recommendations as essential for any participatory process.

6.1.3.2 Politics & Politicians

The code '*politics & politicians'* is concerned with participants interactions with politicians throughout the process as well as their general perception of the current political landscape. In general, most participants reported positive interactions with members of different political parties, although for the case of the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly the responses were more nuanced. Belgian participants repeatedly highlighted respectful and interesting discourse during follow up hearing with local government officials. For Austrian participants, a difference between the perception of local politicians and the broader national government was noticeable, especially regarding the willingness to work on implementation of recommendations. The small scale of the governmental processes and personal relationships with politicians has been highlighted by members of the East Belgian citizens' council as follows:

"I can only speak for the parliament here in Eastern Belgium. I think, since the distances are very short here, it's a very small community, yes. It's very good." – Interviewee 5 (Belgium)

"So it is close and constructive. They listen to us, and here and there they've actually addressed our issues". – Interviewee 6 (Belgium)

These findings may suggest that small scale participation processes possess some innate advantages over nation-wide processes, although further research is needed to make substantiated claims. As the interaction between participants and politicians has not been a pre-established area of interest before the interviews were conducted, *'politics & politicians'* is handled as an inductive code.

6.1.3.3 Transparency

Transparency is essential for any governmental institution, whether this regards spending of the finance ministry, who receives government contracts for infrastructure projects or court decisions. For the case of participatory processes, transparency is especially important. Participants spend their time mostly on weekends, to deliberate, discuss and find compromises to find adequate solutions for the task they are presented with. During this time expectations that recommendations will be implemented can start to build up as participants put significant effort and energy into their work. The way in which recommendations are then handled and how transparent further steps following deliberation are communicated, is essential for the feeling with which participants leave the process. As was stated earlier in the *human agency* theme, participation per se is not innately beneficial for participants perceived self-efficacy. Participatory processes

certainly do have the power to increase perceived agency, but they also have the possibility to leave participants with increased disillusion about political processes, leading to further political disenchantment. As was discussed in the *implementation / follow up* paragraph, clear, scope, communication and seriousness in handling citizen crafted recommendations are an essential part of a well-designed participatory process. Further steps after deliberation has ended and clear communication regarding non-implementation of recommendations emerged as topics relevant to participants throughout the interview. Especially for participants of the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly transparency was deemed insufficient by the interviewees. Both, how the non-implementation of recommendation was communicated in the official response report and insufficient knowledge about what steps follow from the government after the deliberation phase ended, were mentioned by participants.

"Not 100 percent. We knew, okay, we'd hand it over to the government. But what would happen next wasn't so clear to me." – Interviewee 3 (Austria)

When asked about the responses in the official response report participants expressed discontent with vague phrasing, as they reported that they had to be concise in their formulation of recommendations and expected a similar communication style.

Yes, brief and to the point, and really facts on the table. If something doesn't work, then just write it down. I think it's much better if you're honest and write it down clearly. You say, "Look, unfortunately that doesn't work because of the law this and that." Or it doesn't work because I don't know. Just write it down, not "We'll look into it." Yeah, what good does that answer do me? It's so vague. What's in it for me? – Interviewee 2 (Austria)

Non transparent communication, has troubled the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly to some degree from the very beginning of the process, as was briefly mentioned in section 3.1 already as the BMK underestimated the importance of transparency regarding the selection criteria, which in turn led to speculation and mistrust regarding the recruitment process for the climate assembly, prompting 'Statistics Austria' to release a report, detailing their recruitment methodology in retrospect (Buzogány et al., 2022, p. 14). These issues of transparency are most likely a result of unfamiliarity of administrative actors regarding the design of a nationwide participation process.

Evidence suggests that in these aspects of process design, an institutionalized process such as the East Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue possess one of the most noticeable advantages. As to pass the necessary legislation which institutionalized the permanent Citizens' Dialogue, every step from recruitment processes up until the handling of recommendations had to be laid out in detail. This thoroughness in process architecture was reflected positively upon by Belgian interviewees. In comparison with their Austrian counterparts, process structure has been laid out from beginning to end in a transparent manner, as one member recalled as:

"The moderator explained it to us quite well right at the beginning. And I think the permanent secretary here in the building did a very good job of preparatory work. She also explained it very well at the citizens' assembly: From

identifying the topics for the citizens' assembly, to the finalization of results, how that all goes, and how, at the end of the day, all the topics are decided upon, either positively or perhaps negatively." – Interviewee 6 (Belgium)

As transparency was a topic of interest when creating the questionnaire and the importance of it became even stronger after conducting the first interview with a member of the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly, transparency is deemed a deductive code for the scope of this thesis.

6.1.3.4 Use cases of participation and scale dependency

The topic off other *use cases of participation* and the issue of *scale dependency* mostly emerged near the end of interviews, with conversations revolving around participants reflecting on their experiences and thinking about how to build upon their experiences. These topics were mostly discussed with participants of the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly, most likely because Belgian participants are already part of a well-established permanent participation process and therefore the topic of further expanding participatory processes did not concern them as much. One reoccurring finding is that participants of the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly spoke in favor of participatory processes on a much smaller than national scale, in which they participated in. When asked about their reasoning, participants mentioned that recommendations on a local level might be easier to implement, as they are not as far reaching, acceptance from the public may be higher and questions surrounding who is responsible for implementation is easier to answer.

"I believe that at the local level, whether in a city, a municipality, or a state, I believe that it's more—how should I put it? —that it's better received." - Interviewee 2 (Austria)

"If you go into politics, it's just not quite ready for it. Especially for some major proposals, especially those at the federal level." - Interviewee 3 (Austria)

This notion of participatory processes working better on a local level, might be founded in the participants experiences with their respective local government which they perceive as cooperative. Members of the bottom-up *'Association of the members of the CCA'* sorted the initial 93 recommendation of the CCA and provided their local government with only those who are relevant to their respective level of governance. This work has been conceived as productive by the members and continues to this day.

The topic of *'Use cases of participation / scale dependency"* was not a primary focus during the start of the research yet has been insightful into participants views on expansion of participatory processes. This code is an inductive one in the scope of this thesis.

6.1.3.5 Media Presence

Throughout the interviews media presence and perceived public opinion were discussed. As the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly had an online tool available for the wider public to participate as part of its process design and it being the first participatory process of national scale, more than half of Austrians reported to have heard about the

Climate Citizens' Assembly after it had ended (Praprotnik et al., 2022, p. 40). Traditional media played a major role in propagating the process to the Austrian people, as 86% of them learned about it through Television and/or the internet, with only 19% hearing about it via social media (Praprotnik et al., 2022, p. 40). This sentiment of vast media coverage is supported by the interviewees, who made repeated remarks about large radio stations, journalists and television channels being present during deliberation weekend.

"What I have to say was that was very well organized... the media presence. The Austrian Climate Council, if you ask anyone. I'd say 60 percent know about the Climate Council." – Interviewee 1(Austria)

This success of media propagation has not yet been replicated by the permanent Citizens' Dialogue in East Belgium so far, with members as well as the administrative spokesperson seeing a vast discrepancy between the 'professional public' and the general public.

"And yes, that was interesting to see that the citizen dialogue itself is perhaps not as well-known here in East Belgium as it is outside of East Belgium"- Interviewee 4 (Belgium)

Overall '*media presence'* arose as a natural topic of conversation when participants were asked what they would classify as working well where they see room for improvement, therefore this code is inductive.

In the upcoming section 5.2 differences and similarities between participant experiences of both councils will be explored. The previously introduced three overarching topics of *Human Agency, Mental Model shifts through deliberation* and *Perceived system responsiveness and institutional trust* will be the basis of analysis, with specifically insightful codes highlighted as well.

6.2. Comparative Insights

In this section compares three thematic clusters *Human Agency, Mental model shifts through deliberation* and *System responsiveness – Institutional trust* for the Austrian and Belgian councils. Whether any differences in experience occurred due to process design or other process related factors will be analyzed in this section.

6.2.1 Human Agency

As previously stated, Agency is defined by Bandura (1989, p. 1175) as 'peoples beliefs about their capabilities to exercise control over events that affect their lives' and whether this agency is influenced positively or negatively by participating in a citizens' council is determined by process quality. Most notably transparency during and follow-up work after the process influences perceived agency of participants the most. Firstly, similarities between the two councils will be analyzed in term of the effects on agency.

Similarities

After analyzing the six interviews it is observable that the interviewees reported an overall increase in their own self-efficacy after undergoing the process. This gain resulted mostly from two different aspects: Success in seeing recommendations treated seriously / implemented, and through deliberation and successive learning from deliberative discussions. Furthermore, for the Austrian participants, building connections throughout the process which lead to the establishment of the bottom-up follow up club 'Association of the members of the CCA' strengthened their belief in being able to achieve their goals if individuals stand up for a cause together. This bottom-up club provides the Austrian participants with means to keep up follow-up work after the process has ended, similar to the top-down organized citizens' council in Belgium, which provides Belgian participants with tools to oversee implementation status on a legal basis. Success in implementation oversight was highlighted by participants of both countries as a motivational factor. When asked about follow-up work in their resident city one member of the Austrian process described it as:

"And that was encouraging to see that, okay, something is really happening and it's just on the federal level of Austria where it's being pigeonholed." – Interviewee 2 (Austria)

While one member of the Belgian citizens' council described their experience in doing follow up work as:

"That's really important. I mean, if I'm successful, I get excited. – Interviewee 6 (Belgium)

Overall, the main similarities in terms of the effect of participation on perceived agency between the two councils lies in the positive direction of agency influence. As previously mentioned all of the interviewed members are engaged in either bottom-up or top-down follow work, so a bias in their perceived agency compared to an average participant cannot be ruled out. Interesting enough, the root for this agency seems to be stemming from different aspects of their participation which will be explored in the upcoming paragraph.

Differences

While perceived agency seems to have increased across the board for members of both councils, a detailed analysis of the interviews seems to indicate different roots of this increase in agency. While Belgian participants focused mainly on their follow up work and the empowering effects of successful implementation, Austrian participants highlighted their learnings during the process and its lasting effect on themselves as well. These effects include but are not limited to an increased confidence in expressing and standing up for their opinion as well as an overall increase in political processes as well as the social and organizational structures built between participants. Especially connecting with other participants who are eager to do follow-up work and having more perceived strength as a collective was highlighted:

"And then we said, okay, let's start a club. And then we'll see if we can continue this as a club. And the networking, of course, is obvious. Otherwise, I wouldn't have networked with the clubs. I wouldn't have done that, yes." – Interviewee 1 (Austria)

This data implies some innate effects of deliberation on expressing and articulating opinions, which helps to increase self-efficacy regardless of process design. While the institutionalized character of the Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue with its high level of transparency enables a structured long-term increase of perceived agency by providing a structured tool for participants to watch over the implementation of their recommendations, one-off processes such as the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly may rely more on self-initiative to oversee implementation. While this self-organization may lead to increased perceived agency by the members of the Austrian club (via forcing progress on their own) it significantly increases the potential for participants to leave the process with a negative feeling as there is more potential ambiguity after recommendations are handed over to authorities.

6.2.2 Mental Model shifts through deliberation

In a participatory process a representative sample of a given population is invited to find consensus and formulate recommendations. During this process many different people, perspectives and mental models meet and exchange. In both the Austrian and Belgian councils most mental model exchange happens during deliberative discussions with other participants, supported by experts. Given similar process design of deliberative discussions, this thematic topic shows the most similarities and least differences between the two processes.

Similarities

Participants of both councils described group discussions being productive, highlighting the moderation and scientific assistance as especially helpful to keep conversations on track, encourage more quiet participants to speak their mind and keeping input from every member balanced. This indicates that as deliberation is the key component of any participatory process, good moderation is key high for a quality outcome. Participants of both councils reported shifts in opinions throughout the group discussions, both within themselves and others within their groups and recalled this process of internal mental model revision as positive. While discussions were perceived as productive and well moderated, they did sometimes involve some friction until consensus was reached:

"It wasn't easy on some topics, but it was necessary and it was cool in that sense" – Interviewee 3 (Austria)

"It's not a debate over coffee and cake. Instead, it's being pushed through to get it done in time." – Interviewee 5 (Belgium)

Looking at the data, institutionalization exerts less difference on mental model revision compared to *Human Agency* and *System responsiveness / Institutional trust,* which will be discussed in a later paragraph, as mental model exchange predominantly happens during the deliberation phase.

Differences

As mental model revision is mostly occurring during the moderated group deliberations, similar experiences during discussions were reported from participants of both councils. Therefore, little significant differences can be found in the data between the councils regarding mental model shifts during deliberation.

6.2.3 Perceived system responsiveness and institutional trust

In this thematic cluster, the different degree of institutionalization between the two councils and its subsequent effect on participant experiences is the most pronounced. This is unsurprising as this thematic cluster is, among others, comprised of the codes *transparency, implementation & follow up* and *politics & politicians*. All of which are more influenced by administrative and political factors, rather than by the participants own actions. Nonetheless some similarities were found between the councils, although differences greatly outweigh.

Similarities

Most notably participants of both councils as well as the Belgian administrative spokesperson highlighted that small scale local governance is being beneficial to participatory success. In the Belgian Citizens' Dialogue the small distances, both physical and social, were mentioned as positive factors. This allows for short distances of travel for participants making logistical planning easier, as well as reaching authorities quickly when issuing political inquiries. When asked about the relationship between the local government and the permanent Citizens' Dialogue one participant is quoted as:

"I can only speak for the parliament here in Eastern Belgium. I think, since the distances are very short here, it's a very small community, yes. It's very good" – Interviewee 5 (Belgium)

In Austria participants who are actively engaging with local authorities of the city of Graz reported the exchange with the local city government as productive and motivating to further pursue follow up work.

"Yes, I would say that we, through the climate council, are in very close contact with the city of Graz. And I'm absolutely thrilled with how they're handling this and what they're implementing. They're giving us feedback, and I think that's really great. Regarding the state, I feel like, well, thanks for wasting taxpayers' money, it's time to put it in the drawer." – Interviewee 2 (Austria)

While this thesis does not make any statements of scale dependency of participatory processes and its success, the gathered data seems to indicate that smaller scale governance structure might be beneficial for participatory processes. Yet further research needs to be done to make substantial claims about this relationship.

Differences

As previously mentioned, the differences of process design and institutionalization are the most pronounced in this section of analysis.

The adequate handling of recommendations is essential to fulfill built up expectations from participants and to ensure that they do not leave the process disillusioned about political participation. In this regard the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly lacked clear communication about implementation plans, while the Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue possesses one of its biggest strengths in the thoroughly planned handling of recommendations. The Austrian handling of recommendations is reminiscent of the G-1000 process in Belgium out of which todays Citizens' Dialogue later originated. Looking at a quote from the administrative spokesperson of the permanent Citizens' Dialogue in East-Belgium the similarities to the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly become apparent:

"*With G 1000, we saw that the process itself was incredibly interesting. And what the citizens did there, how they put it together, what was developed there. It was all incredibly exciting. And then the new government came along. And the organizers of G 1000 had a lovely band, made up of the recommendations. The new government said, oh, thank you very much. And then nothing ever happens with them. That means that if there is no commitment from politicians to such a participatory process, nothing happens with the recommendations. And then you increase frustration and prevent them. And you increase disinterest and don't create interest." – Administrative spokesperson (East-Belgian Citizens' Dialogue)*

This feeling of lacking political commitment is supported by one of the Austrian participants of the Climate Citizens' Assembly who stated the following about his experience with the federal government:

We had discussions with politicians from time to time. Yes. Various party politicians were there. You could see a bit of reluctance from some parties. – Interviewee 3 (Austria)

and

"In our current political environment, if you go into politics, it's simply not quite ready for it. Especially for some major proposals, especially those at the federal level." – Interviewee 3 (Austria)

The widespread political support was highlighted by the administrative spokesperson of the East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue as an essential necessity if one wants to build a legitimate participatory process. Given the lack of this support in Austria during the time and now with a new government in place, implementation of federal level recommendations is increasingly unlikely.

Additionally, transparency of process design in all stages can be identified as a clear difference between the two councils. Whereas the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly was plagued with transparency issues from the very beginning (participant selection), the Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue shows great strength in this matter in part due to its institutionalization and detailed legal basis.

In terms of media presence, the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly achieved great visibility throughout the media landscape with approximately 500 newspaper articles published (Buzogány et al., 2022, p. 51). This sentiment of public knowledge around the process was confirmed by the interviewees, in contrast to Belgian interviewees who noted that public knowledge about the permanent Citizens' Dialogue is an area that can be improved upon.

Overall, it can be concluded that if participant driven activities are analyzed, such as group discussions, a large overlap of similar experiences is observable. There are innate learnings and positive effects of mental models shifts possible whenever people discuss in a well-moderated fact-based environment, regardless of process design and degree of institutionalization. Whenever processes are outside of participants' sphere of influence, such as handling of recommendations, the thoroughness, transparency and detail of process design are most important for shaping positive participant experiences. To provide more insights into the systemic and administrative perspective, an analysis of the interview with the administrative spokesperson will be provided in the upcoming section.

6.3 Administrative interview findings

In this section the findings from the interview with the administrative spokesperson of the institutionalized East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue will be presented. Given the different perspective from an administrative point of view on the participatory process, new codes were used to analyze the data while the methodology stayed the same. Following the same procedure as in section 6.1 interview codes used for analysis are compiled into three overarching themes for streamlined analysis. The three themes of analysis are as follows: *Systemic integration of participation, Barriers – Tradeoffs – Success criteria, Internal & External Communication*. The full list of codes which the themes consist of are presented in the following table:

Table 5: Administrative themes and corresponding codes

Themes and Codes	Definitions
Systemic integration of participation	**Integration of a participatory process into the broader democratic system**
Origins	Steps from G-1000 to the institutionalized permanent Citizens' Dialogue
Institutionalization	Structural characteristics of the process and its evolution over time
Social Circle	Influence of the process on social circle of participants and politicians
Barriers – Tradeoffs-Success criteria	**Criteria the administration uses to assess both success and challenges**
Barriers & Challenges	Political, organizational and financial challenges
Success criteria - Impact assessment	How is success of participation defined
Implementation & Follow-up	Handling of recommendations after deliberation has ended
Internal & External communication	**Media coverage, changes in internal political communication and changes in politics to public communication following institutionalization**
Politics & Politicians	Relationship of the politicians with participatory processes
Media Presence	Coverage throughout different media channels and knowledge of the public regarding the process

6.3.1 Systemic integration of participation

The institutionalization of the permanent Citizens' Dialogue did, as already laid out in a previous section, not happen overnight. From the well-known G-1000 assembly during national governance crisis to the first pilot citizens dialogue in East-Belgium many years passed. Now as the process established itself into the political system and with a newly elected government in place, the strengths of the institutionalized foundation of the permanent Citizens' Dialogue are at display in times of political transition.

This overarching theme of *Systemic integration of participation* consists of codes regarding the process and its inception itself and how it interacts with different actors of the broader democratic system. From a deliberative democratic perspective this institutionalized participatory process of the East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue can be thought of as one way to enhance the connections between the 'public- ', 'empowered-' and 'private-space' as postulated by deliberative democracy theorists (Dryzek & Stevenson, 2011, p. 3). A more thorough look at this permanent addition to the democratic system will be provided in the discussion.

6.3.1.1 Origins

When discussing the origins of the Citizens' Dialogue, the G-1000 in 2011 was coined as the original 'starting point' for the deliberative expansion of the democratic system in Belgium laying the groundwork for the participatory process design.

"And what would we like to pass on to such a government? That was truly the starting point, you could say. And to this day, our citizen dialogue still reflects the foundations of this first G-1000 process. And that's no coincidence, because during this long development from 2011 to 2019, we looked at various participation models in Europe. In any case, you can still recognize some of these G-1000 principles, regardless of what else we've looked at in the meantime." – Administrative spokesperson (East-Belgian Citizens' Dialogue)

When it came to defining the legal basis for institutionalization, researchers who previously worked on the G-1000 supported policymakers in the East-Belgian region to ensure a robust and high-quality process by adapt the design structure to regional needs and circumstances.

6.3.1.2 Institutionalization

The institutionalization of the Citizens' Dialogue brings many advantages but also challenges with it. One of the biggest advantages is the permanence of the process. The institutionalization allows for the Citizens' Dialogue to work independently throughout election cycles. In 2025, the first change of government took place, with many of the politicians who witnessed the inception of the process leaving office. During the time of the interview (shortly after the elections), some concerns were raised regarding this change of government constituents.

"After the new parliamentary elections, with a lot of new representatives, we're currently in a phase where we must make sure that the mood doesn't deteriorate, so to speak, on the political side. Because the politicians who helped shape this decree and passed it unanimously aren't even here anymore, right?" – Administrative spokesperson (East-Belgian Citizens' Dialogue)

While the initial concerns of the old constituents leaving were reasonable during this time of uncertainty, in an interview with a current member of the citizens' council they described a productive and ambitious work environment with the new constituents as follows:

"Of course, they had to familiarize themselves with the topics first. Yes. Because a lot of things changed, and they were familiar with the working methods and topics because they were handed over. But nevertheless, here and there, you had to promote understanding and then steer things a bit accordingly. But that was constructive, absolutely." – Interviewee 6 (Belgium)

Another factor which was highlighted regarding long-term success and productivity of the permanent citizens dialogue is being in a constant state of learning with subsequent improvement of system structure. Feedback regarding the process is received from many different actors connected to the permanent Citizens' Dialogue and was worked into a revision of the decree of institutionalization in 2024.

"We've had from the very beginning, i.e. since 2019, a panel of scientists supporting this process. They also continually give us pointers on what they believe is going well and what needs improvement. And there has already been a far-reaching adjustment to the legal basis last year. This results partly from the scientists' observations, but also, it must be said quite clearly, from feedback from the permanent Citizen Dialogue Secretary, who, I would say, experiences the hurdles in the processes like no other, but also partly from politicians and the parliamentary administration, who also provide feedback on what is going well in the dialogue with politicians and what could be improved." – Administrative spokesperson (East-Belgian Citizens' Dialogue)

This continuity of work from the Citizens' Dialogue across different parliamentary compositions and its success in handling political turnover, allowed it to establish itself as a new democratic institution in the political landscape of East-Belgium.

6.3.1.3 Social Circle

In the previous section 6.1 participants experience and exchange with their social circle throughout the process analyzed. In the administrative interview the perspective shifted from individual experiences to a systemic one, viewing participants, politicians and other stakeholders involved as 'multipliers' of the participatory process in their respective social circles.

"For example, that's something we wanted to examine more closely from a scientific perspective: that these people are multipliers in their own environment. So, not everyone has a positive experience in the context of the citizens' assembly. For the sake of completeness, it should be mentioned that there are also some who leave the citizens' assembly in frustration. But most people are positively influenced by the way they can participate here. And they are multipliers in their own environment when they return." – Administrative spokesperson (East-Belgian Citizens' Dialogue)

This relates back to participatory processes potentially being a double-edged sword when it comes to agency and driving positive feedback loops (LP7) (Meadows, 1999). While they certainly have the potential to increase perceived agency, they can also lead to disillusion about political participation if the experience is negative due to unfulfilled expectations or untransparent process design.

6.3.2 Barriers – Trade-offs – Success Criteria

As developing recommendations is the main goal of deliberative discussions in a participatory process the institutionalized Citizens' Dialogue brings unique opportunities for consistent civil engagement and exchange between citizens and politicians. The upkeep of this constant structure of deliberation within the East-Belgian community also leads to unique challenges for the administration. The complexity of impact assessment and problem solving to ensure a high-quality process is discussed in the codes below.

6.3.2.1 Barriers & Challenges

When discussing barriers and challenges of the Citizens' Dialogue financing and time-intensity came up for discussion. These themes are generally to be expected when discussing participatory formats. Another challenge faced by the Citizens' Dialogue was the limited capacity, which prevented the inclusion of all individuals interested in participating. With about 150 citizens replying to the official invitation and expressing their interest to joining a citizens' assembly, the spokesperson mentioned problems regarding their inclusion despite showing democratic interest as follows:

"Now 120 people will not be selected for this process, but only 30. What do we do with the other 120 who have expressed a potential interest in getting involved? How can we still win them over, in the sense that they have already taken the first step towards interest? How can we do that now, how can we somehow involve them in this process, even if they are not directly in the citizens' assembly? And secondly, with the participants in the citizens' assembly, as I have just described, we have seen that not all of those interested can make the jump to the citizens' council. How can we still involve them as, let's say, ambassadors of democracy or the democratic model that we are pursuing here in East Belgium? There are definitely still things that can be improved and something else that we really need to look at closely." – Administrative spokesperson (East-Belgian Citizens' Dialogue)

This issue of having to turn away potentially interested citizens is a relevant issue for this new institution, given its stated goals are not only to formulate recommendations for politicians, but rather foster political interest and reducing political disinterest within their community.

A particularly challenging time for the Citizens' Dialogue is after an election, with new elected officials taking power and being unfamiliar with the process. During the time of the interview this transfer of power happened for the first time since its establishment, testing the resilience and continuity of the process in times of political change.

"We're in a bit of a phase where we must make sure that the mood doesn't deteriorate, so to speak, on the political side. Because the politicians who helped shape this decree and passed it unanimously aren't even here anymore, right?" – Administrative spokesperson (East-Belgian Citizens' Dialogue)'

This political motivation is needed for the success of the process, as the permanent Citizens' Dialogue brings more work for all parties involved. Therefore, the benefits of the process must be made visible to politicians and other administrative actors.

"Yes, exactly the additional work. And with this additional work, I would say, we now have to make sure that the process still has a positive flow." – Administrative spokesperson (East-Belgian Citizens' Dialogue)

In later interviews with members of the current citizens' council, this transfer of power was described as productive and newly elected officials being described as engaged with the positive continuation of the process.

6.3.2.2 Success criteria - Impact Assessment

While at the end of any participatory process is the handing over of recommendations formulated during deliberation to respective authorities. One might assume that the success of a citizens' council is strictly measured by the number of recommendations implemented in the end. And while this is certainly true to some extent, it became clear during the interview that the implementation of recommendations is important, yet other objectives are also of key interest in the process and were highlighted when talking about how to assess the impact of the process, quoting the administrative spokesperson as follows.

"When I get interviewed by journalists or scientists alike, the first question I always get is: How many recommendations have been implemented? And I always answer: That is not the right question to ask, given the goals that we have set with this permanent Citizens' Dialogue. The inspiration of politicians via the input of citizens' is one aspect, the others are combating the political disenchantment of citizens, enhancing understanding of political processes, reflections of politicians regarding their previous communication with the public and generally being in exchange with citizens, proving themselves until the next election. And here I see a success story if you will" – Administrative spokesperson (East-Belgian Citizens' Dialogue)

Political disinterest and political disenchantment are strongly tied to a lack of understanding about how political decisions are made. Here the permanent citizens' dialogue provides an essential connection point for the public to the political decision-making process.

"And this disenchantment with politics, it is something we've already looked at scientifically, consists primarily in a lack of understanding of political processes, how decisions are even made. And in the fact that these decisions are then not explained in a way that allows citizens to understand what happened or what didn't happen. And that's important to us, precisely in the context of a citizen dialogue process, the processing of an issue, to let citizens gain experience, among themselves in the development of recommendations, but also in discussions with politicians, simply this: how do you arrive at decisions? And recommendations are also decisions within the context of a citizens' assembly." – Administrative spokesperson (East-Belgian Citizens' Dialogue)

Other factors which are deemed to be critical for the success of participatory formats are political support from all parties involved, providing the necessary administrative basis, defining topics over which the respective authorities possess jurisdiction over, including authorities regarding process design and providing process-guarantees to participants about what to expect and transparent communication. To provide these guarantees to citizens, political commitment is deemed essential for any participatory process.

It doesn't matter whether it's permanent or not. I would always say that if the political community isn't broadly behind it, it can be packed up and put away. This means that if there is no political commitment to such a participatory process, nothing will happen with the recommendations. And then you increase frustration without alleviating it. And you increase disinterest without generating any interest. – Administrative spokesperson (East-Belgian Citizens' Dialogue)

Following this line of thinking, stark contrast in terms of process design regarding the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly become apparent, as widespread political support was mentioned to be lacking from the beginning and decreased political interest from participants was observable for some participants after the process finished.

Another aspect which allows the permanent Citizens' Dialogue to work efficiently is the relatively small scale of the autonomous region in East-Belgium, quoting the interviewee as follows:

"And it must be clearly stated that organizing the process is relatively easy in a small federal state like ours. If we invite people to a local public meeting, the longest distance is, let's say, 80 kilometers. For a national process; we're talking about a different scale. We can also ensure representativeness with 30 citizens here" – Administrative spokesperson (East-Belgian Citizens' Dialogue)

This sentiment was shared by members of the Citizens' Dialogue as well, highlighting the short distances as a helpful for the productivity of their work.

6.3.2.3 Implementation & Follow up

As any other deliberative participatory process, the participants of the citizens assembly do not formulate policies, rather non-legally binding recommendations to politicians are decided upon during deliberation. As recommendations are not mandatory to be implemented and not all recommendation can be implemented in some cases. Transparency in the handling of recommendations must be provided by authorities, especially regarding proposals which will not be implemented. Leaving participants in ambiguity about further steps in the process must be avoided to prevent disillusioned about the work they put in.

"And inspiring means that it is not anchored in the citizen dialogue that recommendations per se must be implemented, but that what the citizens have developed must be seriously addressed ... In the best-case scenario, it will be implemented, but if it isn't, we can understand why. So, these guarantees in the process absolutely must exist" – Administrative Spokesperson (East-Belgian Citizens' Dialogue)

The way in which these guarantees of serious considerations are manifested, is laid out in the legal framework of the Citizens' Dialogue. Inquiries about the status of implementation can be made continuously by the permanent secretary. Furthermore, mandatory parliamentary hearings are set in place for exchange with participants, give updates and to clear up any possible misunderstandings, regarding the wording of recommendations.

"So, one month later, the affected committees must issue an initial statement on the recommendations, along the lines of, how do we assess this? What else do we want to do in this matter? For example: Regarding this recommendation, we will definitely not be able to implement this or regarding this recommendation the government already has it in its program, and it will be implemented in any case. And then for the fine-tuning, to ultimately see whether we will implement this in this way or not and we'll give this to the government along the way, but we don't yet know exactly what will come of it. This is the case after a year." – Administrative spokesperson (East-Belgian Citizens' Dialogue)

These scheduled exchanges with respective authorities also aid in clearing up misunderstandings between participants and politicians regarding proposals in the recommendations. One of the participants of the East-Belgian permanent citizens' dialogue described their experience as follows:

"Because with a lot of things, it really depends on how you interpret them. Some things might have been misunderstood because they just weren't worded clearly. And then we had the chance to revise them. And there actually were follow-up meetings where they said, 'Okay, now we get it, now we'll take another look at it.'"- Interviewee 6 (Belgium)

The institutionalized character of the Citizens' Dialogue allows for a detailed and transparent process design setting it apart from legally undefined one-off events, where things can generally be framed more loosely as no decree regarding the process design needs to be evaluated and voted upon. This may lead to process guarantees being harder to ensure for participants.

6.3.3 Internal & external communication

This theme is comprised of codes which relate to media coverage, internal political communication and changes in politics to public communication following the introduction of the permanent Citizens' Dialogue.

6.3.3.1 Politics & Politicians

The permanent Citizens' Dialogue in East-Belgium has influenced political communication practices since its establishment. Given the novelty of direct communication channels with citizens, political actors had to adapt their way of communicating with the public from a top-down to more dialogue-based approach. This new means of direct exchange led to a rethinking of existing habits of communicating from politics to the public.

The opposition and the coalition sometimes approach each other very aggressively. They demand arguments in a very assertive, demanding manner. And we had to learn that a civil dialogue requires different qualities of communication. And this communication, which takes place directly with the citizens, naturally also triggered some reflection on how we politicians usually communicate with the citizens, how we actually explain what we do, or perhaps why we don't do something. - Administrative spokesperson (East-Belgian Citizens' Dialogue)

In addition to conversations themselves, the spokesperson highlighted the role of spatial settings on communication dynamics. Stating that the parliamentary plenary hall where dialogues with citizens are held, reinforces those long-standing top-down communication approaches, a more neutral setting would be better suited for these discourses.

"Unfortunately, we often think that the only available space for this encounter between citizens and politicians is the plenary hall. And that directly creates this atmosphere of politicians talking, which is a bit of a shame. We often wish we had a different room, where people sit around the table differently. " – Administrative spokesperson (East-Belgian Citizens' Dialogue)

This highlights the impact of spatial settings and its impacts on dialogues for this and other participatory processes which build on new paths of communication between politics and the public.

6.3.3.2 Media Presence

The permanent Citizens' Dialogue is well-known in academic and scientific fields due to its ambitiousness and forwards thinking in participatory process design. Yet, as was stated by members and the administrative spokesperson, citizens in East-Belgium are less knowledgeable about its existence and workings compared to the formal public.

"And I would say that we are always amazed. This so-called East Belgium model is known worldwide in science... But just ask the citizens here in East Belgium. At least every second person will say: What is that?"- Administrative spokesperson (East-Belgian Citizens' Dialogue)

While for every citizens assembly there are radio spots and news articles which covering the events, more knowledge about the process is desired by authorities. Especially for participatory formats like the Citizens' Dialogue it is essential to inform citizens about possibilities to participate.

In summary the findings highlight the importance of widespread political support, process adaptability and effective internal and external communication. While the East-Belgian Citizens' Dialogue has achieved several successes since its inception, both in implementing recommendations into policies and increasing political engagement among citizens, it is still continually faced with challenges. These include public visibility, financing, additional workload for all actors involved, inclusion of all interested citizens and continuity following political transfer of power. The findings of the administrative interview underscore that institutionalized citizens' councils like the East-Belgian Citizens' Dialogue must be viewed as continually evolving democratic infrastructures. In the following chapter the position of institutionalized citizens' councils within the broader system of democracy and its connection to leverage points are explored.

7. Discussion

Adaptation is an essential part of system resilience (Jia et al., 2021, p. 5). This is the case for any complex system which wants to stand the test of time, democratic systems are not excluded from this. Furthermore, any complex system which is tightly connected via multiple relationships between its nodes tends to be more stable than a weakly connected system ('Preparing for Practice', 2012, p. 19). A forest with high biodiversity is more resilient than a monoculture, finances are more secure if invested in different shares and a modular energy grid makes for a more stable energy infrastructure. In the end one can think of any system as nodes and links. The same is the case for modern societies.

Recalling key concepts from section 2.1 (where the deliberative system was introduced) and with the help of some additional systems theory, we can start to make some assumptions about modern societal and governance structure. Deliberative systems theory proposes the public, private and empowered space, the nodes in our system (Dryzek & Stevenson, 2011). Between these nodes there are links. The empowered and public space are linked by transmission and accountability. In other words, the election of political figures in and out of power respectively. The link between public and private space is less institutionally defined, as the public space can be viewed as an agglomeration of private spaces and media discourse. This thesis argues that adding an additional node to the system which connects to all three spaces, public, private and empowered, has the potential to provide improved connectivity and therefore additional resilience to the complex system democracy.

This additional node in our case is a permanent institutionalized citizens' council, taking citizens from the private space connecting them with the empowered space and bringing elements of the empowered space back to their private spaces as they are 'multipliers' of the process, a concept proposed by the Belgian administrative spokesperson. Citizens, politicians and involved stakeholders alike. Through which means does such an extra node bring benefits to the system overall and push it into a desired more fair and sustainable direction? After all nothing is free and certainly no government institution was ever cheap. Here the innate qualities of participatory processes and deliberation come into play. As we explored in section 3.1 participation in a citizens' council can be analyzed from the different thematic perspectives *human agency, mental models* and *system responsiveness & institutional trust*. These three themes can act upon different leverage points if the participatory process is sufficiently connected to other parts of the deliberative system. This sufficient connection in this case is argued to be institutionalization. This increases stability as its future is not newly decided each election cycle and process design quality at every step, from recruitment to follow up must be laid out in a detailed manner. Which leverage points are influenced by citizens' councils will be explored in this upcoming section.

To start off, the themes and the respective leverage points they act upon are summarized in the following table:

Table 6: Main themes and their connection to Meadows' leverage points

Theme	Connected Leverage Point
Human Agency	(4) The power to add, change, evolve or self-organize a system (7) The strength around driving positive feedback loops
Mental model shifts through deliberation	(2) The mindset or paradigm out of which the system – its goals, structure, rules, delays, parameters – arises (3) The goals of a system (4) The power to add, change, evolve or self-organize a system (8) The strength of negative feedback loops, relative to the impacts they are trying to correct against
System responsiveness and Institutional trust	(4) The power to add, change, evolve or self-organize a system (5) The rules of the system (such as incentives, punishments constraints) (6) The structure of information flows (who does and does not have access to what kinds of information) (7) The strength around driving positive feedback loops (8) The strength of negative feedback loops, relative to the impacts they are trying to correct against (9) The length of delays, relative to the rate of system change

In the following paragraphs the links between participatory processes and different leverage points will be explored. As is seen in the table above, some leverage points are connected to more than one theme. While some connections are stronger than others, overlap between different themes acting on the same leverage points is to be expected given the complex nature of system interactions. Given their potential for significant change, a detailed look into the connection between citizens' councils and deep leverage points will be given first, advancing to more shallow leverage points throughout this section.

(2) The mindset or paradigm out of which the system – its goals, structure, rules, delays, parameters – arises

'Growth is good, nature is a stock of resources to be converted to human purpose and one can 'own' land', these examples were brought forth by Meadows to illustrate her definition of seemingly unshakeable paradigms (Meadows, 1999, pp. 17–18). To change a mindset or paradigm one needs to change their own mental models. Here participatory processes can act as an institutional tool to facilitate such mental model shifts, allowing for an increase in perceived self-efficacy. Interview data suggests that adaption to beliefs and mental models, mainly occurs during moderated group discussions. Successes after the deliberation phase ended show strong potential to increase perceived self-efficacy, leading to more political and community engagement as a result. Positive experienced made during participatory processes may allow for people to overcome paradigms such as 'oh I cannot change anything anyways', an assumption which is supported by the creation of the bottom-up club formed in Austria as well as ex-participants of the Belgian Citizens' Dialogue running for office in local elections following their participation. Both are examples of how mental model revision and an increase in perceived agency can lead to concrete political actions taken by empowered citizens standing up for their beliefs. These results support findings from a previous study conducted in 2015, which followed participants of a deliberative processes in the US and Australia for up to one year. In this study participants on average reported an increase in their perceived capabilities to participate in politics and stated themselves to be more engaged as active members in their local communities as a direct result of their participation in the process (Knobloch & Gastil, 2014, p. 193).

This potential to revise one's assumptions about the world and increasing self-efficacy within citizens may lead to broader change, namely the goals of a system. This leverage point will be discussed in the next paragraph.

(3) The goals of a system

As participatory processes allow for the revision of mental models and paradigms, the goals of people within that system may change. As many current problems are consequences of the systems' goals, they cannot be solved by keeping the initial goals as

they are, or as Einstein famously put it *'no problem can be solved from the same level of thinking that created it'* (Davelaar, 2021, p. 738). Evidence from the administrative interview suggests that people in contact with participatory processes do not only keep their experiences and changes to themselves, much rather they can be seen as 'multipliers' of said process. This is not exclusively the case for participants, but politicians and other stakeholders as well. They are all influenced by experiences and mental model revisions within citizens' councils' and propagate those learnings in their own social networks, whether that is within their social circle or institution that they are part of. Here potential for broader change may be possible. While one-off nationwide processes such as the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly possess little influence over systemic goals, on a smaller scale interview data suggests that evidence is present. These changes in the goals of the system mainly manifest in East-Belgian politicians being provided with a more in-depth view of what citizens care about, rethinking their ways of communicating to citizens and them being held accountable for their (in)- action to a different degree than prior to the institutionalization of the Citizens' Dialogue.

While citizens' councils alone may not alter the overarching goals of a political system, their cumulative effect when deployed consistently across different scales may have the potential to reshape the relationship between the public and elected representatives over time on a fundamental level (OECD, 2020, p. 125).

(4) The power to add, change, evolve or self-organize a system

Providing citizens with the feeling that they can exert influence and help shape their collective future is essential for a transition to a more just and sustainable future. A concrete example of this leverage point is found when looking at the ex-participants of the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly, who formed a club to pursue participant driven follow-up work. This bottom-up club is successfully pushing the implementation of recommendation in their resident city of Graz. This has led some of their members to make further connections with city authorities as well as other communally engaged clubs, showing the strength of acting upon this leverage point. Participatory processes appear to support the improvement of competencies needed to exercise self-organization. Learnings in group discussion such as articulating one's opinion, getting to know the political system, understanding its workings better, keeping the common goals as a priority, as well as providing a connection point for citizens and political authorities assists participants in improving their self-organizing capabilities.

A second different interpretation of this leverage in action can be found in Belgium. The Citizens' Dialogue itself shows signs self-organizing behavior which aligns with this leverage point. Several changes to improve the permanent Citizens' Dialogue were passed in a decree in 2024, based on feedback received throughout its first five years. This included feedback from politicians, the permanent secretary and the scientific advisory

board with the aim to break down existing barriers and sharpening the impacts of the Citizens' Dialogue.

As we see, self-organization and evolution of a system and its components can take many different shapes, yet all democratic innovation share the goal of reimagining and deepening of the role of citizens in governance processes (Elstub & Escobar, 2019, p. 23). Paired with an increase in self-efficacy of citizens, an increase in self-organization in communities and institutions becomes highly relevant for driving systemic change.

The leverage points discussed above are the most difficult to access, showing the high potential impact of institutionalized citizens' councils from a systems perspective. Additionally, citizens' councils show connection to more shallow leverage points as well. These will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

(6) The structure of information flows (who does and does not have access to what kinds of information)

Citizens' councils restructure information flows within democratic systems in multiple ways. During the process itself citizens receive scientific information from the advisory team, they exchange perspectives and different mental models within their discussion groups and politicians receive information from citizens about present issues and possible solutions. Crucially another flow of information in the process happens from authorities back to participants. In this thesis this flow of information is defined as 'transparency'. As Meadows put it, *'Missing feedback is one of the most common causes of system malfunction'*(Meadows, 1999, p. 13). This statement can be directly applied to the two councils investigated in this thesis. The Belgian council shows high levels of transparency, while the Austrian council was troubled with issues regarding transparency throughout the process. Furthermore, this leverage point can be interpreted in a broader democratic point of view as well. Citizens' councils improve information flows within the system by expanding information flows from citizens to politicians and vice versa, as well as between citizens themselves. Rather than once every few years, depending on election cycles, a constant stream of feedback between politicians and the public is established. Furthermore, media coverage about topics discussed in cizens' councils may extend the information from within the council to the public. An example for this was observed in Australia in 1999 where a consensus conference on genetically modified food garnered considerable public attention, with little to no public debate on this matter before the conference took place. (Goodin & Dryzek, 2006, p. 228).

(7) The strength around driving positive feedback loops

Citizens' councils can activate positive feedback loops in civic engagement under specific conditions. Driving positive feedback loops is in the case of citizens' councils a double-edged sword, as previously explored on the topic of human agency. Perceived

success can be a motivation factor for continued engagement, representing a reinforcing feedback loop. Yet, if process design lacks transparency and appropriate institutional response, it can amplify existing disillusion with the political system. Therefore, the strength and direction of this feedback loop is strongly connected to process design quality, transparency and institutional commitment.

(8) The strength of negative feedback loops, relative to the impacts they are trying to correct against

Negative feedback loops are stabilizing forces within a system, crucial for long term welfare of a system (Meadows, 1999, p. 9) . An example of a citizens' councils acting on this leverage point is by providing a tool for citizens to engage with politics increasing political engagement and interest. If the treatment recommendations and process design is of high quality, participants who felt politically disenchantment now engage with it more than before joining. This may be beneficial for democracy by, for example, increasing the continually declining voter turnout in elections.

In summary, institutionalized citizens' councils have the potential to influence a variety of parts and actors within a democratic system. During deliberation deep leverage points can be accessed, enabling personal growth, as well as institutional development. As deep leverage points are generally hard to access, citizens' councils provide unique opportunities to foster self-organizing abilities, mental model exchange and reflection on one's paradigms. Furthermore, it expands current democratic system structure by providing additional links between politicians, stakeholders and the public, offering new information channels and communication opportunities between citizens themselves and with authorities. Citizens' councils need to be applied with clear scope, a high level of institutional commitment and transparency regarding follow-up work to maximize their impact on the democratic system. The evidence gathered in this thesis indicates that embedding institutionalized participatory formats into democratic systems may prove to be beneficial for democratic health moving further into the 21st century and its challenges.

8. Conclusion

This thesis explored the effects of citizens' councils in terms of their potential for individual and systemic change. To assess the impact on participants themselves, changes to human agency and mental models of participants were of interest. To assess the impact on the broader democratic system citizens' councils are embedding in, Meadows' leverage points framework was used as the primary basis of analysis. To answer these questions, a comparative case study between an institutionalized (East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue) and un-institutionalized (Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly) participatory process was conducted. The two councils were deliberately chosen to gain a deeper understanding about the impact different degrees of institutionalization exhibit on both individual participant experiences and systemic impact.

During the analysis of the six participant interviews it became evident that especially group deliberation tends to exert similar effects on participants. Regardless of the degree of institutionalization, it is observable that scientifically grounded and well-moderated group discussions with other citizens hold innate value. This value comes, most noticeably, from the exchange with and exposures to different opinions and worldviews throughout the discussion rounds. Or in the language of this thesis, the extensive mental model exchange and conducive conditions they provide for mental model revisions are innate values of participatory processes. Participants reported that they experienced multiple mental model shifts, either within themselves or within their group resulting from group deliberation. These positive effects of group discussions on individuals seems to be largely independent of institutionalization degree yet strongly connected to the quality of information and moderation. Both was perceived well by participants of both councils.

Looking at the effects on perceived agency and self-efficacy, the importance of institutionalization degree on participant experience manifests itself more clearly. As it was discussed above, the effect of participatory processes on perceived agency of participants can be two folded. In the best case it leads to the empowerment of citizens, in the worst case it leads to disillusion about political participation. Which direction this agency shift is directed in, is in large parts connected to process design quality, with transparency emerging as probably the single most important factor of process design quality. As participants spend their energy and spare time on weekends to deliberate on recommendations for politicians, expectations and hope about potential implementation can build up. Here the respective authorities have great responsibility to not undermine the participants efforts by showing a lack of commitment. While it is not plausible for authorities or expected by participants that every recommendation is implemented, an honest, serious and most importantly transparent way of dealing with recommendation is essential for a well-functioning, legitimate and positively perceived participatory process. Here institutionalization ensures that a comprehensive process design must be developed prior to the adoption of a legally binding decree. This builds the basis for clarity,

accountability, and long-term stability of the council by leaving as little ambiguity as possible about process design and handling of recommendations. For the case of the East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue this entails multiple scheduled hearings and meetings with politicians, the ability to oversee implementation progress and the necessity to provide detailed explanations in the case of non-implementation of recommendations. While it is not impossible to achieve a high level of process quality for an un-institutionalized council, there is more room for ambiguity regarding process design by not having a legally binding decree as a basis. As can be seen in the follow-up from authorities in response to the recommendations following the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly.

Regarding the systemic implications: As Meadows put it, deep leverage points, those concerned with intent and design, possess the highest potential for transformation but are the hardest to access. In the data gathered throughout this thesis citizens' councils show potential to access these deep leverage points. Evidence suggests that systemic changes can result from individual changes through chains of leverage. The bottom-up club formed by ex-members of the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly provides a great example for individual empowerment manifesting itself into continued structured civic engagement.

Creating an institution which fosters civic engagement and connects citizens with each other, and the political realm is valuable, especially in times of declining institutional trust, frustrations rising among citizens and a multitude of challenges needing to be addressed. These current challenges modern societies face are in line with the types of problems citizens' councils are especially well suited to address, namely; value-driven dilemmas, complex problems and long-term issues (OECD, 2020, p. 125). Here deliberative processes fulfill three distinct functions within the broader democratic system (Mansbridge et al., 2012, pp. 11–12): First, an ethical function which promotes mutual respect among citizens especially beneficial in times of polarization in society. Second, an epistemic function which produces opinions, recommendations and decisions based on logic and facts, counteracting false claims and misinformation. And lastly, a democratic function which ensures the inclusion of diverse voices, interests and concerns in the decision-making process, supporting inclusive policy design. While there is no one-size fits-all process design, participatory and deliberative models of governance generally increase the number of interactions within the system, leading to an increase in diversity and creativity of solutions, helping to address blind spots in the problem solving process (Wagenaar, 2007, p. 42). This increases information flows within the system, now including experiential or 'local' knowledge of citizens which may be overlooked or not visible at all to experts who are particularly likely to ignore experiences of marginalized groups in their assessments (Wagenaar, 2007, p. 42)(Mansbridge et al., 2012, p. 14).

In some way democracy shows strong resemblance to a common good, similar to global climate and ecosystem health. People benefit from a well-functioning democracy the

same as they benefit from clean air. Everyone is using it, yet no single person truly feels responsible to keep either in a healthy state. As Barber (2014) put it, citizens need to be more than 'interest-driven consumers of government'. Democracy needs participation and establishing an institution which fosters participation and the public mindfulness of citizens is most likely beneficial for the long-term health of the system.

As all interviewees were either part of the citizens' council in Belgium or the bottom-up club formed by ex-members of the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly, both of which concern themselves with follow-up work, some bias in their responses is to be expected and must be acknowledged accordingly. Most notably, more positive responses are expected from these interviewees as they decided to stay engaged in the field, after the deliberative process phase ended. Additionally, the relatively small scope of 7 interviewees (6 participants, 1 administrative person) leads to limited generalizability of results and is a clear limitation of this study.

To produce more generalizable data, quantitative research about the experiences from participants as well as politicians and stakeholders could pose insightful future research opportunities. Here Germany could be of specific interest, as citizens' councils are increasingly often established across different governance scales, offering extensive opportunities for data collection, both quantitative and qualitative. For Austria and Belgium, the participatory processes in the respective capital cities, Vienna and Brussels, may offer valuable insight for adopting citizens' councils at the city level. Additionally, future research which focusses on participants who were left unsatisfied after their participation and are now less engaged than before would pose a great opportunity for additional studies. Although this group of frustrated ex-participants might be difficult to reach, this area of research would be especially beneficial for improving process design.

To conclude this thesis, I want to circle back to how citizen inclusion can advance and strengthen sustainable development efforts. Given the overlap of topics discussed in the two councils with key SDGs, such as SDG 13 (climate actions), SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy) and SDG 11(sustainable cities and communities) in the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly, and SDG 3 (good health and well-being), SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) in the East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue, the relevance to the field of sustainability science is clear. As the multitudes of crises are advancing, citizen inclusion can assist the design of fair and sustainable policies, urgently needed to manage the ongoing challenges of the 21st century, steering democratic societies towards a more just, stable, sustainable and citizen driven future.

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Appendix 1

List of codes from participant interviews

Themes and Codes	Definitions	Frequency
Human Agency	**Shifts in participants perceived agency to influence political and societal processes**	
Perceived Agency	Participants feelings of self-efficacy and empowerment before - during - after the participatory process	**26**
Engagement	Political or community engagement before / after the process. Concrete activities & motivation following the deliberation process	**24**
Social Circle	Influence on social circle of participants. Reactions from social circle to participation	**11**
Mental Model shifts through deliberation	**Evolution of beliefs, assumptions, and perspectives through deliberative exposure**	
Mental Models	Participants preexisting views and changes following deliberation	**39**
Polarization	Participants' views on polarization within group discussions, perceived polarization in society	**10**
Expectations	Expectations before / during / after the process and motivations to join	**14**
Discussions & Deliberation	How participants experienced the discussions during the participation process. How discussions changed over time	**15**
Moderation team & Scientific advisory team	Impact of moderation and scientific team on the deliberative process and group discussions	**20**
Perceived system responsiveness and institutional trust	**Views on the current political system, its responsiveness, transparency, and the perceived willingness from politicians to implement citizen-generated recommendations.**	
Implementation & Follow-up	Perceived handling of recommendations by authorities. Follow-up actions taken by participants	**33**

Use cases of participation & scale dependency	How participation can be supported in society on different scales	**21**
Politics & Politicians	Opinions about politicians, political landscape, participants' experiences of interacting with politics	**28**
Media presence	Media coverage of the process and how participants experienced media & public opinion	**6**
Transparency	Transparency during the process how recommendations will be handled, Transparency in feedback to recommendations	**13**

List of codes from administrative interviews

Themes and Codes	**Definitions**	
Systemic integration of participation	**Integration of a participatory process into the broader democratic system**	
Origins	Steps from G-1000 to the institutionalized permanent Citizens' Dialogue	**3**
Institutionalization	Structural characteristics of the process and its evolution over time	**13**
Social Circle	Influence of the process on social circle of participants and politicians	**2**
Barriers – Tradeoffs- Success criteria	**Criteria the administration uses to assess both success and challenges**	
Barriers & Challenges	Political, organizational and financial challenges	**8**
Success criteria - Impact assessment	How is success of participation defined	**23**
Implementation & Follow-up	Handling of recommendations after deliberation has ended	**7**
Internal & External communication	**Media coverage, changes in internal political communication and changes in politics to public communication following institutionalization**	
Politics & Politicians	Relationship of the politicians with participatory processes	**15**
Media Presence	Coverage throughout different media channels and knowledge of the public regarding the process	**5**

Appendix 2

Interview Guideline - Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly

Introductory Question

What role did you have during the process? Which working group?

Group Discussions

What was it like to discuss with other participants who may have had very different perspectives or values? How did this process develop over time? (Challenges / Tensions?)

Did you perceive the conversations as productive?

Did you change your own opinion during one of the group discussions? Did you notice changes of opinions in your group?

Changes in Perception between Process and Outcome

What did you want to achieve with your participation in the citizens' council?

Was it clear to you how your recommendations would be handled by the responsible authorities after the deliberations?

Do you think greater transparency would have had an effect on the working process? If yes, what kind?

How did the authorities handle the recommendations of the Climate Assembly compared to your initial expectations? Were the justifications satisfactory? Were there discrepancies between your original expectations and the policy outcome?

Effects after the Process, Improvements, Suggestions

In your view, did the authorities provide sufficient justification in their responses to the recommendations?

Since your participation, have you felt more encouraged or more discouraged to engage politically? Why?

Has your participation led to concrete behavioral changes in your own life and/or in your social environment, during and after the process?

Looking back on your experience: Which aspects of the process could be improved, and what worked well?

Do you think processes like the Climate Assembly could be applied more widely in other thematic areas?

Interview guideline – East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue

Introductory Questions

Which citizens' assembly did you participate in? (Which topic was discussed?)

What was your personal motivation to participate – and were your expectations met?

What motivated you to continue your engagement in the citizens' council after the citizens' assembly?

Group Discussion

What was it like to discuss with other participants who may have had very different perspectives or values? How did the discussions evolve over time? (Challenges / Tensions?)

Did the discussions unfold as you initially expected? Did you perceive the conversations as productive?

Did you change your own opinion during one of the group discussions? Did you notice changes of opinions in your group?

Changes in Perception between Process and Outcome

Did you receive any reactions from your private or professional environment regarding your participation? Did this lead to changes in attitudes/behaviors or spark discussions?

Did you learn or take away something from participating in the process? If yes, what?

Since your participation, have you felt more encouraged or more discouraged to engage politically or privately? Why?

Has your perception of politics changed since your participation in the citizens' dialogue? If yes, how?

Were you satisfied with how politics treated the recommendations? Did this have an influence on your further engagement?

How would you assess the cooperation between politics and citizens within the framework of the citizens' dialogue? Have there been changes in the last five years?

How did the authorities handle the recommendations of the citizens' assembly compared to your initial expectations? Were the justifications satisfactory? Were there discrepancies between your original expectations and the political outcome?

Effects after the Process, Improvements, Suggestions

Do you believe that the concept of a citizens' dialogue can have a positive impact on our modern society? If so how?

Interview guideline – Administrative spokesperson of the East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue

Introductory Question

Can you describe your position, your responsibilities, and your daily work within the citizens' dialogue?

Governance & Institutionalization

How did the citizens' dialogue come about, and how has it developed since its introduction?

What are the biggest challenges in maintaining the citizens' dialogue as a long-term democratic instrument? What works well what can be improved upon?

(Some deliberative processes are one-off events, while others, like the model in East Belgium, are institutionally anchored.) What do you see as the greatest advantages and challenges of institutionalization?

Public & Political Reception

How has the citizens' dialogue been received by the general public and the media in East Belgium? How about in the rest of Belgium? Is it perceived as an effective political instrument?

Have you observed changes in political attitudes (trust, engagement) in the wider population as a result of the citizens' dialogue?

How do elected representatives perceive the citizens' dialogue and how do they interact with it? Are there tensions?

Are all political parties, both governing and opposition, equally involved in the citizens' dialogue?

Comparative Reflection

Based on your experience, what advice would you give to other regions or countries considering a similar model?

Workload & Financial Impact

Has the introduction of the citizens' dialogue led to a noticeable increase in workload and financial burden for parliament?

How do you assess these costs in comparison to the results and benefits the citizens' dialogue has delivered?

With institutional trust declining, the climate crisis accelerating and political polarization on the rise, democratic societies are facing a multitude of crises in the 21st century. Participatory democratic processes such as citizens' councils may assist in facing these current challenges by fostering exchange between citizens, producing citizen-backed recommendations for policymakers and strengthening democratic system resilience. To evaluate the role of different participatory processes in the broader democratic system, this thesis investigates the potential of participatory processes to act upon deep leverage points as postulated by Donella Meadows. In a comparative case study, seven semistructured interviews were conducted, three with participants from the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly, three with participants of the East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue and one with the administrative spokesperson of the East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue. The results of the interviews were analysed through qualitative coding in MaxQDA and subsequently synthesized into three overarching categories: 'Human agency', 'Mental model shifts through deliberation' and 'System responsiveness and Institutional trust'. These three categories connect to different leverage points within democratic systems. Most notably, participatory processes show the potential to act upon usually hard-to-access deep leverage points, including: 'The mindset or paradigm out of which the system arises', 'The goals of a system', and 'The power to add, change, evolve, or self-organize system structure'. Furthermore, the effects of system structure and institutionalization on participant experiences were explored as the two processes differ substantially in their organizational structure. While the East-Belgian permanent Citizens' Dialogue is an institutionalized participatory process, the Austrian Climate Citizens' Assembly was a one-off event held in 2022. Differences in process structure mainly manifested in the handling of recommendations and general transparency throughout the process, which in turn directly influenced the perceived agency and institutional trust of participants. During the deliberation phase, system structure did not exert a significant effect on participants' experiences, as the effects of deliberative discussions on mental models of participants were mostly similar in both cases. The findings suggest that, if transparency and organizational process design are well executed, participatory processes can help to facilitate broader societal change by acting upon deep leverage points.

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