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From representative to represented mini-publics : how mini-publics' outputs are shaped by representation

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## Introduction

Over the last decade, the world has witnessed a deliberative wave in which democratic innovations have surged across the globe (Dryzek et al., 2019). This deliberative wave is mainly embodied by the rise of deliberative mini-publics, i.e., representative groups of citizens deliberating on salient issues to impact public policies through specific recommendations (Curato et al., 2021). More recently, scholars have argued that mini-publics should be situated and evaluated in the context of a wider democratic system (Beauvais and Warren, 2019). This systemic turn in the literature has sought to expand deliberative scholarship beyond single, discrete sites towards a broader study of the multiple sites in which various actors and institutions contribute to public deliberation and policy-making in an interconnected yet differentiated fashion (Parkinson and Mansbridge, 2012). One of the main normative goals of a deliberative system is to be consequential and lead to binding collective decisions and social outcomes (Dryzek, 2010; Warren, 2017). Hence, when we place mini-publics in a systemic perspective, the question becomes how mini-publics' outputs should be transmitted to empowered policy-making spaces to secure their uptake (Goodin and Dryzek, 2006; Hendriks, 2016; Setälä, 2017). Bächtiger and Parkinson (2019, p. 123) posit that this should be done according to the faithful transmission ideal, which means that mini-publics' outputs should be transmitted in a way that stays close to their original meaning and intent.

This article complicates the practical attainability of the faithful transmission ideal by analyzing mini-publics as represented institutions to argue that the transmission of their outputs is always mediated by how they are represented. While previous scholarship has discussed how mini-publics are representative of the wider population (Farell and Stone, 2020; Landemore, 2020), scholars have yet to study how they are represented. This is an important conceptual move if we take the systemic turn seriously and no longer conceive of mini-publics as institutional islands in

themselves but as parts of a wider deliberative system. In such a system it is no longer sufficient to study how representative a given mini-public is. We also need to study how mini-publics are represented in different sites of the representative system, which is essential to understand the transmission and eventual uptake of their outputs. For mini-publics share one important feature with the demos at large: they cannot speak for themselves and are dependent on a representative of some sort to represent their outputs. Therefore, this article instigates a new research agenda by shifting the attention from how mini-publics are *representative institutions* to how mini-publics are *represented institutions*.

Taking this perspective, the article draws on the literature from the democratic system and constructivist turn in representation literature to theorize three main ways in which representation mediates the transmission of mini-publics' outputs. Namely, it argues that mini-publics' representatives must interpret, perform, and negotiate outputs. To study this theoretical argument, we draw on a least-likely case-study of the Agora social movement party as a representative of the Brussels Citizens' Assembly, which is ideal for theory-confirmation (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Levy, 2002). The Agora party's unique programmatic goal is to organize a mini-public and transmit its recommendations to parliament in a literal and faithful way. To this end, its representative takes on the role of an extreme delegate. It is therefore a least-likely case for interpretation, performance, and negotiation to play a major role in representing mini-publics' outputs. This article shows that the literal and faithful transmission of outputs is much more complicated than often assumed and that interpretation, performance, and negotiation play a significant role even in a least-likely case. The findings highlight how representatives struggle with representing mini-publics' outputs.

The article begins with an overview of the extant literature on the relation between mini-publics and the concept of representation and argues for the literature to go

beyond mini-publics as representative institutions to mini-publics as represented institutions. The second section discusses the literature on mini-public uptake and contends that faithful transmission is always mediated by representation. Finally, the theoretical argument is studied in a least-likely case.

### Mini-publics from representative to represented

Most literature investigating the link between representation and mini-publics has focused on the question of mini-publics' potential representativeness (Brown, 2006; Farrell and Stone, 2020). The focus is on how mini-publics are representative institutions in themselves and in what way participating citizens are "citizen representatives" (Warren, 2008). In this view, mini-publics are discursively and descriptively representative (Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2008; Landemore, 2020). Discursive representation entails the presence of the relevant political discourses related to a given issue so that they can be subject to deliberation. Mini-publics are descriptively representative when their composition mirrors all relevant demographic attributes of the polity. Descriptive and discursive representation are related since the inclusion of citizens from diverging backgrounds can amount to the inclusion of a diverse and wide array of social perspectives, interests, and forms of knowledge (Bohman, 2006).

Mini-publics rely on sortition to achieve their legitimate status as representative institutions (Warren and Gastil, 2015). One of the pioneers of this approach was James Fishkin (2009), who randomly selected participants for his deliberative polls to obtain a statistically representative sample of the broader population. Based on this selection procedure, Fishkin (2018) makes the inferential argument that his deliberative polls represent what the citizenry at large would think when ordinary citizens get the opportunity to think through salient political issues by providing skilled facilitation and well-balanced information. The idea is that the opinions from a randomly selected

sample of citizens represent what the general public would think if they could deliberate under qualitative conditions (Deligiaouri and Suiter, 2021).

However, if participants transform their opinion after participating in a mini-public, can they still be representative of the wider public? Cristina Lafont (2019) forcefully argues that proponents of mini-publics cannot have it both ways. They cannot argue that mini-publics are a representative sample of the wider public if they also maintain that mini-publics are an enlightened sample of the wider population that is better informed and more deliberative. Why should constituents feel represented by unelected representatives engaging in a deliberative process that is little visible and difficult to follow as an outsider? This problem is exacerbated because non-participants cannot authorize mini-publics or hold them accountable (Parkinson, 2006). These issues have spawned new theoretical and empirical work in the field that discusses how mini-publics' participants can be considered representatives and are accepted as such by the demos at large (e.g., Curato et al., 2020; Goldberg and Bächtiger, 2022).

This article aims to push the literature on the link between representation and mini-publics beyond these debates on descriptive and discursive representation. It aims to shed light on mini-publics and representation from a different perspective, namely, how mini-publics and their outputs are represented. As Pitkin (1967, p. 37) argues, representation is a concept that can be approached from multiple angles; by focusing on a single dimension, one risks missing others. While most extant research has studied the representativeness of mini-publics, our focus is on how mini-publics themselves are represented. Mini-publics find their original purpose in resolving the practical issue that the maxi-public itself cannot engage in mass deliberation (Fishkin, 2009; with possible exceptions of mass deliberation, such as the constitutional moments described by Ackerman, 1998). But just like the practical limitations of mass deliberation have given rise to mini-publics, mini-publics depend on spokespersons

or representatives to transmit their output to other areas of the deliberative system. In practice, mini-public discourse and recommendations are never transferred to other sites in the deliberative system by all participants but by a small number of representatives. These representatives can be a subsample of participants, organizers, or relevant policy-makers. As Boswell and colleagues (2016) argue, what and how voices from a mini-public are heard often comes down to very few (policy) actors. This article argues that these actors engage in mini-public representation by voicing what a mini-public stands for in a specific way. If mini-publics are to be more than isolated forums and are at least discursively connected to other sites of the deliberative system, someone must represent them there. Hence, conceptually speaking, representation is intrinsic to placing mini-publics within a wider democratic system.

#### Mini-publics from the perspective of contemporary representative theory

Representative theory provides us with the conceptual vocabulary to understand how mini-publics are represented. Early models of representation have often limited the scope of the concept to the formal electoral link between voters and their elected representatives (Rehfeld, 2006). However, more recent accounts recognize that the boundaries of representation are not as distinct and that there is a lot of representation going on that is politically relevant but in which it is not self-evident who represents whom (Castiglione and Pollak, 2019; Disch et al., 2019). One central tenet of this approach is that representation can be studied in non-electoral and non-statal forms (Montanaro, 2018). Judge and Leston-Bandeira (2018), for instance, have built on the claim-making approach by showing that political institutions such as parliaments can also be represented. Accordingly this opens up the possibility that mini-publics and their outcomes are also represented. However, how should we understand what it means to be represented?

According to the constructivist turn we should understand representation as an *activity* of claim-making (Urbinati and Warren, 2008; Severs, 2010; Saward, 2006). . In the claim-making account of representation, the act of representation always entails a claim-maker that puts forward a subject, making claims on behalf of an object (the representation or portrayal of the real thing) that stands for a referent (the real thing), directed to an audience (Saward, 2010). For example, a politician presents herself as a subject “advocate of mini-publics’ outputs” acting for an object “her portrayal of the outputs”. As a claim-maker she directs this claim to an audience “television watchers”. The referent “mini-publics’ outputs” is different from the object “outputs” because it consist of the outputs themselves independent of their portrayal.

Constructivists maintain that representatives construct the interests, identity, and preferences of the represented (Castiglione and Pollak, 2019; Disch et al., 2019). We can understand this common statement in two main ways that are not mutually exclusive. First, constructing what is represented implies that representatives create a political reality through the activity of representation (Disch, 2011). According to this view, representatives are not just picking up what is out there in society among their voters but actively contribute to shaping their preferences. Hence, there is a feedback mechanism from representatives back to the represented.

Second, as Fossen (2019) has argued, representation is not only an act that influences the interests, identities, and preferences of the represented but it is also constituted by it. This means that representation turns the referent into an object by portraying it in a certain way. In other words, what we represent does not come out of thin air and is the portrayal of an object that is based on a referent prior to it. Without a referent there is nothing to be represented. If there is no mini-public (referent) we cannot represent our portrayal of that mini-public (object). At the same time, the referent is *mediated* through representation into an object (Fossen, 2019). In what follows we unpack the consequences of representation as mediation for mini-publics’ outputs.

## Representing mini-publics' outputs

Most mini-publics are consultative bodies aiming to formulate recommendations on a given topic that can be transmitted to policy-makers (Paulis et al., 2021). Scholars have drawn attention to the way in which mini-publics are coupled to other sites of the democratic system and to how their outputs are transmitted (Setälä, 2017; Boswell et al., 2016). According to Hendriks (2016, p. 46), the difference between coupling and transmission is that the former is focused on the institutional relationship between sites, while the latter emphasizes communication flows between them. This paper is primarily interested in the communicative flows of transmission since it discusses how outputs are represented, regardless of the precise institutional arrangement between mini-publics and other institutions of representative democracy.

Building on concepts such as transmission and coupling, there is a burgeoning literature on whether mini-publics' outputs can be effectively transmitted to democratic policy-making (e.g., Dryzek and Goodin, 2006; Pogrebinschi and Ryan, 2018). Scholars have mainly gauged mini-publics' impact on policy through a congruency approach. They study whether there is a textual correspondence between mini-public recommendations and subsequent policy outputs (e.g., Michels and Binnema, 2019; Jacquet and van der Does, 2020). Recently, Vrydagh and Caluwaerts (2020) have argued that this approach insufficiently considers pre-existing policy preferences of decision-makers that are dealing with mini-public output. Instead, we need to consider the extent to which decision-makers take up mini-public recommendations that align with or diverge from their own agenda.

However, such an approach still implies that there can be a direct and literal transmission from mini-publics' outputs to binding policy-making if only those in charge were willing to do so. In much of the literature, the tacit assumption seems to be that policy-makers have a clear notion of what mini-publics' outputs entail and



whether they match their preferences. These studies implicitly assume that mini-public output is clearly intelligible and can simply be taken up by policy-makers. And if they fail to do so, studies often explain this lack of congruence in terms of strategic considerations such as cherry-picking (Smith, 2009; Font et al., 2018). This idea is at odds with Boswell's and colleagues' (2016) argument that the transmission of deliberative outputs is not only about spreading them but also about laundering them. Instead, the congruency approach sits better with what Bächtiger and Parkinson (2019, p. 123) call *faithful transmission*, which implies a transmission of outputs that is as faithful to the original as possible. In the vocabulary of representation, such a view implies that mini-public representatives are strict delegates that stick as close to the original intent of participants' recommendations as possible (Pitkin, 1967).

However, the faithful transmission of mini-publics' outputs is very challenging when conceived from the lens of representation. Outputs are not literally and directly transmitted but are always mediated by representation for three main reasons. First, mini-publics' outputs must be *interpreted* before they can be translated into policy. These interpretations are not always unequivocal and can be contested, leading to diverging representative claims based on the same source. Second, outputs are also *performed* in a certain way. This is because it does not only matter *what* people say but also *how*, *where* and *to whom* they say it (Hajer, 2005). Mini-publics' recommendations that get represented in other sites of the democratic system must adopt to the cultural scripts that are proper to those sites and intended audiences. As such, recommendations in transmission take the forms of memes, which are units of meaning that evolve and take different shapes as they travel from one cultural setting to another (Bächtiger and Parkinson, 2019). After all, just like other people, mini-public organizers and representatives know that they have to behave themselves differently in different settings and that they need to talk differently to different audiences (Eliasoph and Lichterman, 2003). Finally, mini-publics' outputs often need to be *negotiated*. Negotiation can occur between different interpretations of outputs

and between outputs and other policy inputs, such as expert advice, and representatives need to know to what extent they can compromise. After all, policy-makers operate in a tight network of advisors and experts, often providing diverse and sometimes conflicting inputs (Torfing and Ansell, 2017).

In what follows, a case-study will illustrate how these issues manifest themselves in practice by drawing on the representation of the BCA mini-public by the Agora social movement party. The findings show that even in a least-likely case where the representative is firmly committed to faithful transmission in principle and has little strategic interest not to adhere to its ideals; the issues of interpretation, performance, and negotiation cause enduring challenges for Agora's representation.

#### Case-study: Agora's representation of the Brussels Citizens' Assembly

The case-study centers on the representation of the Brussels Citizens' Assembly (BCA) by the Agora movement party in Belgium. The Agora party obtained one seat in the Dutch-speaking part of the Brussels Parliament during the regional elections of May 2019. Agora is a single-issue party that organizes itself according to deliberative and participatory principles and exclusively focuses on promoting deliberative and participatory democracy within the broader political system (Junius and Matthieu, 2022). Organizing the BCA is the main way they seek to realize these goals. The BCA is a permanent mini-public that has been organized in three iterations on topics such as housing, cyber violence, and housing. Each iteration consists of randomly selected citizens from Brussels appointed for each iteration of the assembly. At the end of each assembly, they formulate recommendations that the Agora's MP must defend in parliament. Agora commits itself to solely representing the BCA's proposals in parliament. The MP's main task is to transmit the BCA's recommendations to parliament faithfully. He can only take a political position according to the assembly's recommendations and must abstain from voting if the BCA did not express itself on a

given topic. As such, he is not a trustee representative but an extreme delegate of the Assembly (Junius et al., 2021). There are only two exceptions to this rule. First, the assembly's recommendations need to stay within the framework of the rule of law and human rights to be defended by the MP. Second, the MP can freely advocate policies that promote deliberation and participation in the Brussels Capital Region. It is important to notice that the institutional coupling between the BCA and the Brussels Parliament is only formalized in the Agora party rules. There is no legal framework in place and the party belongs to the opposition.

As the purpose of the paper is to shift attention to the representative dimension of mini-publics' uptake, the theoretical argument is illustrated by studying a least-likely case. Least likely cases are well suited for theory confirmation (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 231). Following Levy (2002, p. 442), the inferential logic of a least-likely case is based on the "Sinatra inference", if I can make it there I can make it (more likely) anywhere . Agora's representation of the BCA is a least-likely case for two main reasons.

First, Agora *explicitly* aims to represent mini-public by following an extreme delegate model of representation, which is closely related to the idea of faithful transmission (Bächtiger and Parkinson, 2019). The Agora party commits itself to literally and faithfully transmit recommendations to parliament. As stated on the party's publicly accessible website:

*"The MP can ask for clarification and rephrase Assembly recommendations to ensure that he has understood them correctly so that he can **transmit them faithfully** to parliament."* (Our emphasis, role description of Agora's MP on website).

Second, Agora has few strategic reasons not to live up to these ideals. After all, the party is a purely procedural, single-issue party with a sole focus on promoting deliberative democracy. Moreover, most power in the party rests in the hands of

idealistic activists who are loyal to these goals (Junius and Mathieu, 2022). If mini-publics' outputs can be faithfully transmitted without having to rely on interpretation, performance, or negotiation then this is what we should expect in the Agora case more than in any other.

The case-study draws on three data sources. First, it collected the BCA's outputs in the form of three citizens' resolutions, which consist of a list of citizens' recommendations. Second, it mapped Agora's representation of these outputs by studying their external communication platforms, gathering all relevant press documents in the Belgian press through GoPress (n=70) and all relevant parliamentary documents in which Agora's MP occurred (n=217). Finally, the article studies how the MP and his team perceived their representative task and what challenges emerged while representing the BCA. This was studied through four semi-structured interviews with the MP and his team and through participant observation at Agora events and meetings from 15 July 2021 to 10 March 2022.

The interviews were all audio-recorded and transcribed. All data was coded using NVivo in accordance with a thematic analysis approach. A two-step process was followed (Boyatzis, 1998; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). An initial theory-guided step consisted of coding all materials according to a coding scheme based on the theoretical argument put forward. In the subsequent step, a more inductive approach to thematic analysis was followed, uncovering new patterns within each facet of the analytical framework. Afterwards, quotes were selected that are particularly representative of general patterns in the data.

## Unpacking the limits of faithful transmission

As discussed above, one of the pillars of Agora's ideological self-conception is that the MP should be an extreme delegate of the BCA and transmit its citizens' resolutions in a faithful, unchanging way. Practically speaking, this means that the MP should solely vote in line with the BCA's recommendations. The MP must abstain if the assembly has not expressed itself on an issue. This ideological self-conception can be reformulated in the following overarching representative claim: "Agora's MP presents himself as an extreme delegate (subject) of the BCA's outputs (object) to the Brussels' government (audience). Hence, Agora claims that the BCA's output represents what the citizens of Brussels would think under deliberative conditions.

Agora's MP publicly positions himself as such in parliament, as illustrated by the following quote:

*"My party wants to create a citizens' assembly by lot to involve all Brussels residents, regardless of their education, age, or gender. We want to inform them about political debates, collect their suggestions, deliberate, and make decisions. I will defend those decisions here. So, in a sense, I become their direct spokesperson."* (Plenary session 19/07/2019).

At first glance, Agora seems to keep this promise, our analysis does not indicate any clear violations of Agora's commitment to only represent the assembly's recommendations. Even when legislation could be adopted with parliament-wide support, Agora does abstain if the BCA did not treat the issue at hand. Other MPs are also well-aware that Agora curtailed itself to these rules. Their reactions regarding Agora's voting behavior are mixed. On the one hand, they regularly applaud the party's integrity in parliament. On the other hand, they disapprove of Agora's tendency to be the sole seat blocking a parliament-wide piece of legislation. Hence, at first glance, Agora seems to uphold its representative promise to be an extreme delegate of the BCA. However, a closer look at the data reveals that faithful

transmission is more challenging than expected in a way that pertains directly to the aspects of representing mini-publics' outputs outlined above.

### *Interpretation*

A first challenge that manifests itself when Agora's MP tries to stick as close as possible to the BCA's propositions is that their interpretation is not always straightforward. In practice, it becomes evident that it is not always clear what is precisely meant by certain assembly recommendations and that interpretation plays an inevitable role in the parliamentary representation of the BCA's proposals. Even though Agora's representative intends to represent them as close as possible to their original intent. Agora did not anticipate the inevitability of interpretation and struggled to respond. This is not to say that it went unnoticed. The party became highly aware of the intrinsic representational nature of promoting mini-publics. One Agora member aptly describes the situation:

*"We underestimated the complexity of promoting the BCA's propositions. Most recommendations make sense when read at first glance in an abstract and detached way. But when we started to engage with these recommendations practically, we found ourselves often puzzled by what was precisely meant by them. It became clear that we have no alternative but to interpret them in a specific way. As such, we had to engage in a way of politics that we were not willing to engage in nor prepared for."* (Interview respondent 2)

This quote suggests that some recommendations might seem unambiguous until they must be interpreted in the context of another site in the democratic system to guarantee their faithful transmission. These recommendations cannot be merely faithfully transmitted in an unchanged way. Agora members are highly aware that this is a political act that challenges the idea that they can always be neutral and objective representatives. Instead, they had to become political representatives. The

party adapted to this new reality by communicating transparently about this way of working in parliament. In the context of a parliamentary vote on renovating buildings Agora's MP stated the following:

*"Agora has been thinking about how to vote on this issue. I am a direct delegate of the Brussels Citizens' Assembly (BBA), on which I base my vote. Sometimes this requires an interpretation, and my interpretation in this case is that we can certainly support this."* (2021-02-04, Brussels Parliament plenary session).

The issue stems from the fact that, just like in other mini-publics; recommendations are listed in a resolution that does not reflect the entire deliberative process preceding them (Curato et al., 2021). When mini-publics' outputs need to be transmitted to other sites of the democratic system, such as parliament, they cannot contain the entire deliberative process. As such, this mode of operation might be inevitable from a practical point of view but complicates the idea that a mini-public's output is something that can be simply adopted or not, as implied by the congruency approach in the literature on mini-public uptake (Michels and Binnema, 2018). Instead, mini-publics' outputs need to be interpreted to be represented in another site of the democratic system before uptake can take place.

If there are problems interpreting the BCA's outputs regarding their meaning and intent, why not just ask the participants themselves? This idea can offer some guidance in working out how the recommendations need to be interpreted but suffers from two issues. The first problem is practical in nature. When Agora tried to contact their ex-participants, it became clear that there was a selection-bias in who responded to their questions and who did not. According to all interviewed Agora members, lower-educated participants are more difficult to reach after the assembly than others. Besides this practical objection, there is also a more fundamental theoretical problem. Normative deliberative theory draws an explicit contrast between the talk-centric

logic of deliberation and the aggregative logic of polling individual citizens as a source of legitimacy (Chambers, 2003). Mini-publics are legitimate by virtue of the former, as legitimacy springs from the deliberative conditions it creates between ordinary citizens to express themselves on an issue of common concern (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015). By polling individual participants about the meaning of mini-public output, the legitimacy basis of the recommendations risks being lost. Moreover, in practice, individually polled participants will likely have diverging opinions on the interpretation issue. These are all issues that are considered by Agora's MP:

*"I would love to go back to the assembly to ask clarifying questions. But that deliberative group no longer exists. After the assembly, we can only ask individual participants about their opinions. Moreover, I am afraid that those that can still be reached are no longer representative of the assembly that was there."* (Respondent 1, Agora's MP)

A previous study by Hendriks (2016) has pointed out how more controversial recommendations can be misinterpreted. However, she suggests that misinterpretation likely takes place due to strategic considerations. Our case, in contrast, shows that interpretation also fulfills an essential and (to some extent) inevitable role when one tries to transmit mini-publics' recommendations literally. At the same time, it is unlikely that other political actors will be as committed as Agora to being faithful representatives of mini-publics' outputs. After all, other MPs have ideological goals going beyond promoting deliberative democracy that might guide their (mis)interpretation and representation of mini-public's output (see Junius et al., 2020).

### *Performance*

Interpretation is but a first step that needs to be taken before mini-publics' outputs can be transmitted to other sites of the democratic system. In a second instance, outputs



are transformed by performing them to fit the cultural scripts of different sites such as the media or parliament (Parkinson, 2012). Moreover, performance is enacted by actors, which turns our attention to their agency and the way that they shape (perceptions of) performance in a specific context (Lyon, 2013). After all, effective communication depends on actors performing outputs in a way that aligns with the cultural scripts of a given audience and context, which to some extent, necessarily transforms these deliberative outputs (Bächtiger and Parkinson, 2019, p. 130).

Agora's MP is the main actor that performs the party's representation of the BCA's outputs. In contrast with the congruency approach, which supposes a literal transmission that anyone could undertake, actors shape the representation of mini-publics. Even though this often happens subtly and unintentionally, such as in the way a representative dresses (Mendonça et al., 2022), one crucial issue is what proposals should be prioritized for representation in parliament and with what urgency and emphasis. As the MP recounts:

*"We try to prioritize issues as spelled out by the assembly. But the assembly offers little guidance. Embarking on my mission to stay faithful to Agora's mission and the assembly, I was often amazed at how pervasive my own identity is. You can try to be objective, but aspects of personality, topicality, and opportunity will always play a role, even if only in perception. In my previous life as an activist, I got access to networks and information that still determine how I articulate and prioritize certain issues over others today. I am also a highly educated male, which shapes the way I communicate and articulate recommendations in parliament."* (Respondent 1, Agora's MP)

Actors do perform representation in a specific context and must adapt to it to communicate effectively. Hajer (2005) has already shown that settings and staging play a crucial role in how actors deliberate. The same logic can also be applied to

representing deliberative outputs. Especially when these outputs must travel settings, and Agora members are highly aware of this:

*“A parliament is not a mini-public. Our MP had to adapt his communication to a more strategic context in which instrumental relations and political games are omnipresent. We also had to couch the recommendations in more legalistic and formal terms suited to the audience sitting in parliament.”* (Respondent 3, Agora member)

This quote illustrates how interpretation and performance are interwoven. Representing mini-publics’ outputs in different contexts requires performative representation, which transforms the outputs to some extent as the process unfolds (Saward, 2020). Just like interpretation, this is a profoundly political activity that demands much more of representatives than a faithful, unchanging transmission of recommendations.

Here again, our case is revealing because it shows that performance does not only play a role when mini-public representatives have strategic interests to deviate from mini-publics’ outputs but also when actors are deeply committed to the ideal of faithful transmission. However, as with interpretation, performance can be used to weave in party interests with mini-publics’ outputs in the way they are articulated. As Agora’s MP puts it:

*“If you think about it, the active role that we unwillingly play when we represent recommendations is scary. We try to communicate openly and transparently about why and when we prioritize certain recommendations over others. But many mini-publics are organized by the authorities, and I fear they will represent recommendations in a way that aligns with their own interests.”* (Respondent 1, Agora’s MP)

## *Negotiation*

After having established that mini-public representatives need to interpret and perform outputs, our case will show that they also need to engage in negotiation. Faithful transmission requires sticking as close to mini-publics' outputs as possible. But what should representatives do when policy-makers are only willing to take up outputs under certain conditions? The advocates of mini-public output must negotiate with the preferences and interests of other institutional actors. After all, policy-makers operate in a tight network of policy advisors and experts, often providing diverse and sometimes conflicting inputs (Torfing and Ansell, 2017). How far can representatives compromise? To our knowledge, mini-publics' reports have little to say about the topic. And for good reason since it seems impossible to anticipate all competing interests with which they must negotiate.

The negotiation issue is directly relevant to the Agora party. As an opposition party in the Brussels Capital Region, they must decide how far they are willing to deviate from the principle of faithful transmission to pass some of their mini-publics' outputs. Yet again, mini-publics' representatives have much more agency than often assumed, whether they want it or not.

*"Initially, this is another issue that we gave little thought to. But in this phase, it is highly relevant. How far are we willing to go to get something done? It is a complicated question that is difficult to anticipate. In practice, we often have to decide ad hoc whether the proposed legislation stays close enough to what our participants wanted."* (Respondent 2, Agora member)

*"What I do plays a key role in the whole process. I feel competent, but at the same time, I doubt a lot. What did the assembly want? I try to stay true to their spirit, but in the end, being a representative entails making political choices. It is a failure of our model, as we*

*wanted to represent our participants directly, but there is little we can do about it. Except for assuming our position and explaining why we do what” (Respondent 1, Agora’s MP)*

The negotiation issue becomes very apparent in our case of a parliamentary represented mini-public but is also relevant for mini-publics that are directly taken up by policy-makers. As Boswell (2016: 724) argues, there is considerable “wriggle room” in the way that vague and contingent decisions get executed and negotiated by policy-makers. Here too, mini-publics’ inputs must be interpreted, performed, and negotiated in a certain way, which is not neutral and is likely to fall short of the faithful transmission ideal. The main difference seems to be that mini-public representation in government is less visible than in parliament, as we know from the policy and administration literature that wriggle room often brings about a political battle concealed from the public eye, which often privileges powerful actors such as technocratic experts and business lobbies (e.g., Lindblom, 1977). Policy-makers often negotiate the outcomes of participatory processes with other inputs in an informal way far away from the public eye (Hendriks and Lees-Marshment, 2019). However, a recent study by Escobar (2021) shows how activist officials can also use informal wriggle space to promote mini-publics and their outputs.

## Discussion and conclusion

This article has argued that mini-publics are not only representative institutions but also represented institutions, in the sense that their outputs and legitimacy are represented in other sites of the democratic system. Moreover, it argues that the representation of mini-publics’ outputs is intrinsic to their uptake and that representing outputs transforms them to some extent. The article identified three main reasons for this: mini-public representatives must interpret, perform, and negotiate outputs. This argument dovetails with insights from the constructivist turn in the literature on representation by showing how representation mediates between the

referent and the object of representation (Fossen, 2019; Castiglione and Pollak, 2019; Disch et al., 2019). We cannot simply transmit mini-publics' outputs without transforming them through interpretation, performance, and negotiation. Therefore, we need to go beyond congruency approaches in the literature on mini-public uptake (e.g., Michels and Binnema, 2018; Jacquet and van der Does, 2020) and study how outputs are represented.

Through a least-likely case-study of Agora's representation of the BCA, the article illustrated how interpretation, performance, and negotiation are pervasive even when representatives have little strategic considerations besides promoting deliberation as a faithful representative of mini-publics' outputs. Given that we find these results in a least-likely case, these issues are likely to travel to other mini-publics to the extent that their outputs are coupled to other sites of the democratic system. If interpretation, performance, and negotiation are unavoidable in a case in which a representative adopts the stance of an extreme delegate that is firmly committed to a faithful transmission of mini-publics' outputs, then it is very likely that other mini-public representatives also need to engage in these practices. Possible exceptions consist of proposals that advocate attributing some formal powers to a randomly selected second chamber (e.g., Gastil and Wright, 2018). To the extent that this randomly selected second chamber would be endowed with formal policy-making powers, its outputs would not require any further representation since they do not need to be transmitted to other parts of the democratic system.

At the same time, the consequences of this article's argument vary between cases. Interpretation, performance, and negotiation might challenge the congruency approach, but this does not mean that there is no correct interpretation or that representation cannot be performed in a way that is faithful to a given mini-public. The importance of these issues is a matter of degree. Interpretation and negotiation can be straightforward in some cases, and the effect of performance is more limited in

some cases than in others. Although the messenger always matters, her relative importance can vary. Nevertheless, it becomes clear in the Agora case that an extreme delegate role is not tenable in practice. The findings show how the promise of being an extreme delegate cannot be delivered upon by Agora's MP. What was expected to be a simple task "simply transmitting" recommendations turned out to be a messy constructivist enterprise in the everyday reality of politics (Castiglione and Pollak, 2019; Disch et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, mini-publics' outputs are represented and this means that representatives need to make political choices. Such as how to interpret specific recommendations or which recommendations to prioritize over others. Currently, much of this process is done by policy-makers far away from the public eye (Boswell, 2016). Provided that this representation transforms outputs to some extent, much of the representation that now takes place at the decision-making table should be done in the media and in parliament. Media attention for mini-publics has been highly variable (Pomatto, 2019) and primarily focused on whether they are legitimate institutions, not on their substantive outputs (Parkinson, 2006).

This state of affairs potentially holds advantages. There is empirical evidence confirming the theoretical claim that deliberation between political actors could be more sincere and qualitative when it does not take place in a public setting (Chambers, 2004; Naurin, 2007; Warren and Mansbridge et al., 2016). However, without public exposure, mini-public participants and the broader public cannot understand how recommendations are represented at the policy table by decision-makers, which increases the risk of cherry-picking and elite capture (Font et al., 2018). Hence, it is key that representation is visible to the broader public and that representatives justify these choices while representing mini-publics (Rummens, 2012; Bohman, 2012). This is especially important when mini-publics are tightly coupled to formal decision-making structures such as government or parliament (Hendriks, 2016). Conversely,

accountability is less important when mini-publics are only loosely coupled to formal decision-making structures.

Another related point in this regard is that there should be transparency on how representatives emerge in a mini-public environment. Who represents mini-publics and is considered as a legitimate representative of mini-publics in different venues of the democratic system? In the Agora case it was quite clear from the outset that the party's representative would represent recommendations formulated by the mini-public. It was explicitly, publicly, and repeatedly communicated that Agora's MP would represent the BCA mini-public by simply transmitting its recommendations. However, in other mini-publics it is often less clear of who emerges as the representative of mini-publics and their outputs. This issue should be tackled by further research.

Finally, conceptualizing mini-publics as represented institutions prompts future research to investigate by whom their outputs are made visible, in what way, at which site in the system (where and when), and for whom.

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