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# Picturing deliberation: How dissatisfied citizens make sense of it<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract**

What makes politically dissatisfied citizens enthusiastic about deliberation? And what makes them hate it instead? Based on a picture task embedded in a series of focus groups conducted in Belgium, we argue that differences in sense-making help to explain why dissatisfied citizens (do not) support deliberation. We focus on two groups of dissatisfied citizens: non-partisan activists and politically disadvantaged citizens. For both groups, we find that when they thought of deliberation as low-key, informal discussion, they linked it to respectful communication and beneficial outcomes; when they thought of it as formalized, structured discussion, their appraisals became much more negative. For researchers of deliberation, our results make clear that we should be careful in asking citizens what they think about ‘deliberation’ without inquiring into the way they interpret it. For deliberation practitioners, our findings underline the relevance of integrating informal interactions into the design of deliberative institutions.

**Keywords**

deliberation; deliberative democracy; political dissatisfaction; political participation; focus groups

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## Introduction

Over the past decades, growing public dissatisfaction with democracy has spurred extensive experimentation with new ways of doing politics in Western democracies. An important part of this push to rethink policy-making are democratic innovations, that is, “institutions that have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process” (Smith, 2009: 1). Democratic innovations such as participatory budgeting, citizens’ juries, and citizens’ assemblies have proliferated and often carry the promise of redressing growing dissatisfaction with democracy (Lerner, 2014; van der Does and Jacquet, 2021). In both the theory and practice of democratic innovations, organized policy discussions among citizens (i.e. *deliberation*) often feature as a key design characteristic (e.g. Fung and Wright, 2001; Smith, 2009). Innovations centering on deliberation have become increasingly common and by now come in many shapes and sizes (OECD, 2020). Examples range from advisory councils at the local level (Galais et al., 2021) to region- (Macq and Jacquet, 2021) and even nationwide organized discussions, such as the French Citizen’s Convention on Climate (Courant, 2020) and the National Assembly on the Icelandic Constitution (Bergmann, 2016).

Prior research suggests that these varied instances of deliberation would appeal particularly to citizens who are dissatisfied with the political status quo (Gherghina and Geissel, 2020; Pilet et al., 2022; Webb, 2013). This implies that we should observe support for organized policy discussions especially among two groups of citizens. The first consists of citizens that openly reject the status quo, expressively resisting the current workings of politics through, for example, protests or civil disobedience (on ‘resisting,’ see Warren, 2017). In our study, we will refer to these citizens as ‘non-partisan activists.’ The second group comprises citizens that are dissatisfied with politics because they rarely get what they want from political decision-making due to their place in society.

Existing studies show that especially people with a lower socio-economic status are less likely to have their voices heard, get the policies they want, and be satisfied with the way democracy works (Ceka and Magalhães, 2016, 2020; Giger et al., 2012; Gilens and Page, 2014; Kölln and Aarts, 2021). We will refer to these citizens as ‘politically disadvantaged citizens.’

A remaining puzzle in the literature on public support for deliberation is why the empirics on both of these groups of dissatisfied citizens point in different directions. For example, some activist movements draw heavily on deliberation and make explicit demands for the use of organized discussions in policy-making (della Porta, 2013; Sandover et al., 2021), whereas others openly criticize deliberative events (Ehs and Mokre, 2021). Similarly, some studies find that politically disadvantaged citizens might be deliberation’s biggest enthusiasts (Neblo et al., 2010), whereas other studies show that they often stay away from organized policy discussions (Font et al., 2021; Gustafson and Hertting, 2017; Jacobs et al., 2009).

The wider literature on deliberation has explained similar contradictory findings on public support for deliberation by demonstrating that citizens’ support is conditional (Goldberg, 2021; Jacquet, 2017, 2019; Pilet et al., 2022; Rojon et al., 2019; Van Dijk and Lefevere, 2022). In this article, we will argue that dissatisfied citizens’ support for this political practice is similarly conditional on its specific attributes. What we add is that such conditional evaluations depend on *how citizens make sense of deliberation*. The argument is that citizens (1) make sense of deliberation in varying ways, (2) consequently associate it with specific attributes, and, finally, (3) base their evaluations on those respective attributes. Based on a picture task embedded in a series of focus groups conducted in Belgium among non-partisan activists and politically disadvantaged citizens, we show that support for deliberation among dissatisfied citizens surfaces particularly when they understand it as *informal* rather than *formal* discussion about public policy.

These findings have important implications for both research and practice. For research, it means that we should be careful in asking citizens what they think about ‘deliberation’ without inquiring into the way they interpret it. For practice, the empirical findings suggest that deliberative practices part of democratic innovations that do not resonate with what dissatisfied citizens experience in ‘everyday talk’ (Mansbridge, 1999) might have a hard time to garner their support and convince them to participate.

In the following, we first position our study in the existing literature. After this, we introduce our research design and methods and discuss our main findings. We end with a discussion of the findings and the implications for democratic theory and practice.

### **Political dissatisfaction and support for deliberation**

Why would dissatisfied citizens support deliberation? Prior research suggests that dissatisfaction with politics tends to translate into a desire for an alternative to the status quo, manifesting itself in support for a wide variety of reforms, including the introduction of deliberative mechanisms (Bengtsson and Mattila, 2009; Ceka and Magalhães, 2016, 2020; Pilet et al., 2022; Webb, 2013). On the one hand, this might reflect what some have called ‘external’ or ‘instrumental’ expectations about the outcomes deliberation can deliver (Jacquet, 2019; van der Does and Kantorowicz, 2022). For example, ‘talk-centric’ (Chambers, 2003) means of involving citizens in policy-making arguably offer dissatisfied citizens a better chance at getting their voices heard compared to standard vote-centric mechanisms that tend to silence those in the minority, giving priority to the majority that stands to benefit from the status quo (Gherghina et al., 2021). On the other hand, it might also reflect ‘internal’ expectations in terms of envisioned ‘gratifications relating to [participation]’ (Jacquet, 2019: 646). To illustrate, several studies suggest that dissatisfied citizens,

especially activists, in this respect view deliberation as an educative tool to form considered opinions or enhance political skills (García-Espín et al., 2017; Gourgues et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, citizens that tend to be most dissatisfied with politics are not supportive of deliberation *per se*. Politically disadvantaged citizens tend to stay away from organized policy discussions (e.g. Dacombe, 2021; Font et al., 2021; Gustafson and Hertting, 2017; Jacobs et al., 2009; Miscoiu and Gherghina, 2021) and, compared to other citizens, several studies show that they do not necessarily express more support for processes involving deliberation (García-Espín et al., 2017; Talukder and Pilet, 2021; van der Does and Kantorowicz, 2022). Similarly, non-partisan activists are also not enthusiastic about deliberation by default (Levine and Nierras, 2007). For instance, recent research shows that members of the Yellow Vest movement in France generally denounced and were underrepresented at the nationwide organized discussions as a part of the Great Debate (Ehs and Mokre, 2021). Further, engaged citizens on the right of the political spectrum generally do not seem in favor of deliberative reforms (Ganuza et al., 2017; García-Espín et al., 2017; Gourgues et al., 2021; Zaslove et al., 2020).

We will argue that a key part of the explanation for these contradictory findings lies in how dissatisfied citizens make sense of deliberation. Our argument builds on prior work that has suggested that dissatisfied citizens tend to feel that deliberation orchestrated by those in power is unlikely to result in a move away from the status quo. When deliberation occurs within the bounds of the existing political system, it is likely to be perceived as ‘more of the same’ in that it will have little impact on policy outcomes and reproduce political inequalities (Sanders, 1997; Talukder and Pilet, 2021; Young, 2000, 2001). Under this understanding of deliberation, it is likely to be viewed as a practice that will simply stall and complicate the required actions to engender desired policy or societal change (Mutz, 2006; Young, 2001). This might not only apply to politically disadvantaged citizens that tend to lack the requisite kinds of capital to participate effectively in

organized discussions (Gherghina et al., 2021; Holdo, 2016; Sanders, 1997; Young, 2000); activists too might be skeptical of deliberation within the confines of the very political system that they are trying to change (Young, 2001). Indeed, several studies confirm that dissatisfied citizens, including both activists and the politically disadvantaged, are likely to stay away from policy discussions when they suspect it will merely serve those in power (Ehs and Mokre, 2021; Gourgues et al., 2021; Jacquet, 2017; Levine and Nierras, 2007; Miscoiu and Gherghina, 2021).

Based on our analysis of the focus group data introduced in the next section, we argue that it is precisely when these citizens associate deliberation with formal, structured policy discussions like those occurring within the confines of the existing political system that they reach negative appraisals of it. On a more positive note, we add to the aforementioned works that when dissatisfied citizens instead understand deliberation as low-key, informal talks similar to those they have in their daily lives, they are more inclined to view it as a form of respectful communication that could stimulate problem-solving, learning, and bridging differences.

## **Design and methods**

Our data come from a series of eleven focus groups (54 participants)<sup>1</sup> conducted between April 2019 and March 2020 in Brussels, Belgium, as a part of a larger research project on representation. In line with increased attention for deliberative institutions across Western democracies, Belgian governments over the past decades have experimented extensively with organized policy discussions (Vrydagh et al., 2021). As Jacquet et al. (2022: 299) indicate ‘all federal and federated parliaments in Belgium have used mini-publics to inform their legislative process.’ Further, the German-speaking community of Belgium was the first to install a permanent citizens’ assembly in 2019 (Niessen and Reuchamps, 2022). This widespread experimentation with deliberation by

Belgian administrations, then, underpins the ecological validity of the study, as various forms of deliberation have taken place and could realistically take place in the near future.<sup>2</sup>

### *Participant recruitment*

Given the qualitative research design, the sampling of citizens was purposive and theoretically driven (Mason, 2013): we sought to bring together a wide variety of politically dissatisfied citizens to assess the many ways in which they might think about deliberation; we did not aim to gain a representative picture of such appraisals among them. The focus groups gathered both non-partisan activists and politically disadvantaged citizens. The activist groups consisted of sympathizers of the Yellow Vests movement (YV), on the one hand, and members of Youth for Climate (YfC), on the other hand. Like in other European cities in 2019, both movements had a clear presence in the Belgian capital at the time of the focus groups. The two movements provide variation in terms of both the grounds of participants' activism (socio-economic issues and climate change, respectively) and their profiles (middle aged and young citizens, respectively). The research team recruited the participants via attending protests and tapping into activists' personal networks.

**Table 1. Overview of focus groups and participants**

Focus group	Date	Language	Female	Age groups			≤ Secondary	N
				< 24	25 - 54	55 - 74		
<i>Non-partisan activists</i>								
YV	April 2019	NL	1	0	2	2	1	4
YfC1	April 2019	FR	2	6	0	0	6	6
YfC2	April 2019	FR	1	5	0	0	5	5
<i>Politically disadvantaged</i>								
Molenbeek1	October 2019	FR	2	0	3	1	3	4
Molenbeek2**	October 2019	FR, AR	2	0	5	0	5	5
Molenbeek3	October 2019	FR	4	1	3	0	2 - 3*	4
Molenbeek4	October 2019	FR	2	0	3	0	1	3
Homeless1	December 2019	FR	0	0	5	3	2	8
Homeless2	December 2019	FR, AR	2	0	5	2	2 - 3*	7
EU1***	February 2020	FR	2	0	3	1	3	4
EU2****	March 2020	FR	0	0	4	0	0	4
<i>Total</i>			18	12	33	9	30 - 32	54

*Notes:* Cell entries are frequencies. Considers the number of participants (still) present during the picture task. ≤ Secondary = Highest level of completed education was secondary or lower. FR = French; NL = Dutch; AR = Arabic. YV = Yellow Vests. YfC = Youth for Climate. EU = EU working class.

\* Missing data for one participant.

\*\* During this group there were also three social workers present in their capacity as French teachers.

\*\*\* Janitors and cleaners at the European Parliament.

\*\*\*\* Audiovisual technicians at the European Parliament, independently employed on short-term outsourced contracts but managing to make a good living nonetheless.

For the groups consisting of citizens that were likely to experience structural political disadvantages, we used several recruitment strategies. First, the team relied on door-to-door

canvassing in a neighborhood of Brussels (Molenbeek) with a high proportion of lower-income citizens belonging to ethnic minorities. The neighborhood served as a relevant spatial demarcation to find citizens that were likely to match the profile of citizens that tend to experience political disadvantages (cf. Dacombe, 2021). In addition, the research team recruited participants with a low socio-economic status in two ways: (1) via contacts established with a homelessness association (Homeless1) and with a community center that supports the homeless (Homeless2) to recruit their respective members, and (2) via personal contacts at the European Parliament to recruit working-class citizens employed at the parliament (EU1 and EU2). These different recruitment strategies make sure that we are not tapping into highly specific pool of citizens likely to experience political disadvantages. In the supplementary material (SM), we provide evidence that these participants in varying ways were unhappy about the political status quo and could thus be considered ‘dissatisfied’ (Box SM1). Table 1 provides an overview of the focus groups and the participants.

### **Focus group methodology**

Our use of focus group methodology follows upon earlier research on citizens’ views on deliberation and democracy (e.g. Ganuza et al., 2017; Gourgues et al., 2021; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002; Miscoiu and Gherghina, 2021). A key advantage of focus groups is that they invite participants to talk about a series of questions or prompts *among themselves*. Compared to one-on-one interviews between the researcher and the participant, focus groups leave more room for citizens to speak in ways they are used to and give them more leeway to set the agenda of the discussion and, therefore, to talk about what they deem relevant to the topic at hand (e.g. Morgan, 1996). This makes focus groups a promising methodological device to understand how citizens themselves give meaning to such a political practice as deliberation.

We depart from prior focus group research on citizens' views on democracy and deliberation in terms of the specific task we used to involve participants in discussions on the topic (for detailed justification and reflection, see SM2). We did so by means of a picture task that we embedded in each of the focus groups. We introduced the picture task after participants had already discussed a short question linked to their respective group (e.g. 'How did you get involved in the Yellow Vests movement?') and had shared what they considered to be the most important societal challenges today as well as how those challenges, in their opinion, should be resolved (for the full topic guide, see Box SM2).

The picture task aimed to focus participants' discussions specifically on the practice of deliberation but leave it up to them what kind of deliberation they wanted to talk about and how exactly they liked to connect it to other political practices. We followed the general set-up of the picture task used in Saunders and Klandermans (2019) by asking participants: 'Here are some examples of ways in which people try to address these problems. What comes to mind when you see these pictures?' We then presented six pictures to the participants. One of these displayed deliberation in the form of citizens sitting around several tables in discussion with one another. We consider this an instance of *organized* political discussion for two reasons (cf. Eveland Jr et al., 2011). First, the picture signaled structured conversation, displaying citizens seated at multiple tables. Second, through the general introduction of the pictures as means to address the problems the participants had discussed in the first part of the focus group, the facilitator signaled that this constituted purposeful discussions, with citizens 'searching for solutions and resolutions' (Wyatt et al., 2000: 73).

The remaining five pictures displayed (1) a voting booth (voting), (2) experts in a meeting addressing the issues (expert involvement); (3) a legal protest; (4) a violent protest (protesting); and (5) citizens helping people in need in a soup kitchen (community action).<sup>3</sup> This juxtaposition

of political practices served two main purposes. First, it allowed us to examine in which ways (if any) the involved citizens linked deliberation to other political practices. Second, it helped us to tease out how participants thought about deliberation in specific rather than about political participation more generally.

All focus groups were transcribed.<sup>4</sup> Our analyses focus on those parts of the transcripts that dealt with the picture task. For each focus group, the qualitative analyses examine (Q1) how participants *make sense* of the picture of deliberation, (Q2) how they *evaluate* deliberation, and (Q3) how they *connect* it to other political practices. Using these research questions, we distributed the analyses of the transcripts of the focus groups among the researchers. This involved a process of ‘meaning condensation’ (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: 205), resulting in a summary per participant on each of the questions. Both researchers read all transcripts and we regularly discussed each other’s interpretations. Discussion thereby served as a way to enhance the accuracy and consistency of our judgments as well as to adjudicate remaining disagreements about the interpretation of the focus group materials (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Mason, 2013). SM1-4 provide further details on the data, design, and analyses.

## **Results**

Recall that our argument is that sense-making matters for dissatisfied citizens’ appraisals of deliberation. In this section, we demonstrate how participants in the focus groups conceived of deliberation and how differences in their conceptualizations related to their evaluations of the practice. We find that both among non-partisan activists and politically disadvantaged citizens positive appraisals linked back to their understanding of deliberation as informal, respectful communication; and negative appraisals related instead to conceiving of deliberation as formal

communication within “the system.” In the following, we first discuss how participants made sense of the picture of deliberation, after which we turn to their appraisals of the practice. In each section, we highlight the striking similarities across the two broad categories of dissatisfied citizens (i.e. activists and politically disadvantaged citizens).

### *Making sense of ‘deliberation’*

How did participants make sense of the picture of deliberation? In both the focus groups among non-partisan activists and those among politically disadvantaged citizens, some participants connected the picture of deliberation to ‘everyday talk’ (Mansbridge, 1999) or what others have called ‘informal political conversation’ (Wyatt et al., 2000), that is, ‘interaction that takes place outside of formal, rule-bound structures and that is closely intermeshed with everyday life and social interaction outside of the political realm’ (Eveland Jr et al., 2011: 1083).

In the activist groups, participants linked the picture to people getting together at their own initiative (Léonard, YfC2, male, 18-24 years old) and to day-to-day conversations about politics with one’s parents (Loic, YfC1, male, 18-24 years old) or with fellow activists (YV). We observe a similar association with informal interactions in the groups among disadvantaged citizens, in which some participants related it, for example, to talking to one’s neighbors (Molenbeek4). Mehmet, an inhabitant of Molenbeek and at the time unemployed, offers a description that illustrates this informality associated with the picture in these focus groups: ‘All around the table, eating together, talking about all problems, the community, everything really’ (Mehmet, Molenbeek3, male, 25-34 years old).<sup>5</sup>

Other participants associated the picture with formal policy discussions instead. In the groups among disadvantaged citizens, participants associated it with discussions occurring in

various sorts of neighborhood assemblies. Ilyan, at the time retired and part of the homelessness association, linked it to meetings of a neighborhood association as well as to a ‘general gathering of inhabitants where the people from the management came, nobody from us went, for example, because every time we went, it didn’t lead anywhere’ (Ilyan, Homeless1, male, 65-74 years old). David, a middle-aged man living in Molenbeek, explicitly contrasted what he saw in the picture with examples of everyday talk and bottom-up initiatives. As he exclaimed in response to a discussion on the role of neighborhood councils, ‘But that’s (...) We should do the opposite! We should come together, (...) in the whole building, so that we create a group’ (David, Molenbeek1, male, 45-54 years old). Along similar lines, in the activist groups, some participants associated it with formal discussions taking place within ‘the system.’ To illustrate, Léonard, one of the members of the Youth for Climate movement, at one point viewed the ‘small discussion groups,’ as he described the picture of deliberation, as occurring within ‘this capitalist system’ and the state (Léonard, YfC2, male, 18-24 years old).

Beyond the degree of formality, participants’ associations with the picture differed in terms of the dynamics they attributed to the interactions they described. In the groups among disadvantaged citizens, several participants linked it to the interactions in the focus group, that is, ‘like we’re having right now’ (Rayane, Molenbeek2, female, 55-64 years old). For Jamal, then without work and living in Molenbeek, this meant an exchange of questions and answers: ‘We have a table like this, I discuss, right, you ask your question, he asks, (...) I ask a question’ (Jamal, Molenbeek2, male, 35-44 years old). This description resonates with participants in the other focus groups that linked the picture to dialogue or an exchange of opinions and ideas. More specifically, participants connected it to a dialogue marked by mutual respect, much in line with the ethical standards political theorists tend to set for political talk (Bächtiger and Parkinson, 2019). For instance, Adil, a young man with a permanent work contract living in Molenbeek, clarified that for

him ‘it’s *staying at the table* and discussing problems’ [emphasis added] (Adil, Molenbeek3, male, 25-34 years old). We find similar associations in the groups among activists. For example, Lara, a woman part of the Yellow Vest movement who in daily life works in debt prevention, stated: ‘And everyone listens to everyone, it’s friendly anarchism, you see? (...) It’s that one will listen to the child, one will listen to the old man, one will listen to the animal, one will listen to the tree. That’s anarchism, that’s respect, yes’ (Lara, YV, female, 35-44 years old).

### *The ascribed purposes of deliberation*

The purposes participants ascribed to such dialogues, in turn, included learning from each other, finding solutions together, and bridging differences. The problem-solving and educative purposes associated with the communicative exchanges described by participants were voiced by activists and politically disadvantaged citizens alike. Among the latter, Adil, for example, viewed it as the one practice ‘that can solve (...) all problems’ (Adil, Molenbeek3, male, 25-34 years old) and for Cathie, housekeeper and the wife of one of the participants working at the European Parliament, ‘it’s most of all related to image number two [i.e. the deliberation picture], so being able to discuss, trying to find solutions’ (Cathie, EU1, female, 35-44 years old). Similarly, among the activists, Loic, part of the Youth for Climate movement, (YfC1, male, 18-24 years old) viewed the political conversations he described as essential forms of education and Lara (YV, female, 35-44 years old) clarified how through conversations with others in the movement she had learned a great deal about politics. What is more, they associated the deliberation picture at times with finding alternatives to the political system in place (YV; YfC2). These findings resemble the results from comparable studies conducted in France and Spain, which underline an educative function of deliberative processes among leftist activists (García-Espín et al., 2017; Gourgues et al., 2021).

The expressed function of dialogue to bridge differences and reach mutual understanding was more prominent in the focus groups among disadvantaged citizens.<sup>6</sup> Imad, a middle-aged man working at the European Parliament for a cleaning firm on a fixed-term contract, in this respect had to think of armed conflicts: ‘Always dialogue. Dialogue, maybe they will get somewhere. Like Arabic countries, now there is no dialogue, always war. (...) When there’s dialogue we can advance’ (Imad, EU1, male, 35-44 years old). In a similar vein, Sonia, a woman living in Molenbeek for over twenty-five years, stressed: ‘That [i.e. dialogue], yes, that is absolutely lacking. I think that [it would lead to] less violence and aggression (...) And dialogue (...) For finding finally calmness again’ (Sonia, Molenbeek1, female, 45-54 years old). Dimitri, a single parent incapable of work, associated it with a form of ‘permanent education,’ which, as he later explained, meant to him being able to find common ground: ‘...with a permanent education, with permanent work, work, knowledge of human psychology, one can reach a certain consensus, you know? And to say that finally we don’t belong to different clans’ (Dimitri, Homeless1, male, 45-54 years old). Other participants put this in more concrete terms, thinking of it as a way to know one’s neighbors and thereby prevent conflicts. Ayman, a middle-aged man with higher vocational training living on the border of the Molenbeek neighborhood, put it this way:

Unfortunately, it’s mean to say, but I think that many foreigners come without... [requisite documentation] And sometimes that creates problems that should not have existed in the first place. That’s why I said 2 [i.e. deliberation] and 4 [i.e. community action] because 2 that allows you to know your neighbor -who I myself, we ourselves, do not know. (Ayman, Molenbeek4, male, 45-54 years old)

### *From understandings to evaluations*

Participants' evaluations of deliberation often seemed to reflect these varying understandings of the practice. More often than not, positive appraisals linked back to their conceptualization of it as informal, respectful communication; and negative appraisals related instead to conceiving of deliberation as formal communication within 'the system' (for exceptions, see SM6). We see this most clearly among participants that alternated criticism with positive appraisals of deliberation. To illustrate, when thinking of it as 'creating places for discussion, reinventing the way we struggle with our ideas and most of all not doing so within the confines of a system and following the logic of power,' Léonard, one of the young activists part of Youth for Climate, viewed it as one of 'the most beautiful solutions' (Léonard, YfC2, male, 18-24 years old). However, when he thought of it as forming part of "the system," he viewed it as a useless tool to change that very system:

Already, I find that non-violence these days in relation to the state is dogmatic and protects the state because uhm... they have taught us to defend our ideas via *the bias of discussion*, voting, all that, which is great and magnificent but those are the only tools they have given us and, in fact, there's no alternative. And the day when your vote becomes pointless, you will not have any other alternative than to go into criminality if you don't agree and become a terrorist. [emphasis added]

To give another example, in response to a discussion on neighborhood meetings, David in Molenbeek1 stated critically that '...if it's [meant] so that they hear us and we're talking to a wall, that's of no use, right.' By contrast, when he talked about deliberation as a bottom-up initiative to come together and discuss, he viewed it as a tool 'to be able to have osmosis, osmosis among us' (David, Molenbeek1, male, 45-54 years old).

Our findings are generally similar for participants that were exclusively positive or negative about deliberation.<sup>7</sup> As most participants' evaluations were positive, we deal with those here but report on exclusively negative appraisals in SM6. Positive judgments at times lacked elaboration (see SM6), but more commonly they could be linked to the imagined functions of problem-solving, learning, and overcoming division. Importantly, these evaluations generally went hand in hand with participants linking the picture to informal conversations rather than to organized discussions. To illustrate, when Lara (YV) emphasized learning benefits, she referred to discussions within the movement: 'It is useful because (...) Otto is teaching me a lot of things about politics for example. (...) So yes Otto is so kind to tell me those things' (see also the example above of Loic, YfC1).

Across the focus groups, we find a similar link between the informal character associated with deliberation and other ascribed benefits. In the activist groups, this related to overcoming differences (YV) and reimagining 'the system' (YV, YfC2); in the groups among disadvantaged citizens, it related to getting to know one's neighbors (Molenbeek4) and creating 'calmness' (Molenbeek1). When participants discussed the dynamics that they associated with deliberation, they connected these imagined benefits to respectful forms of communication, referred to frequently as 'dialogue' in both the focus group discussions among activists and politically disadvantaged citizens alike (see above: EU1; Molenbeek1-2; YV). As Malik, a man living in Molenbeek and studying at the time, stated, for example, 'Me too, I prefer dialogue (...) so that uhm... everyone respects others' opinions' (Malik, Molenbeek2, male, 35-44 years old).

In brief, how participants made sense of deliberation was reflected in their appraisals of it, and these appraisals were most positive when they linked deliberation to informal forms of conversation. Even though the precise, concrete understanding of deliberation still differed among participants belonging to the two broad categories of politically dissatisfied citizens (e.g. everyday talk with one's neighbors among politically disadvantaged citizens vs. informal conversations

within a social movement among non-partisan activists), we identify a remarkable consistency of this finding across the two categories at this level of abstraction.<sup>8</sup> In the next section, we reflect on the implications of these results.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Based on a picture task embedded in eleven focus groups in Belgium, we argue that we can explain contradictory findings in the literature on dissatisfied citizens' support for deliberation in part by *how they make sense of it*. We find that when these citizens thought of deliberation as low-key, informal discussion, they linked it to respectful communication and beneficial outcomes such as learning, bridging differences, and problem-solving; when they thought of it as formalized, structured discussion, their appraisals became much more negative. This explanation fits well with a broader literature that has demonstrated a link between citizens' understandings of 'politics' and their political attitudes and behavior (Bedock, 2020; Fitzgerald, 2013; Morey and Eveland, 2016; van Wessel, 2017).

Our finding on the link between sense-making and evaluations of deliberation provides a potential explanation as to why prior research in various countries finds that dissatisfied citizens at times are wary of organized policy discussions out of fear that 'government participants (...) [will] hijack the issues' (Levine & Nierras, 2007: 6) or, for example, that political representatives will use it merely as 'facades (...) to gain legitimacy' (Gourgues et al., 2021: 15 [own translation]; see also Miscoiu & Gherghina, 2021: 11). Based on the present study, we would argue that these concerns probably derive at least partly from an interpretation of deliberation as a formal political practice bound to reproduce the workings of policy-making under the political status quo.

Further, our results may equally explain why qualitative studies in Spain and France find that mostly (left-wing) activists support deliberation, with less support coming from politically disadvantaged citizens such as precarious workers (García-Espín et al., 2017; Gourgues et al., 2021). Much in line with the Yellow Vest and Youth for Climate participants in our focus groups in Belgium, activists in these countries viewed deliberation as a promising alternative but only to the extent that it is not coopted by ruling elites and does not replicate the dynamics of the existing policy-making process. Our conjecture is that politically disadvantaged citizens in the respective studies had exactly that in mind: more of the same kind of structured discussions that already keep them at the losing end of policy-making.

But our study's findings also point to a way forward in the design of deliberation by indicating that blending in informal, low-key interactions could enhance support from dissatisfied citizens. On the one hand, this could include informal discussions prior to or in between organized discussion sessions *among citizens themselves*. This could not only enhance public support but could also have a positive spillover effect on the subsequent structured policy discussions, given that recent research suggests that informal conversations and bonding exercises among citizen-participants tend to improve the quality of their policy discussions (Niemeyer et al., 2021). On the other hand, informal discussions could be 'designed in' to occur *between citizens and political leaders* alongside the structured discussions part of many democratic innovations. This also appears feasible. It is what many political leaders seem to prefer in terms of their interactions with citizens and, furthermore, 'the idea of "designing in" informality would be an extension of what happens within many public engagement exercises where smaller more interactive spaces are interspersed between larger plenary-style sessions' (Hendriks and Lees-Marshment, 2019: 611).

Yet, blending in informality is not a silver bullet. Informal discussions bring along their own 'democratic dangers' (Hendriks and Lees-Marshment, 2019). Their informality implies that

there are no mechanisms in place to ensure equal participation nor, in the case of leader-citizen interactions, that political leaders will follow up on the concerns and wishes expressed by citizens. This highlights the need to view them as a complement to formal procedures that can ensure both citizens' inclusion and empowerment. Along similar lines, we should underline that while some participants in our focus groups viewed deliberation as a panacea, most did not consider it sufficient on its own to address pressing public issues. Hence, the inclusion of informal conversations in democratic innovations should not be taken as a fix-all strategy. Per our participants, addressing public issues requires a mix of political practices, ranging from protests and voting to direct community action, boycotts, and, for some, violence (SM5) -in fact, much like recent systemic perspectives on deliberation in democratic theory (Parkinson and Mansbridge, 2012).

We see two main limitations to the study. First, it admittedly comes from a specific context and it remains an empirical question whether our findings will travel beyond the Belgian context as well as beyond the specific groups of citizens that participated. Nevertheless, the fact that we find the link between sense-making and deliberation among two very different categories of dissatisfied citizens makes it plausible that one would find a similar link among other citizens too. Second, it was difficult in some focus groups to start a detailed discussion on the pictures among all participants. Some participants did not speak at all during the task and others only mentioned which picture(s) they preferred without much elaboration. However, as we detail in the supplemental material (SM2), most of the time participants did not just minimally participate in this way in the picture task but instead skillfully mastered it, contrasting the pictures and motivating their opinions, or even questioned the task's very rules and logics.

We end with two broad suggestions for future research on public support for deliberation. First, we encourage further work on sense-making to gain a more nuanced understanding of how citizens relate to deliberation. How people think about deliberation can vary considerably from one

citizen to the next and even a single citizen may switch from one conception of the practice to another -even within the timespan of a single focus group. To be able to ground both democratic theory and practice in citizens' own experiences, we still need to better understand what 'deliberation' means to them. Second, our results underline the relevance of studying informal discursive interactions that may occur alongside the formal, structured policy discussions part of many democratic innovations. Following upon recent work in the field (Hendriks et al., 2020; Hendriks and Lees-Marshment, 2019), the findings stress the need to acknowledge the importance of these seemingly mundane interactions in democratic theory as well as to think about how to incorporate them in formal participatory processes in democratic practice.

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## Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Notes

1. Refers to the number of participants still present during the picture task (33% female, 61% between 25 and 54 years of age, 56-59% secondary education or lower). For details, see Table 1.
2. Bedock and Pilet (2020: 7) even argue that ‘Belgian citizens are therefore more likely than citizens in many other countries to have heard about deliberative mini-publics,’ and, hence, about organized policy discussions more generally. There is some survey evidence pointing in this direction: in 2017, around half of the Belgian public had heard at least a little about the high-profile deliberative event ‘G1000’ (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2018: 124-125).
3. We do not own the copyright to the images. They are available for interested readers upon request.
4. The focus groups transcripts are available upon request, following the procedure described in SM3. All names used in the text are pseudonyms.
5. In the groups among disadvantaged citizens, the parallels participants drew between the picture of deliberation and what was going in the focus group itself also make clear that highly formalized deliberative settings often did not speak to their imagination.

6. Nonetheless, it was clear too in the Yellow Vests group where participants emphasized the role of dialogue in bridging differences between citizens in Flanders and Wallonia and in reaching understanding among members of the movement.
7. We should note that out of the 51 participants that spoke during the picture task, fifteen did not express an identifiable opinion related to the picture of deliberation.
8. The only focus group that does not fit with this general finding is EU2, the group among less disadvantaged working-class people employed at the EU parliament as audiovisual technicians (see SM6).

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