



Political embedding of climate assemblies. How effective strategies for policy impact depend on context

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ABSTRACT

Scholars and practitioners discuss how to increase the policy impact of climate assemblies (CAs) noting that their proposals tend to be more ambitious than government policy. CAs comprise groups of randomly selected citizens (minipublics) who deliberate on climate policy issues. We argue for greater focus on how political actors strategically use CAs and suggest welcoming some of this strategic use. We propose that CAs, and minipublics more generally, need *political embedding*. That means, minipublic designers should first consider how political actors will likely interact with a process given their interests and political context, and subsequently make deliberate use of strategies to foster objectives like policy impact. Using a thought experiment, we then demonstrate that the effectiveness of such political embedding strategies to promote CAs' policy impact depends on political context. Our analysis shows that the impacts of mass publicity, commissioning actors, inclusion of perspectives, and strategic framings vary with the constellation of interests of climate political actors. This exercise challenges sweeping statements about optimal CA and minipublic design, contributing to more realistic theorizing. Considering political embeddedness will help democratic reformers assess potential models for minipublic institutionalization more accurately.

1. Introduction

Deliberative minipublics on climate change—citizen participation methods based on random selection of participants and intense deliberation—have become increasingly popular. In the past few years and in Europe alone, national governments and NGOs have invested millions of euros in these so-called climate assemblies (CAs) (KNOCA, n.d). Many scientists and practitioners hope that CAs can drive progressive climate policy partly because participants do not face the same institutional constraints as politicians, such as concerns about re-election and career progression (e.g., Willis et al., 2022).

Researchers have studied the policy impact of CAs (Wells et al., 2021; Weber, 2023; Hoffmann, 2023), and the factors moderating their impacts (e.g., Elstub et al., 2021a; Torney, 2021), aiming to design more effective processes in the future. However, past research has been criticized for formulating overly simplistic theories (Boswell et al., 2022). Context variables have received little systematic attention, particularly those describing the political context (but see Ainscough and Willis, 2024; Lewis et al., 2023; Setälä 2021). Scholars rarely discuss what

different constellations of actors and their political agendas mean for the prospects of CAs. This is striking, considering that it is often argued in quite a straightforward manner that CAs can have *political effects* like breaking deadlocks or reducing influences of lobby groups (Willis et al., 2022). This neglect of political agendas and context might lead to simplistic beliefs about the (in)effectiveness of CA designs.

Our aim is to build more nuanced and useful scientific theory explaining the (lack of) policy impact of CAs, and minipublics more generally, ultimately contributing to more effective and politically embedded processes in the future. We do so by demonstrating how the effectiveness of strategies to promote CA policy impact depends on political context using a thought experiment. Next to academic scholars, this paper speaks to all practitioners who are, in some way, involved in minipublic and CA design and framing. These can include civil servants, politicians, professional service providers, civil society representatives, and academics (Elstub and Escobar, 2019, Section III; Pfeffer forthcoming 2025).

After sketching the extant literature on minipublic policy impact (Section 2.1), we conclude that a strategic political usage of minipublics

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is a ubiquitous fact and can even be desirable (Section 2.2). We then argue for strategic political embedding of CAs (Section 2.3). Political embedding means that minipublic designers first consider how political actors will likely interact with a process given their interests and political context, and subsequently make deliberate use of strategies to foster their objectives. In this paper, we focus on political embedding of CAs to enhance policy impact – specifically progressive climate policy impacts.¹ Hence, the paper is written from the perspective of those aiming for progressive climate policy to address the dangerous risks climate change poses to societies (Lenton et al., 2019; Magnan et al., 2021; Rising et al., 2022). (Despite this instrumental framing, our analysis promises insights for minipublics independent of policy substance – see discussion.)

In Section 3, we introduce our analytical approach, main concepts, and assumptions. Our thought experiment in Section 4 demonstrates how effective strategies for promoting CA policy impact vary across different climate political contexts. We focus on four strategies of political embedding related to minipublic design and communication: initiation and commissioning, inclusion of perspectives, strategic framing, and publicity. Our analysis challenges prevailing, overly general statements about the determinants of minipublic policy impact. For example, while mass public attention might be necessary for policy impact in one context, its effects could be unclear in another. We raise questions about impact mechanisms yet unaddressed in extant theory.

2. Minipublic impact, political usage, and political embedding

Deliberative minipublics convene representatively selected groups of ordinary citizens discussing political issues. They are provided with balanced information, may hear experts and stakeholders, and ultimately decide upon a collective outcome such as recommendations (Smith and Ryan, 2014). To date, most minipublics have an advisory role to elected officials, and some have been connected to public referendums (Setälä 2021). In this paper we focus our analysis on advisory minipublics. Citizens' assemblies are one form of minipublics characterized by a relatively large number of participants (typically about 80–160) and long deliberation times spreading several weeks (Reuchamps et al., 2023). Climate assemblies (CAs) are citizens assemblies on climate-related issues (Boswell et al., 2022). Here, we sketch the state of the art of research on minipublics more generally before diving into a thought experiment within a climate political context.

2.1. Policy impact and its determinants

There is little robust and systematic knowledge about the policy impact of minipublics and CAs (Jacquet and van der Does, 2021; Jacquet et al., 2023). Present evidence suggests that they can sometimes have direct impact on policymaking, that the extent varies between cases but is generally rather low, and mostly limited to supporting existing government plans—e.g., by providing momentum or reducing policymakers' uncertainty (Weber, 2023; Hoffmann, 2023; Vrydagh and Caluwaerts, 2020; Wells et al., 2021). Stronger policy impacts, such as breaking deadlocks, shifting positions or introducing innovative ideas, appear exceptional (Weber, 2023; Vrydagh and Caluwaerts, 2020). In

¹ As scholars concerned with democracy and the climate crisis, we believe a note on normativity is due. We explicitly treat social action to mitigate and adapt to climate change as normatively desirable, while acknowledging that there will always remain some tension with the value of open-endedness in democratic processes. We do not think any 'progressive climate policy' is necessarily desirable. Some policies may be seen as unfair, ineffective, illegitimate, and so on. We hope that good democratic processes will favor progressive climate policies of higher intersubjective value over those of lower value. In this paper, we treat progressive climate policy as generally desirable, for simplicity.

this paper, we focus on direct impacts on policymaking, although other impacts should also be considered when assessing the overall value of minipublics (e.g., discursive, or democratic impacts) (e.g., Curato and Böker, 2016; Jacquet and van der Does, 2020).

Limited evidence suggests several determinants of impact for minipublic proposals, which can be categorized into context, design, and proposal factors. Font et al. (2018) found that proposal and context variables were the strongest predictors of the impact of participatory processes, including minipublics. Predictors include the degree to which a proposal aligns with policymakers' previous positions and existing policy, the economic costs associated with implementation, and the quality dimensions of proposals, such as their usefulness for policymakers (Weber, 2023; Vrydagh and Caluwaerts, 2020; Wells et al., 2021; Font et al., 2018). Although less systematically tested, political culture, particularly perceptions of the legitimacy of minipublics, is expected to moderate their policymaking impacts (e.g., Dryzek and Tucker, 2008).

Minipublic designs have been argued to affect policymaking impact, because they can influence the nature and quality of proposals, perceived minipublic legitimacy, minipublic awareness and relevance among policymakers, and the political dynamics surrounding it (e.g., Elstub et al., 2021a). Internal dimensions describe how deliberations in minipublics are organized – e.g., participant selection, agenda framing and scope, information provision, or deliberation times (Boswell et al., 2022). External design dimensions refer to the multiple ways in which minipublics are connected to conventional policymaking structures and processes—e.g., their commissioning body, purpose framing, timing, or follow-up. Design, particularly external dimensions, is related but not equal to our concept of political embedding (Section 2.3).

2.2. Political usage of minipublics

In this paper, we focus on how political actors strategically interact with minipublics. It has been acknowledged that minipublics operate within a system fueled by political interests and power struggles, and that impact primarily hinges on them (e.g., Parkinson, 2006). However, this is rarely discussed focally in scientific publications (but see Courant, 2022; Lewis et al., 2023; Hendriks, 2006, 2009).

While scholars adopting a deliberative democracy lens on minipublics tend to be suspicious of political actors' interests and strategic actions (Hendriks, 2009), we argue that it is important to embrace political usage of minipublics. Minipublics have traditionally been viewed as an antidote to strategic actions in electoral democracies. Their value is often portrayed as allowing political communication shielded from politics. Hence, political uses of minipublics are seen as reprehensible, and co-optation is scented whenever political actors are closely coupled to a process (Hendriks, 2016). Against this background, we argue that deliberative scholars ought to embrace political usage of minipublics, not only because it is a ubiquitous fact, but also because it is desirable (also Hendriks, 2009). If political actors do not attempt to make strategic use of a minipublic, it is probably because they believe the process is politically irrelevant, which in turn makes it politically irrelevant, and unlikely to have any notable systemic effects. We think this is undesirable.

For conceptual clarity, *political usage* can entail but is not equal to co-optation or manipulation. While political usage of minipublics refers to all strategic action by an actor toward specific political goals, co-optation or manipulation are specific strategic actions to steer minipublic deliberations and their outcomes to an illegitimate degree. For illustration, consider two cases of political usage that are *not* known to have been manipulated: In the frequently cited Irish success case, political actors strategically used a minipublic to address a contentious abortion issue (Farrell and Suiter, 2019). In Berlin, a minister of the Green party used a climate assembly to pressure coalition partners toward more progressive climate policy, partly through making strongly worded promises to 'comply or explain' (Weber, 2023). Political usage is often exercised through minipublic design and communication strategies constructing

the role and political relevance of a process. We contend that, from a democratic reformers' perspective, the question ought not be how to prevent political usage of minipublics, but how to enable political usage that effectively enhances system performance while limiting the risk of undue manipulation and co-option (cf. [Batory and Svensson, 2019](#)).

While we endorse political usage of minipublics, extant scholarship cautions us that enthusiastic attempts to democratization and radical change often get co-opted by political elites, resulting in mere window-dressing without meaningful disruption of power imbalances, dominant worldviews, and entrenched policy practices ([Bua and Bussu, 2023](#); [Boswell, 2016](#); [Blue, 2015](#); [Blue and Dale, 2020](#); [Fung and Wright, 2003](#); [Elstub and Khoban, 2023](#)). Commissioners of participation often exert strong influence over processes, e.g., by setting and framing agendas and selecting experts and information ([Pfeffer, 2024](#)). Aware of this, organizers of recent European CAs have experimented with governance structures by varying which actors are involved in agenda-setting, and with how much power ([Pfeffer forthcoming, 2025](#)). Moreover, once policy proposals enter traditional politics, they are often watered-down, cherry-picked, or re-interpreted during decision-making and implementation ([Font et al., 2018](#); [Boswell, 2016](#); [Galván Labrador and Zografos, 2023](#)). Hence, political embedding must consider follow-up mechanisms fostering accountability and scrutiny, to countervail power asymmetries favoring well-organized lobby interests later in the policy process ([Boswell, 2016](#); [Galván Labrador and Zografos, 2023](#); [Fung and Wright, 2003](#)).

2.3. Political embedding of minipublics

The view that political usage of minipublics can both enhance and undermine their value is related to the concept of embeddedness in participatory governance ([Bussu et al., 2022](#); [Ainscough and Willis, 2024](#); also see 'coupling', [Hendriks, 2016](#)). For [Bussu et al. \(2022\)](#), "embeddedness [...] provides a means for assessing which forms of [formal and informal] institutionalization are desirable and productive" (p. 136). The authors differentiate between a temporal, spatial, and practice dimension to capture varieties regarding when, where, and how participation processes are connected to actors and institutions in political systems and governance contexts. We propose to add the dimension of political embeddedness.

Adopting a *political embeddedness* perspective means analyzing how political actors interact with participatory processes considering their motivations, strategies, and (power) relationships within a political context, and assessing the resulting effects (like [Hendriks, 2006](#)). The act of *political embedding* refers to the deliberate use of strategies to foster the objectives of a participatory process considering how political actors will likely interact with the process in a given context. Such strategies of political embedding can entail design choices, communication approaches, and other activities. While political embedding overlaps with minipublic design, it is not identical; political embedding emphasizes the strategic consideration of political actors' motivations and anticipated behaviors and includes activities beyond design. In this paper, we focus on the political embedding of CAs to achieve the objective of policy impact.

Political embedding of minipublics and CAs requires an understanding of how such processes affect dynamics between political actors, i.e. their political impact mechanisms. Advocates of minipublics have made bold claims about their potential to break political deadlocks, limit the influence of the fossil fuel lobby, enhance public support for policy change, or challenge governments ([Willis et al., 2022](#); [Hammond, 2020](#); [Howarth et al., 2020](#)). However, these claims (or hypotheses) are often backed by little substantial empirical evidence. Previous research has not thoroughly theorized the contexts in which these mechanisms are plausible or identified the relevant actors and their political usage of the minipublic as implied in the causal mechanisms. Developing these theoretical aspects is crucial because they inform about the impacts we can (not) expect from minipublics and CAs in different contexts, the

challenges they may face, and the strategies of political embedding that might address these challenges.

In sum, advocates posit minipublics' potential for strong policy-making impacts through political mechanisms, but current evidence suggests such impacts have been exceptional. They depend on political interests with political actors making strategic use of minipublics, e.g., through design and communication strategies. We argue that political embedding is needed to enhance minipublics' policymaking impact. Surprisingly, the ways in which political contexts—constellations of actor interests, strategies, and relationships—affect the policy impact of national- or state-level minipublics is understudied.

Hence, we are interested in i) how the political context of minipublics determines which political impact mechanisms are plausible and thus ii) which strategies of political embedding are effective to enhance policy impacts ([Fig. 1](#)). We focus on contexts of climate policy and CAs, as they have attracted particular scientific and societal attention and form the center of this special issue. Therefore, we ask: *How does the political context of Climate Assemblies moderate the effectiveness of political embedding strategies to enhance impacts on climate policy?*

3. Analytical approach

3.1. Thought experiment

To address our research question, we conduct a thought experiment. Thought experiments are a well-accepted analytical tool in various scientific fields ranging from physics to political theory ([Stuart et al., 2018](#); [Brownlee and Stemplowska, 2017](#)). As [Brownlee and Stemplowska](#) note,

"they can (1) expose a contradiction, (2) undermine a key premise, (3) reveal a conflation of concepts or principles, or (4) highlight the counterintuitive implications of an argument. In positive terms, they can (1) demonstrate the consistency or coherence of a set of principles/concepts, (2) highlight congruities and similarities between different claims, (3) reveal the scope of the application of a given principle, and (4) bring forth intuitions not previously considered, amongst other things." The authors define a thought experiment as "a multi-step process that involves (1) the mental visualization of some specific scenario for the purpose of (2) answering a further, more general [...] question about reality" ([Brownlee and Stemplowska, 2017](#), p. 25).

For our analysis in [Section 4](#), we proceed as follows: Operationalizing political context, we first introduce four different scenarios of climate politics, each highlighting an ideal typical political barrier to progressive climate policy ([Fig. 2](#)). For each context scenario, we then examine the plausibility of several political impact mechanisms ([Table 1](#)) and the effects of a selection of political embedding strategies on CA policy impact. Finally, we compare how the effects of political embedding strategies differ across political contexts, i.e., how some strategies are promising in one political context but not another ([Table 2](#)). Before we begin this thought-experimental analysis, we outline our key concepts and assumptions.

3.2. Concepts and assumptions

(Progressive) impact on climate policy is a key objective of many CA practitioners ([Averchenkova and Ghilan, 2023](#)) and serves as our dependent variable. Here, progressive climate policy impacts broadly refers to collective political decisions (partly) caused by a CA that are more ambitious than existing government policy. Progressive climate policy impact implies that CA proposals are both more ambitious than government policy and have impact on policy decisions. In our scenarios, we assume the first condition is given—i.e. that CAs will produce ambitious recommendations on climate issues, and political actors anticipate this. On average, this seems to be an appropriate assumption

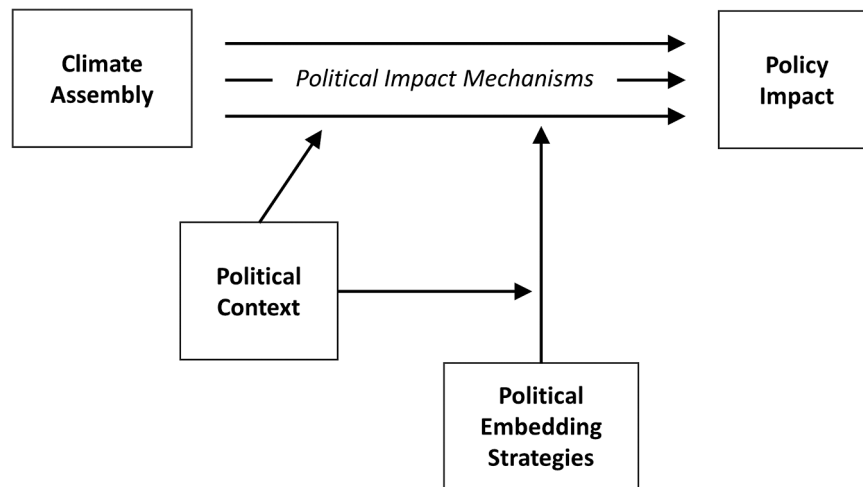


Fig. 1. Analytical Perspective.

(Weber, 2023; Hoffmann, 2023; Lage et al., 2023), although future research should revisit this and investigate scope conditions. Hence, we assume that the stronger the impact of CAs on public policy decisions, the more progressive climate policy will become. We therefore assume that political actors supporting progressive climate policy change aim at enhancing CA policy impact, and vice versa.

Context, for us and in the most general sense, refers to variables that constitute the main barriers to policy change in a given policy subsystem on a given issue (Pfeffer, 2024). These can include political barriers like lacking government motivation, conflict within government, influential lobby interests, lack of voter support and government wariness of public resistance, but also non-political barriers such as limited administrative capacities, bureaucratic inefficiencies, limited knowledge, lack of coordination, and so on (also see Jordan et al., 2022). Given the importance of political will for CA policy impact (Section 2.1), we focus on the politics dimension of context as the focal interest of this paper. We operationalize this political context through scenarios in Section 4.

Political impact mechanisms refer to models hypothesizing a causal chain that explains how minipublics lead to policy impact—progressive climate policy change—by altering the strategic behavior of relevant political actors. Hence we exclude mechanisms that only focus on minipublics' internal processes and outputs, such as the argument that CAs foster progressive climate policy because they may be more rational, just, or future-regarding than conventional political actors (e.g., MacKenzie and Caluwaerts, 2021). Such mechanisms do not explain how minipublic outputs become collective political decisions. We derived a list of political impact mechanisms from the literature on deliberative minipublics and classic dynamics in public policy processes (e.g., Goodin and Dryzek, 2006; Dryzek et al., 2019; Beauvais and Warren, 2019; Howarth et al., 2020; Weible and Sabatier, 2018) but formulate them in more abstract terms to increase their analytical value and transferability (Table 1). We also spell out more detailed sub-mechanisms as falsifiable hypotheses to invite future empirical scrutiny as many mechanisms lack testing (Ryan, 2023).

Minipublics may lead to policy change by pressuring and *challenging those in power* to alter their policy positions (e.g., Hammond, 2020), for example by demanding more ambitious climate policy like a ban on domestic flights in France (CCC, 2021, pp. 252–262) or a speed limit on highways in Germany (Bürgererrat Klima 2021, p. 48). Minipublics might facilitate policy decisions by *reconciling conflicts* (or breaking deadlocks) (e.g., Setälä 2017), for example by proposing new solutions that are more acceptable to conflicting parties due to their substance, or by providing actors with an opportunity to avoid losing face. Minipublics may foster policy change by *constraining the power of opponents* to change (e.g., Willis et al., 2022), for example by reducing the direct influence of

fossil fuel lobby interests or limiting oppositional groups' capacity and/or willingness to mobilize, be they elected or non-elected. It may, for instance, be less easy to mobilize against “what citizens want” compared to “what government dictates”. It may also be less convincing for opponents to mobilize if they were somehow included in the process. Minipublics may facilitate policy change by *empowering supporters* of change, for example by providing them with political resources to legitimize their decisions and persuade others, or by reducing their uncertainties over how their policy decisions will be received in public (Goodin and Dryzek, 2006; Howarth et al., 2020). Finally, minipublics may facilitate policy change by *persuading the public*, for example by altering public discourses, changing public attitudes, or limiting the risk of public backlashes (Niemeyer et al., 2018; Warren and Gastil, 2015) – although there is conflicting evidence on whether people change their attitudes based on minipublic information (cf. Ingham and Levin 2018a, 2018b; Már and Gastil, 2021; Gastil et al., 2023; Boulianne, 2018; Esaïsson et al., 2016). Our analysis will demonstrate that some mechanisms can occur simultaneously and may interact synergistically, while others interact in an antagonistic way.

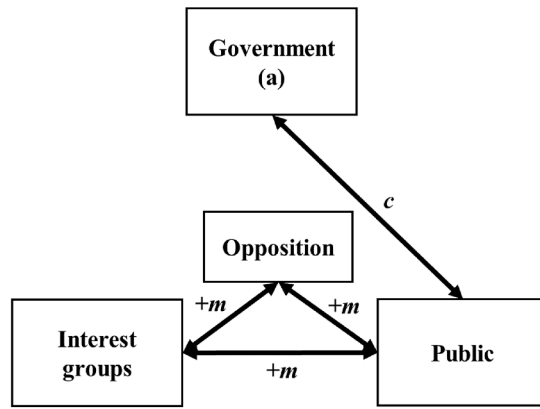
Political embedding, in our analysis, refers to the deliberate use of strategies to enhance policy impact of a CA considering how political actors will likely interact with the process in a given context. Such strategies can entail deliberate choices along numerous dimensions of minipublic design and communication (see Smith, 2022; Curato et al., 2021a for lists of design features). To operationalize political embedding in our thought experiment, we focus on four dimensions: *initiation and commissioning, inclusion of perspectives, strategic framing, and publicity*. While we consider these dimensions important, we do not claim they have the most explanatory power for policy impact. Our goal is to show how effective strategies for policy impact depend on context, using these dimensions as examples. We will also discuss design dimensions that may not depend on context later (Section 4.3).

- **Initiation and commissioning** has been argued to affect policy impact (Hoffmann, 2023; Pfeffer forthcoming, 2025). Government commissioning may increase policy impact compared to parliament, or civil society commissioning (Hoffmann, 2023), but commissioner constellations are complex (Boswell et al., 2022). Commissioning by single ministries has been argued to reduce policy impact because other affected ministries were not integrated (Weber, 2023).
- **Inclusion of perspectives** refers to the selection of information provided to minipublics (Curato et al., 2021b) but also to whether and how different actors are integrated in the process (cf. Hendriks, 2006). Integration can range from merely being informed to providing testimony, being involved in process governance and even

A. Overcoming government hesitance

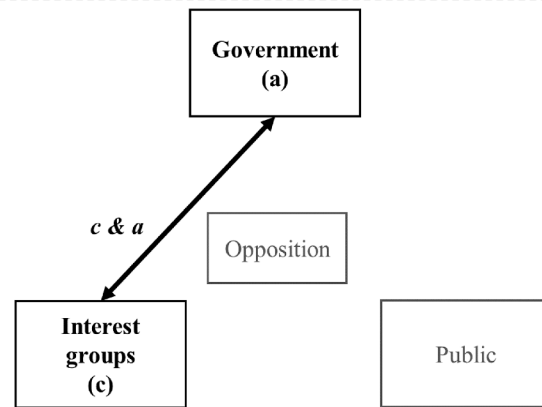
A unitary government agrees that the consumption of animal-based products needs to be reduced significantly to decrease animal-based greenhouse gas emissions.

However, the government is worried that political measures will face strong public resistance and will be exploited by the opposition resulting in a major loss of voter support. Moreover, the well-organized farmers' association has signaled to mobilize against any major policy changes. The public tends to sympathize with farmers, especially smallholders. Environmental groups support government plans.



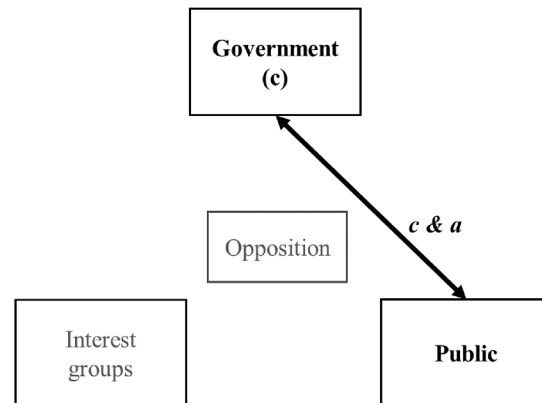
B. Steering collaborative governance

An energy ministry plans tightening regulation in the power sector to accelerate the transition towards carbon neutrality. Environmental groups are in favor but demand more while large energy companies oppose the plans. This policy subsystem has a history of collaborative policymaking and trustful personal relationships. The ministry depends on collaborations with energy companies on other matters, like heating and private investing in new technologies. Government wants to avoid accusations of being ideologically biased and a threat to the economy.



C. Overcoming government deadlock

Two parties in a coalition government are in conflict over a set of climate measures including stricter speed limits on highways. The conflict has led to deadlock. The greens support stricter climate measures while the conservatives oppose them. Public opinion is slightly in favor of green positions but polarized. Conservatives fear voter loss if they supported climate measures and believe that vetoing a speed limit will increase their approval rates.



D. Challenging government (in)action

A unitary government assigns low priority to saving greenhouse gas emissions. A majority of citizens is generally concerned about climate change when questioned, but it is not ranked among the top issues that citizens find most important, and there is no salient discourse in the mainstream media. The environmentally concerned minority in the opposition and environmental advocacy groups have not been able to mobilize their supporters to pressure the government demanding more climate action.

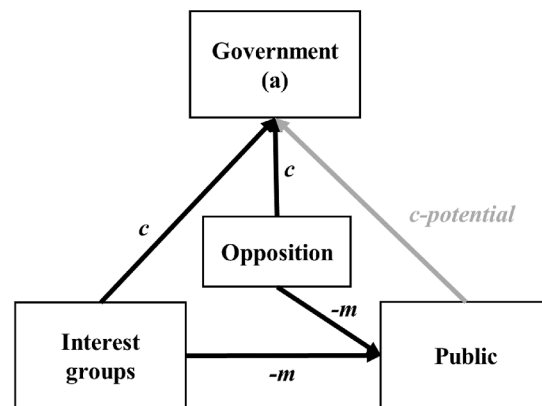


Fig. 2. The political context of Climate Assemblies: Ideal-typical scenarios of climate politics.

Note: Panels on the right display actor constellations of scenarios A to D, highlighting relationships of particular importance for explaining barriers to progressive climate policy. Symbols: *c* denotes conflict between and within actor groups with regards to their political goals, while *a* stands for alignment. $\pm m$ displays high or low capacities of actors to mobilize against (or for) policy change.

Table 1
Hypothesized political impact mechanisms of minipublics.

Political impact mechanism	Sub-mechanism hypotheses
Challenging those in power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demanding more ambitious (climate) policy • Pressuring through mobilization and media attention
Reconciling conflicts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing novel compromise solutions • Providing opportunities to avoid losing face
Constraining the power of opponents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limiting opponents' capacity/willingness to mobilize
Empowering supporters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reducing (fossil fuel) lobby influence • Providing opportunities to legitimize policy action (e.g., blame shifting)
Persuading the public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reducing uncertainties (e.g., testing waters) • Increasing/reducing public support/opposition • Altering public discourse

Table 2
Comparing political embedding strategies between contexts.

Political embedding	Scenario			
	A. Overcoming government hesitance	B. Steering collaborative governance	C. Overcoming government deadlock	D. Challenging government (in)action
Initiation and Commissioning	Responsible ministry	Responsible ministry	Inter- or supra-ministerial	Opposition / Citizens / Automatic
Inclusion of perspectives	Potential mobilizers	Conflicting actors (interest groups)	Conflicting actors (politicians)	Less relevant (or government)
Strategic framing	Obtain will of the people	Independent jury	Independent jury / Support government	Hold government accountable
Publicity	Unclear effects	Not necessary	Unclear effects	Necessary

taking part in deliberations. Recent developments have seen more active integration of politicians and stakeholders into minipublic deliberations (e.g., Harris et al., 2023; Bergk et al., 2022). This raises the question of where to ultimately draw the conceptual boundary for minipublics, given that lay-citizen participation is their definitive characteristic.

- **Strategic framing** includes the political role and relevance assigned to a minipublic as well as communication strategies to utilize its results for political purposes. For example, roles ascribed to CAs have included supporting governments in their climate action efforts, supporting parliament in holding government accountable, or affecting coalition negotiations and resulting agreements (Pfeffer forthcoming, 2025).
- **Publicity** has generally been argued to be decisive for policy change (Newig, 2004) and to favor more just transitions (Newell et al., 2022). Minipublic scholars and practitioners have argued for more public attention to increase minipublics' policy impact and democratic value (Elstub et al., 2021b; Rountree and Curato, 2023).

4. Analysis

4.1. Operationalizing political context: ideal type scenarios

We operationalize the political context along several basic dimensions, inspired by theories of the policy process (Weible and Sabatier, 2018): involved actor groups, their goals and strategies regarding progressive climate policy, their relationships and main lines of conflict, and their power over policy decisions. The power over policy decisions can include formal but also informal dimensions such as

responsivity of formal powerholders to other actors like interest groups, or voters, or the capacity of actors to mobilize opposition or support. In line with classical thinking on democratic systems (e.g. Lijphart, 1968; Dahl, 1971; Jones and Baumgartner, 2012) and works on participatory governance (e.g. Meadowcroft, 2004), we differentiate between four actor groups: government, (parliamentary) opposition, interest groups, and the public. This allows us to capture basic power struggles among actor groups with defined legal characteristics in many democratic systems. These actor groups may be in conflict or aligned with regards to their policy goals and strategies. There can also be conflict and alignment *within* actor groups to which we point if they are relevant for explaining barriers to policy change. Listing all possible combinations of these few variables would already yield an overwhelming number of political contexts. Hence, we confine our analysis to a selection of four scenarios that we believe are theoretically and practically relevant – albeit with no aspiration of being fully representative of the population of possible contexts.

Our scenarios of climate political contexts emphasize four ideal types of *political barriers to progressive climate policy*. These ideal type scenarios are neither meant to mirror single empirical cases in their full complexity nor to be fantastic imaginations. Rather they represent commonly occurring realistic but simplified thought experimental situations that help to expose contradictions or reveal the limits of certain theories and hypotheses. The narratives built around ideal type barriers mainly serve an imaginative function.

Fig. 2 displays narratives and illustrations of our four scenarios. The barrier in scenario A is characterized by government fearing public resistance to progressive climate policy and a high capacity of oppositional actors to mobilize against the government and its plans. In scenario B, a ministry has to manage conflicting organized interests amid a history of collaborative policymaking and future dependence on large companies opposing progressive climate policy. The barrier in scenario C is characterized by conflict between greens and conservatives within a government coalition, and in scenario D, advocates of progressive climate policy aim at challenging government inaction.

4.2. Thought-experimental analysis

4.2.1. A. Overcoming government hesitance

4.2.1.1. *Political impact mechanisms.* In scenario A (Fig. 2), the main barrier to progressive climate policy change is governmental fear of public resistance and mobilization capacities of oppositional actors – farmer groups and elected opposition. Political impact mechanisms (Table 1) that plausibly address this barrier are empowering political supporters (here government), constraining political opponents (here interest groups, and elected opposition), and persuading the public. Less plausible are mechanisms challenging those in power, and reconciling conflict.

Future research should investigate relations between impact mechanisms, and their necessity and sufficiency for policy impact (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012). For example, reducing uncertainty for government appears necessary for progressive climate policy in scenario A, and might even be sufficient. CA proposals can act as test balloon reducing uncertainty. A lack of oppositional mobilization and public resistance might be sufficient for government action. It is unclear whether public persuasion or reductions in oppositional capacity/willingness to mobilize are necessary or sufficient for that.

4.2.1.2. *Political embedding. Initiation and commissioning.* In scenario A, it is plausible that the ministry responsible for food policy would initiate and commission the process. Involving other ministries increases transaction costs with little added value if there is no conflict within government. Commissioning by parliament might reduce oppositional capacity to criticize the process as being manipulated by

government (even if unfoundedly). However, if government cannot control the process, they may be less interested in it and more hesitant in their strategic framing prior to the process.

Inclusion of perspectives. Including the perspectives of potentially mobilizing actors—farmers and elected opposition—may be a successful strategy to reduce their mobilization capacity/willingness. A common strategy of actors unfavorable of minipublic outcomes is to criticize process integrity. Amid exclusion of affected groups this criticism is valid, while inclusion limits its persuasiveness. Sometimes, included groups even become less willing to criticize the process if they participated (Newig et al., 2018). Whether and how to include potentially mobilizing actors in minipublics beyond providing short testimony, and to what effects, is a question for further research.

Strategic framing. The CA purpose may be framed as obtaining the informed will of the people on a contentious issue. Government might then strategically communicate that: “Most people want this.”; “We should follow what the people want.”; “The CA has heard farmers and opposition and made fair proposals”; “The opposition is wrong.” etc. However, there would also be counter frames such as “Why listen to a focus group?”; or “There was only 100 participants”.

Publicity. Whether mass public attention of a CA is conducive to progressive climate policy in scenario A is unclear and depends on the type of publicity and causal mechanisms unfolding. The main barrier to progressive climate policy in this scenario is governmental fear of oppositional mobilization and public resistance. One plausible impact mechanism is that the CA reduces oppositional willingness and/or capacity to mobilize. Thus, the CA would foster progressive policy by limiting negative mass publicity and avoiding to wake sleeping dogs (Newig et al., 2018). On the other hand, positive publicity might help to persuade (relevant groups of) the public or limit backlash. While there is some experimental evidence of such effects (cf. Årsælsson et al., 2024; Ingham and Levin 2018a, 2018b; Esaïsson et al., 2016; Boulianne, 2018), this requires high levels of public attention which has been rare to date and is understudied (see Elstub et al. in this special issue). Finally, high levels of mass publicity tend to correlate with conflict and negative rather than positive messages, and we do not know whether CAs can break through this.

4.2.2. B. Steering collaborative governance

4.2.2.1. Political impact mechanisms. In scenario B (Fig. 2), the main challenge to progressive climate policy is to manage relationships in collaborative policymaking – specifically to mediate conflict between business and environmental groups while empowering the ministry to take a stand. Government is criticized by all, leans toward environmental groups but intends to maintain a good relationship with businesses and seeks to avoid being perceived as one-sided. Political impact mechanisms that plausibly address this barrier are, empowering political supporters, and constraining political opponents. Challenging government, persuading the public, and reconciling conflict are less plausible.

Reconciling conflict through the CA is less plausible because the conflict occurs between interest groups. That is at least if we consider the way we conceptualized minipublics reconcile conflict, through providing opportunities to avoid to losing face or new compromise solutions: ‘Avoid losing face’ does not apply to interest groups in the way it applies to conflicting political actors circumventing public perceptions as losers. Moreover, new compromise solutions are unlikely if there are hard material conflicts of interests between business and environmental groups. Hence, a CA in scenario B mostly supports progressive climate policy by giving government opportunities to legitimize their decisions towards the interest groups (and media). Policy proposals may be met with higher acceptability by interest groups, if they originate from the CA as compared to the ministry. This limits risks of being accused of ideological bias and related framings.

4.2.2.2. Political embedding. Initiation and commissioning. In scenario B, the only plausible initiator and commissioner is the responsible energy ministry. Including more ministries would only increase coordination costs and have little added benefit.

Inclusion of perspectives. In scenario B, strong inclusion of those conflicting and affected groups that government seeks to maintain good relations with appears necessary, as weak inclusion or exclusion would likely lead to discontent. CAs ought not replace the democratic and epistemic benefits of established structures of collaborative governance, such as regular exchange between interest groups, mutual trust-building, and knowledge integration (Ansell and Gash, 2008). Again, future research should investigate possibilities of integrating collaborative governance and minipublics.

Strategic framing. The CA purpose may be framed as citizens acting as an independent jury to resolve conflict in a fair process. The ministry might then strategically communicate that: “All interests were heard.”; “Citizens proposed a fair compromise.”; “The ministry will now follow the citizens.” etc.

Publicity. For the CA to be framed as central and legitimate institution within the policy subsystem in scenario B, relevant conflicting actors must be aware of it. Mass public attention beyond the subsystem does not appear necessary to support government in taking a stand amid conflicting interests. Yet, publicity might be conducive for interest groups’ acceptance of the CA.

4.2.3. C. Overcoming government deadlock

4.2.3.1. Political impact mechanisms. In scenario C (Fig. 2), the main barrier to progressive climate policy change is deadlock between Greens and Conservatives in a coalition government. The main impact mechanisms plausibly addressing this barrier is reconciling conflict. Given there is some willingness to compromise, the CA may propose compromise solutions and/or provide opportunities to avoid losing face. Such mechanisms may be sufficient conditions for policy change. If, however, at least one veto player is fundamentally unwilling to compromise on the issue at stake, then such mechanisms are less plausible.

4.2.3.2. Political embedding. Initiation and commissioning. To reconcile conflict within government, it may be most effective when all conflicting parties collaboratively initiate and commission the CA. If only one ministry, say the climate ministry led by the Green party, was to commission the process, then Conservatives may view it as a “Green project”, and CA recommendations may be treated as “just another proposal from the climate ministry”. Hence, inter- or supra-ministerial initiation and commissioning may be most effective. If, however, at least one conflicting party is unwilling to compromise or expects to lose, then initiation of a collaborative CA is unlikely (Pfeffer forthcoming, 2025). Here, new mechanisms for initiating CAs are necessary – e.g., rights for the opposition or citizens, or ‘automatic’ mechanisms triggering initiation under conditions of deadlock (Pfeffer forthcoming, 2025; Setälä 2017). While such mechanisms are conducive to political responsiveness, more generally, they are not *necessary* in scenarios where majorities have an interest in running a CA (like in scenario A).

Inclusion of perspectives. Similar to scenario B, scenario C likely necessitates inclusion of conflicting actors. Here, this means some inclusion of politicians. Upon receiving minipublic proposals, politicians sometimes question whether citizens considered all arguments, especially if they oppose the proposal. While this is a more general issue requiring attention, it appears particularly pressing in scenario C. One strategy to abate this problem is directly involving politicians in minipublic deliberations. There is some experience of this practice, although researchers have mostly focused on whether politicians dominate deliberations, and less on attitude changes of politicians, or political effects and policy impact (but see Harris et al., 2023).

Strategic framing. The CA purpose may be framed as citizens acting as an independent jury to resolve conflict in a fair process. Approval of such a framing by all conflicting parties seems important to increase the likelihood that CA proposals will be accepted as compromise. Governments may prefer not to publicly communicate internal conflict. In that case, they might internally agree on a conflict reconciliation function and publicly communicate that government consults citizens on difficult issues. Strategic communication will depend on the main political impact mechanisms that apply. For example, to avoid losing face, conflicting parties may communicate: “Citizens appreciated arguments of both parties and proposed a fair compromise”; “This is not about party politics, and who won or lost, but about governing our country responsibly”.

Publicity. We do not know whether reconciling conflict through a CA is more, less, or equally likely given high or low public attention. Mass public attention can exacerbate deadlock because conflicting parties have more to lose if they give up their position. However, public attention can also increase pressure to break a deadlock and pressure to take up the CA proposal.

4.2.4. D. Challenging government (in)action

4.2.4.1. Political impact mechanisms. In scenario *D* (Fig. 2), the main barrier to progressive climate policy change is a general lack of government interest in climate action. Political impact mechanisms that plausibly address these barriers are challenging powerholders, persuading the public, and empowering supporters. Reconciling conflict and constraining the power of opponents are less plausible.

The underlying government motivation and political context explaining inaction play an important role in assessing how likely progressive climate policy change through public pressure is. We can expect little from a CA given a government that assigns little importance to climate change or even questions its anthropogenic nature and/or given government constituency that is unconcerned. For scenario *D*, we may assume that progressive climate policy change through public pressure is possible.

4.2.4.2. Political embedding. Initiation and commissioning. It is unlikely that government initiates a CA that challenges government, although not impossible. Government may falsely anticipate not to be challenged or willing to bear the anticipated degree. This may have been the case for the French CA. The likelihood and conditions under which political actors (in)correctly anticipate minipublic outcomes is a fundamental question for positive and normative theory that has received little attention. For CAs, we may assume that political actors by now generally anticipate progressive climate policy. Hence, in scenario *D*, it is unlikely that a CA will be initiated from within the political structures of the state.

In the past, civil society groups have initiated CAs as means to raise awareness, create momentum and/or challenge governments. While such initiatives are certainly not generally doomed to fail, they do run the risk of being ignored by elites if they are not somehow coupled to empowered spaces of policymaking or cannot mobilize sufficient public pressure (Hendriks, 2016; Hoffmann, 2023). CAs initiated by civil society might have a higher chance of impact at the local level, as they could be too close and visible to ignore. However, for national level contexts, like in scenario *D*, new mechanisms allowing, for example, (parliamentary) minorities or citizens the initiation of CAs within state structures appear necessary (see discussion).

Inclusion of perspectives. The inclusion of specific perspectives seems less relevant if challenging government is the focal impact mechanism. Confrontation between high-profile government actors and CA citizens may increase media attention and help mobilization. It is unclear how such a situation could be ‘designed’ as government actors will have little incentive to engage with the assembly. In a scenario

where persuasion of government actors is conceivable, designers may attempt to engage them.

Strategic framing. The CA purpose may be framed as holding government accountable to will of the people. Oppositional groups may strategically communicate: “Government does not take citizens seriously.”; “Citizens want government to do more.”.

Publicity. A high level of publicity is a necessary condition for policy impact in scenario *D*. As mentioned earlier, only few CAs have received a high level of media attention. However, once a CA set in scenario *D* has reached a critical threshold of attention and political relevance, its chances to gain and maintain high levels of attention may be higher than in some other scenarios because conflict has a high media value and mobilization of advocacy groups (Hendriks, 2006) and public protest also hinges on critical thresholds and feedback dynamics (e.g., González-Bailón et al., 2011).

4.3. Comparing political embedding strategies between contexts

Our analysis suggests that the effectiveness of political embedding strategies for policy impact differs between contexts questioning sweeping statements about minipublic design (Table 2). While in scenario *A* and *B*, initiation and commissioning by a single responsible ministry are most plausible, in scenario *C* inter- or supra-ministerial commissioning is necessary. In scenario *D*, mechanisms allowing oppositional, citizen or automatic initiation are required.

Political context also affects whom to include in CA processes. Analysis suggests to include actors potentially mobilizing against policy change in scenario *A*, and conflicting actors in scenario *B* (business and environmental groups) and scenario *C* (green and conservative politicians). In scenario *D*, including specific perspectives seems less relevant.

Strategic framing of CA purposes varies, as well. In scenario *A*, the CA is positioned to publicly communicate that government plans align with the will of the people. In scenario *B* and *C*, the CA is used as an independent jury to reconcile conflict. And in scenario *D*, the CA serves to hold government accountable.

Finally, a lack of publicity is frequently used to explain limited policy impact. Our theoretical analysis suggests that whether publicity bolsters policy impact might vary with context, as it seems to only be necessary in scenario *D*. In scenario *B*, publicity might not be necessary, and in scenario *A* and *C*, its effects are theoretically ambiguous.

To demonstrate our argument that effective strategies for enhancing minipublics’ policy impact depend on context, we focused on illustrative dimensions of political embedding. However, many minipublic design features are of importance in all contexts. These include design choices ensuring process integrity because perceived process legitimacy often is a pre-condition for policy impact. Another example of design features likely increasing impact irrespective of context are accountability mechanisms like commitments to respond to minipublics and follow-up processes. In sum, our analysis suggests that some strategies to promote policy impact of CAs and minipublics more generally are always worth pursuing while other strategies are effective in one but not another context.

5. Discussion and conclusion

CAs may facilitate progressive climate policy by proposing more ambitious measures and altering policy decisions through various mechanisms such as supporting hesitant governments or breaking political deadlocks (Willis et al., 2022). Yet, such policy impacts have been limited for past processes (Wells et al., 2021; Weber, 2023; Hoffmann, 2023). Scholars and practitioners brood over strategies to enhance the policy impact of CAs (Smith in this special issue). We have argued that they ought to pay more attention to how political actors make strategic use of CAs. We propose that CAs, and minipublics more generally, require *political embedding*. That is, minipublic designers should first consider how political actors will likely interact with a process given

their interests and political context, and subsequently make deliberate use of strategies to foster minipublic objectives. Strategies of political embedding can entail design choices, communication approaches, and other activities.

Based on a thought experiment, we then contended that the effectiveness of political embedding strategies to promote CAs' policy impact can depend on political context, at least in theory. We operationalized political context as ideal type actor constellations constituting barriers to climate policy change. For example, in contexts where government inaction is to be challenged, high levels of mass publicity appear necessary for policy impact, whereas in other contexts the effects of mass publicity are unclear. Similarly, commissioning a CA by an entire government or multiple ministries might enhance impact where they are in dispute. However, single ministry commissioning is more plausible where the ministry is managing stakeholder conflicts within a policy subsystem. Through this exercise, we challenge sweeping statements about the right choices for CA and minipublic design and contribute to building more nuanced theory.

Our analysis reasserts that disruptive minipublics will likely remain an exception as long as there are no institutionalized initiation mechanisms or rights for (parliamentary) minorities, citizens, or some other less partial actor (Pfeffer, 2024; Setälä 2017). Future research should investigate the legitimacy, functionality, and legality of such initiation rights and mechanisms in more detail. For example, minipublics could be integrated into the governance architecture of policy subsystems making them a recurring mandatory step in a policy cycle (Schatz et al., 2024). One could also ponder whether to legally define situations that automatically trigger or allow minority initiation of a minipublic, e.g., if government is in deadlock, if policy targets are not met, or if a policy discourse is dominated by misinformation. However, to avoid that such 'unwanted' minipublics are simply ignored by an unwelcoming government (Pfeffer, 2024), they would have to be paired with public pressure and media attention, follow-up processes supporting accountability, recognition and scrutiny (e.g. Boswell, 2016), referendums (e.g. Gastil and Knobloch, 2020), or be equipped with decision-making or veto power themselves (e.g. Gastil et al., 2019).

We wrote this paper from a perspective of those aiming for progressive climate policy change. Despite this instrumental framing, our analysis holds insights independent of policy substance, and might just as well be transferred to contexts where political embedding of minipublics is used to resist instead of promote policy change. Our analysis generally portrays ways in which political actors might use "informed citizen judgments" of a minipublic against other political actors deviating from minipublic positions. Hence, the underlying normative question is whether, or under which conditions and by which standards, this enhances or undermines democratic system performance (Curato and Böker, 2016; Beauvais and Warren, 2019).

A risk is that if only one side repeatedly uses minipublics against the other side (and wins), then that other side will try to delegitimize minipublics, undermining their democratic potential lastingly. But is it likely that minipublics always favor one side? We do not think so. While deliberation might have a tendency toward progressive attitude change (Gastil et al., 2010), minipublics often produce pragmatic outcomes that trespass party positions. Moreover, no party is aligned with "informed citizen opinions" on every issue. If initiation rights ensure that minipublics can be used by different groups whenever they believe to be "on the side of the citizens", they will more likely come to be seen as a legitimate instrument in the political game.

The inclusion of perspectives in minipublics requires more attention. Whether and how businesses and different interest groups (dis-)engage with CAs and minipublics will shape resulting public discourse and the prospects for and nature of policy impact (Hendriks, 2006). We suspect that engaging affected actors is key for bolstering minipublics' quality of proposals, legitimacy, and policy impact, and avoiding that powerful lobby actors simply sidestep minipublics by relying on their direct access to policymakers behind closed doors (Hendriks, 2006, p. 584).

We believe that strategic framing by political leaders can have significant effects as they possess notable power over assigning political relevance to processes. This, in turn, shapes media attention, interest group engagement, and impact expectations. However, leaders might be hesitant in assigning too much relevance to minipublics as they cannot be certain about the outcome. Time will tell whether they become more or less daring with experience.

One shortcoming of our analysis and extant literature is that most CA impact mechanisms are unidirectional hypotheses. Scholars concerned with climate action should consider whether CAs could also undermine progressive climate policy, even if their proposals are ambitious and the process maintains integrity. It may, for instance, be argued that pacifying effects of CAs forestall more disruptive future policy changes.

Our analytical choice of working with four actor groups – government, opposition, interest groups, and the public – is deliberately simplified and reflects empirical reality only to some degree. The literature on high-carbon regime resistance often theorises these groups as intertwined and, at times, incoherent and unstable blocs (e.g. Ford and Newell, 2021). For example, incumbent actors from government and industry (but also trade unions) who seek to stabilize existing (unsustainable) regimes are conceptualized in opposition to niche actors who challenge existing structures (Geels, 2014; Price, 2020). Empirical work inspired by our scenarios will have to adapt their conceptualization of actor groups accordingly.

With this paper we speak to actors who can somehow influence minipublic and CA design and framing but we do not address the micropolitics of CA governance, i.e., who is (or ought to be) involved and with how much power (Carrick, 2022; Pfeffer forthcoming, 2025). The micropolitical dynamics within governance bodies can depend on how those involved interpret their roles, the culture of contestation, or the capabilities of actors to renegotiate power (Holdo, 2024; Lowndes and Paxton, 2018; Elstub and Escobar, 2019, Section III). Civil society actors can play a vital role in contesting entrenched worldviews and policy rationales allowing for more openness to new perspectives in agenda-setting and the selection of information and experts (Pfeffer forthcoming, 2025).²

Finally, while we focused only on policy impact, adopting a political embeddedness perspective will also yield more realistic estimations regarding other democratic impacts. The direction and degree to which minipublics influence public discourse, democratic trust and legitimacy, policy attitudes, power asymmetries, and so on, will depend on how political elites choose to strategically interact with them. Hence, thinking about political embeddedness is particularly important when assessing models to institutionalize minipublics more permanently within democratic systems (e.g., Courant, 2022). The challenge, in our eyes, is to build institutions that enable and incentivize desirable political usage of minipublics fostering democratic system performance while limiting risks of manipulative usage undermining democratic values (cf. Batory and Svensson, 2019).

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Janosch Pfeffer: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Jens Newig:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization.

² However, this does not mean that processes led by civil society are always more disruptive. Zeitfogel et al. (2024) found that CAs organized by civil society were not using substantially different framings (e.g., less technocratic, more disruptive) than a CA commissioned by parliament. If civil society actors must fear to be ignored when being too radical, they might strategically constrain themselves. Hence, empowering civil society actors in CA and minipublic governance within state structures may be more productive than decoupled civil society led processes.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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