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The Consequences of Deliberative Minipublics: Systematic Overview, Conceptual Gaps, and New Directions

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From Jürgen Habermas to Barack Obama, political theorists and policy-makers alike seem to agree that to make democracy work it needs to become more ‘talk-centric’ (Chambers, 2003). Starting out as a normative ideal in the early 1980s, practitioners and scholars have since experimented extensively both in the lab and in the field with ways to materialise deliberative democracy (Smith, 2009). The most celebrated class of innovations in this respect are so-called deliberative minipublics (Elstub, 2014; Goodin & Dryzek, 2006). These are small-scale (quasi-)representative forums of lay citizens who discuss political issues. Prominent illustrations are the Canadian citizens’ assemblies on Electoral Reform, Deliberative Polls®, and the Irish Constitutional Conventions, but many more have taken place since the spread of minipublics in the 2000s (Grönlund, Bächtiger, & Setälä, 2014).

Much attention has been dedicated to the internal dynamics of these procedures (for a discussion see Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019). Previous research indicates that ordinary citizens are capable of taking part in exchanges on complex political issues once they enter into minipublics (Curato, Dryzek, Ercan, Hendriks, & Niemeyer, 2017). Yet, it remains ambiguous what can be the consequences of such innovations on what happens outside the deliberation room (Elstub, 2014). Case studies have identified a wide variety of phenomena that follow upon these deliberative events, but we still lack a comprehensive understanding of minipublics’ consequences. This article seeks to fill this gap by providing a systematic overview of how previous work has conceptualised minipublics’ consequences. This then allows us to identify problematic gaps in the literature and suggest ways forward.

We proceed as follows. We first introduce a new database (MINICON) covering 35 years of research on minipublics’ consequences (1984–2018). We then use the MINICON database to systematically review how preceding work has conceptualised, normatively justified, and explained minipublics’ consequences. We identify two main approaches: minipublics as institutions that can transform individuals (*individual consequences*), and minipublics as actors that may influence the policy-making process (*policy-making consequences*). We show that while the literature has always shown a concern with both types of consequences, it has mostly considered their proximate effects on individuals and policy-making. We then discuss the evolution of the sub-field and put forward new directions for research focused on minipublics’ more distant consequences.

The MINICON Database¹

Previous attempts to synthesise the literature have either focused on a specific subsample of minipublics (Fung, 2003; Goodin & Dryzek, 2006; List, Luskin, Fishkin, & McLean, 2013), a single country or policy area (Masuhara, Baba, & Tokai, 2016; Safaei, 2015; Street, Duszynski, Krawczyk, & Braunack-Mayer, 2014), or a specific type of consequence (Gastil, 2018; Michels, 2011). This has impaired general assessments of minipublics' consequences on the functioning of large-scale political systems. To address this limitation, we constructed a *comprehensive* and *systematic* database on minipublic research (MINICON). MINICON includes English-language publications that appeared before 2019 and that deal with minipublics. Minipublics are forums that involve structured discussion among unorganised lay citizens and attempt to make 'some claim to representativeness of the public at large' (Goodin & Dryzek, 2006, p. 221) by engaging citizens through a process of random selection and/or targeted recruitment.

We based MINICON on a screening of 1,455 publications retrieved via the following search in the Scopus database:

'minipublic*' OR 'mini-public*' OR 'mini-populus' OR 'minipopulus'
OR 'deliberative poll*' OR 'planning cell*' OR 'citizen* jur*' OR
'citizen* assembl*' OR 'citizen* panel*' OR 'issue* forum*' OR
'twenty-first century town meeting*' OR ('consensus conference*' AND
'deliberat*').

These search terms correspond to classic examples of minipublics featuring in the most widely cited reviews and edited volumes on the topic (Grönlund et al., 2014). We excluded publications either because they did not meet technical criteria (i.e. duplicates, non-English, non-peer-reviewed, no access) or our definition of a minipublic. This reduced the database to 394 publications. The Online Appendix provides further details on the selection of publications, coding of variables, and reliability.

This article focuses on the 212 publications included in MINICON that deal specifically with minipublics' consequences, broadly understood as anything resulting from the mini-public event. We identify two main types of minipublic consequences: consequences on *individuals* and consequences on the *policy-making* process. For each publication, we coded whether it considered one or both of these two types of consequences. We also coded several additional variables to provide more detailed insights. We introduce all variables in the following sections (see also the Online Appendix), after a brief description of the main trends in the data.

In terms of coverage, MINICON covers 35 years of research, the oldest publication dating from 1984 (Renn, Stegelmann, Albrecht, Kotte, & Peters, 1984). The publications in MINICON reach well beyond mainstream political science journals, including publications in journals like *Social Science and Medicine* and *BMC Public Health*. The publications also deal with cases other than famous (positive) examples often studied in political science, such as the Irish citizens' assemblies or the Citizens' Initiative Review in Oregon. Examples

include a citizens' reference panel on health technology assessment (Abelson, Bombard, Gauvin, Simeonov, & Boesveld, 2013) and citizen panels on climate-compatible energy supply (Hörning, 1999).

Figure 1 displays the publication trend over time and suggests that minipublic research only really picked up pace in the mid-1990s. The early literature on minipublics introduced several classic formats such as the Deliberative Poll® and the planning cell (*Planungszelle*). The main purpose of these publications was to describe how these innovations work and could address the malfunctioning of mass democracy. Minipublics' consequences on the wider political system thus were already a key concern in these initial works. Despite a slight drop in recent years, research on minipublics' consequences has clearly increased: from an average of 1.7 publications per year in the 1990s to 14.1 in the 2010–2018 period.

Both of the two main types of consequences are receiving increased attention (Figure 1). Although slightly more publications have considered individual consequences (N = 154), publications that mention policy-making consequences have become more common (N = 131). In fact, a substantial part of the work on consequences combines the two approaches (N = 73). Nevertheless, the general trends displayed in Figure 1 to some degree mask that some types of consequences have received little empirical attention. We tease out the details of these empirical studies in the next sections.

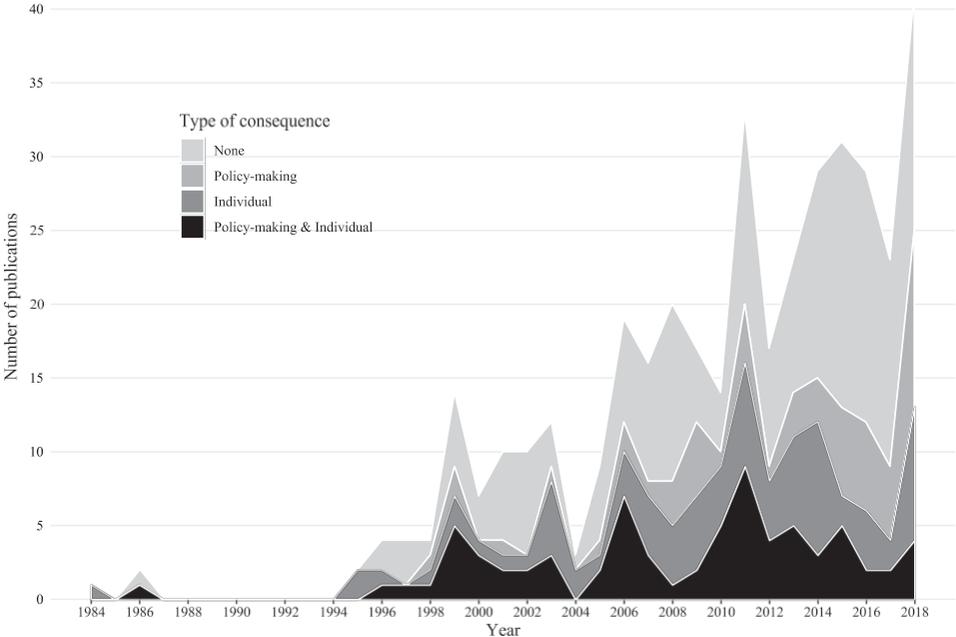


Figure 1. Publications on minipublics by types of consequences (1984–2018).

Individual Consequences

Figure 2 shows the extent to which empirical research has considered the consequences of minipublics on individuals. Individual consequences include changes in how individuals perceive and evaluate the world (*Attitude*); the extent to which they are able to articulate their ideas and pursue their objectives (*Capabilities*); and/or the ways in which they engage (or not) in various activities (*Behavior*). We categorised individuals into three groups: (1) citizens who participate in the minipublic (*Participating citizens*); (2) citizens who do not participate in the minipublic (*Non-participating citizens*); and (3) elites such as politicians, public servants, journalists, or other professionals (*Elites*).

Most empirical research on individual consequences focuses on the transformation of participating citizens (Figure 2). The main premises behind this line of research is that a minipublic's participants should become more knowledgeable on the issue(s) discussed and, hence, reach more considered opinions (Fishkin, 2009). Others add that minipublics should yield benefits associated with political participation more broadly, such as an enhanced sense of political efficacy and improved civic skills. In the end, then, minipublics should produce 'better citizens' (Andersen & Hansen, 2007; Fournier, van de Kolk, Carty, Blais, & Rose, 2011; Grönlund, Setälä, & Herne, 2010; Michels, 2011).

In this light, most empirical studies examine to what extent participation changes citizens' attitudes. For instance, in their study of the *We the Citizens* initiative in Ireland, Farrell, O'Malley, and Suiter (2013) examine to what degree participants of the respective citizens' assembly shifted their opinions on the economic and political issues they discussed compared to various control groups. Studies of other attitudinal effects on participants, such as changes in political interest or citizens' sense of collective identity, remain less common (Di Mauro & Fiket, 2017; Fournier et al., 2011).

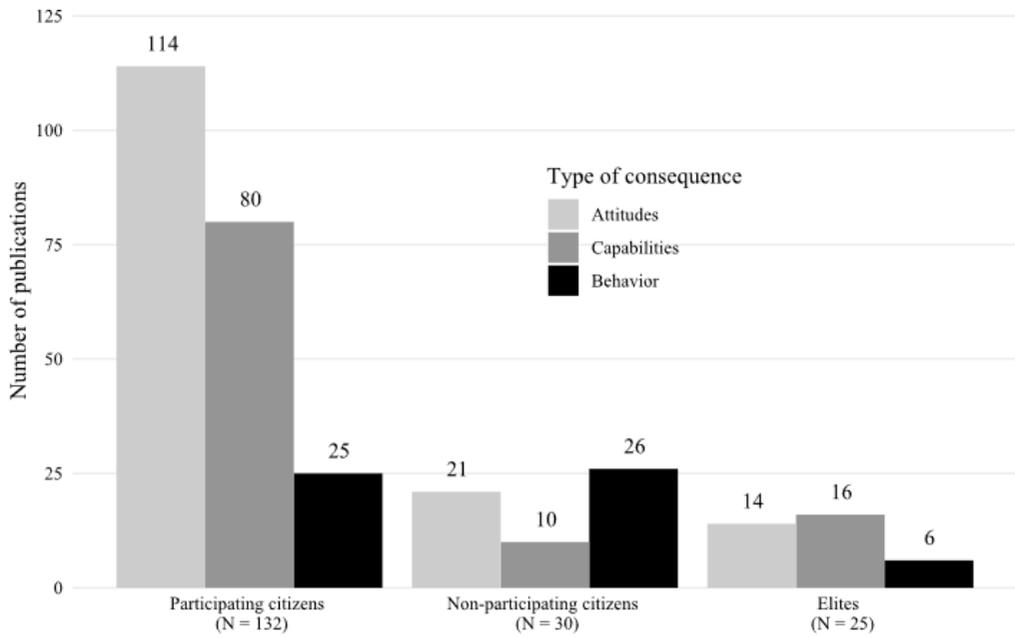


Figure 2. Empirical studies of minipublics' individual consequences.

Changes in participants' ability to articulate their ideas and pursue their objectives (*Capabilities* in Figure 2) have so far largely remained constrained to studies of knowledge gains and feelings of internal political efficacy. The literature remains largely silent on minipublics' effects on participants' skills (exceptions include Einsiedle & Eastlick, 2000; Font & Blanco, 2007). The behavioural consequences of participation (*Behavior* in Figure 2) are equally underexplored. Only a few studies have looked at effects on individuals' voting behaviour or, for example, their engagement in political talk and other civic activities (e.g. Einsiedle & Eastlick, 2000; Gastil, 2018; Mikami, 2015).

The literature has also looked beyond a minipublic's participants. In normative work, some maintain that minipublics should improve policy-makers' and other professionals' understanding of and responsiveness to citizens' wants and needs (Fishkin, 2018). Others argue that they should affect lay citizens that do not participate, either by providing them with decision-making 'shortcuts' (Gastil, 2014) or 'cues' (Mackenzie & Warren, 2012), or, instead, by stimulating wider 'discursive engagement' (Niemeyer, 2011), that is, further reflection and discussion among individuals in the wider political system. In contrast to this lively normative debate, empirical research on both *elites* and *non-participating citizens* remains limited. As displayed in Figure 2, few studies offer empirical evidence for minipublics' effects on these groups of individuals, although recently several elaborate survey experiments have been conducted on the attitudes of non-participating citizens (Boulianne, 2018; Ingham & Levin, 2018). Overall, then, research on individuals has focused predominantly on those closest to the minipublic (i.e. participating citizens) and has paid less attention to outsiders (i.e. non-participating citizens and elites). Substantively, it has focused mostly on opinion and knowledge changes and less so on consequences for individuals' skills and behaviour.

Policy-Making Consequences

A proliferation of case-specific analyses has led to a wide variety of understandings of how minipublics may affect policy-making, defined as the broad process of collective decision-making that goes from agenda-setting in the public sphere to policy evaluation (Howlett & Giest, 2013). We propose to structure the literature by discerning three types of policy-making consequences: to what extent policies reflect a minipublic's recommendations (*Congruence with decisions*); to what degree the minipublic and its recommendations are considered in the policy-making process before decisions are made (*Consideration*); and how much the minipublic affects the functioning of the political system itself (*Structural transformation*). Figure 3 shows that most empirical attention so far has been paid to the congruence of minipublics' recommendations with decisions (71 publications) and their consideration in the policy-making process (87 publications).

First, congruence with decisions is the most intuitive way to study policy-making consequences. It deals with the decision stage of the policy-making process (Howlett & Giest, 2013). Some have supported it by the normative argument that

because minipublics are supposed to embody an inclusive and deliberative ‘voice of the people’ their recommendations should directly translate into binding decisions (Fishkin, 2009). Others criticise this approach for bypassing the public. They argue that this means giving up on mass democracy (Lafont, 2015) and point out that minipublics lack formal accountability to other citizens (Parkinson, 2006). Examples of empirical studies include Hüller (2010) study of minipublics held by the European Commission and subsequent decisions or the study of a deliberative poll as an explanatory factor of the phase-out of nuclear power by the Japanese government after the Fukushima disaster (Watanabe, 2016).

Second, other studies provide empirical evidence for the *consideration* of minipublics in the policy-making process (87 in total). This is connected to the agenda-setting phase of the policy-making process (Howlett & Giest, 2013). 60 publications focus on consideration in the public sphere (e.g. NGOs, protest, media) and 75 address consideration in empowered institutions (e.g. legislatures or governmental agencies) (Cobb & Elder, 1983). Especially research on the former corresponds to an increasingly popular normative argument that minipublics should contribute in a more indirect way to policy-making (Curato & Böker, 2016; Felicetti, Niemeyer, & Curato, 2016; Fishkin, 2018). For example, minipublics are imagined to synthesise and disseminate arguments into the broader public sphere in order to foster the quality of deliberation at a systemic level. In a similar way, they could prepare the questions of a referendum and inform citizens before they cast their votes, like in the Irish cases (Setälä, 2011).

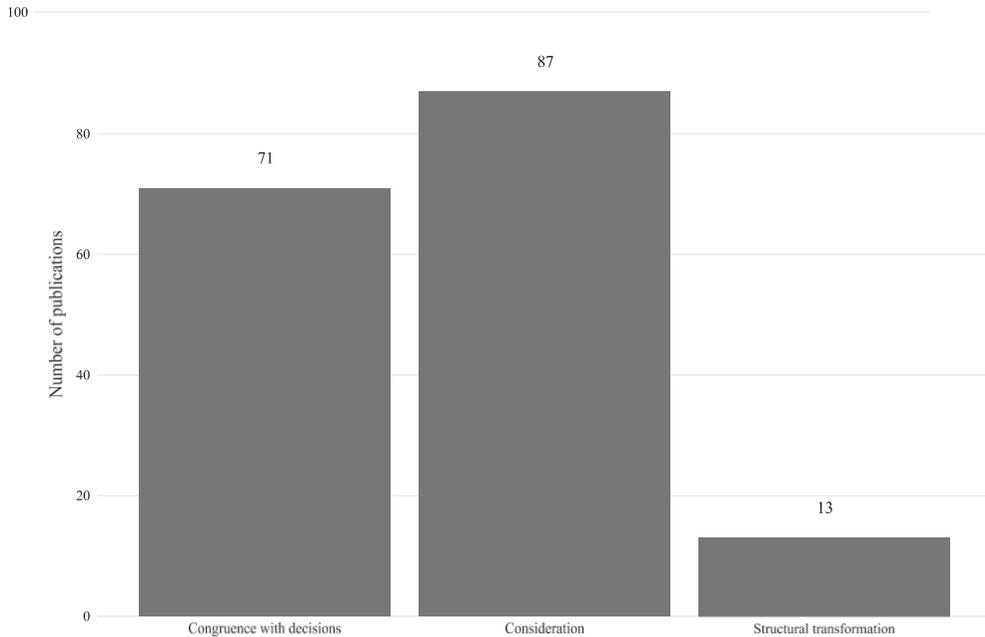


Figure 3. Empirical studies of minipublics' policy-making consequences.

As an example of an empirical study, Hendriks, Dryzek, and Hunold (2007) show how a minipublic on genetic diagnostics did not leave any clear traces on collective decisions. Nevertheless, the minipublic succeeded to attract some media attention. It therefore would be inaccurate to conclude that the minipublic did *not at all* affect the policy-making process broadly conceived. This illustrates how we may underplay the consequences minipublics have on the policy-making process when we only consider final decisions.

Third, only 13 publications look at *structural transformations* to the policy-making process effected by minipublics. This final approach to policy-making consequences requires one to adopt a broader scope of analysis and move beyond short-term effects on policy considerations and decisions (Abelson et al., 2013). To illustrate, in their study of a Canadian public consultation including citizens' juries on therapeutic transplantation from animals to humans, Jones and Einsiedel (2011) report how the event contributed to the transformation of the policy culture in the Canadian public health sector. Following this first experience, new public consultation standards were implemented. By organising a deliberative event, the administration acquired new practices and a way of working that they then also adopted in other policy areas. This means that deliberative minipublics could have a more indirect impact on the functioning of the political system itself, even if their influence on policy considerations or decisions is, at first glance, absent. We highlight the importance to consider this type of consequence in the final section.

Discussion: Toward a Broader Understanding of Consequences

Starting as theoretical imaginations, minipublics by now have been extensively tested in practice and subjected to academic scrutiny. Based on the new MINICON database spanning 35 years of minipublic research, we have tried to provide a comprehensive and structured overview of research on minipublics' consequences. It reveals the vitality of scholarly work on these democratic innovations. Research on individual consequences concentrates on changes in opinions and knowledge among minipublic participants. Research on policy-making consequences focuses on the questions to what extent a minipublic is considered in the policy-making process and whether decision makers directly implement its recommendations. As summarised in Table 1, most research has concentrated on minipublics' *proximate* consequences (the upper quadrants of Table 1), while their more *distant* consequences (the lower quadrants) remain underexplored. Two reasons can account for this focus on *proximate* consequences.

The first is theoretical. Minipublics initially functioned as laboratories to show that the ideal of a deliberative democracy could gain traction in practice. Studies of minipublics sought to provide evidence for several key premises in deliberative theory, most notably that lay citizens are able to deliberate about complex political issues and develop more considered preferences through deliberation (for a discussion see Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019). Especially in early work, researchers were therefore mainly concerned with the consequences they could observe immediately after the event. The second reason is methodological. Conducting research on proximate consequences is easier to manage. Researchers can distribute questionnaires to the participants at the end of the process and rely on official case reports that describe what the public authorities did directly after the reception of the recommendations. Gathering information about distant consequences is more difficult, because it requires collecting empirical material far away from the deliberation room.

Table 1. Typical examples of proximate and distant consequences.

	Individual	Policy-making
Proximate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in participants’ opinions and knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consideration of recommendations in the media or legislature • Congruence of recommendations and policy decisions
Distant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in skills and behaviour • Effects on non-participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structural transformation of the policy-making process

Despite these methodological difficulties, we argue that the lower quadrants of Table 1 deserve more attention. By now, minipublics’ advocates do not only view them as useful laboratories anymore, but consider them also as important practical tools for deep democratic renewal (Curato & Böker, 2016). These innovations are supposed to open up the policy – making process to a variety of actors and foster participation and deliberation among lay citizens, including those that do not participate in the deliberative forum. In order to analyze to what degree such promises are fulfilled in practice, future empirical research should address these *distant consequences*. Regarding individual citizens, important questions include ‘To what extent can minipublics truly produce better citizens?’ and ‘To what extent can they stimulate deliberation among citizens that do not participate?’ Several qualitative studies in our review have addressed these questions by means of semi-structured follow-up interviews, allowing the researcher to gain a detailed picture of (non-)participants’ changes in behaviour after the respective minipublic (Hall, Wilson, & Newman, 2011; Mikami, 2015). With regard to the policy-making process, it will be important to address the question raised by sceptics to what degree minipublics function as ‘window-dressing strategies’ that do not affect the involvement of ordinary citizens in the policy-making process (Pateman, 2012). The study by Jones and Einsiedel (2011) forms a useful point of reference. Drawing on interviews with stakeholders a decade after six citizens’ juries, they show how minipublics can lead to structural changes to the policy-making process.

In short, while broadening the scope of consequences by considering more distant effects represents a methodological and theoretical challenge, it is the only way to discover to what extent minipublics can contribute to a renewal of currently disaffected democracies.

Note

1. The full database can be accessed at <https://osf.io/qn5sm/>.

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