(Not) Talking About a Revolution:

Engaging with political decision-makers about democratic innovation in Germany, France and the UK

Neele Eilers, Daniel Kenealy, François-Xavier Demoures, Jan Eichhorn

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Executive Summary

To address the challenges representative democracies have been facing, new forms of political engagement – focussed on citizen engagement, participation, and deliberation between elections – have been developed and implemented in various contexts. While such **democratic innovation** has garnered much attention from democracy activists and researchers, many political decision-makers are not convinced by calls to embrace political participation outside of traditional electoral politics and conventional forms of consultation. But why is that? Are they simply worried about a loss of power? Or do they have specific concerns that advocates should understand better?

This report aims to provide some answers to those questions. Synthesising the insights from in-depth interviews with 55 politicians, civil servants and policy professionals in Germany, France, and the UK, the report explores what such actors' scepticism of democratic innovation is really grounded in. Using those findings, it offers key recommendations for how those advocating for democratic innovation might better engage in constructive dialogue with those inside the structures of representative democracy.

The research was coordinated by d|part (Neele Eilers and Jan Eichhorn) and carried out in cooperation with Daniel Kenealy (University of Edinburgh) and François-Xavier Demoures (Grand-Récit). The project was supported by a grant from the Open Society Foundation gGmbH in cooperation with the Open Society Foundations.

Key insights and recommendations

1 | **No rejection of democratic innovation, but for most a low salience issue**

Few political decision-makers expressed outright opposition to democratic innovation, but for most it was a low-salience issue. While most have concerns about challenges that representative democracy is currently facing, few see democratic innovation as key to addressing them. While it was frequently perceived as useful for specific tasks, most emphasised the need to strengthen existing structures. Democratic innovation advocates should therefore consider framing discussions in relation to how new forms of participation can enhance and complement existing forms to build common ground.

2 | **Democratic innovation is not recognised as a coherent brand**

Democratic innovation may be a well-established field for advocates and researchers, but for many decision-makers it is not. They do not recognise it as a "brand", or as a coherent set of proposals. Overall, knowledge about various forms of democratic innovation is low, especially when discussing specifics about how different tools work. In conversations about democratic innovation, assumptions about existing knowledge should therefore be avoided and space should be made to explain how any particular approach is designed to work.

3 | **Practical experience with democratic innovation is key for support**

Support for democratic innovation is greatest amongst decision-makers who have already had some practical experience with it. Those who have seen a particular form of democratic innovation in action, are much more likely to embrace it. Support tends

to be specific to the type they engaged. For example, experience of citizens' assemblies does not translate automatically to support for other approaches, such as participatory budgeting. Advocates should develop opportunities for decision-makers to take part in the implementation of democratic innovation. Additionally, politicians and civil servants who have done so already can be convincing spokespeople.

4 | **Constructive criticism is often directed at particular forms**

Critique and support are often directed at specific forms of democratic innovation rather than the whole idea. Criticisms are sometimes based on experience and are constructive suggestions about how forms of democratic innovation could be improved. Advocates should therefore not feel compelled to counter all forms of negative feedback. Acknowledging limitations and that some forms of democratic innovation are suited to certain contexts rather than others can create common ground to discuss how best to select and implement specific forms.

5 | **The role of organised civil society is important to decision-makers**

Decision-makers committed to comprehensive citizen engagement are often concerned about democratic innovations that focus on the exchange between individuals, even when those individuals are representative of the population (e.g., because of sortition). In discussions about democratic innovation, the role of organised civil society should be taken seriously, as several decision-makers report good experiences with such groups and particularly their ability to give voice, in an empowered and community-oriented way, to people who are too often underrepresented.

6 | **The national context greatly shapes discussions of democratic innovation**

The political context is crucial for how democratic innovations are viewed. While there are similarities across countries, the way problems of democracy are understood differs substantially. The extent to which political institutions are seen as functioning (rather well in Germany, rather poorly in the UK, with France in between, for example), and the extent to which citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting are established features on the national political landscape, shapes decision-makers' perspectives about democratic innovation. Advocates should therefore adapt their communication strategies to the respective national (or sub-national) context.

7 | **Decision-makers want democratic evolution, not revolution**

Most politicians and civil servants want to see improvements to the democratic system, but they want change to be evolutionary, not revolutionary. Those involved in implementation are worried that an "everything, everywhere, all at once" approach may undermine the gradual support base they are building. Proponents of democratic innovation who plan to work with decision-makers in established institutional settings will need to embrace an incremental approach to change. An impetus for faster transformations is unlikely to be initiated within current structures.

Content Table

1. Introduction

Representative democracy is facing a moment of protracted crisis. Public attitudes surveys suggest rising disaffection and an increasing lack of trust by people in the systems and structures of representative democracy.[1] In parallel, the increasing complexity of policy challenges and the political system's inability to find solutions have left many people feeling politically powerless and angry at politicians and governing institutions. It is increasingly difficult to defend the notion that the existing systems and structures of representative democracy are best suited to solving contemporary crises. Populism, with its simple answers to complex policy problems, often involving scapegoats, delivered by politicians who claim to speak "for the people" against a corrupt and distant "political elite"[2] is on the rise.[3]

As Chwalisz (2019) summed it up:

> *"Today's political context—characterized by political polarization; mistrust in politicians, governments, and fellow citizens; voter apathy; increasing political protests; and a new context of misinformation and disinformation—has prompted politicians, policymakers, civil society organizations, and citizens to reflect on how collective public decisions are being made in the twenty-first century."*[4]

Many politicians, policymakers, and civil society organisations are paying increasing attention to new ways of organising democratic politics and new ways of making policy decisions that are participatory and deliberative in nature. International organisations such as the OECD[5] have compiled cross-national evidence about the impact that greater citizen participation in policymaking can have both on policy outcomes and on public support for democracy itself,

[1] Roberto Stefan Foa, Andrew Klassen, Micheal Slade, Alex Rand & Rosie Collins (2020): The global satisfaction with democracy report 2020. Bennett Institute for Public Policy at the University of Cambridge, Available at: https://www.cam.ac.uk/system/files/report2020_003.pdf
Andreas Zick, Beate Küpper & Nico Mokros (Eds.) (2023): Die distanzierte Mitte. Rechtsextreme und demokratiegefährdende Einstellungen in Deutschland 2022/23. Available at: https://www.fes.de/index.php?eID=dumpFile&t=f&f=91776&token=3821fe2a05aff649791e9e7ebdb18eabdae3e0fd
OECD (2022): Building trust to reinforce democracy: Main findings from the 2021 OECD survey on drivers of trust in public institutions. Available at: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/b407f99c-en/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/b407f99c-en

[2] Jan-Werner Müller (2019): The Rise and Rise of Populism? The Age of Perplexity: Rethinking the World We Knew. BBVA OpenMind, Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial. Available at: https://www.bbvaopenmind.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/BBVA-OpenMind-Jan-Werner-Muller-The-Rise-and-Rise-of-Populism-1.pdf.

[3] Nguijol, Gabriel Cyril; Sithole, Neo; Kastoriadou, Konstantina; Guidotti, Andrea; Diethelm, Johann Mathies & Mancini, Luca (2023): Symposium Report: Impacts of Global Power Transition on Authoritarian Populism and Multilateralism." European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). November 23, 2023. https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0045

[4] Chwalisz, Claudia (2019): A new wave of deliberative democracy. Carnegie Europe, 26, pp. 1-6. Available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/files/10-17-19_Chwalisz_Deliberative.pdf

[5] OECD (2020a): Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/339306da-en.

helping to re-establish trust in the system, closing the gap between political decision-makers and their publics, and helping to reverse the trend towards feelings of powerlessness and a lack of self-efficacy amongst many people.[6]

Often referred to under the umbrella heading 'democratic innovation", various participatory and deliberative processes – such as citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting, amongst others – are being increasingly implemented around the world.[7] At the same time, the umbrella term 'democratic innovation' has become fashionable, being applied more widely. The term has perhaps been overstretched to describe a variety of different participatory processes. In this report we follow Elstub and Escobar's definition:

> *"Democratic innovations are processes or institutions, that are new to a policy issue, policy role, or level of governance, and developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence."*[8]

As has been pointed out by many historians of democracy, such practices are not new. Indeed, the practice of deliberative democracy based on sortition can be seen as far back as Athenian democracy.[9] These ideas have translated into the mainstream of public discourse around democratic participation. In 2019 a *Financial Times* editorial stated 'deliberative democracy is just what politics needs', going on to describe citizens' assemblies in particular as tool that can help democracies overcome increasing polarisation of opinion:

> *"It turns out that debating controversial, complicated policy issues with a fellow citizen who disagrees can be a transformative experience capable of shifting opinions in a more open-minded and accepting direction."*[10]

Alongside the increasing use of such deliberative mechanisms – as well as other participatory processes such as participatory budgeting – an academic research programme has emerged in this space. Many books and articles have appeared in recent years dedicated to both the theory and the practice of deliberative and participatory democracy.[11] Scholarship has focused on how to develop and implement such practices well and how they can operate

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[6] Michels, Ank (2011): Innovations in democratic governance – How does citizen participation contribute to a better democracy? International Review of Administrative Sciences, 77 (2), 275–93. https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852311399851

[7] OECD (2020b). OECD database of representative deliberative processes and institutions. Available at: https://airtable.com/app8WHymuaeTMsvCp/shrRYPpTSs9NskHbv/tblfOHuQuKuOpPnHh

[8] Elstub, Stephen and Escobar, Oliver (2019): Defining and typologising democratic innovations. In: Handbook of democratic innovation and governance. Edward Elgar Publishing. Pp. 11-31. p.4.

[9] Bouricius, Terrill G. (2013): Democracy through multi-body sortition: Athenian lessons for the modern day. Journal of Deliberative Democracy, 9 (1). DOI: https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.156

[10] Financial Times (2019): 'Deliberative democracy is just what our politics needs', 11 August 2019. Available at: https://www.ft.com/content/6bc199c8-b836-11e9-96bd-8e884d3ea203

[11] Elstub, Stephen & Oliver Escobar (eds.) (2019): Handbook of democratic innovation and governance. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Newton, Kenneth & Brigitte Geissel (eds) (2012): Evaluating democratic innovations: Curing the democratic malaise?. Routledge.

Ercan, Selen A., Hans Asenbaum, Nicole Curato, & Ricardo F. Mendonça (2022): Research methods in deliberative democracy. Oxford University Press

alongside the existing structures and processes of representative democracy. We now know a considerable amount about the positive impacts that well-structured and well-implemented deliberative and participatory processes can have on politics and policymaking.[12]

However, for such exercises in democratic innovation to take place, politicians – or perhaps civil servants presenting ideas to the political actors they work with – must decide to do them. It is therefore important to understand what political decision-makers think about forms of democratic innovation. Yet little research to date has focused on how and what political decision-makers think about democratic innovation.[13] That is the overarching purpose of this study.

Across three countries, 55 political decision-makers – principally politicians but also civil servants, political advisers, and some civil society campaigners – were interviewed and asked about: how they saw the current state of representative democracy; their knowledge of and experiences with democratic innovation; and the role that democratic innovation could play in tackling disaffection and lack of trust in politics. Interviews involved in-depth discussion of various forms of democratic innovation, with the aim of understanding what political decision-makers saw as the pros and cons of those various forms, as well as how they could work alongside existing systems and processes of representative democracy (a full method note is contained at the end of this report in Annex A and the interview guide is at Annex B). Building on the insights gained from interviews, we organized workshops that brought together diverse perspectives, including decision-makers, administrative representatives, and civil society organizations. The objective of these workshops was to broaden our understanding, facilitate discussions on existing dissonances in perspectives, and formulate recommendations based on the collective insights gained.

The report begins with a discussion of interviewees' thoughts about the state of democracy in general (section 2), before exploring their level of knowledge of, experience of – and interest in – democratic innovation (section 3). Section 4 discusses the barriers and reluctance to democratic innovation in general before section 5 explores interviewees' perspectives and thoughts about a range of specific forms of democratic innovation – citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting, citizens' initiatives/referendums, and public petitions. Section 6 closes the report with seven core findings, each paired with specific recommendations for civil society actors who champion democratic innovation that could be useful in their conversations with political decision-makers.

The report is structured thematically although country-specific caveats are included where necessary. Each country – France, Germany, and the UK – has its own recent experiences with deliberative and participatory forms of democracy, which we summarise in Box 1, 2 and 3, and those experiences shaped some patterns of responses in our interviews.

[12] Vincent Jacquet, Matt Ryan, Ramon van der Does (eds.) (2023): The Impacts of Democratic Innovations. ECPR Publishing. Available at: https://ecpr.eu/Shop/ShopProductInfo?productID=192

[13] An exception is Nino Junius, Joke Matthieu, Didier Caluwaerts & Silvia Erzeel. (2020): Is It Interests, Ideas or Institutions? Explaining Elected Representatives' Positions Toward Democratic Innovations in 15 European Countries. Front. Polit. Sci. Volume 2 (2020). https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2020.584439

Info Box 1: UNITED KINGDOM

The first UK-wide citizens' assembly, sponsored by the UK Parliament, was organised in 2018 and focused on how adult social care in England should be funded. Since then, the UK Parliament organised a further assembly, which met during 2019-2020 focused on understanding public preferences about how the UK should tackle climate change. There have also been a handful of citizens' assemblies organised at the local level. Three such assemblies were supported by the UK government's "Innovation in Democracy" programme, which trialled the involvement of citizens in decision-making at local government level. That programme ran from 2018 to 2020 but has not been followed up. None of these assemblies were especially visible. Perhaps the most aware people in the UK have been of the idea of citizens' assemblies was during the protracted process of negotiating Brexit. In the 2019 Conservative leadership election, one candidate (Rory Stewart) suggested holding a citizens' assembly to try and find a way to leave the EU that emerged through a consensus-building process involving the public. Former prime minister Gordon Brown also supported this idea.

Since around 2007, the UK has seen increasing numbers of local governments experimenting with models of participatory budgeting (participatory budgeting). However, most cases of participatory budgeting in the UK have been small scale community grant allocations.

It is important to note that democratic innovation looks considerably different in Scotland compared to the UK as a whole. The Scottish Government have made democratic renewal, community empowerment, and open government a key part of their policy agenda. In Scotland, the Scottish Government and the 32 local governments have a target to spend at least 1 per cent of their budgets through participatory processes, a target that has now been exceeded (at 1.4 per cent). As the Scottish Government puts it, 'we support participatory budgeting as a tool for community empowerment and as a resource to build on the wider development of participatory democracy in Scotland". The Scottish Government has also organised two citizens' assemblies – one on the future of Scotland (2019-2020) and one on climate change (2020-2022). The current Scottish Government are committed to making such assemblies "a permanent feature of political life" in Scotland. The issue of democratic renewal through participatory and deliberative processes therefore has a political champion in Scotland that is not mirrored in England, nor for the UK as a whole.

Info Box 2: FRANCE

In France, the first citizens' assembly organised by the government was held in 2019-2020. 150 citizens chosen by lottery were invited to "define the structural measures needed to achieve, in a spirit of social justice, a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions of at least 40% by 2030 compared with 1990 levels". They were asked to propose the legislative measures they deemed necessary and indicate those that could be put to a national referendum. This deliberative process received extensive media coverage and public support. Some of the citizens' proposals were incorporated into the law. However, this gave rise to a controversy that called into question the mechanism of citizens' assemblies and its use by the government. A second citizens' assembly, dedicated to the topic of end-of-life, was subsequently held in 2022-2023, albeit attracting less media coverage. Since, the format has been adopted by many local authorities.

The concept of democratic innovation or democratic renewal is not widely used in France: it is more commonly referred to as participatory democracy or citizen participation, which covers a wide range of practices, from simple consultations to neighbourhood councils to citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting and referendums. Since the end of the 1990s, a series of laws have been passed to develop citizen participation, particularly at local level: the National Commission for Public Debate introduced in 1995, neighbourhood councils in 2002, local referendums in 2003, and Shared Initiative Referendum (a mechanism initiated by MPs and supported by citizens) in 2008. Over the last ten years or so, participatory budgets have grown rapidly and are now subject of a political consensus: today, nearly 400 municipalities, representing 12 million inhabitants, have set up such a process, especially in the biggest cities. The amounts allocated are still modest. Paris is the exception, with 34.5 euros per inhabitant, or 5% of its investment budget.

Democratic innovation came back to the political agenda following the Gilets Jaunes movement in 2019. Specifically, protesters demanded the introduction of a citizens' initiative referendum. In response to the protest, many local authorities have opened "cahiers de doléances" (grievance books) in town halls for citizens, which are part of the imagination of the French Revolution. At the same time, the President of the Republic launched the "great national debate", a consultative tool open to all, "to bring forward the wishes of the French people" on four themes - climate, taxation, democracy and citizenship, and the organisation of the State. These initiatives were highly visible, but the results were criticised as disappointing. Following these experiments, in 2021, the government assigned new responsibilities to the Conseil Économique Social et Environnemental, the third chamber representing civil society, for organising citizen participation at national level, including citizens' assemblies. Representatives are now giving these processes a great deal of attention.

Info Box 3: GERMANY

Between 2019 and today, seven nationwide exploratory citizens' assemblies have been conducted at the national level in Germany. These initiatives, largely serving as pilot projects, have played a crucial role in shaping the discourse on how to design and implement such assemblies on a national scale. The first citizens' assembly officially commissioned by the German Bundestag following its approving vote in May 2023, commenced its activities during the course of this research project in September 2023. The selection of the assembly's topic "Nutrition in Transition" was accomplished by members of parliament in a rapporteur group, ensuring representation from all factions. A diverse cohort of 160 individuals, randomly selected from across Germany, has been convened to actively contribute to the deliberative process and is expected to present its recommendations to the German Bundestag in February 2024.

This citizens' assembly follows a series of noteworthy national initiatives by different institutions aimed at exploring the format of citizen's assemblies. For example, in January 2022, the German Federal Foreign Office organized a "National Citizens' Forum" that explored ideas for the future of Europe with randomly selected citizens through a pilot deliberative process. Preceding this, in January and February 2021, a Germany-wide citizens' assembly was convened to deliberate on the overarching theme of "Germany's role in the world" in the field of foreign policy. This assembly, bringing together 160 citizens selected by lot, was organized by the Bundestag's Council of Elders and under patronage of the then-President of the Bundestag, Wolfgang Schäuble, as a pilot project to assess the efficacy and applicability of citizens' assemblies on national level and complex issues.

At the state and municipal levels, a wide range of citizens' assemblies have been organized so far. At the state level, citizens' assemblies have been implemented, notably in Baden-Württemberg, as well as in Rhineland-Palatinate and Thuringia, but also in Berlin and Saarland, covering diverse topics such as climate protection, Covid-19 measures, agriculture or education. According to the coalition agreement in Baden-Württemberg in 2021, citizens' assemblies are soon to be established and formalized as a fixed participation instrument at the municipal level of the state. Besides, the number of local citizens' assemblies is growing in Germany in recent years, as is the number of initiatives promoting their establishment. Numerous citizens' initiatives are campaigning for citizens' assemblies in their municipalities, often with successful outcomes. Over 80 such local citizens' assemblies have been set up so far across Germany, with a steady increase in recent years.

Participatory budgeting is enjoying great popularity in Germany. The idea and implementation of participatory budgeting have been around in Germany for over 25 years. In the network "Municipalities of the Future" (1998-2002) and in the pilot project "Municipal Participatory Budgeting" in North Rhine-Westphalia (2000-2004), the idea of participatory budgeting was put into practice for the first time in Germany. The pilot municipalities back then were small and medium-sized towns. Since then, the concept has become well-established and has also been widely applied in larger cities. There are hundreds of examples of active and past successful participatory budgeting processes, although they have primarily remained at the municipal level.

2. The state of democracy: general perceptions

The interviews commenced with a broad discussion about the state of democracy and this section addresses a set of interrelated questions: How did interviewees assess the general state of democracy in their country? What did they suggest could be done to improve the situation? And what role might democratic innovation play in improving the situation?

2.1. National context and views about core democratic institutions

Across the countries, interviewees identified a range of challenges facing representative democracy. Although there was considerable overlap in responses, distinctive issues were identified in each country. Beginning with an appraisal of the core institutions of the state, German interviewees were generally more positive than their counterparts in France and the UK. This might reflect recent political history – unlike those in the UK, and to a lesser extent France, Germany's core institutions have not suffered fundamental crisis, or been widely characterised by chaos, in recent years.

German interviewees often grounded that confidence in an appreciation of a political architecture designed, after World War II, to be resistant to radical, extreme political forces. Interviewees pointed out various mechanisms – such as public petitions, consultations, and public hearings – through which citizens can participate in democracy, besides voting in elections. Germany's federal system, with its clearly delineated levels of government and division of powers, was widely seen as a strength. Several interviewees pointed out that elected representatives, especially at the Federal level, are well-staffed and well-resourced, which creates the *capacity* for democratic engagement. However, such engagement is only possible if the relationship between politicians and citizens is strong and healthy, which many interviewees felt was increasingly not the case (see section 2.2).

In contrast, several French interviewees identified fundamental issues with the core institutions of the state. The over-centralisation of power and the balance of power between the national government and the French parliament were identified as challenges. Recent instances of the government using articles of the Constitution to force immediate votes in parliament, or to impose time-limited debates, were identified as undermining the process through which dissent can be expressed within political structures before a consensus is reached.[14] Logically, changes to parliamentary procedure and to the electoral system were seen as potential solutions to such problems. Furthermore, concerns were expressed about the rule-of-law in France, particularly by those on the left keen to preserve the right to protest and to ensure that citizens continue to be protected from arbitrary decisions.

[14] Le Monde, 16.03.2023: 'Macron opts to force pension bill through Assemblée with no vote'. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/politics/article/2023/03/16/macron-opts-to-force-pension-bill-through-assemblee-with-no-vote_6019608_5.html

Even more so than in France, UK interviewees identified major structural issues. Except for Conservatives, most interviewees identified several of the following problems: the first-past-the-post electoral system; the undemocratic House of Lords; the over-centralisation of power in London; a lack of clear, constitutionally safeguarded structures of local government. The UK's recent political history has featured significant political turbulence and core institutions and processes have been tested almost to breaking point.[15] Given that context, interviewees were generally pessimistic about the state of democracy. Local politicians and officials pointed to the impact of austerity on public services, identifying it – alongside the structural issues identified above – as a crucial driver of citizen disaffection.

To summarise – in Germany, conversations tended to focus on strengthening the existing institutions of democracy, as opposed to the UK where many of those institutions were questioned in principle and identified as being part of the problem. Despite some disquiet about fundamental aspects of the democratic system, the general attitude amongst French interviewees was closer to their counterparts in Germany.

2.2. Common concerns: alienation, disengagement, populism

Although opinions differed about the relative health of the core institutions of the state, a more common and cross-national set of concerns emerged about how citizens feel about politics (and politicians) and how they engage with political issues. Many interviewees in each country perceived an increasing number of citizens feeling disenchanted, even alienated, from the political process. Such feelings were seen to lead either to disengagement or a turn to populist parties. Many interviewees focused on the quality of political and policy discourse, and the role of intermediary institutions such as political parties, trade unions, and civil society organisations in a well-functioning democracy.

A prevailing sense emerged that as the policy challenges facing society have become more complex, citizens have grown increasingly frustrated with the inability of the political system to address those challenges clearly and effectively. Such sentiment, combined with a related feeling that politicians were a detached elite with little understanding of people's day-to-day realities and concerns, was seen by many as creating a feeling of disempowerment and a lack of self-efficacy in increasingly more people. Concern was widely expressed about an increasing lack of dialogue and a growing polarisation around political questions, a development that makes it harder to build consensus. In France, several interviewees pointed to a succession of recent protests without a political resolution – for example, the Yellow Vests protests and the pension protests – to illustrate the point.

[15] Meg Russell (2021): Brexit and Parliament: The Anatomy of a Perfect Storm, *Parliamentary Affairs*, Volume 74 (2), pp. 443–463. Available at: https://academic.oup.com/pa/article/74/2/443/5855887?login=false.
Jess Sargeant, Steph Coulter, Jack Pannell, Rebecca McKee and Milo Hynes (2022): Review of the UK Constitution: Final Report, Bennett Institute for Public Policy and the Institute for Government. Available at: https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Review-of-UK-Constitution-final-report.pdf.

Several interviewees in each country commented on the declining ability of intermediary institutions to aggregate political preferences and structure political debate in a coherent way that could then be fed into the formal institutions and processes of the state. The sense that intermediary institutions were failing to perform this role as well as in the past was expressed by several French and UK interviewees. For example:

> *"… all of Britain's political parties at that time [the 1970s] were mass movements. They had a million members … we're talking about a process in which the public were more engaged, and the manifestos of political parties evolved, they were underpinned by a much more actively involved membership … As a document, I remember party manifestos were published and available in the shops to buy. They were properly underpinned documents of intent … Now the whole policy platform underpinning a political party is not supported by a mass movement in any sense whatsoever." (Member of the Scottish Parliament, UK, Conservative)*

A French interviewee suggested that political parties and trade unions no longer engaged substantially with the public, resulting in political demands no longer being mediated:

> *"Even the unions are sometimes part of the system (...). There are some collective bodies that come to short-circuit the already constituted bodies. What I've observed is a kind of "gilet-jaunisation" of all public and private structures … It's not difficult to listen to them. The Parliament just needs to be more open to [alternative groups] and even the government. You have to work with whoever challenges you [beyond the institutions]." (Former Member of Parliament, France, Renew)*

Increasing feelings of alienation from the political process, and a sense of powerlessness were seen by many interviewees as resulting in either disengagement from the political process or a turn towards populist parties, with their combination of simple answers to complex policy challenges offered by politicians claiming to speak "for the people" against a remote, political elite. Interviewees in all three countries – although more in Germany and France than in the UK – identified the rise of populist and extremist politics as a major challenge to representative democracy. Particularly in Germany, almost all interviewees expressed concern about rising support for the far-right AfD (Alternative für Deutschland Party), framing it as a symptom of a defective political debate culture that requires reaching back out to disenchanted and frustrated citizens.

Interviewees' views of the public differed across the countries. In Germany, most held a generally positive view, seeing people as active participants in a democratic system rather than as consumers of services. Politicians did not give an impression of being "afraid" of the people. However, in France, perceptions were more conflicted. Several interviewees saw citizens as individualistic and generally disengaged – "most of them don't care" was a common refrain. At the same time, and in apparent contradiction, many were worried about citizen engagement in protests. In other words, a certain type of engagement – with parties and established civil society channels – was seen as good but increasingly uncommon, and

other types of engagement were seen as concerning and increasingly common, which entrenched an overall negative view.

Many of those French interviewees acknowledged that they were partly responsible for this trend because politics has become increasingly professionalised and politicians increasingly distant, amongst other things. In contrast to German interviewees, some French interviewees expressed concern about threats directed against them by citizens and pointed out a crisis of vocation amongst elected representatives, especially at the local level. For example:

> *"And then there's the vocational crisis among local councillors, which is going to get worse and worse. Why are all local councillors between 60 and 70 years old? Not only has it become a thankless job, but it's a job that no one is interested in anymore." (Mayor, France, Socialist Party)*

UK respondents were closer to their counterparts in France than Germany. Like France, several respondents raised concerns, often citing specific instances, about threatening behaviour directed at politicians via social media or via protests outside parliament. Most interviewees offered some variant of, "most people just want to get on with their lives, they're not that interested in government and politics". There was a general rejection of the notion that there is significant unmet demand for more opportunities to participate in the democratic process although some civil servants and Green politicians expressed the opposite view.

2.3. Solutions focused on improving the political culture

When asked about potential solutions to the problems and challenges they had identified, rather than focusing on new forms of participation and deliberation, interviewees tended to focus on how the culture of political debate could be improved in ways that would reduce polarization and simplistic, soundbite argumentation. A small number of interviewees suggested that making policy in a more expert-driven, technocratic manner might help achieve that. Most talked about the need to close the gap between politicians and citizens by improving communication and consultation *within existing structures*, rather than *creating new structures* to facilitate new forms of citizen participation.

Several German interviewees suggested focusing on political education to enhance the culture of debate. For example:

> *"So I am still of the opinion that education, education, education, is the be-all and end-all, and this happens too little […] and starting from an early age. Learning about democracy and making it clear how this state works or doesn't work, I believe, is the most important thing." (Member of Parliament, Germany, Social Democrats)*

As a solution, political education focuses on the *preconditions for participation* rather than *the mechanisms of participation*. In France and the UK, a few people also made an argument

in favour of better civic education. For example, discussing political education in the context of convoluted and confusing structures of local government in England, one interviewee said:

> *"[Political education] is not something we do well in this country. There are a lot of people who genuinely don't understand the difference between a councillor and an MP. So, they've spoken to a councillor, and they don't like the answer and they think, 'I'll get in touch with my MP', because they think I'm the next level of referral. And then there are people who think I run the council. It's quite disturbing. I got social media bombed [about a public spending decision taken by the Council] ... Some of it was getting a bit testy, some pretty abusive stuff ... I met with the guy running [the organisation that lost funding] and he said, 'Why don't you give me the money?' And I said, 'I don't run the council', and he said, 'Yes you do, you're the MP' So you see this is the problem, if you're asking people to participate in a process and they don't understand what the process is, and that's no criticism of people because we don't do this well in this country, you wouldn't see this in Germany." (Member of Parliament, UK, Conservative)*

However, an equal number of UK interviewees expressed scepticism that civic education would be a particularly useful focus, in some cases because they mistook civic education – cultivating the practice of participation and democracy in a school setting – for teaching the history of British politics, and in other cases because of a broader scepticism that more education was always the answer, seeing such calls as a form of special pleading by people who are interested in government and politics.

> *"I was at party conference and there was a resolution about how the teaching of politics and modern studies should be made mandatory to all pupils in the education system. And I remember thinking, yes, but I read a week ago, the British Association of Geographers, or whatever, had just voted at their conference that geography should be compulsory for all pupils on the curriculum. Everybody believes that what they are focused on should be the thing that everybody is focused on … There's always an education-based answer to a policy issue, a 'fix it in the schools' answer. You know, people are all overweight, well, we'll teach healthy eating in schools, you know, and it completely abrogates responsibility." (Local Councillor, Scotland, SNP)*

Developing their answers further, several German interviewees talked about the need to improve political communication and increase the visibility and approachability of politicians, especially at the local level. Politicians should be encouraged and supported to be in closer contact with their communities and to be responsive to the needs and concerns of constituents. Such solutions, they suggested, are grounded in the notion of greater individual efforts by politicians and in trying to improve the broader political culture through communication and education, rather than participation and deliberation.

Related to the above, across the three countries, and especially at the local level, several interviewees suggested that finding better calibre politicians was necessary, thus implicitly – and sometimes explicitly – criticising their colleagues. Several made the point that it is the job

of elected representatives to engage their communities in an ongoing way, working with key stakeholders and groups, whilst also noting that many do not do this, or do not do it effectively. Most respondents who made this argument tempered their claims about the calibre of politicians by reemphasising the point about necessary support and resources.

In the UK, many local councillors talked at length about public engagement, outreach, and consultation exercises, especially targeted at communities that are most distant from the policy process. They bemoaned the fact that cuts to local government funding had often meant these units in local government had been cut.

> *"[…] our Community Engagement team could, well we used to invest in it, we had a fairly big team but now it's one or two people now." (Local Councillor, Scotland, Labour)*

Similarly, in France there was an interest in what could be done to strengthen dialogue between citizens, elected politicians, and administrative officials. In addition to improving civic education, some interviewees talked about the need for politicians to change their own culture and behaviours, engaging more closely with their constituents. For example:

> *"I think that political leaders also need to rediscover a great deal more humility and simplicity in the way they behave and, finally, they need to stop taking themselves for kings. We're all little barons in our little baronies … we've got big offices, we've got staff, we've got drivers, we've got all sorts of things. Can you imagine the disconnect?" (Mayor, France, Socialist Party)*

Other French interviewees pointed out that democratic innovation could be used to strengthen the acceptability of policies already elaborated, which brings the issue back to something closer to selling, communicating, or legitimating policy, as opposed to rethinking the mechanisms through which policy is developed. Greater citizen participation was viewed as a mechanism to better inform politicians in their work, helping them to set the agenda or to propose policies that they could claim had some degree of public support.

In the UK, recalling the deep structural problems identified earlier (section 2.1), when conversations turned to solutions, they typically focused on rewiring some, or all, of the fundamentals of the state alongside increasing the resources available to improve public services. Most saw these problems as the real ones to be solved.

In sum, the focus of most interviewees across the countries was strengthening existing structures. It was often emphasised – especially by Conservative politicians – that the bedrock of democratic legitimacy is the conventional chain of electoral accountability. Within the context of familiar political contestation, most interviewees wanted to find ways to improve the culture and quality of political and policy debate and to improve the way in which politicians communicated their ideas to the public.

2.4. Democratic innovation as peripheral to the search for solutions

Generally, interviewees did not see democratic innovation as the sole – and often not even a particularly important – solution to the challenges facing representative democracy. Despite most of the politicians we interviewed expressing a desire to be more engaged with their constituents, most did not see democratic innovation as something that could help them achieve that aim. This was especially surprising given how many of them were concerned about problematic feelings of powerlessness and a lack of self-efficacy that they detected amongst their constituents. Even when diagnosing the problem in this way, very few politicians saw democratic innovation as an important part of the cure.

In the UK, those who were prepared to engage in a fuller discussion about democratic innovation expressed some curiosity about the various formats, often posing questions to the interviewer about how they worked in practice. Nevertheless, most of them saw such mechanisms as little more than nice "add-ons" once the deeper, fundamental problems facing democracy had been solved. In the context of a discussion about the creation of new Mayors in some of England's biggest cities outside of London, one interviewee remarked:

> *"So, take the Metro Mayors – where is the Assembly, where's the local assembly? London has a London Assembly, but for the regional mayors, where's the Council or the Assembly body to hold them to account? I mean, it hasn't even got the most basic checks and balances, so there's very little scrutiny. So, before we start talking about new forms of participation, we need to revisit some of the basic principles that we're getting wrong." (Member of Parliament, England, Labour)*

This was interesting insofar as it implicitly rejected the notion that democratic innovation could play a role in the broader democratic reform that most interviewees said they would like to see happen. Green politicians, Scottish Government officials, and politicians with specific lived experience of democratic innovation showed a greater appreciation for the potential role that such innovations could play – not in isolation but alongside other reforms – in meeting the challenges facing democracy. Similarly in Germany, even those who were open to, and interested in discussing mechanisms of democratic innovation, did not believe that they would be transformative in isolation. Once again, they were seen as potentially interesting "add-ons", to be tried alongside the more important process of improving the preconditions for participation.

In France, however, interviewees who were more enthusiastic about democratic innovations saw them as potentially more useful in efforts to tackle the challenges facing representative democracy. They saw deliberative formats as a partial solution to citizen disengagement because they offer participants a transformative experience. One interviewee told a story about one of their constituents:

> *"There's a citizen in my commune who was drawn by lot, who was far removed from politics. Well, since then, she's been very involved, she's involved in associations because she's taken to the game. Because her voice is heard." (Mayor, France, Socialist Party)*

Others pointed to an indirect effect of participating in a deliberative process, namely that it re-legitimised elected representatives in the eyes of the citizens participating. One civil servant observed that participants in the French Citizens' Convention on Climate experienced the complexity and the accountability inherent in decision-making that is often described by politicians:

> *"Where they started to sound like MPs was when their neighbours, they told us, started insulting them by calling them elites. There too, the MPs (...) were in a swoon because that's so much what they experienced too. All of a sudden, just because you think you represent the people, people say: 'who do you think you are?'" (Civil Servant, France)*

Finally, interviewees were not uniformly reluctant or sceptical about all forms of democratic innovation. Responses were nuanced and specific forms of democratic innovation – such as citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting, and referendums – were viewed as having strengths and weaknesses (see section 4). The next section of the report presents findings about interviewees' level of knowledge and experience with various forms of democratic innovation and their overall level of interest in them.

3. Democratic innovation: Knowledge, experience, interest

Interviews explored general levels of knowledge about various forms of democratic innovation, as well as how relevant our interviewees perceived such innovations to be for their work. Interviews also explored what, if any, experience people had with democratic innovation and what impact those experiences had on people's attitudes.

3.1. General levels of knowledge and salience

Overall, most interviewees possessed some general knowledge about the existence of various forms of democratic innovation. Most were aware of the existence of citizens' assemblies and participatory budgets, amongst other formats, and that such things are being increasingly talked about and used as part of the practice of modern politics. However, there was a lack of specific knowledge about, for example, how selection worked for a citizens' assembly, what the process of organising a participatory budgeting process might involve, and so forth. This lack of specific knowledge often cultivated a view that such processes favour those who are already mobilised and engaged in politics. For example:

> *"[…] if you bring a Citizens' Assembly in, and they decide policy, or influence it even, and again, that is, I think it's been evidenced to be fairly, a fairly tight demographic that would participate in that, and it's not representative [of the area] – it means a potential group of middle-class, tree-hugging Greens get to push their policies to the Council. Well, that can't be the right way to do it. So, I suppose my take is that we're elected by the public to do our jobs and that's who should make decisions [for the area] … Now, is there a better way for me to be informed about the decisions we take in the*

Council? Yes, probably. But then, which model do you use for that? I don't think it's an assembly because that won't engage people who need the most support from the Council." (Local Councillor, Scotland, Labour)

But I don't know if these new suggestions solve the fundamental problem because, in my experience, the new formats also tend to reach mainly those who are already socially active today. And it continues to be difficult to reach those who feel marginalized or left behind. Whether that's the case or not is another question, but they have the feeling that they are not being addressed by democracy. (Member of Parliament, Germany, Liberals)

The argument that organising participatory and deliberative processes would tend to favour those who are already organised, vocal, and participating in politics and public policy was offered by multiple interviewees in each country. Particularly in the case of citizens' assemblies – or at least well-organised ones – the argument reveals a lack of understanding about the institutional design that is intended to overcome that concern. In most cases, when interviewees were told that successful citizens assemblies were typically organised with the help of outside organisations with expertise in selecting panels to be representative, the argument was reassessed. Nevertheless, it is interesting that so many interviewees moved quickly to this concern when the topic of democratic innovation was raised.

In part, this could be because democratic innovation does not have a distinctive "brand identity" in the marketplace of political ideas. Indeed, few interviewees recognised that citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting, and so on, are seen by many academic researchers and democracy campaigners as tools in the same toolbox. Terms that are used by researchers and campaigners – such as "democratic innovation", "participatory democracy", and "deliberative democracy" – have not crossed over into common parlance. Many interviewees required an explanation, or prompt, to grasp what the interviewer meant by democratic innovation. The difference between representative, participatory, and deliberative democracy had to be explained regularly.

Across all three countries, there was a tendency to approach the topic through the lens of familiar practices such as consultations, public engagement, and constituency surgeries. For example, in the context of a discussion about what one interviewee described as efforts to engage in participatory democracy, when asked by the interviewer to elaborate on what was meant:

"Well, you know, we try it, but you sort of lose the will eventually. We had some really tough budget decisions to make just last year, and we organised a whole series of public meetings and it was the same faces coming along that we always see in our surgeries [one-to-one meetings with constituents] and all anybody wanted to do was say "don't cut this", "don't cut that". Well, the fact was we had to cut something, but nobody wanted to make that decision. It's not serious, it's not realistic." (Local Councillor, Scotland, Labour)

If one of the principal arguments in favour of democratic innovation is that it offers the opportunity of a step-change in how citizens engage with politics and public policy, it is concerning that many interviewees engaged with it from existing preconceptions of how citizens engage with established processes and institutions, such as public meetings.

At a country level, context seemed to influence the salience of democratic innovation as a topic. Salience seemed higher in France and Scotland than in Germany and England. In Germany, most interviewees were aware of the ongoing discussion about citizens' assemblies given the recent vote in national parliament in May 2023 on the first citizens assembly commissioned by the Bundestag,[16] as well as numerous preceding pilot citizens assemblies on national level and others at state and local level.[17] However, although established at national level, the scope of the organisation and impact as well as the relevance of the assemblies has been rather limited. Organised predominantly as model projects, they were not designed to substantially inform the political decision-making process on a national level and did not reach wide public attention as a credible new form of participation. Rather they were intended to inform the process of designing the format adequately.

In France, the issue seemed to have higher salience in general, perhaps because two high-profile national citizens' assemblies have been deployed for the past three-years, which have contributed to putting the issue of democratic innovation on the political agenda. Following the Yellow Vests movement, the Citizens' Convention on Climate was widely covered by the media in 2019-2020. In early 2023, a new citizens' assembly dedicated to end-of-life was established. Moreover, the format has spread at a local level. Since 2020, regional and metropolitan councils such as Grenoble, Nantes, Occitanie, and Montpellier have organised their own assemblies. Amongst French interviewees, citizens' assemblies were widely seen as fashionable and in vogue, with participatory budgeting seen as more old-fashioned, having been institutionalised at local government level in many areas.

In the UK a within-country difference was noticeable. Scottish interviewees were more aware of democratic innovation in general and often in interviews this was connected – sometimes positively, sometimes critically – directly to the Scottish Government's "Democracy Matters" initiative and broader agenda of community empowerment and participatory budgeting. There is no equivalent policy agenda in England. There have been sporadic examples of citizens' assemblies in England but the most recent UK-wide assembly to date – on climate change, which reported to six House of Commons select committees in September 2020 – was neither highly visible nor impactful.[18]

[16] Deutscher Bundestag, Bürgerrat Ernährung. 2023. Available at: https://www.bundestag.de/parlament/buergerraete/buergerrat_th1

[17] Bürgerrat.de; Mehr Demokratie e.V. Available at: https://www.buergerrat.de/

[18] Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD), Stephen Elstub, 25.11.21. Available at: https://www.wfd.org/commentary/how-has-uk-climate-assembly-impacted-parliament

3.2. Experiential knowledge and learning journeys

Those interviewees who possessed greater knowledge tended to have acquired that knowledge either through direct experience or through learning journeys in which they had come to engage with the issue, for example by taking evidence about democratic processes as part of their work on a parliamentary committee. As a result, knowledge was often 'siloed'. For example, an interviewee (*Local Councillor, England, Labour*) who had invested considerable political capital in establishing and institutionalising processes of participatory budgeting had little detailed knowledge about citizens' assemblies. The person was not opposed to citizens' assemblies, they simply had not engaged with them because their use of participatory budgeting was driven by the need to address a specific issue related to public spending.

With respect to learning journeys, the most explicit example came from a UK interviewee (*Member of the Scottish Parliament, Conservative*) who explained how, from an initially sceptical position about citizens' assemblies, their perspective changed after meeting politicians from other countries who had shared positive, first-hand experiences of such assemblies. Further evidence came through in several other interviews – sometimes first-hand, other times second-hand – about how politicians who approached specific exercises of democratic innovation with initial scepticism or indifference shifted to a more positive perspective through seeing a process in action.

Those who had direct experience tended to identify advantages in such exercises for the broader process of decision-making, with several emphasising the usefulness of recommendations that emerged from deliberative processes. For example, one interviewee explained their experience with citizens' assemblies on the regional level as follows:

> *"Sometimes, interesting turns occur where one can say, yes, this comes very close to what pays off in democratic processes as the struggle for the best solution. And, of course, this also helps us as representatives or as an institutional body to be even closer to the citizens or the population's issues and concerns." (Member of State Parliament, South Germany, Greens)*

Even some politicians who had not been *directly* involved in a form of democratic innovation, but had heard positive things about such an exercise, tended to adopt a positive perspective about the specific form they had heard about. It seems that good news can spread and shape perceptions. However, several interviewees in Scotland who are, or have been, involved in promoting democratic innovation – both civil servants and politicians – sounded a contrasting note of caution about negative examples and bad news stories also being able to spread, thus making it important not to rush forward with poorly-designed or under-resourced exercises in democratic innovation or doing things "for the sake of it".

Amongst our interviewees there were no direct instances of politicians shifting to hold more negative attitudes *after* experiencing a form of democratic innovation first-hand, although some Scottish interviewees pointed out examples of this second-hand, which they attributed to experiencing poorly designed examples. However, those with negative experiences of

established forms of citizen engagement – such as consultations or public meetings – were often hesitant to invest further time and energy in participatory and deliberative formats. For example, referring to their experience with consultations at the municipal level, a German interviewee remarked:

> *"When I attend these events, I realise that it's become a matter of catering only to specific interest groups. Only certain factions show up, driven by their own agenda, and we no longer reach the broad majority of the population. The issue is that these events attract particular interest groups, whether left or right, climate-focused or conservative, it doesn't matter. But they are just small groups we can still engage with. That's why I have to say, and I know many people in administration, we're all disillusioned today and we're saying, this is not the way." (Member of State Parliament, Central Germany, Conservative)*

Similarly, a UK interviewee remarked:

> *"I don't really see the point in organising more of this sort of stuff when we know what we're going to get … Fine, you're saying it might be set-up a bit differently but if it's the same handful of people, and it's always a handful, talking the same s**t in a different room, I don't see the point." (Local Councillor, Scotland, Labour)*

In short, for some politicians it seems that forms of democratic innovation can be, unfairly, guilty by association with processes such as consultations and public engagement sessions, whereas politicians who get to experience democratic innovation tend to see that they are different and often become more positively predisposed toward them. Indeed, experience of forms of democratic innovation was often transformative *precisely because* it contrasted with previous experiences of traditional methods of consultation. For example:

> *"There was a period of citizen consultation, particularly at local level in the 1990s and 2000s. It went into crisis. There was a sort of professionalisation, an over-representation of people with time on their hands. (...) [With the citizen assembly for climate] The 'I have no preconceived views, I'm bound to respect the balance' aspect was democracy as in a book." (Civil Servant, France)*

Crucially, however, that positivity does not often spillover from the specific format they experienced to other formats. Most interviewees who had experience of democratic innovation saw it as a case of picking a particular format to solve a particular problem. The experience was framed through a lens of pragmatic problem-solving. Put simply, a positive experience of a participatory budget does not seem to make somebody more positive about the idea of a citizens' assembly, nor vice-versa. Very few interviewees demonstrated a deep, principled commitment to democratic innovation *in general* – few spoke in broad terms about recasting the relationship between the citizen and the state. Those interviewees who expressed broad support for democratic innovation were civil servants who had been closely involved in developing and delivering such exercises, pundits or commentators who champion reform broadly, and – specifically in the UK – Green politicians.

Overall, levels of knowledge were somewhat arbitrary, largely determined by the vagaries of what an individual happened to have experienced or heard about. It seems that experience matters but that experience does not lead to people becoming converts to the broader cause of democratic reform through democratic innovation.

3.3. Little desire for more knowledge or debate

Most interviewees conveyed little interest in discussing democratic innovation in great depth, or in engaging in a deeper debate about the relative merits of such mechanisms in the present context of growing public dissatisfaction with democracy. The topic held low salience for most and interviewees' interest in the topic became quickly saturated. Most interviewees returned to what they perceived to be the broader challenges facing modern representative democracy, to the details of their work as elected politicians, and to what changes they would like to see. Apart from those rare enthusiasts – and those tasked with working on democratic renewal in an official or activist capacity – it was difficult to sustain 45- to 60-minute interviews on the topic of democratic innovation.

In the UK, the only interviewees who demonstrated a real interest in knowing more were elected politicians who thought they might want to use a form of democratic innovation themselves. For example, several Green councillors in England were keen to know more about best practices around citizens' assemblies because they were interested in setting one up. No such enthusiasm for information was found among any of the French or German interviewees.

3.4. Consistency of views

Inconsistencies in views emerged in many interviews. Some interviewees expressed certain perceptions at the beginning of an interview that they later contradicted, or that they did not hold throughout the interview. For example, interviewees would sometimes start by denying that a lack of self-efficacy was a driver of low trust and low satisfaction with democracy, only to later start talking about exactly that problem. Or they would criticise forms of democratic innovation as being dominated by the same vocal, organised people and groups – often termed "the usual suspects" – and therefore disadvantaging the most marginalised in society but then go on to praise established consultative mechanisms, which often entrench similar structural disadvantages.

The overall impression was that many politicians do not have ordered and consistent views about democratic innovation. Unlike more concrete public policy issues – health, education, immigration, for example – it did not feel as if politicians were rehearsing familiar lines and ideological positions. Rather, the different forms of democratic innovation were taken on and discussed individually and independently of each other, which often led to contradictions across an interview. Instances of reflective comparison were notable for their infrequency.

For example, one UK interviewee who entertained the idea of Australian-style compulsory voting reflected on that much later in the interview when the conversation turned to compulsory attendance at citizens' assemblies, akin to jury service.

> *"Yeah, it does link to my compulsion to vote thing. If I'm saying you need to vote then, well, let me say it the other way, if you have to show up for a citizens' assembly but you don't have to vote, that seems backwards to me." (Local Councillor, Scotland, Labour)*

Given that interviewees' thoughts about specific forms of democratic innovation mostly depended on their experiences, discussion of the pros and cons of specific formats often led to inconsistent views overall. For example, in Germany some interviewees described positive experiences with a particular form of democratic innovation, however when they talked about it in more general terms, they did not support it being replicated on a broader level. One conservative interviewee explained at the beginning:

> *"The experiences with the citizens' assembly have been quite positive where it has been organised calmly and with the appropriate time, without any pressure to act."*

But went on to say, later in the interview:

> *"Well, it's not as if I would say that I'm convinced that citizens assemblies always work as intended [...] I don't think we can solve many problems in a broader sense with it." (Regional policy professional, Germany)*

In France, one interviewee was very supportive of the idea of democratic renewal in theory, but when it came to discuss specific things such as participatory budgeting, they were very reluctant to extend it.

4. Barriers and reluctance to democratic innovation

This section explores interviewees' concerns about democratic innovation to understand what is driving reluctance and creating barriers. The section begins with a discussion of an often-presumed barrier, namely that politicians fear giving up the power to make policy decisions. It then focuses on concerns about how democratic innovation can be integrated into existing processes and structures, and concerns about the inclusivity of new formats, both of which raise important *theoretical* questions about democratic innovation but also important *practical* questions. The section closes with a discussion of some practical and logistical concerns that were raised.

4.1. Power, control, and a fear of the unknown

It is important to re-emphasise that most politicians did not see democratic innovation as a particularly useful remedy for what they perceived to be the current ills of democracy. However, the topic was also generally a low salience one. Given that, no interviewees – except one (*Local Councillor, England, Liberal Democrat*) – expressed strong hostility to democratic innovation *tout court*. Instead, concerns and reluctance were more specific and tended to focus on the implications of different forms of democratic innovation – often understood as operating in parallel to, but separately from, existing structures of representative democracy and public engagement – for the smooth overall functioning of democracy.

A fear of losing power over decision-making processes was rarely stated *explicitly* by politicians, although there were exceptions:

> *"And then, politically – obviously – the biggest thing is that people don't want to give up control, particularly once they've just been elected. It's not going to be first on those people's agendas to say, right, now I'm going to give over control of this budget to somebody else, whether that's to members of the public or anybody else. And I think that's the real nub of the issue. That's my feeling." (Labour Councillor, England)*

Overall, comments such as, "they elect us to make policy decisions" were grounded far more in a perception that most people did not want more opportunities to engage and participate more so than they were grounded in a defensive, zero-sum way. Few expressed concerns that a greater use of the tools of democratic innovation could shift decision-making power towards citizens by making the policy process less closed and hierarchical. Given the evidence presented earlier in this report, particularly that democratic innovation was often understood as akin to more public engagement, it could be that many interviewees did not fully understand the implications of democratic innovation and thus did not articulate such concerns.

Although politicians tended to downplay concerns about losing power, this was often mentioned explicitly by civil servants as a reason why politicians may be reluctant to embrace democratic innovation. For example:

"A colleague mentioned that … some federal or state legislators might feel their own competencies are being restricted, because suddenly there is another body, and this diminishes their own decision-making authority for which they were elected. I find this argument very plausible. On the other hand, in my opinion, it's an unjustified fear. Because it's not about implementation if, from the outset, you say, 'we are interested and want to discuss it seriously'." (Civil Servant, state level, Germany)

"I hear it a lot, you know, 'I've been elected to represent the people and I will be making the decisions', and that's fair enough. But what we always say is that, 'who knows best? Who knows what's needed in local communities? Is it one elected member, or a few people around the table, or is it the thousands of people living there?' … But yeah, the biggest challenge really is the sharing of power." (Civil Servant, Scotland)

Some civil servants in each country perceived politicians as worried about losing their position and portrayed them as feeling somewhat insecure. Politicians were characterised as seeing democratic innovation as potentially devaluing their role as political representatives. In France, one civil servant suggested that adopting democratic innovations could be seen by politicians as representing their own failure to resolve issues through established processes.

A related concern is about losing control of a process by adding more components and making things more complex and potentially messier. Such concerns were palpable amongst many politicians who often talked about mechanisms of democratic innovation as if they would constitute a more elaborate form of *consultation*, with views to be fed back into the existing policy-making structures. Several interviewees expressed a concern about what they would do with these recommendations and the difficulties such recommendations might create for them as politicians. For example:

"Like I say, we do consultation all the time and we have a set of processes to do it. Could they be better? Sure. Everything can be. But we do it and there's a rhythm to it, the people we consult are coming to us and giving us the perspective of this group, that group, and we take that in and, that's the process. It's got some structure to it. My concern is, if you start setting up new things, is that there's this constant sort of production of demands or whatever. What am I supposed to do with that?" (Local Councillor, Scotland, Labour)

The quote reveals a pattern of thinking that is much more akin to consultation and the potential for consultation to become messier and less structured, as opposed to thinking about shifting decision-making power in a more fundamental way. Several politicians conveyed a fear of the unknown – a sense that they have an imperfect set of current tools but that they know how to use them, they understand them. Civil servants also pointed to uncertainty and a deeper sense of fearing the unknown as barriers that politicians needed to overcome.

"Perhaps it's also about the uncertainty. […] Or the fear of something new. That's often the case when you're not quite sure how to deal with it. And then it's also quite

complex. There's often a fundamental scepticism or perhaps even a basic pessimism, like, it's always the same people who end up coming and participating. So, you [as civil servants] have to put in extra effort and seek more experiences and get advice." (Civil Servant, state level, Germany)

French civil servants suggested that politicians' reluctance might be linked to the risk of going back to decisions they have already made and taking even longer to implement public policies.

Interestingly, a more critical perspective about power in the context of democratic innovation was offered by several interviewees in all three countries. It was articulated clearly by a UK interviewee:

"The person who decides which questions are asked is more powerful than the people who answer the question … the design and the choice of the issue in participation is the most powerful part of the process, not the participation itself. And so, one shouldn't be too starry-eyed about empowerment because power lies where it lies, and the people who exercise power, and who will do so one way or another, they have to be accountable for it, responsible for it, and so on. And so formal participatory processes are hemmed in by how they started. I mean the most extreme example of that is a referendum … I don't have a problem with them [forms of democratic innovation in general] at all and I can see that they have a place but for me the important question it comes back to is, what are you pointing it at? And who decides that? Because there's always a decider." (Policy Adviser, UK, Labour).

The point being made was that *somebody* would always be exercising power by deciding when to use a form of democratic innovation, what form to use, what question to ask, how to frame the issue, how to present the evidence, and so forth (this is discussed in more depth later in the report, in the context of citizens' assemblies). In France, interviewees who were sceptical about democratic innovation often justified their reluctance by pointing out that such processes could be "rigged", with an agenda set by governing authorities to get answers that they wanted. This was also brought up by some interviewees in Germany, pointing to the possibility of politicians establishing and even manipulating forms of democratic innovation in service of their own agenda, mainly through exercising control over the organisation and management of such processes.

4.2. Integrating democratic innovation within existing structures

Throughout the interviews, a clear concern emerged about how democratic innovations would work alongside the existing processes and structures of representative democracy. Numerous interviewees pointed out that a process designed without a clear institutional outcome – that is to say without considering how representatives would be able to use it in the process of making public policy – would be, at best, unproductive and, at worst, damaging because it would raise false expectations and create a sense of decision-making power where

none existed. This concern was sometimes expressed in an abstract way, but it is a deeply practical concern related to the institutional design of each instance of democratic innovation, which we discuss further below (section 4.4).

Expectation management was a particular point of concern, and interviewees emphasised the need for the core question addressed to citizens to be clear and the status of the output of any process to be clear as well. Otherwise, democratic innovation could be discredited or viewed as performative in the eyes of the public. This issue was often raised by interviewees in France, particularly among left-wing politicians who pointed out that President Macron pledged to "take up unfiltered" the proposals of the Citizens' Convention on Climate that he initiated in 2020, but ultimately did not.

One UK interviewee (*Member of the Scottish Parliament, Conservative*) made the point repeatedly throughout their interview that whenever you decide to have any form of participatory or deliberative democracy you must think carefully at the outset about framing the topic precisely and clearly, and you must be explicit about the status of the outputs or recommendations and the way they will be connected to the existing structures of representative democracy in a way that offers clear closure to the process. They argued that it was important for forms of democratic innovation to be underpinned by commitments made within the normal channels of representative democracy – so, for example, a commitment to hold a citizens' assembly should be included in a political parties' manifesto to give it legitimacy.

> *"I do think one of the worries of a citizens' assembly is that a slightly mendacious government, where there such a thing, could be elected, having never discussed an issue of controversy at all, then decide to convene a citizens' panel on that issue, that citizens' panel could then come forward with recommendations, the government could then legislate on those recommendations using the citizens' panel as the justification for doing so. But for those issues never ever to have been discussed or voted on in a national election, and I think to my mind that would be a slightly more sinister abuse of the process." (Member of the Scottish Parliament, Conservative)*

Perhaps unsurprisingly for a Conservative, considerable thought was given to embedding forms of democratic innovation in clear institutional frameworks. Underpinning all of that, they argued, must be a mature exchange with clear communication:

> *"I think that the key in all of this, whenever you do it, is for there to be a maturity in the exchange during the process, which allows those who participated, even if what they recommended didn't happen in the way that they wanted it to, to feel that it had been a worthwhile exercise because they understood that the issue had been properly discussed, and why or why not what they'd recommended then went on." (Member of the Scottish Parliament, Conservative)*

This was largely echoed by Scottish Government civil servants and local government officials who work in this area.

4.3. Concerns about inclusivity

Several interviewees feared that an already existing gap in political participation could be exacerbated by new forms of democratic innovation. There was a sense amongst many politicians that it was marginalised communities and groups that were least likely to participate politically in general and to vote in elections, and they were even less likely to participate in a citizens' assembly, or show up to a public fair, or vote in a participatory budgeting exercise, as voting was seen as less costly than those more involved activities.

> *"That's why we're always going to find the same people, the same people who are willing to take time, because the truth is that policy making takes time, and it takes time out of your personal life. So, we also need to free up people's time." (Former Member of Parliament, France, Renew)*

There was also a concern that forms of democratic innovation would place a high demand on the public, who would have to learn how they work, forming new democratic habits, which could prove most difficult for those already marginalised and distant from existing structures and processes. Participating in citizens' assemblies or participatory budgeting exercises was seen by many interviewees as resource-intensive in multiple ways – from the time required to learn about the issues and to attend and participate fully, to the financial resources in terms of transportation and potentially foregone income. In the specific context of citizens' assemblies, a German interviewee remarked:

> *"That's where I say, it can be discouraging for many people when you're randomly chosen for this role, in addition to your job and taking care of your children, and everything else you have to manage. It can be overwhelming, and you may not even know who to turn to for help. So, I believe there are inherent risks in this. It's not always as great as it sounds; it's very theoretical and idealistic, which is well-intentioned, but you really have to make it work effectively." (Member of State Parliament, North Germany, Social Democrat)*

Some also expressed concern at how certain formats could privilege the more naturally vocal, those who are comfortable speaking in public, or those more formally trained due to educational privileges to argue and debate political issues. These were seen as barriers that could disproportionately hinder poorer, marginalised, or less-educated people from participating fully. Within these concerns there was often a return of the "usual suspect" argument, discussed above (section 3.1).

At the local level, some politicians questioned the geographical scope of democratic innovation and how representative participants would be. For example:

> *"Is one point of view more sacred than another? For example, when you're planning a housing project in a neighbourhood, how can we ensure that neighbour's opinion is as legitimate as people who live ten-minutes away on foot, as people who work in the neighbourhood, or as people who have been waiting for social housing for a long time? It's a matter of scope and rules we set ourselves." (Former minister, France, Green)*

In connection to a participatory budgeting process, one interviewee expressed their concerns as follows:

> *"We've probably already left out so many people, and it will be difficult to motivate them again. My question is, what happens if I'm for example in a socially disadvantaged neighbourhood, and they have a budget available on which we want to decide together. Who gets to participate then? And among those participating, are they the ones in a youth centre, those in a nursing home, or even people in homeless shelters on-site, or the ones in social meeting places, that you include? These are the questions that occupy my thoughts in this regard." (Member of Parliament, Germany, Social Democrat)*

It was interesting to note that those who have worked to develop and implement democratic innovation are attuned of the challenge of inclusivity and try to develop best practices to mitigate such issues, from practical concerns about the accessibility of venues and materials to those with disabilities, to designing processes in a way that *begins* with communities and groups furthest removed from existing structures and processes.

Overall, it was interesting to contrast the observations with interviews with civil servants in Scotland working more broadly on democratic reform and community empowerment, who pointed out that the broader culture of policymaking is what needs to change and that any given instance of democratic innovation would only be one part of a much bigger, more complex whole – that whole being about a broader opening of government to participation and an embrace of more co-productive methods of developing policy.

> *"If we're going to shift power, and we are thoughtful about how we do that, then whatever your policy is, you go to the people furthest from government, because you'll pick everybody else up on the way back in and involve them, and seek their views." (Civil Servant, Scotland).*

4.4. Cost, resources, and the practicalities of implementation

Logistical issues such as cost, resources, and various other practicalities of implementation came up repeatedly in interviews, raised by politicians and civil servants. The most common concern was that democratic innovation costs time and money for little obvious political benefit.

In Germany, civil servants were the most enthusiastic about forms of democratic innovation, but they also identified a range of issues. Most of them pointed to existing mechanisms of involving citizens and stressed the challenges of designing them well and then implementing them well, with appropriate staff and money. Increasing the number of formats if they are not well-staffed and well-resourced could, several interviewees feared, lead to a public backlash. Regarding implementation, German civil servants pointed specifically to legal obstacles and how the lack of pre-existing legal frameworks for forms of democratic innovation could be an obstacle to establishing them – some said they would be forced into

finding legal gaps that would allow such formats to go ahead. In a context in which civil servants reported being under-staffed and under-resourced, these concerns were significant ones.

> *"We also need to allocate some funds to have some space to experiment. And establish the necessary legal framework to implement this in a normal manner, and that presents a challenging act of balance for us. […] And we need the politicians to really want this and support implementing it." (Civil Servant, State level, East Germany)*

A similar point about legal frameworks was made by a UK interviewee, who explained that it is often not possible to delegate decision-making powers to, for example, participatory budgeting processes without first amending various laws, which poses a high barrier to reform.

> *"My understanding, just from the few conversations I'd had … [was that] local committees effectively have delegated powers over things like transport funding, so roads, things like that, and I was told we couldn't do it [hand those powers to panels of citizens] because basically it had to only be councillors making those decisions … I was absolutely not going to have it be just councillors because that would totally go against everything we'd done up to that point. So, it just wasn't an option as far as I was concerned. But I can't say that I went into it in every detail and tried to look for ways around it as it were. But I always felt that was the next stage." (Local Councillor, England, Labour)*

Sometimes, politicians calculated that the political capital required to enact legal changes was too high given the likelihood of pushback and opposition from some of their colleagues. It was also said by several politicians that they felt civil servants and local government officers often used variants of the "we can't do this because of legal frameworks" argument to block and obstruct experimentation with democratic innovation.

In France, civil servants shared many of these implementation concerns – time, resources, and workload were often mentioned. These considerations were especially strong in smaller local authorities, which already lacked the expertise required to implement public policies. More specifically, some civil servants tasked with supporting the implementation of forms of democratic innovation pointed to a problem with the culture of dialogue at the national government level. According to interviewees, a culture of dialogue is already better established and managed at the local government level ("friction is part of life"). However, as several French interviewees pointed out, the national administration and civil service would not directly engage with citizens, and democratic innovation was seen by them more as a problem to cope with than a solution to problems. Therefore, it was suggested that when civil servants at the national level engage in such formats they do so in a very formal way, "because it has to be done", with a lack of interest and knowledge.

More generally, interviewees highlighted the fact that they felt caught between politicians on the one hand, who were seen as reluctant to share decision-making power, and citizens on the other hand, who have their expectations raised and put forward proposals that may be

deemed intellectually admissible but impossible to implement, particularly from a legal point of view. One civil servant explained:

> *"[Civil servants] are in a system where they can't move. Citizen demands may be intellectually acceptable, but in practice it's not [always] acceptable. Because a law or a regulation doesn't allow it, because you'd have to multiply actions to address the demand, and therefore have more resources, or more time. And civil servants find themselves caught in a vice, with very strong constraints, from above, from their hierarchy, and very strong pressure, from below, from the citizens, without having the means to be able to respond." (Civil servant, government administration, France)*

In the UK, there was a contrast between civil servants working for the UK Government and civil servants working for the Scottish Government. At the UK level, there is little political impetus behind democratic innovation as a policy issue, with policy responsibilities unclearly divided across ministries and departments. In contrast, Scotland – as already mentioned – has developed a broader policy agenda around democratic renewal, community empowerment, and participatory policymaking. Scottish Government and Scottish local government officials are acutely aware of many of the barriers and challenges to democratic innovation but have also worked to build best practice guidance on how to overcome them. There is an ongoing process of policy learning, and Scottish Government officials works to support and advise colleagues across Scotland about how to run democratic innovation exercises well. Given that democratic innovation is still emergent, those tasked with developing and implementing exercises in democratic innovation are keen to ensure that they are done as well as possible, to avoid negatively damaging its reputation.

A final point that was made by numerous interviewees was that the successful development of democratic innovation required the investment of political capital and support by those in positions of responsibility – council leaders, ministers, chairs of relevant parliamentary committees. Civil servants emphasised that bureaucracies naturally move slowly and cautiously but can respond to clear political directives that are backed by political capital and that give them the space and the flexibility to experiment.

5. Perceptions about different formats of democratic innovation

Where possible, interviews explored participants' perceptions of different forms of democratic innovation. This section explores the details of these responses, considering what interviewees thought about citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting, and referendums – in what context might such formats be appropriate? At what level of government? It is important to recall that knowledge of various forms of democratic innovation was sporadic and largely based on experience. Given that, responses were nuanced and complex. There was no clear, overwhelming endorsement of any specific format in any specific context. Most interviewees were critically open to thinking about different formats and when they might be useful.

5.1. What needs to be considered when implementing DI?

Most interviewees emphasised the importance of considering the specific context in which a particular democratic innovation might be adopted. These considerations tended to focus on the level of government at which democratic innovation might be suitable and the sort of policy issues that might best be addressed by such mechanisms. In addition, most interviewees who engaged with this question made the point that if a form of democratic innovation was going to be used, thought needed to be given to the appropriateness of the format and the timing of the process.

Level of government

Thinking about appropriate forms for appropriate levels of government was a prominent theme. There was a feeling that what works well at the local level might not necessarily work well at the national level. In Germany and the UK, interviewees mostly supported exploring democratic innovation at the local level. Only in France was there broader support for democratic innovation – citizens' assemblies in particular – at the national level.

Many politicians suggested that local concerns were better suited for innovative participatory and deliberative formats, whereas national policy issues were often more complex, involving trade-offs between policy areas that might be less suitable for participation and deliberation beyond parliament. For local political issues, local people were often perceived to be "the experts"; they could inform policymaking in a valuable way because they were often directly involved or concerned.

However, for many interviewees "local" often meant "hyper-local", at the community level. Describing one example of an attempted participatory budgeting exercise, an interviewee explained:

"[They tried to organise it] across a big southern block of the city. And that wasn't the level that communities thought of. It wasn't, there was no identity. It was like people from the [Area A] wouldn't go to an event in the [Area B] because that was somebody else. It just didn't work and in rural areas as well where wards cover several towns, I remember being asked, you know, 'we tried this, it didn't work, what would you recommend?' And I said, 'Did you use your ward boundaries?' And they said, 'Yes'. I said, 'How many different towns are in your ward?' Three. I said, 'Have you considered that you maybe need to do three of these at a smaller scale?'" (Local Councillor, Scotland, SNP)

Policy issues

At the national level, the most common types of issue cited as suitable for democratic innovation were moral issues, or issues that cut across standard ideological and party-political divides. In the UK, several interviewees alluded, retrospectively, to a citizens' assembly to handle the question of EU membership (an issue that divided political parties), or to the Irish citizens' assembly that discussed abortion (a moral issue), amongst other things. Two other issues were identified by UK interviewees as potentially suitable for a national citizens' assembly: the end-of-life debate and how we fund the National Health Service although *not* whether the UK's healthcare model should be fundamentally reformed – an interesting example of how politicians seek to control the parameters of debate even within deliberative settings. Interestingly, some French interviewees were open to the idea of citizens' assemblies for controversial issues such as policing despite being sceptical about democratic innovation in general. For example:

"We should give citizens a voice on major issues, so that their voices are heard. Security, for example: the police lack empathy, they're not efficient, they're divisive. That would be useful. Then there's healthcare: a majority think our system is collapsing. The same goes for education. It's no longer a republican melting pot, and people are complaining about it." (Mayor, France, Conservative)

Most politicians in the UK and Germany saw issues such as foreign policy, migration, and economic policy as unsuitable for democratic innovation because of their cross-cutting, complex nature. It was also often mentioned that these – and other issues – often involve making difficult, unpopular decisions and that it is precisely the job of politicians, to think in long-term and sustainable ways, considering policy questions in relation to other issues and overall national resources. Some claimed that this is not something that can be expected from citizens in a one-off process of participation or deliberation, for example:

"Politics also needs to make difficult decisions. For example, because childcare fees are frequently raised, water fees, waste fees; we even have school closures and the closure of public swimming pools. All of these are indeed demanding decisions, like how to create accommodations for a large number of refugees, which not everyone supports, especially not in their immediate neighbourhood. We are in such a transitional period where I also wonder, if promising that we can shape all of this through citizens'

assemblies and dialogic citizen participation, to be consensual in the end; isn't this just a nice promise that might backfire?" (Regional policy professional, Germany)

In several instances, it was hard to pinpoint where interviewees were drawing their lines, especially given that many felt a citizens' assembly on foreign policy would be too complex but a citizens' assembly on climate change would not – it sometimes seemed to be more a question of the salience of the issue, and other times the complexity, which illustrates the lack of coherent, thought-through positions amongst many interviewees.

At the local level, interviewees across the three countries saw community development as a good area to engage in democratic innovation, especially if budgets were involved. The emphasis was on small projects in tightly drawn geographical areas. Very few politicians envisaged larger local budgets, such as transport or social care, as suitable for deliberative or participatory innovations. Climate change and local sustainability developments were typically suggested as possible topics for local citizens' assemblies, likely a reflection of the current high salience of that policy area. Two politicians in the UK specifically suggested that developing an all-encompassing anti-poverty strategy for a city could be a suitable topic for a local citizens' assembly. In Germany, many politicians suggested infrastructure developments such as road construction, design of market squares, playgrounds, or wind parks as suitable areas for citizens' assemblies at the local level. In France, most interviewees mentioned urban development projects as issues for local referendums or participatory budgeting, and climate policies for citizens' assemblies.

Overall, what became clear was that democratic innovation was seen as most suitable either for very tangible, concrete, and precise questions, or for issues with a direct and personal connection to people. In general, the higher the level of government and the more (seemingly) complex the policy issue, the less supportive interviewees were of democratic innovation.

Timing of the process and appropriateness of format

Regarding timing, interviewees often stressed that if the insights and recommendations that emerge from a mechanism of democratic innovation are to have a meaningful impact, then it is important for it to happen before key decisions are made. Several politicians criticised cases in which citizens were consulted at a point in the overall policymaking process by which most, or all, of the fundamental decisions had been made. There was a concern that this could lead to more public frustration about politics, further eroding citizens' trust in politicians, and entrenching feelings of detachment and voicelessness. Many interviewees identified the importance of structuring democratic innovation mechanisms carefully, to allow sufficient time both for proper participation and deliberation *within the mechanism* and for the mechanism to conclude in sufficient time to inform the policymaking process.

Interviewees emphasised that the usefulness of various formats of democratic innovation largely depends on the policy issue. More complex or contentious problems might benefit from formats that allow a more structured presentation of evidence, in-depth discussion and

– crucially – *deliberation*. Simpler matters, such as how to spend a ring-fenced pot of money, might be more suitable for processes that are *participatory* – whether through voting in a participatory budgeting exercise or a referendum – but not necessarily *deliberative* (although, of course, there are more deliberative mechanisms of participatory budgeting).

In the following sections, perspectives about various forms of democratic innovation will be explored in more depth. Before that, it is worth re-emphasising that criticisms and concerns are typically about *specific* formats and processes and not about *the general principle* of democratic innovation. Recall also that national context matters – certain forms of democratic innovation are fashionable in different countries. Citizens' assemblies are increasingly in the spotlight in Germany and especially in France, but less so in the UK (although more so in Scotland than England). Participatory budgeting is considered somewhat passé in France but is very much in vogue in Scotland – it also has a long history, although usually at quite a small scale, in England.

5.2. Citizens' assemblies

Citizens' assemblies have gained prominence as a democratic innovation, offering a mechanism for informed deliberation and decision-making by a representative cross-section of the public. A range of views emerged from the interviews, illustrating several nuances and complexities in the debate. Concerns focused on the ability of the format to enhance the quality of debate, the idea of sortition in the context of representativeness, the legitimacy of outputs, as well as a range of concerns about implementation and integration within existing structures.

Enhancing the quality of debate and reducing political alienation

A lot of the discussion about citizens' assemblies in the interviews focused on whether such formats would enhance the quality of debate about political issues and public policy – something that many interviewees felt had eroded significantly over recent years. Most interviewees in France saw assemblies as a potentially useful mechanism to explore complex and conflicting societal issues. They were discussed by many as an interesting format that could offer a space for informed deliberation and consensus-building, again something that many politicians felt was increasingly rare in political debate. Some interviewees saw assemblies as useful in building common interests by overcoming individual ones and perhaps freeing participants from any tribal political identities that they may hold – engaging as citizens in a common endeavour rather than as members of a certain political faction. In France, interviewees from the political right remained more sceptical or oppositional.

Such positive perspectives were particularly found amongst interviewees from the political left, as well as amongst civil servants. The most enthusiastic interviewees argued that assemblies might offer citizens that very feeling of self-efficacy that was felt to be increasingly lacking. Similarly, in the UK, politicians from the SNP and the Greens – along with civil servants

and officials – were most inclined to see the positive potential of citizens' assemblies to contribute to remedying feelings of disempowerment and alienation amongst the public. They often explicitly mentioned the *deliberative* format of such assemblies as a useful counter to increasing polarisation in political debate.

In Germany, it was mostly civil servants working to develop new forms of participation who saw potential in citizens' assemblies to shape new forms of debate and citizen engagement. While most politicians were not against the use of citizens' assemblies – and often saw them as interesting experiments – most did not see how they could be effectively useful in the policymaking process or in their broader work as elected representatives. They were also more sceptical that such assemblies could significantly enhance the quality of political debate. Some politicians questioned the extent to which citizens' assemblies would lead to a greater sense of self-efficacy across society, at scale. They did not expect a "trickle-down" or "trickle-out" effect to the public more broadly because participants in assemblies would be perceived as speaking for themselves and therefore would not necessarily be perceived as closer to the average citizen than an elected politician.

> *"I mean, the further away the individuals who are selected are, the less of a feeling of representation there ultimately is. So, if, for example, there are 500 people selected at the federal level, you have just as little connection to those individuals, perhaps even significantly less, than to constituency representatives in the end." (Member of Parliament, Germany, Social Democrat)*

Furthermore, questions were raised about the effectiveness and political utility of recommendations emerging from citizens' assemblies. Some interviewees in Germany said that recommendations would not be based on expertise but would rather reflect the personal preferences of participants. Some worried that the format could be too brief to allow for a comprehensive assessment of complex issues and unfavourably compared the process of a citizens' assembly to a rather imagined, idealised view of the policymaking process within governments and parliaments – an idealised view in which subject specialists in government ministries and parliamentary committees carefully weigh relevant evidence before arriving at policy proposals. Many politicians raised doubts about the ability of the format to produce holistic, well-informed decisions, especially regarding financial and budgetary implications and longer-term policy planning. These views fed into a broader scepticism amongst some interviewees that citizens' assemblies would enhance the quality of policy outputs, even if they might establish a different culture of debate amongst the participants.

Sortition and representativeness

Sortition – the idea that a citizens' assembly should be appointed by lottery in a way that creates a representative sample of the overall population – was a prominent and common concern in Germany and the UK. Most interviewees were not aware of the specific mechanisms by which citizens' assemblies tend to be appointed. Indeed, that lack of awareness often led to the fallacious claims, described above (section 3.1), about assemblies

“always involving the usual suspects”. For many, a citizens’ assembly was thought of as akin to a public/Town Hall meeting.

Often, sortition had to be explained in the interview. Even then, many interviewees wondered whether sortition-based assemblies could truly represent the interests and political ideologies of the broader population. There was a concern that they would instead elevate individualistic interests and particular identity traits. Several German interviewees expressed scepticism that people could “speak for” a group just because they have been selected to statistically represent that group.

> *“Sometimes, this is presented in a very simplified way. It's like, 'Let's have people from migrant backgrounds speak up too.' But the question arises: just because someone has a Turkish name, it doesn't automatically qualify them to speak on behalf of Turkish-German citizens in general, or, for example, for youth, women, or disabled individuals.” (Member of State Parliament, North Germany, Social Democrat*)

In addition, interviewees across the countries were concerned that it would still be “the usual suspects” – those who are already politically engaged or those who voice their opinion loudly – who would mainly participate. Even with recruitment by lot, there was a concern that people already engaged in politics would be more represented in assemblies as many people who were approached to participate, but who are generally disengaged, would decline the invitation.

> *“Often the idea behind the citizens' council is to select random citizens. But if we're honest, it's the same people who end up taking part.” (Member of Parliament, Germany, Liberals)*

> *“I think there is a real risk that you set up these structures, and we can talk about selection and making sure it’s more or less representative and so on but, at the end of the day, you can’t make people do it. And so, the people who will do, who will give up the time to sit on a panel, or they’ll spend a Sunday afternoon wandering around a participatory budgeting fair probably because they already know someone there, or they’re in a community group that’s there, they’re already doing stuff. And so, it’s fine to do more of this stuff but I’m not convinced it’s reaching the people we might like to think it’s reaching.” (Local Councillor, Scotland, SNP).*

Even after giving more information on additional mechanisms of scouting that can strengthen sortition-based approaches, most interviewees remained sceptical. Even with professional sortition processes, there was a concern that those who are most marginalised and disconnected from politics – and from society more broadly – would not be reached. Therefore, in Germany at least, forms of free recruitment not involving sortition were preferred by many politicians. It was often not clear *precisely* how they envisaged such a process of free recruitment working or how it would be more representative than sortition.

By contrast, most French interviewees had no significant concerns regarding sortition. Some of them had already experimented with such processes in their communities. Most politicians viewed lottery as the only process capable of preventing citizens' assemblies from being captured by the "usual suspects". It was seen as the default mode of selection ("I don't see how we can do it any other way") and was perceived as a generally effective way of ensuring representativeness.

Related to sortition is the question of compulsion; should people, once selected by lot, be compelled to participate in a citizens' assembly, like performing jury duty. The issue came up in several interviews in France and the UK with those advocating for it framing it as a form of civic duty.

> *"[Citizen assemblies] immediately reminded me of jury trials. In other words, at a given moment, you ask citizens drawn by lot to devote some time to a subject. I find that quite virtuous, in fact." (Civil Servant, France)*

However, most interviewees were sceptical of compulsion with most questioning how it could fit into current frameworks in which non-participation is an accepted norm and ought to remain a legitimate political expression.

Legitimacy

Two distinct issues arose in relation to the legitimacy of citizens' assemblies. For some interviewees, the main question about legitimacy was an echo of the concerns about representativeness. Some were sceptical that assemblies could be as legitimate as decisions made by elected representatives voting in councils and parliaments because, despite being selected for one reason or another, participants in citizens' assemblies are ultimately expressing personal preferences – they are not, as a collective group, the product of preferences being aggregated across the whole of society (or at least those in society who vote in elections).

A second concern was about the potential for the legitimacy of a citizens' assembly to compete with the legitimacy of an elected representative body. Some interviewees feared that citizens assemblies might undermine the work of elected representatives and create a possible contestation or competition with formal representative elected structures. This concern was often expressed more strongly when conversation turned to more embedded structures of citizens' assemblies, such as standing citizens' assemblies like in Paris.

> *"Well, that [a standing citizens' assembly] is a totally different thing. Then we're talking about a second chamber [of parliament], with a mandate that's not coming from that sort of to-and-fro of the political system. I don't know how that would work to be honest because you'd have two competing mandates and the potential for serious tensions in the legislative process." (Political adviser, UK, Labour)*

Discussing the specific example of Paris' standing citizens' assembly, a councillor in Scotland remarked:

> *"Right, I see, well I never heard about that before. I go back to what I said earlier, you know I can see a space for experimenting with things like this. I have had colleagues on the council talk about having one on anti-poverty or climate. So, doing it as a way to come up with ideas and as a way of engaging with the public, fine, but a permanent sort of shadow council, I just don't see how that works in practice. And at the end of the day these things have to come back to the council. So, yeah, recommendations and ideas, all for it, but I think some people get a bit carried away with this stuff." (Local Councillor, Scotland, Labour)*

Most interviewees preferred that any recommendations emerging from citizens' assemblies should be understood as just that – recommendations that then needed to be incorporated into existing frameworks and processes of lawmaking and policymaking. That underlines the importance of thinking carefully about the design of a policymaking process that involves a citizens' assembly at some point, an issue discussed further below.

Choosing a topic and introducing evidence

A relatively common critique was about how topics for a citizens' assembly are chosen, a question that concerns agenda-setting power. As discussed above (section 4.1), several interviewees pointed out that you can never remove power from political decision-making. Concerns were raised about how governments or other influential lobbying or campaigning groups could exert influence over topic-selection. For example, in Germany two interviewees questioned the choice of topic for the first official citizens' assembly initiated by the Bundestag focusing on food and nutrition. The citizens' assembly's subject was determined by Members of Parliament through the establishment of a parliamentary rapporteur group, representing all factions in the German Bundestag, engaging in discussions on various proposed topics. Despite their efforts, a topic was chosen that did not receive full support from the opposition. At this juncture, these two German interviewees expressed concern, contending that the topic selection process was influenced by party politics and aligned with established political agendas, leading them to suspect that the outcomes of the assembly may have even been predetermined from the outset. One interviewee saw the decision as political and went on to criticise the government's selection of NGOs and expert organisations commissioned to deliver the assembly as biased. Summing up their concerns, they said:

> *"There is a risk of politicizing the formats, and I view that very critically." (Member of Parliament, Germany, Conservative)*

Beyond the selection of a topic as being politicised, concerns were voiced about who would determine what evidence would be introduced in the sessions of the citizens' assembly, and how it would be introduced. There was a fear that these processes – at the level of

institutional design – could be manipulated by certain interests. Moreover, there were reservations raised about the neutrality of organisations that help governments organise assemblies, with suggestions that they might not be impartial or that they might represent certain perspectives over others. For example:

> *"It all sounds very nice and impartial but it's not. You've got a bunch of people who have a whole agenda around this. There are people who are experts in running them but they have a whole set of political interests. People will tell you they can be done impartially but they can't. It's politics. The problem is these things sound almost apolitical, as if you're taking all the bad bits of politics out but you're not, you're hiding them, which is worse … You're going to do one, let's say on climate change. Are you going to bring in local business owners to talk about how much it'll cost them and their business to change this and that? Or people whose business relies on moving things around and driving when the sort of people who will be running the citizen's jury want cycle lanes and low emission zones?" (Local Councillor, England, Liberal Democrat)*

Some French conservative politicians expressed similar concerns. Discussing the French citizens' assembly about end-of-life, one remarked:

> *"Despite everything, we have the impression that it's biased, that overall there are positions that will be expressed, but that there's a fringe of people who already have a desire to do something on the subject, and that the text is already written. And since a convention is an addition of discussions, debates, etc., if you have people who are in the game to manipulate the thing, it's not very difficult to get there." (Former Deputy Mayor, France, Les Républicains)*

Some interviewees pointed out the importance of good moderation to allow citizens' assemblies to proceed in a respectful way, where all voices could be heard equally. There was some concern that those who can assert themselves more effectively in such settings could dominate proceedings adding additional layers of bias. Factors such as political knowledge, rhetorical prowess, discriminatory experiences, and social status were seen as shaping people's ability to engage and participate fully.

Communication, expectation management, and integration

Many interviewees commented on the potential for citizens' assemblies to further fuel frustration and disaffection with the political system if the recommendations they produce are not subsequently implemented in part or in full. Despite this, as discussed above, very few interviewees suggested that decisions of such assemblies should be binding on elected representatives because politicians must reserve the power to weigh any recommendations against other considerations and resource trade-offs.

Consequently, many interviewees underlined the importance of establishing the process clearly beforehand and communicating the status of any recommendations produced by the assembly. Essentially, this comes down to expectation management, a term used by many interviewees. In France, based on the recent experience of the Citizens' Convention for

Climate (2019-20), one interviewee pinpointed expectation management and clear communication about the status of the recommendations and outputs as their main concerns.

> *"Between consultation and decision-making, there are proposals. But you have to accept that this format is propositional. With the citizens' climate convention, Macron laughed at people, because he never said, 'guys, this is propositional'. He would have said: 'It's pre-decisional. Go ahead, make proposals and we'll submit them to the national assembly for debate', that would have been different. Generally speaking, I just think we have to accept that citizens' conventions are propositional. Otherwise, people won't get involved. They'll say, 'Why don't you do a survey?' In the end, there has to be something concrete, a proposal, but you have to be prepared to say that from the start." (Deputy Mayor, France, Socialist Party)*

Most interviewees recognised the importance of citizens' assemblies working alongside and in cooperation with existing representative democracy structures. Several UK interviewees who possessed knowledge of concrete examples pointed to the assembly set up in Ireland in 2016 to consider a range of constitutional issues, and how its function and role as part of the broader political system was communicated. Several politicians and civil servants in Germany, and several politicians in the UK, pointed to the need to have clear institutionalised processes for citizens' assemblies. Although being aware of the problem, few had considered the intricacies of solutions in any depth (except those with direct experience or recent involvement in the process).

In summary, citizens' assemblies have varying levels of support and concerns across the countries. Interviewees in France were most likely to see them as a potentially valuable tool. German respondents were generally more sceptical, particularly regarding sortition-based assemblies and the practicalities of the process. The outlook was mixed amongst UK interviewees.

5.3. Participatory budgeting

A process through which citizens collectively decide how to spend a defined part of a public budget, participatory budgeting has been around for many years and has been used in multiple places in each of the three countries. As with citizens' assemblies, perceptions about the usefulness of participatory budgeting as a format varied and often reflected existing knowledge and experiences. In France, participatory budgeting is a widely institutionalised format at the local level, mainly in local governments run by the Left. However, it is perceived to be out of fashion. In Germany, knowledge was generally quite limited but there was some curiosity about using participatory budgeting. In the UK, awareness of participatory budgeting was high amongst politicians in Scotland, largely because the Scottish Government champions participatory budgeting as part of a broader community empowerment policy agenda. In England, awareness and knowledge was lower. The principal concerns about participatory budgeting that emerged from the interviews focused on levels of engagement and

representation and the suitability of public finance as a topic for public deliberation. There was also a scepticism about the geographical scalability of participatory budgeting.

Engagement and representativeness

Many interviewees saw participatory budgeting as an interesting tool because it seemed to offer a direct and concrete form of participation in a precise, targeted way. Concerns about expectation management and communication, repeatedly directed at citizens' assemblies, were seldom articulated about participatory budgeting because, in principle, the decision process and the expectation seem clearer. Many interviewees saw these aspects as advantages. Having people vote on a set of potential public spending proposals was seen, by some, as a way to inform political decision-makers about the priorities of citizens and to potentially make budgeting more inclusive and needs-based. In Germany, most interviewees showed limited knowledge about the specific process and practicalities, however, once it was explained they expressed a growing interest and curiosity in participatory budgeting as a way to engage citizens.

In France and the UK, concerns were voiced regularly about the representativeness of those who participate, and the ability of participatory budgeting to engage those who are generally disengaged from politics. Although not denying that participatory budgeting is participatory and deliberative in a way that goes beyond the normal mechanisms of electoral politics and trying to lobby or influence elected politicians between elections, several UK interviewees suggested that participatory budgeting events would be principally attended by those who are already organised and mobilised within communities, and thus that the process would further entrench biases in participation. Similarly, amongst French interviewees, significant concern was expressed about low participation and the perceived unrepresentative nature of those who tend to participate in participatory budgeting. Politicians recounted experiences of their constituents being disinterested in such formats. For example:

> *"I get the impression that citizens don't want to get involved in budgeting. In the participatory budgets set up by local authorities, there isn't much citizen participation. The majority don't care, don't want to, don't have the time to look into it." (Former Member of Parliament, France, Renew)*

Countering that somewhat, several UK interviewees – responding directly to a prompt about the potentially unrepresentative nature of participatory budgeting – remarked that you would never be able to design a process that would draw everybody's attention but that should not be used as an argument to do nothing:

> *"Well, you're right it doesn't involve everybody but what does? […] So, the way we approach this is to have various things going on as part of a broader strategy of engagement and participation. If you have a set of different things going on, including better community engagement in general and more co-produced policy, then more and more people will find some access point. It'll never be perfect, and it'll never been 100 per cent of people participating but, yeah, to be honest, I find the argument that*

we shouldn't have participatory budgeting because not everybody shows up a bit cynical to be honest. We had 45 per cent turnout in the last local elections in Scotland and so, what, we don't bother with elections either because not everybody shows up. It's a silly argument." (Local Councillor, Scotland, SNP)

Other interviewees, again typically those with some experience of participatory budgeting, pointed out that there are different ways to do participatory budgeting and how some of them are more engaging than others. However, more engaging formats, such as community fairs, tend to be more resource intensive and therefore, as one interviewer explained, most participatory budgeting exercises tended to be of the less engaging, public meeting, variety – a format that is far less effective:

"So good participatory budgeting is participatory budgeting that brings people together … Bad participatory budgeting involves giving a pot of money to a Community Council, and the Community Council holding an evening where all the local groups come along and make a presentation in a theatre. And at the end, everybody votes on a ballot paper for what, who they want to get the money and then everybody goes away again. And unfortunately, that's probably about 75%. Because that's easier. There's a big difference, I think, between marketplace and meeting participatory budgeting … A marketplace or a community fair type of participatory budgeting, where everybody who's there is also showing off what they do … [that] is serving the purpose of being a fair for the community. The idea is that you have this thing that brings people together, that lets them know what's going on, and that makes connections and creates body heat in the room, I think that's the important thing. That's how you get people engaged." (Local Councillor, Scotland, SNP)

Suitability of deliberating about budgets

Some interviewees questioned whether public finances and budgeting were suitable issues for greater participation and deliberation. In France and the UK, local politicians often expressed doubts about participatory budgeting driven in large part by the resource constraints that they face in a context of declining budgets or – especially in the UK – statutory requirements about expensive public services that they must deliver, leaving them little scope for discretionary spending. In this case, it is not necessarily opposition to participatory budgeting *in principle*, it is a pragmatic assessment that there is little capacity amongst local government officials to organise participatory budgeting events, and that the money available for discretionary projects is small and often inconsequential (although the sums involved might be very consequential to the community groups that secure them of course). For example:

"It's not particularly strategic because it's just another one, two thousand pounds to put on a summer course for kids or something. It's trivial amounts – maybe up to five thousand you know. The same in [AREA], they had 12 applications and none of them got more than about two thousand pounds. They have more of an engaged process to be fair. So, there's, you put an application in and it's scored by a group of local people

and then it goes out for a public vote and then, that of course allows the local projects to get out and lobby like the things you see, like in Tescos [a supermarket], when you put little tokens in [to vote for something], they do that kind of approach and that's a bit more engaging I guess, people are participating in a decision-making process but it's on fifty thousand or something … So, it's not transformative or anything but I mean, fine, do it." (Local Councillor, Scotland, Labour)

Some decision-makers – in particular conservative and liberal politicians in Germany – believed that budgeting should remain the prerogative of elected representatives, where appropriate trade-offs could be made between competing interests. There was scepticism that the public could possess an adequate overview of an entire public budget and that any insights gleaned from a participatory budgeting process would represent little more than a snapshot of a narrow set of public preferences. Budgets were seen as something that required long-term planning and complex trade-offs. Some politicians also expressed concern that the public might decide to cut certain things within a budget but, ultimately, the responsibility for anything that went wrong because of those cuts would sit with them as elected representatives, thus blurring lines of accountability:

"[…] if we're going to say, actually we're just going to stop cutting back trees that are dangerous, so we'll close the forestry service and just have to do it privately, you know, the first tree that falls through somebody's house and smashes it to pieces that'll be the Council's responsibility. Or we could reduce our environmental health team to a skeleton force and then somebody will get poisoned in a restaurant, and they'll blame the Council. What I'm saying is these are difficult decisions, and the responsibility will always come back to us." (Local Councillor, Scotland, Labour)

A more pessimistic view was offered by a few local politicians in the UK who worried that in a participatory budgeting process the public would vote for things that they want, as opposed to things that are needed, a sort of paternalism that suggests the public are not able to make sensible decisions about expenditure in their communities:

"If you try to crowd-source a budget you would end up with no methadone clinics, you know, no adult social care, you know, and all these things are incredibly worthy, and you need them, but they're not popular. What you would end up with is a hundred play parks, lots of sheltered housing for granny, and every road resurfaced 14 times, but you'd never get any of the things that a council needs to do." (Member of Parliament, England, Conservative)

When it was pointed out that participatory budgeting typically involves smaller pots of funding being devolved or allocated to participatory processes, not the entire local government budget, the same interviewee responded:

"You see, I think that starts getting messy because it's then, what do you devolve? So, OK, street scene, place, but it's going to get spent on, every road is going to be

resurfaced 19 times and there'll be potted plants everywhere, but critical infrastructure won't get repaired." (Member of Parliament, England, Conservative)

More positively, when the mechanics of participatory budgeting exercises were explained to interviewees in Germany, many became more interested and open to the idea. Others argued that particularly at the local and municipal level, people understand their needs, perhaps better than their elected representatives do, and can prioritise accordingly. One German politician voiced concerns about the current distribution of funds at the local level through project funding, where a lack of democracy often leads to resources being allocated to less essential projects for the broader public.

"There is so much project funding [on the municipal level]. Then you adapt to the project proposal, which you may not even need. But those in the state government have this super great idea, and as a municipality, you have no money, so you adapt to the proposal. I am really not a fan of that. And, the people on the ground already know pretty well what's good for them." (Member of state parliament, West Germany, Conservative)

A similar concern was voiced by a local politician in the UK who described established processes of grant applications as favouring people who can navigate the bureaucracy of local government and thus not reflecting the broad range of potential needs in the community. The same interviewee also suggested a tendency on the part of politicians to like to spend money on "big ticket" projects that draw media attention and can be "claimed" as political wins, as opposed to smaller community-based projects. Participatory budgeting was therefore seen as a useful alternative mechanism to diversify the opportunities to secure public money.

Overall, politicians' confidence in the ability of citizens to make budgetary decisions was relatively high. However, an important qualifier is needed, which is discussed next.

Scalability: geographic and financial

Two separate but related issues arose in discussions about the scalability of participatory budgeting – the first concerned geographical scalability and the second concerned financial scalability. There was a consensus across the countries that participatory budgeting should *primarily* be used at the local level – often the most local level of governance, smaller than a city or a town. This was not necessarily driven by a desire to keep participatory budgeting on the margins of public policy but was sometimes the result of reflecting on how to get people involved in such a process.

Several interviewees in the UK, with direct experience of participatory budgeting processes, pointed out that it typically does not work if the geography is not right and stressed the importance of thinking that aspect of a participatory budgeting process through carefully at the outset. They emphasised thinking in terms of meaningful boundaries rather than political

boundaries drawn on maps given that, often, constituency boundaries or electoral boundaries did not map onto actual communities of interest within which people can make shared spending decisions.

In France and Germany, no interviewees saw the potential for participatory budgeting to be used extensively – or even at all – at the regional or national level. Many returned to an emphasis on legitimacy and clear accountability of political representatives when deciding upon large budgets at broad geographical scale They also often returned to their arguments about budgets becoming more complex, involving more trade-offs, and requiring longer-term planning the bigger they were. This was seen by many as too complex for citizens to oversee through a participatory and deliberative process.

Most interviewees also said that the format was suitable for relatively small pots of money that make-up a limited proportion of the relevant overall budget. Few respondents were prepared to put specific monetary or proportional values on the potential floors and ceilings of participatory budgeting.

In Scotland, where participatory budgeting is in fashion, the target is for 1 per cent of the combined total of all 32 local government budgets to be allocated through participatory mechanisms. In 2023 that target was exceeded, reaching 1.4 per cent. However, as those involved in developing and implementing this policy in the Scottish Government point out, 1 per cent is a floor and not a ceiling and the aim is to expand participatory budgeting beyond local governments, for example to health boards and the police. The idea is to incrementally grow the proportion of budgets and build a broader culture of participation and deliberation. Civil servants who were interviewed were reluctant to put precise numbers or percentages on scalability of participatory budgeting but emphasised doing things in a well-structured way, with proper support and evaluation, as more important than racing to some arbitrary target.

5.4. Referendums and citizens' initiatives

Interviewees in all three countries underlined the relevance of direct democracy formats as expressions of bottom-up politics and as a way to grant citizens' direct political influence outside of elections.

In all three countries there was a general scepticism about extending direct democracy formats, in particular referendums. Many interviewees expressed their concern that these mechanisms often created polarization and were susceptible to populist campaigns and statements, and to manipulation. Several interviewees in Germany and the UK were specifically cautious about the risk of referendums being exploited by radical, right-wing forces. Consequently, in the discussion of democratic innovations, formats of direct democracy were not discussed as a priority issue of renewing democracy and broadening citizens political participation.

Many German interviewees were conflicted about formats of direct democracy, with many articulating sympathies for the principle while at the same time expressing caution about the potential for polarisation and manipulation. Often with reference to the UK's 2016 referendum on EU membership, many German interviewees argued that referendums should be reserved mainly for local and regional issues. Many interviewees further stressed that referendum questions should be restricted to those that do not threaten the democratic constitutional order or the protection of minority rights. Additionally, some in Germany voiced concern that referendums could lead to destructive, short-term perspectives triumphing over more constructive debate and nuanced outcomes. For example:

> *"I am not fundamentally averse. However, I notice that the discussion about direct democratic elements is being hijacked by populists with the intention of dismantling minority protection in favour of the perceived right of the majority. So, here too, caution on the platform edge." (Member of Parliament, Germany, Liberals)*

UK interviewees were generally cool towards referendums, perhaps because of recent political history. Multiple interviewees expressed concern about the divisive nature of referendums, about their susceptibility to short-term or manipulative campaign arguments, about the role of money in campaigns, about the power to set the question, and about the usefulness of outcomes that are close to fifty-fifty. Unfavourable comparisons were often drawn with Switzerland and states in the United States, where referendums are common.

For those who were most engaged with democratic innovation, there was a concern that referendums encourage exactly the opposite traits to what they are aiming for, namely deliberation. One side must win, and one side must lose, which is the opposite principle to a deliberative process aimed at finding compromise and consensus. In the UK, referendums were not seen as innovative tool of democratic renewal. Rather, they were viewed with scepticism and to be reserved for national questions that touched on constitutional issues, such as membership of the EU, changes to the electoral system, or Scottish independence.

French interviewees specifically emphasized national-level direct democracy. Direct democracy returned to the political agenda in 2019 as a demand of the Yellow Vest protestors. They were calling for a citizen-initiated referendum that would enable a law to be proposed or repealed by the people, without a decision from the president or the parliament, who are the only ones to benefit from this prerogative. More recently, President Macron raised the possibility of revising the constitution to broaden issues that could be submitted to a referendum.[19] Halfway between these two formats, the "Shared Initiative Referendum" was introduced in 2008. This mechanism is initiated by MPs, gathering signatures through a petition.

Interviewees were mostly reluctant to extend the use of referendums in France. They shared concerns specifically about the framing of the question, and the ability of the process to produce clear and reliable outcomes that could subsequently shape policy decisions. Most of

[19] France 24, News Wires, 04.10.23: 'France's Macron promises more referendums to decide on 'areas of national life'.' Available at: https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20231004-macron-promises-to-let-referendums-decide-more-issues

them stressed that issues submitted to referendum are reduced "to black and white, which is rarely reality", and a majority felt that referendums should remain an exception, used for issues of great symbolic importance.

However, the "Shared Initiative Referendum" was supported by some politicians on the Left. They expressed the need to simplify the rules surrounding these mechanisms, particularly the need to gather signatures of 10 percent of the electorate to trigger a referendum, pointing out that this threshold is almost impossible to reach when the intermediary institutions of French democracy are in crisis. The paradox was captured by a deputy mayor:

> *"[Shared initiative referendums] are real processes that offer the possibility of challenging politicians and forcing them into a debate or even a decision. The problem is that you need intermediary institutions that are capable of putting forward a demand and mobilizing a large number of signatories to do so. I think it's biased (...) because we have allowed this type of questioning when intermediary institutions are weakening. In the end, we give the illusion that it's possible to question, but we'll never get the signatures because we won't have the people to get them." (Deputy Mayor, France, Socialist Party)*

At a local level, referendums have been permitted since a law passed in 2003 but they are rarely used. They are only binding if there is more than 50 percent participation. Interviewees were mostly sceptical about promoting their wider use, pointing out concerns about the legitimacy of the process, low levels of participation, and issues of geographical scope. Only one interviewee – a conservative mayor – saw a local referendum as a potentially useful mechanism to get their constituents to decide between two public investment options.

In summary, direct democracy in the form of referendums or citizens' initiatives was treated coolly and cautiously by most interviewees, with German decision-makers expressing the most interest in them. UK interviewees were generally unenthusiastic about an increased use of referendums to decide policy questions. French interviewees emphasised national-level (but controlled) initiatives, as explained in the next section. They all shared common concerns about maintaining democratic principles and minority rights when implementing direct democracy.

5.5. Petitions

Public petitions were supported by some politicians in Germany, mostly from social-democratic or green alliances, as a constructive and useful mechanism of democratic participation. Some politicians observed that the current electoral system promotes a somewhat passive citizenry, offering a comfortable vantage point for criticism but too often encouraging an abdication of responsibility. In this context, several politicians saw the expansion of petition systems as potentially beneficial. Petitions were seen by some as a lower-threshold and less resource-intensive mechanism of political engagement compared to citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting exercises. Additionally, those who were

supportive of petitions expected them to stimulate greater involvement by political representatives, and candidates, with their constituencies, and to encourage campaigning between elections.

> *"In my electoral district, there are many people who are dissatisfied with national politics, people who would typically withdraw or simply complain. However, you can provide them with the tool of a petition, in my electoral district, there was one [...]. This petition was successful, and I can see the impact it has on people, making them feel like they could change something on their own. They get a hearing in the Bundestag; they are heard. It's not necessarily about them achieving success with the petition, but rather about guiding them into the democratic system, opening a door, and providing a place within the democratic, representative system. I believe that an expanded official petition system, perhaps with enhanced rights, could be a significant opportunity for this." (Member of Parliament, Germany, Social Democrat)*

Two French interviewees mentioned petitions as a way of putting issues that might otherwise not be heard on the agenda, thus giving voice to minority concerns.

> *"Petitions are a bit different: they're about how you put an issue for debate on the agenda of an Assembly that is interesting for a significant number of people, but which doesn't manage to break through the sound barrier of the agenda. This is a prerequisite for saying that a minority is interested. If that minority is sufficient, it becomes a subject for the majority." (Civil servant, France)*

One politician called for a "citizens' right to seize the local council", forcing the council to discuss a specific policy issue by gathering enough local signatures to put the issue on the council's agenda. A form of reciprocity was suggested, where the citizen who initiated the process would be invited to defend their proposal at the council, with the council required to respond and justify its position:

> *"As we're talking about democracy, the most useful thing for citizens is to appeal to politicians (...) to ask them to debate. It would be almost like a right of amendment or a citizens' thing. In that way, we would strengthen democracy without competing with representative democracy, and that's much more interesting. As a citizen, you can propose a municipal resolution if you have X number of signatures. The local authority is obliged to put it on the agenda. The proposal is defended by the first citizen to sign. You force the local authority to take a stand. You're not questioning the fact that it's representative, the local authority can refuse the decision but must justify why it is refused." (Deputy Mayor, France, Socialist Party)*

Several UK politicians mentioned public petitions, pointing especially to the advantages of the petitions process in the Scottish Parliament and the ways in which the operation of that parliament's petitions committee creates real opportunities for public participation in the democratic process. One interviewee pointed out that several legislative changes in Scotland

came about because of such petitions. Another suggested that well-structured petition committees could be effective at overcoming partisan and ideological barriers between members of the parliament who sit on them:

> *"The agenda [of the public petitions committee] is so broad that the party whips haven't got time to look at it and so therefore, almost uniquely, the politicians who come onto the committee don't come with a set of instructions. They actually have to use their brains and it therefore can lead to a much more satisfying engagement with an issue … [You] tend to have a much more genuine engagement around the issues and far fewer votes actually between Members, where there's any controversy in the decision that we've come to." (Member of the Scottish Parliament, Conservative)*

5.6. Party political perspectives?

Attitudes towards democratic innovation could not be mapped on to party politics without exception, but some patterns did emerge.

In Germany the main party-political distinction was not about the pros and cons of specific formats of democratic innovation. Rather, a distinction emerged between those who primarily focused on policy outputs and those who focused more on policy inputs. Those focusing on the outputs of the democratic process saw the efficiency and effectiveness of policy making as paramount, while those focusing more on the inputs saw meaningful citizen participation in shaping policies as equally if not more important. On the one hand, conservative and liberal politicians tended to hold a somewhat more administrative, output-oriented view. For many of them, the quality of the results was of utmost importance, with a secondary focus on procedural questions. Thus, extending citizen participation would only make sense when it would not "harm" the quality and effectiveness of policy outputs. Discussions about how different processes might also lead to better outcomes and results were rare.

> *"There is already a lot of influence for the citizens, and what goes beyond that, we always have to evaluate it from the perspective of whether we measure politics on the path or whether we measure politics by the achieved goal. And ultimately, this is the tension between the expansion of direct democratic possibilities and what the state is expected to deliver as a result." (Regional Policy Professional, South Germany, Conservative)*

On the other hand, overall, Social Democrats and Greens had the tendency to additionally place more of an emphasis on the intrinsic value of involving the public in decision-making. Their perspective was aligned with a broader conception of democracy and social justice, where meaningful citizen participation would be considered an essential basis. A focus on better, more participatory processes could enhance the quality of democracy in terms of inclusion, representativeness, and social equality. And, as some argued, more inclusive participation could also enhance more just policies and decision-making. However, little

thought has been given to how better participation processes could also produce more effective results. In Germany, this distinction was the clearest one to break along party-political lines.

In France, decision-makers exhibited a similar left-right divide. Conservatives showed more interest in local referendums as a way to decide between different public investment projects. Green and Left interviewees favoured more deliberative processes that could also be applied to national decision-making contexts. However, even among supporters of deliberative democratic innovations, there was a shared belief that the promised outcomes of these processes must be communicated and implemented in honest and sustainable ways. The case of President Macron breaking his promise to incorporate all proposals following the Citizens' Convention on Climate was perceived by many interviewees as having significantly harmed the legitimacy of that process, despite some understanding of the rationale behind Macron's move.

In the UK, things were somewhat different. Conservative politicians tended to offer the strongest defence of existing institutions and processes although there was, in each case, a curiosity about how at least one form of democratic innovation could be used although always in narrow and limited ways. Each Liberal Democrat interviewed gave rather different responses ranging from hostility to every form of democratic innovation mentioned to an enthusiastic embrace of every form in specific instances. Labour politicians tended to adopt a view that "the public" wanted politicians to get on with the job of governing and delivering public services. Most saw the primary issue as getting more money into public services and redistributing wealth, both of which were seen as potential remedies to public dissatisfaction with democracy. They tended to be instinctively cautious about democratic innovation, viewing it as of secondary importance and potentially even a distraction from achieving what they see as more important change. Put simply, democratic innovation did not fit neatly into the typical Labour politician's diagnosis of the problem.

Whilst often agreeing with their Labour counterparts about redistribution and the need to improve public services, Green and SNP politicians were supportive of democratic innovation as part of a broader approach to renewing democracy and tackling the problem of public disaffection. This was not uncritical support for democratic innovation, nor was it a call for an "everything everywhere all at once" approach, but it was a call to try and change the underlying culture of democracy in a way that was not echoed by interviewees from other parties.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

1. Political decision-makers are rarely *opposed* to democratic innovation *entirely*, but it tends to be a low salience issue in the context of addressing the present challenges to democracy.

Democratic innovation rarely elicited strong, emotive reactions from our interviewees. Most politicians and civil servants were comfortable discussing the issue. While few expressed great enthusiasm, only one articulated an outright rejection of all forms of democratic innovation. Most interviewees had significant concerns about the functioning of democracy in their respective countries but, even so, democratic innovation was not seen as the key to addressing those concerns. It was seen as useful in particular ways, as solution to specific problems in specific contexts, rather than as something that could improve democracy in a more general sense. Politicians seldom framed their concerns about democratic innovation in terms of losing power over decision-making. Instead, they often viewed newer forms of democratic engagement as a lower priority than improving existing democratic structures and processes.

Recommendations to civil society actors:

To establish discussions with political decision-makers about democratic innovations, advocates should approach politicians as critical but open to conversation. It is important to raise the salience of democratic innovation as part of the solution to the challenge of improving democracy, a challenge that is broadly recognised. Starting a conversation is likely to be successful if a common ground is established regarding the shared concern about challenges to democracy – but without immediately positioning participatory and deliberative democracy *against* representative democracy. Instead, openness is likely to be greater if conversations about new forms of citizen engagement and participation are explicitly linked to considerations of how representative democracy can be improved. Decision-makers are more likely to respond positively if democratic innovations are presented and framed in a way that focuses on helping them address their core concern: the functioning of institutions of the democratic system. It could be fruitful to connect the intrinsic arguments for deliberative engagement with citizens with extrinsic arguments about the potential links between such engagement and the system of representative democracy.

2. Democratic innovation is not recognised as a distinctive "brand" or toolbox, resulting in limited interest in, and knowledge of, it.

Partially because of the lower perceived salience amongst many decision-makers, democratic innovation is not recognised as an established set of ideas. For most politicians, there was no "brand recognition" in the way there would be for many academics, civil society activists, and civil servants who work on democratic reform and renewal. Therefore, interest in learning more about it was initially limited. When asked about what forms of citizen engagement and

participation they might favour, politicians often referred to traditional formats such as consultations, public meetings, or one-to-one meetings with constituents, which are quite distinct from participatory and deliberative formats of democratic innovation. Furthermore, even when they were aware of specific formats of democratic innovation, many interviewees had limited knowledge of the details – knowledge about how citizens' assemblies work in practice, for example, was often poor. Respondents often made contradictory claims about certain forms of engagement, demonstrating that their views should not be understood as fully formed and holistic but rather open to change through reasoned dialogue.

Recommendations to civil society actors:

When presenting initiatives for democratic innovations to decision-makers, proponents should carefully assess what assumptions they are making about the actors they are engaging with. Frameworks, arguments, and language that those working in the field are familiar with are unlikely to be common frames of reference for their interlocutors. Democratic innovation should not be presented as a "brand" of its own but rather as a set of various formats and tools. To enhance understanding, it is important to explain how deliberative and participatory forms of citizen engagement are distinct from existing formats. At the same time, conversations are likely to be more successful if advocates integrate existing forms of citizenship engagement and consultations into the "toolbox" of engagement. By linking the discussion of established and more innovative approaches, the distinctive goals of deliberative formats can be presented – and their additionality can be explained – more clearly. This is likely to open space to discuss specific tools and mechanisms.

3. The most important factor determining decision-makers' support for democratic innovation is practical experience.

While limitations in knowledge about various forms of democratic innovation were apparent, knowledge was not the most important factor in determining decision-makers' support. It would be a mistake to assume that people who supported forms of democratic innovation had consistently higher factual knowledge about those forms. Indeed, we found that even amongst supporters of, for example citizens' assemblies, sortition was not fully understood. However, interviewees who had been involved with a particular form of democratic innovation in practice held more positive views about that form. When their involvement enabled them to interact with citizens in positive ways, or if they felt that there were positive outcomes for subsequent discussions in their daily work, they tended to show a greater appreciation for that form of democratic innovation in general. Decision-makers with experience also had a greater appreciation for the need to resource such processes sufficiently to make them work properly.

Recommendations to civil society actors:

Rather than presenting arguments about forms of democratic innovation in the abstract, bringing decision-makers as closely as possible to seeing them operate in practice could be a

fruitful way to open conversations. Ideally, involving them directly would produce the greatest learning effect but, short of that, providing opportunities to observe good-practice examples would be useful. This is more likely to work for those who already have a meaningful level of interest – those who do not might be unlikely to commit time to learning. Advocates should consider how to present materials and arguments. Bringing in politicians and civil servants who have implemented forms of democratic innovation could be a helpful way forward. They could prove to be more convincing spokespeople than advocates themselves, with a greater ability to connect sometimes abstract procedures, processes, and formats to the concrete, day-to-day work of making policy.

4. Critique and support are commonly directed at specific forms of democratic innovation rather than comprehensively at the overall idea.

Given that most interviewees had only engaged with certain forms of democratic innovation, and had not been thinking about them holistically, arguments in favour or against were usually specific to particular forms and mechanisms. People with experience of a particular form of democratic innovation were often more aware of the issues and challenges of that form. However, articulating those challenges did not usually mean opposition to repeating the exercise. Rather, the discussion tended to focus on how to make that specific format more successful, often related to the question of appropriate funding and staffing. In generally tight budgetary environments, finding the resources to run exercises in democratic innovation well was a persistent concern.

Recommendations to civil society actors:

It is important to allow decision-makers to formulate critiques. Rather than directly countering them, advocates should consider if the critique or concern is directed at a specific form of democratic innovation or at the detailed operation of that specific form, as opposed to being a broad critique of democratic innovation overall. In that case, it could be fruitful to acknowledge the limitations of a particular approach and discuss whether that approach is best suited to achieving certain goals. Discussing how different forms of democratic innovation can be better or worse suited to specific contexts and problems could help to differentiate legitimate and constructive concerns from more general opposition. Furthermore, acknowledging that there are instances in which forms of democratic innovation have not worked well – for example, because it was not designed well, or funded well, or integrated properly into existing structures – makes discussions less confrontational and allows for a deeper engagement about specific formats and how they can be improved.

5. The role of organised civil society is often seen as crucial in ensuring democracy is strengthened.

Politicians who cared about improving citizen engagement were sceptical about a potential over-reliance on formats that rely on directly recruiting individuals to participate. They emphasised an additional set of actors that they saw as a crucial intermediary between a large mass of individual citizens and a structured democratic process, namely organised civil society. Some interviewees voiced concerns that sortition-based approaches were not the only – or the best – way to ensure that those who are underrepresented in existing representative mechanisms would be heard. Community-based civil society groups were often described as managing to do this well and in a way that puts less pressure on any one individual. Proponents of using forms of democratic innovation at the local level regularly emphasised that they work best when organised civil society plays a role in bringing people into the process.

Recommendations to civil society actors:

Advocates of democratic innovation should demonstrate how organised civil society either is already integrated into processes of participatory and deliberative democracy or could become integrated. This is particularly important when talking to politicians committed to improving citizen engagement but who have strong connections to civil society groups and care about their work. Crucially, sortition should not be presented as the only way to overcome the "usual suspects" argument. Instead, approaches and narratives that connect the strengths of participatory and deliberative formats to the strengths of civil society's organising capacity could be fruitful.

6. Political context is crucial – problems of democracy are understood very differently across countries, which results in different perspectives on the role of democratic innovation.

Although most of the overarching insights apply in all three countries, significant differences in views were identified that reflected national political contexts. This affected the salience of democratic innovation. In the UK, many politicians described the political system as so fundamentally broken that to focus on creating citizens' assemblies and participatory budgets was relatively unimportant. Additionally, many saw the economic situation as so dire that they questioned whether it could be justified to divert resources from improving public services to improving deliberation. The overall outlook in Scotland was somewhat warmer due to the prevalence of two governing parties that have made democratic renewal part of the policy agenda. In France, democratic innovation was seen as something more established, so the focus of discussion was more about the role of democratic innovation relative to systemic change. The utility of democratic innovation was commonly viewed through the lens of how to meaningfully address public manifestations of discontent with the political system, which France has been seeing with increasing frequency. Scepticism was less about the

intrinsic worth of new forms of democratic innovation, and rather more about the quality of their implementation and the likelihood of them resulting in actual change. Finally, in the German context, institutional structures were seen as relatively strong, and the focus of many interviewees was on democratic culture and citizen participation. A key worry was the rise of the far-right AfD and the challenges that posed to the working of parliamentary democracy. Therefore, openness to democratic innovation was strongest when it was seen as strengthening representative democracy.

Recommendations to civil society actors:

Engagement with decision-makers must consider the national context. While there is a strong exchange between researchers and practitioners working on democratic innovation internationally, for non-experts, how discussions about the topic are heard and reacted to is strongly affected by the national political context. Most politicians – apart from those who are already champions of the cause – looked at democratic innovation through an instrumental, pragmatic lens. In other words, it is important to be able to answer the question, "what problem will this help me solve?" The answer to that question will typically be context dependent and it is vital to be able to explain why, for example, forms of democratic innovation might help politicians to combat the rise of extremist or populist parties, or help to strengthen arguments about reforming electoral systems, or reforming local government powers. Adapting messages and engagement strategies to specific contexts is likely to increase the salience of discussions about democratic innovation.

7. Decision-makers want to improve the democratic system, but they want evolution not revolution.

When the topic was connected to their wider concerns about democracy, built on personal experiences, and focused on specific forms, many interviewees were willing to engage in conversations about the role that democratic innovation could play. However, they consistently talked about democratic innovation as needing to complement and strengthen existing institutions and processes. Rather than embracing all-encompassing changes to the democratic system, they talked in terms of change that could be introduced gradually. Even those convinced of the value of forms of democratic innovation, and those working in government on the design and implementation of them, were cautious about the idea of an "everything, everywhere, all at once" approach. This caution was driven by a fear that it could undermine the continuous, gradual work they have been doing to support high-quality examples of democratic innovation.

Recommendations to civil society actors:

If advocates of democratic innovation want to work with political decision-makers currently in office, they will most likely have to engage in incremental strategies. Getting more politicians involved in deliberative and participatory exercises requires time and action in multiple locations. Harnessing the critical openness that seems to characterise many decision-

makers might often require starting small, gaining traction in a particular place, and building gradually. Proponents of democratic innovation who call for rapid and comprehensive adoption of forms of democratic innovation, couched in a narrative about transforming the nature of democracy, will find that barriers within established political institutions are too high. Most people working day-to-day within the political and policy system are not in the market for a democratic revolution.

Annex A: Method Note

This research project sought to examine the perspectives of political decision-makers about democratic innovation in France, Germany, and the UK. Conducted in two qualitative phases, the project aimed to find out the intricacies surrounding the perceptions, challenges, and potential of democratic innovations as viewed by political decision-makers.

First, we conducted individual qualitative interviews with political decision-makers in France, Germany and the UK to learn what challenges to representative democracy they identify and what their perspectives on – and experiences of – democratic innovation looked like. This first phase provided the main source of data for the analyses in this report. Second, based on these conversations and their structured and comprehensive analyses, we ran two supplementary workshops. These workshops were designed to bring together a diverse group of actors – political decision-makers, civil society actors, and civil servants – to engage with the issues and perspectives brought up in the interviews. The results of the project and its two research phases are combined within this final report, which is published in English, German, and French.

Methodology

Phase 1: Elite Interviews

In the initial phase, a series of qualitative interviews were conducted with political decision-makers across the three countries. A total of 55 interviews were undertaken between May and October 2023, comprising 18 interviews in Germany 16 in France, and 21 in the UK. In the UK we aimed at conducting a similar number of interviews in England and Scotland facilitating a comparative analysis, as Scotland had already experimented with a greater range of democratic innovation formats.

Interview participants were selected to represent all major parts of the national political spectra, geographical regions, and various government levels, from municipal to national. Participants were drawn mainly from representative elected politicians. However, we also interviewed civil servants and a small number of policy professionals such as staff in political parties, foundations, or public administrations. Most participants were not specialists or outspoken supporters of democratic innovation. Specifically, we recruited with the aim of capturing concerns from typical political representatives to develop a comprehensive understanding, avoiding a biased inclination toward specialists on, or experts in, political engagement and democratic innovation, or fervent public supporters of democratic innovation.

Interviews were conducted in the national language of the respective country – based on a common master interview guide. The interview guide is included in this report (Annex B). Interview transcripts were analysed thematically within each country, with the results systematically compared across nations.

This report is based mainly on the compiled and systematically analysed results of the interviews. The research team undertook a common structured process of identifying overarching themes and categories, allowing for the synthesis of central patterns that spanned across the diverse political landscapes of France, Germany, and the UK. Afterwards, applying this framework, transcripts were comprehensively analysed, enabling the extraction of nuanced insights. This not only facilitated an overarching understanding of elite perspectives on democratic innovation but also laid the groundwork for cross-country comparisons. The resulting synthesis, presented within this report, reflects the complexities and commonalities inherent in the perspectives of political decision-makers.

Phase 2: Engagement Workshops

Building upon the insights gathered from the elite interviews in Phase 1, the second phase involved two comprehensive workshops conducted in Germany and France. At those in-depth workshops, we aimed to welcome both representatives from the target groups identified above, as well as representatives from civil society organizations that work on enhancing public engagement. Designed to foster a collective dialogue and to provide a dynamic forum, the workshops centred on the diverse perspectives about the potential usefulness – and challenges – of democratic innovation, with a focus on discussing and overcoming dissonances in perspectives. The research team collaborated with participants to develop recommendations and interventions tailored to address specific concerns and barriers to democratic innovation identified during Phase 1. Through real-world accounts, research findings, and other relevant inputs, the aim was to prompt a reconsideration of positions and identify potentially transformative opportunities. The goal was to investigate whether such interventions – such as accounts of experiences, research findings, and other inputs – might lead to a reconsideration of positions and greater opportunities for transformations. Using the insights from these workshops, we formulated recommendations for strategies to engage political decision-makers. The results of these discussions are included within this report.

Advisory Group

An Advisory Group consisting of 10 stakeholders engaged in democratic renewal in Germany, France, and the UK, and beyond, accompanied and advised the project. Through four collaborative meetings over the course of the project, this group provided invaluable insights, identified critical aspects for exploration, and advised the research by reviewing the formulation of the interview guide. Their engagement continued through the iterative process, with discussions on interview results informing the preparation for the workshops, thereby enhancing the project's depth and relevance.

Research Team

The research was conducted by an international team of researchers, coordinated by ***d|part***. Research on France was conducted by François-Xavier Demoures from ***Grand-Récit***. Research on the UK was conducted by Daniel Kenealy from the ***University of Edinburgh***. Research on Germany was conducted by Jan Eichhorn and Neele Eilers from ***d|part***, who also coordinated the project.

Annex B: Research interview guide

A. Introduction (5min)

Thank you for your time and agreeing to participate in this interview.

My name is _____ and I am part of an international research team working for d|part – a Berlin-based independent think tank doing research on political participation/ Grand Récit/ The University of Edinburgh.

The interview is being carried out as part of a research project about the state of democracy and citizens political participation. The research explores attitudes towards democracy and the relationship between established and newer forms of democratic participation and citizen engagement.

The project is funded by the Open Society Foundations and coordinated by d|part.

This interview is part of a series of qualitative interviews with decision-makers and those involved in the political and policy process at different levels of governance in Germany, France, England and Scotland.

Later in the project, we will conduct joint workshops with civil society practitioners and political decision-makers for more profound discussions and perspectives on the state of democracy.

Our conversation will last about 40-45 minutes. Is this still a good time for you to have this conversation undisturbed?

Before we start, let me briefly explain the framework on how this interview will be conducted and in which way we will make use of the information you disclose:

- In order to simplify the analysis and also to be able to refer back to the conversation at a later time, I would like to record the conversation.

- All information and opinions you disclose will be anonymised within the framework of the project and the data will not be used for any other purpose.

- Only persons directly involved in the project will have access to the project data.

- If you so wish, your data will be deleted immediately after the end of the project.

- You can withdraw your participation until XXX.

[Ask for questions, ask if people are ok with this.]

B. Conception of democracy and participation (10 min)

a) Could you please shortly introduce yourself and your position?

b) What marks a well-functioning democracy for you?
   a. *Prompt: Optionally probe for:*
      i. Why are these key aspects so important for the well-functioning of democracy?
      ii. What role should the citizens play?
      iii. How should democratic decisions be made?
      iv. In relation to this, what would an ideal democratic system look like to you?

c) How well do you think representative democracy in [country] is doing at the moment?
   a. *Prompt: Optionally probe for:*
      i. What do you see as the major challenges to representative democracy at the moment?
      ii. Do you see any problems with citizens not being able to affect decision-making in parliaments a lot between elections?
      iii. Do you see any hurdles to citizen participation and citizen involvement in decision-making processes (for example regarding representation or legitimacy) in [country, city] at the moment? And if yes, please elaborate on them.
      iv. Has there been any change in how representative democracy is doing in [country]? If so, to what extent do we need to react to that?

Note for us:

- *Do they see any problems with the way democracy is doing at the moment? Do they see a need to change/ transform?*
- *Keep the question open to give interviewee possibility to come up with challenges/ see their awareness of them. However, mention and specify during the question on the aspect of citizens participation if not talked about by the interviewee.*
- *Cut the interviewee's answer short and direct them back to the topic if they are only talking about external challenges to democracy.*

C. General awareness of democratic innovation (5 min)

d) How should the democratic institutions and political actors react/ adapt to the challenges they are currently facing?
   a. *Prompt: optionally probe for:*
      i. *Strengthening of representative democracy (e.g. expanding franchises to non-citizens/younger voters, i.e. inclusion; changed powers to parliaments, strengthening parliament vs executive; stronger anti-corruption/undue influence laws)*
      ii. *Supplementing representative democracy*
      iii. *Partially replacing it with alternative forms*

e) Regardless, of what you think of them, what forms of democratic innovation have you come across so far? Are you familiar with any examples or initiatives?

Note for us:

- *What do they know already/ awareness/ understanding of innovative forms of democracy?*
- *Intuitive appraisal: Are they interested/ Bored/ Challenged/ Comfortable/ Hesitant towards democratic renewal?*

Used definition of democratic innovations:
"Democratic innovations are processes or institutions, that are new to a policy issue, policy role, or level of governance, and developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence".

D. Initiatives and concepts of democratic innovation (15-20 min)

A range of ideas have been suggested to enhance the quality and quantity of citizen involvement in the political decision-making process. (You mentioned some of them already). These initiatives and concepts range from consultative formats to moving decision-making power more directly to citizens. For an overview we have created the following table. Please take a look.

All formats can be more or less: Consultative ⟷ Binding / Decision-Making		
Types	**Formats**	**Prompt for us**
Direct democratic formats	- Citizen Initiated referenda (bottom up) - Authority Referenda (top down) - Mandatory Referenda (eg. constitutional changes)	- Prompt: majority decision/ minority policies and issues
Deliberative democratic formats	- Citizen's budget / Participatory Budgeting - Public consultation campaigns - Citizens assemblies / mini publics drawn by a lot	- Prompt: Sortition/ drawn by lot, representation, minority issues, role of experts
Digital democratic formats	- Liquid democracy - E-participation (eg. E-panels, Hackathon)	- Prompt: accessibility

f) Which, if any, of the formats do you think might be useful? And why?
   a. *Prompt: Optionally probe for:*
      i. Can you think of specific topics for which some of these formats may be well suited for?
      ii. Better representation?

g) Which, if any, of the formats do you think might be less useful? And why?
   a. *Prompt: Optionally probe for:*
      i. Accountability?
      ii. Legitimation?
      iii. Inequality and Representation? Epistemic Inequalities and exclusion mechanisms? Rule of majority?
      iv. Role of experts/ stakeholder/ organizers?
      v. Question of resources or knowledge needed to participate/set up

h) <u>If not talked about before</u>: Some initiatives have put forward the idea that citizens' assemblies should be formed as mini-publics by drawing lots. In this way, a number of people should be drawn representatively by lot among all citizens or residents in a specific area to participate in the citizens' assemblies to deliberate on a specific topic

to then make a policy recommendation. What do you think of sortition based assemblies?

a. *Prompt: Optionally probe for:*
    i. Which aspects sortition-based mini-publics do you consider most useful and which ones most problematic?
    ii. On what level of governance do you see them as more useful/not useful?

i) What do you think, how should the work of mini-publics be linked to the work of parliament? How binding should the decisions made by these formats be?

a. Prompt: Optionally probe for:
    i. Consultative vs authoritative decision-making power?
    ii. Mandatory consultation and report with explanatory remarks
    iii. Who initiates? Parliament or citizen groups, etc.? Top-Down/ Bottom-up

E. Acting on democratic renewal (5 min)

j) What needs to change so that these new forms of democratic innovation that you support will get established? (Unless already discussed above)

a. Prompt: Optionally probe for:
    i. What knowledge would you need?
    ii. How could this be made useful for you?
    iii. Whose support/buy-in do you need? How can you get it?
    iv. What would you support and why?
    v. What can actors outside of the political system, such as CSOs and private foundations, do to help?

k) (Optional question if time permits: A lot of politicians and public figures express the need to foster public political participation and a democratic culture. But when it comes to transformative changes of decision-making process shifted towards the public, many stay hesitant. Why do you think this is?

F. Conclusion (5 min)

l) Do you have the feeling that there is an important topic that we have not covered during the conversation?

m) Thank you for the interview.

n) Offer to keep the politician posted on workshops taking place in September and the outcomes of the project.


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