In Search of Better Politics. Linking Mini-publics and the Deliberative System

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Introduction

A citizen jury does not a deliberative democracy make. One may run the best mini-public where reasons are exchanged in an inclusive, respectful and public-spirited manner, but this has little bearing in a political system shaped by polarising rhetoric, spin doctoring and profit-oriented media. Deliberative democracy, as Simone Chambers (2009) rightly points out, is a project that involves 'mass democracy.' More needs to be done to ensure that the public sphere and formal sites of power realise the virtues of deliberative politics, instead of fixating with the internal design of deliberative forums.

This, however, is not to say that a broad view of deliberative democracy should give up on the study of mini-publics. While the systemic turn has shifted the attention away from mini-publics to various spaces in which discourses can be contested, it also brings forth a re-evaluation of the normative theory underpinning mini-publics. What are the functions of mini-publics in a deliberative system? What is the relationship between macro and micro deliberation? Put another way, how can a citizen jury or deliberative forums in general contribute to a deliberative democracy?

We aim to provide analytical clarity on these matters by theorising the relationship between macro and micro-deliberation in the context of a deliberative system. We put forward one main conjecture. We argue that though macro and micro deliberation are conceptually distinct, they are inherently connected. The connection, however, is more tenuous than originally proposed by some deliberative democrats. We argue that mini-publics are best appreciated as sites that 'filter' discussions in the public sphere, rather than sites of decision-making. The macro-political impact of mini-publics should be on the level of shaping the course of public will-formation (discursive) rather than making decisions on behalf of the public (decision-making). The challenge, therefore, is imagining ways in which mini-publics establish links with the public space and play a discursive function, instead of being formal sites of political decision-making. This is a crucial theoretical position to take if one were to address legitimacy and practicality issues that cast doubt on the democratic character of micro-deliberative forums. We provide empirical context to our theoretical claims by focusing on two case studies of mini-publics conducted in Bologna (Italy) and Sydney (Australia).

We show that despite from a micro-standpoint both deliberation processes are characterized by complexities, the Australian forum had greater impact. This, we argue, is due to the latter mini-public’s ability to play a discursive role in the system. The forum worked as a filter and the result of deliberation provided an effective feed back into the wider deliberative system. In contrast, due to its design, as well as implementation, and administrative oversight the Italian mini-public came closer to play a decision-making role. That role limited the ability of the forum to enhance the deliberativeness of the system. In particular, the experiment was unable to conveying to the outside the key insight from deliberation, whilst the legitimacy of the forum was questioned by a number of actors and. We argue the impact of mini-publics is determined more by the way deliberative experiments interact with surrounding actors than by the quality of deliberation during the process.

The Paradox of Mini-Publics

In the past decade, mini-publics have been used as exemplars of deliberative democracy. Compared to avenues like voting and party membership where public participation is recorded to be in decline, mini-publics are pitched as non-partisan democratic innovations that call decision-makers to be responsive to public opinion (Gronlund et al., 2014: 1). Mini-publics take various forms, but their
most common characteristics are as follows: they are ‘mini’ because they are small in scale and they have a ‘public’ character as their composition reflects the broader characteristics of constituencies affected by the topic of deliberation. For Archon Fung (2003), mini-publics are democratic projects ‘creating instances of more perfect public sphere’ where citizens gather in ‘the dozens, or hundreds, or thousands, but certainly not in the millions or tens of millions, in self-consciously organised public deliberations’ (Fung, 2003: 338-9). By carefully designing the procedure and rules that govern mini-publics, deliberative democrats have witnessed the possibilities (as well as limitations) for deliberative virtues to be realised under relatively ideal conditions. ¹

Today, mini-publics have received sustained attention by both advocates and critics of deliberative democracy, a far cry from the observation Fung made more than ten years ago that these democratic innovations, because of their modest scale, ‘have occurred mostly under the radar of democratic and social theorists’ (Fung, 2003: 339). Numerous studies have been published to account for deliberative mini-publics’ virtues and vices. Some of these studies treat mini-publics as deliberative experiments to uncover the ‘black box’ of deliberation (what does deliberation actually do?). Others, instead, investigate how deliberative forums can enrich the quality of actually existing democracies. While there is no consensus on what mini-publics actually ‘can do’ for democracy, the diversity of findings points to the dynamic and contextual rather than cookie cutter quality of these democratic innovations. Years of mini-publics research have generated a tempered appreciation of mini-publics, suggesting that these forums are neither a panacea nor an insignificant achievement of deliberation. Evidence points to participants’ capacity to overcome group polarisation, promote social learning or enhance inter-subjective consistency given conditions conducive for deliberation. Mini-publics of course, are not without critics. In the past few years, pessimistic accounts of mini-publics have taken a paradoxical character which can be summarised as such: Mini-publics are problematic because they are powerless, and when they are powerful they are problematic. The first half of this paradox—they are problematic because they are powerless—is one of the earlier criticisms against deliberative forums. As Grönlund, Bächtiger and Setälä (2014) observed, mini-publics have taken the role of ‘ad hoc consultative bodies,’ which, except for certain democratic innovations like participatory budgeting, usually do not have decision-making powers. In some instances, mini-publics are used as avenues for token participation which merely rubber stamps government policies. The legacies and long-term impacts of mini-publics are also put into question. What use are mini-publics after the afterglow of its ‘democratic benefits’ run out as participants return to their everyday lives?

Deliberative democrats have responded to this critique in various ways. John Dryzek and Robert Goodin (2006) have provided an account of the ‘macro-political uptake’ of mini-publics, illustrating the track record of these forums in influencing policymaking in various stages. Carolyn Hendriks’ (2016) recent work has further conceptualised the ways in which macro-political uptake can be rendered possible, through her notion of ‘designed coupling’. She argues that ‘like organised dating,’ designed coupling recognises the need for active intervention to instigate relationships among sites of deliberation that would otherwise not form. These relationships, for Hendriks, are crucial in linking mini-publics to spaces of decision-making. Her case study, for example, demonstrates how mini-publics have provided the Public Accounts Committee of the New South Wales Parliament the opportunity to hear from a segment of the community that it struggles to reach, and therefore, represent. Through designed coupling, the legislative committee developed a broader concept of the public and considered the broader consequences of their policy decisions. While the mini-public still did not have decision-making power, the legislative committee was better able to realise its mandate of being sensitive to public reasons in the process of policymaking.

John Boswell (2015)

¹ Mini-publics take varied forms depending whether one takes an expansive or restrictive view (see Ryan and Smith, 2014). For the purposes of this paper, it is appropriate to embrace an expansive definition as conceptualised by Fung to account for the ways in which deliberative forums with various purposes, designs and democratic qualities are linked to the broader public sphere.
extends this argument further by proposing ways in which mini-publics can be convened not only as part of the process of public will formation and policymaking but also in the iterative process by which decisions are turned into action. ‘Deliberating downstream,’ as Boswell puts it, can take various forms, such as scrutiny forums, contestatory reviews and feedback funnels, all of which illustrate how deliberation can be embedded at various phases of the policy process. Taken together, these developments in the literature characterise the precise power of mini-publics, whether it is in the form of shaping policy, making empowered spaces more responsive to public reasons or ensuring the democratic quality of policy implementation.

That mini-publics are increasing their influence in spaces of decision-making, however, has not gone uncontested. Cristina Lafont (2015), among others, questioned the bases of mini-publics’ legitimacy. For Lafont, the problem is not that mini-publics are powerless, but that mini-publics gain too much power, such as when the outcomes of their decisions are used to directly determine policies. The epistemic validity of mini-publics’ decisions are limited for these were generated under ‘sterile’ conditions of discourse free from the mess and imperfections of the broader public sphere. For Lafont, as in Chambers, the more reasonable approach to enhancing deliberative democracy is to pursue a macro strategy of enhancing the quality of institutions for mass deliberation such as the media and parliamentary politics. After all, as Nicole Curato and Marit Böker (2016) point out, ‘how can a public sphere appreciate or contest mini-publics’ outcomes if the public does not have the capacity to engage in deliberation?’

Curato and Böker’s solution, however, places a more central role for mini-publics as Lafont imagined. As polities wait for Lafont and Chambers’ structural changes to take root, mini-publics can simultaneously contribute to enhancing the deliberative capacity of the broader system, particularly the public sphere. Simon Niemeyer’s (2014) conceptualisation of mini-publics is crucial here, where mini-publics are best viewed as agents of deliberation-making that can distil relevant discourses to be transmitted to wider publics, instead of engaging in direct decision-making. As proponents of particular discourses, mini-publics, Curato and Böker further argue, are not absolved from the ‘obligation to persuade’ the broader public of their views, as it is this process of clarifying, justifying and refining their views that they gain legitimacy.

It is these set of views that we wish to further develop in the rest of this article. We aim to overcome the mini-publics paradox by precisely identifying their democratic role in the deliberative system as well as the desirable impacts in building the deliberative capacities of democratic polities. We begin our investigation by presenting two case studies from local public deliberation experiments in Italy and Australia respectively: the Iniziativa di Revisione Civica (IRC) in Bologna and the Sydney Climate Change Adaptation (SCCA) forum in Sydney. First, we investigate the deliberative quality of each event. Then, we critically reflect on the extent to which the (micro) difference in quality of deliberativeness matter to their impact. We not only analyze the micro possibilities given the macro settings (that received more attention in literature) but also the relationship between the quality and outcomes of micro-deliberation and its macro impacts. Finally, we illustrate the various ways in which mini-publics can more effectively impact on the deliberative system by adopting a discursive function, rather than a decision making one.

The micro-qualities of deliberation and the macro-context: the IRC and the SCCP

In assessing the relationship between a mini-public and deliberative democracy, it is necessary to understand its relationship with deliberation. Approaches to assessing deliberation tend to either involve assessment of the process, usually via analysis of speech acts — e.g discourse quality index (DQI) (Steenbergen et al., 2003) or assessment of complexity/sophistication of arguments (Wyss et al., 2015). This approach has predominantly been applied to parliamentary settings.

While we recognise the importance of assessing procedural quality of deliberation, the analysis here assumes that the legitimacy of deliberative outcomes is at least partly a function of the positions
that citizens arrive at. This is not least because the process of transmission (to the wider public or decision makers) does not involve conveying the minutiae of the discussions that take place. Rather, it is the outcomes that those citizens arrive at.

There are a number of competing ideas concerning what constitutes a ‘good’ deliberative outcome. For example, the classic benchmark simply states that deliberation should result in preference change (Przeworski, 1998) — which has come under increasing scrutiny as a proxy for deliberative quality (Baccaro, Forthcoming).

Another approach involves assessing the nature of the transformation that has taken place. For example, Dryzek and List (2003) argue that deliberation is likely to induce greater preference structuration, thus reducing the chance of problems associated with social choice — an argument that is also empirically verified (List et al., 2000). While this approach is an improvement, it speaks to potentially important by-product of deliberation, rather than the core of deliberative transformation.

Here we follow the broad approach described by Niemeyer and Dryzek (2007) where the ‘ends of deliberation’ need to be assessed in respect to the relationship between the underlying reasons/arguments that support particular recommendations in respect to policy outcomes. Here we perform this assessment in two main ways. First we look at the magnitude of transformation at two different levels:

1. Underlying reasons (subjectivity; values, beliefs) involving specific arguments and/or claims in respect to the issue
2. Resulting Preferences (choices between policy options) involving alternatives that are relevant and exhaustive

In practice, underlying reasons are captured via surveying responses to statements pertaining to the issue in question. These statements, which are used in conjunction with the application of Q method as a form of discourse analysis (Dryzek and Berejikian, 1993) contain assertions about the nature of the issue (beliefs), importance of particular ends (values) or a combination of both. Preferences are surveyed by rank ordering of policy options. Repeating both exercises before and immediately after deliberation permits assessment of the changes that took place.

We then investigate the relationship between these levels using intersubjective consistency (IC). In short, IC is based on the assumption that, to the extent there is agreement in preferences, this is also reflected in terms of the underlying reasons upon which they are based. The extreme version of this is Habermasian rational consensus, where all agree for the same reasons. But rather than perfect consensus, here we adopt a version of metaconsensus (Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2006) whereby disagreement in preferences is consistent with disagreement in respect to reasons. The actual contours of the relationship between preference and reasons is intersubjective, hence the term intersubjective consistency.

IC is not so much measured, as observed. This is done by correlation pairs of participants on their policy preferences and combining this with the correlation between their agreement on underlying reasons. By plotting all possible pairs of deliberators the collective consistency can be observed to the extent that they converge toward the regression, while recognising that there is a tradeoff between the strength of regression and level of consensus. For example, if there is perfect consensus, then the R2 for the regression is 0, but we still have perfect consistency — bearing in mind that IC is the indicator of whether deliberation might have occurred, not perfect consensus (Niemeyer and Dryzek, 2007).

Although there are cases where a high IC might result from conditions that are not deliberative (Niemeyer and Dryzek, 2007), an increase in the relationship demonstrably indicates improved translation of “underlying preferences” with actual policy choices in a manner consistent with the

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2 Values and beliefs are not used separately as part of the methodology because understanding of the ‘logic’ of underlying discourses means that the relationship between them is important, as it is difficult to tease apart (Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2006).
ideal of deliberation (Manin, 1987). To this end, we use it as a tool to assess what took place during deliberation and the potential implications for legitimacy of a particular mini-public case study.

The first case study is a local deliberative experiment, the *Iniziativa di Revisione Civica* (IRC), held in 2012, in Bologna province, Italy. Twenty local citizens, selected through a stratified random sampling, deliberated and voted on a proposal to merge five small local councils into a larger new single council covering a vast countryside area nearby the city of Bologna. The merged council would replace an existing body called *Unione*, which already guaranteed a minimum of integrated governance with respect to some issues. This public deliberation was introduced by the local administrations in view of a forthcoming referendum on this issue. The local administrations (in favour of the merging) supported the IRC as a means to innovate political participation. In their eyes democratic deliberation would help citizens understanding the reasons for proceeding with the merging process and would displace their opponents’ parade of symbolic politics. Also local opposition parties and activists, mobilizing for voting NO to the referendum, participated to the IRC. Besides having a genuine interest in democratic engagement, these actors saw in the IRC a convenient platform to express the solidity of their objections to the merging, in a campaign in which their opponents detained more influence and resources. After three days of intense debate, deliberators voted overwhelmingly in favour of the merging in occasion of a mock election (17 pro, 2 against, 1 abstain), although in their final report they highlighted a long list of weaknesses characterizing the merging proposal. The original intention was for the report generated by the IRC to be distributed widely to residents in the lead up to a referendum on the issue. The intention was not to dictate to residents how a ‘deliberated’ outcome would look like, but to contribute to wider public deliberation. This did not eventuate, due to administrative oversight, and ultimately it was the result of the actual vote at the event that dominated what public discourse subsequently took place (Felicetti et al., 2015).

In order to understand the main dynamics of deliberation from a micro perspective we look at how discourse and preference transformation vary during deliberation as well as at the changes that occur in terms of intersubjective consistency. The IRC shows that during deliberation participants displayed moderate and consistent levels of discursive and preference transformation (Figure 1). Instead, intersubjective consistency, which was very high already before the deliberation, actually had a small decrease after deliberation, though its overall level remained very strong (Figure 2). Despite an overall transformation in respect to both underling issues (responses to Q statements) and policy preferences (Figure 3), the overall effect of deliberation seems relatively small, with a slight increase in favour of the proposal to amalgamate the municipalities, but also a move toward favouring the status quo, with consensus that is low before and after deliberation. Thus, much of the individual movement occurred in different directions.
Figure 1 Transformation IRC

Figure 2 IRCIC pre and post deliberation
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Option Description</th>
<th>Pre deliberation</th>
<th>Post Deliberation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Unione</strong></td>
<td>Increase the power of the existing Unione</td>
<td>1.9 (1)</td>
<td>2.3 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. NO</strong></td>
<td>Leave things as they are</td>
<td>3.4 (4)</td>
<td>3.6 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. YES</strong></td>
<td>Go ahead with the amalgamation as proposed</td>
<td>2.0 (2)</td>
<td>1.8 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. Postpone</strong></td>
<td>Postpone the amalgamation</td>
<td>2.7 (3)</td>
<td>2.3 (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3 Pre- and Post-Deliberative Option Ratings: Valsamoggia IRC

The second case study refers to another local deliberative experiment the Sydney Climate Change Adaptation forum (SCCA). This minipublic on climate change involved a broadly similar design to that of the Valsamoggia case study, but on the issue of climate change adaptation within the City of Sydney. Similarly to the Valsamoggia case, the SCCA was a combination of commissioning by a decision making body (City of Sydney) and cooperation with researchers. The City of Sydney commissioned the event as part of a wider project developing a strategy for anticipating and adapting to the effects of climate change. SCCA had strong political support. The main outcome of the deliberation, the citizens’ report, offered an important contribution to public policy in a broad/advisory sense and these were uptaken by the local council in the development of their adaptation plans (Schlosberg and Niemeyer, Forthcoming).

The event itself involved 23 participants drawn from a stratified random sample, participating in a two and a half day event. Like the Valsamoggia case, participants considered concrete proposals being considered by the Sydney Council. In addition, SCCA sought to draw out citizens’ own priorities in respect to adaptation in light of the climate change information that was being presented to them (Schlosberg et al., Forthcoming). These priorities were gathered into a brief citizens’ report that was presented to council (Anonymous, 2014).

Overall, the level of transformation associated with the Sydney Climate Change Citizens’ Panel (SCCP) is on a level comparable to the Valsamoggia case study. Also in this case the discursive transformation was moderate but consistent. With respect to preference transformation, instead, change was weak and inconsistent (Figure 4). Intersubjective consistency increased only minimally and stayed weak also after the deliberation (Figure 5). Changes in respect to the five broad policy options presented to participants were small (Figure 6). Schlosberg et al. (Forthcoming) report that there were systematic changes to underlying issues to the extent that the original set of discourses that they informed changed. The transformations that did occur did not result in an appreciable increase in intersubjective consistency, or consensus for either underlying issues or policy preferences.⁴

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³ Rankings out of 5 (most to least favoured). Overall rankings shown in brackets.

⁴ In the case of policy preferences this could reflect the fact that the survey instrument did not really reflect the focus of participant deliberation, or the content of their report to decision makers (Anonymous, 2014).
Figure 4 Summary of Transformations SCCA

Figure 5 SCCA IC pre and post deliberation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option Description</th>
<th>Pre</th>
<th>Post</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 PROTECT INFRASTRUCTURE</td>
<td>2.41 (1)</td>
<td>2.27 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The City should plan for any deep structural change necessary to protect all</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>infrastructure and operations of the City.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 INDIVIDUAL ACTION</td>
<td>2.45 (2)</td>
<td>2.23 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The City should implement education programs and assistance for individual</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>households and businesses to develop their own plans to</td>
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accommodate and adapt to climate change. The City should make plans to withdraw from vulnerable areas, and relocate or abandon threatened infrastructure.

Adaptation should be focussed on ensuring continued economic growth of the City of Sydney.

More research and development is needed to inform an appropriate adaptation policy. Adaptation really needs to be coordinated at the State level (rather than the local council level) in order to be effective.

The City doesn’t need to take any action on climate adaptation.

| 3 WITHDRAW | accommodate and adapt to climate change. The City should make plans to withdraw from vulnerable areas, and relocate or abandon threatened infrastructure. | 3.82 (5) 4.23 (5) |
| 4 GROWTH | Adaptation should be focussed on ensuring continued economic growth of the City of Sydney. | 4.5 (6) 4.14 (6) |
| 5 RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT | More research and development is needed to inform an appropriate adaptation policy. | 3.45 (4) 3.32 (3) |
| 6 STATE COORDINATION | Adaptation really needs to be coordinated at the State level (rather than the local council level) in order to be effective. | 3.32 (3) 3.86 (4) |
| 7 NO ACTION | The City doesn’t need to take any action on climate adaptation. | 6.27 (7) 5.95 (7) |

Figure 6 Pre- and Post-Deliberative Option Ratings: SCCA

In the face of the clear difference in terms of the subjects under discussion, dynamics of micro deliberation at SCCA are not too different from those of the IRC. The fuzzy image of the changes that occurred during the IRC and the SCP has little in common with the neat picture of what deliberative democrats may want to see happening during deliberation. Yet, direct observation of the CRI and the SCCA suggests that the process followed standard dynamics of engagement and featured a great degree of engagement from participants (Felicetti et al., 2015). To us, these case studies speak of the vast complexities that each deliberative experience brings with itself. There is ultimately no remedy to the complexity of the processes occurring in participants’ mind during real-world public deliberation. On the other hand, it is entirely possible and necessary for deliberative democrats to take this complexity seriously when thinking of the role of public deliberation in broader systems and what sort influence it should have in respect to given issues.

Understanding Macro impacts of mini-publics and their different functions

How can the difference in impact between the two events be explained? Our argument is that an important difference between the two case studies occurs with respect to the function they come to play in the wider political context they are part of. In particular, we refer to the tendency of CRI and SCCA to play two different roles: decision making and deliberation making respectively. The way in which these mini-publics came to play these roles can be ascribed in part to deliberate decisions by the organizers and in part to the interaction between micro and macro aspects and the way the output of deliberation was integrated in the local systems. In each case, a few key aspects characterize these processes.

The CRI was called in sight of a local referendum. This meant that the main contribution that the assembly could give to the local deliberative system consisted in helping citizens in making an informed choice. This aspect of itself does not imply that the mini-public would have a decision making nature, as opposed to a deliberation making one. Actually, the original idea was to give selected citizens an opportunity to engage in depth with each other and with experts to write a report with their reflections about the referendum, to the benefit of the wider public (Unione di Comuni Valle del Samoggia, 2012). Yet, the event ended up playing an entirely different (and

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5 Rankings out of 7 (most to least favoured). Overall rankings shown in brackets.
decision-making) function because of the way micro-macro elements interacted in the deliberative system.

To begin with, the CRI took place roughly one month before the referendum. Participants’ work was framed in terms of finding arguments for or against the referendum question. On the one hand, this is reasonable since, at such a later stage, there was no going back from the decision to hold the referendum. Yet, as the participants’ final document showed, deliberators’ greatest concern rested with two related issues that questioned the opportunity of holding the referendum at all (Gruppo di Revisione, 2012). The first issue concerned the lack of a clear plan with respect to the amalgamation proposal, which hindered the possibility of an informed decision. This problem was only exacerbated by, second point, what deliberators saw as a severe lack of high quality participation in the lead up to the event. Essentially, participants claimed that the local system would need much more substantial deliberation rather than decision-making. The deliberation was structured along the yes and no divide. Yet, the main effect that the mini-public had was not orienting deliberators in one or the other direction. Rather, it led them to question the quality of the process leading-up to the referendum. As our data show, it appears that participants’ pre-deliberation beliefs were shaken rather than structured or changed.

The mini-public, nonetheless, ended up playing a markedly decision-making function. The participants’ report itself came to be taken as an indication of vote rather than an information source. This was partly due to two implementation problems. First, participants were allowed to have a final vote on the referendum question, whereas according to the original plan they would vote on individual statements of relevance to the debate in favour or against the amalgamation. In consequence of this change, the entire debate after the release of the report focused on the clear majority that participants expressed with regard to amalgamation proposal (see Saliera, 2012, Ruscigno, 2012). Their demand for clarifications about the amalgamation process and more participation was overlooked. A second problem is that the report was not circulated, as planned, in each local household. In fact, as organizers realized only too late, doing so would contravene to local laws. The circulation of the report was thus left in the hands of partisan local actors that cherry picked its content. The local government publicised the overwhelming victory of the amalgamation proposal, whereas the opponents highlighted the weaknesses of the process leading to the amalgamation.

Far from representing an inconsistency in participants’ views, the tension between the criticism to the amalgamation proposal and the overwhelming majority in favour of a yes vote to the referendum is a manifestation of the different logics underpinning the discursive and decision-making functions of mini-publics. The citizens’ report features a vast discussion that engages with all four discourses that existed in the public sphere. Three of these (increase the power of mini-publics, making functions of mini-publics and no divide). Yet, the main effect that the mini-public had was not orienting deliberators in one or the other direction. Rather, it led them to question the quality of the process leading-up to the referendum. As our data show, it appears that participants’ pre-deliberation beliefs were shaken rather than structured or changed.

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The highly adversarial logics dominating the local referendum dispute made it extraordinarily difficult for deliberative capacity building through a single deliberative mini-public. On the contrary, local dynamics were such that pushed the mini-public to serve the traditional mechanisms of political confrontation rather than deliberative politics. As already mentioned, both parties (local government and oppositions) accepted to participate in the mini-public expecting to win the contest for the better argument. Whilst willing to give an opportunity to deliberation within the forum, neither party was ready to let the other win the dispute. In an adversarial setting it is unrealistic and possibly undesirable to expect otherwise (Hendriks, 2006). Nonetheless, whilst either party could have questioned the legitimacy of the event, as is the case with mini-publics in general (Parkinson, 2006, Lafont, 2015), the CRI claimants had at least two good reasons to do so. First, the mini-public was called for and organized by the local administration with the opposition participating in it, despite their taking no part in the governance of the event (Felcetti et al., 2015). Second, the decision-making orientation that the mini-public came to have that fuelled those who questioned the legitimacy of the process. Demands for a higher quality amalgamation process could not be met. Thus, they fell out of the contest or were used instrumentally. The improvised vote of twenty randomly selected citizens remained as the locus of attention and of contestation, pace systemic deliberation. The *pax deliberativa* that lasted during the mini-public was soon replaced by an ignited clash between proponents and opponents of the amalgamation.

The SCCA was not called around an impelling political decision. Nor were deliberators asked to focus on a dichotomous choice. These aspects represented two important assets in enabling systemic impact to the event. On the one hand, deliberators had the possibility of exploring a wide range of policy options and clearly identify those they would prefer seeing implemented. On the other hand, the local council had the opportunity to select from these options the most interesting ones, envisioning possible opportunities to develop them over time. The SCCA’s report itself comprised a set of overarching principles, followed by a set of climate-related risks they considered important and by a series of specific recommendations. The generation of a ‘wish list’ risked to end up being overlooked by policy makers. Yet, decision makers, which unitedly supported the event, carefully considered the content of the report and incorporated a number of findings into a draft climate change adaptation strategy (City of Sydney, 2015). This state of affairs is in stark opposition with that of the CRI. There, deliberators’ preference proved to be beyond the two options they were given and their indications were used as ready-disposable tools for political confrontation, rather than deliberative capacity building. Though both the SCCP’s and CRI’s reports were capable of conveying the complex processes that characterized deliberation, only the former ended up furthering systemic deliberation.

The CRI’s case questions the idea that deliberation is best understood as a preliminary to a vote. This view is aptly rendered by Goodin’s (2008) expression: ‘first talk, then vote’. The above understanding of the relationship between deliberation and voting may represent a valuable insight in arranging deliberative procedures. However, it does not help to properly understand the role of mini-publics in a deliberative system. Goodin (2008: 114) rightly suggests that adding voting mechanisms through a deliberation process may help breaking the issues related to discursive path dependency that characterize deliberation. As he argues, the ‘natural’ starting points in a conversation may bias subsequent discussion in arbitrary ways (Goodin, 2008: 116-7). Introducing voting mechanisms during the process may break this trend. Voting, like facilitation and communication with experts (Gastil and Levine, 2005), can certainly give a contribution to deliberative processes. These mechanisms can serve deliberation. What is problematic, however, is the opposite view whereby deliberation becomes instrumental to voting. Preference aggregation mechanisms, such as voting, should not be necessarily intended as the final outcome of a deliberation. Against Goodin’s (2008: 124) claim that deliberative processes ‘make the ultimate decisions through more purely aggregative procedures’, we suggest that, whenever possible, mini-publics should make no decision at all, especially through purely aggregative mechanisms. Rather, they should focus on giving arguments upon which systemic deliberation can be built. Decision
making is bound to occur at some point in the deliberative system and mini-publics may be a difficult site where to stage this process.

As we have seen, aggregation seems to perform a particularly poor job in conveying the complex reasoning that deliberators undertake during deliberation. This problem is especially evident when the outcome of a deliberation process is circulated through standard (and highly agonistic) channels. A focus on voting might lead to overlooking the content of deliberative reports, a much more substantial resource to further informed debate in the system. Second, far from establishing ground for deliberative politics, voting tends to expose deliberation to agonistic logics. In particular, voting at the end of a deliberative forum is bound to establish a divide between winners and losers. Rather than engaging all actors in reason giving, this divide, may induce winners to simplistically remark upon their victory and losers to question the credentials of a deliberative process. On the one hand, boasting about the results of a vote may add little or nothing in terms of the quality of an argument, or, for that matter, system-wise deliberation. On the other hand, direct attacks on deliberative forums may not be negative from a systemic standpoint to the extent that they may point out to weaknesses of the deliberative process (Parkinson, 2006). Nonetheless, systematic attacks, which are dictated more by strategic reasons than genuine concern with forums, are arguably detrimental to the promotion of deliberative democracy. More generally, forums oriented towards a decision making functions are arguably more exposed than deliberation-making ones to legitimacy questions. In this respect, Lafont’s (2015) argument on the lack of legitimacy of minipublics offers food for thought. As mini-publics include aggregation mechanisms they come closer to playing a decision making function and are in greater need for legitimacy justification. To say it with Lafont, mini-publics are not ‘feasible shortcut for realizing deliberative democracy’ (see also: Dryzek, 2016). Indeed, mini-publics which boast alleged decision making capability may be far from acquiring any comparative advantage in this respect. Rather, mini-publics should be thought of as components whose contribution to systemic deliberation can vary greatly – not just because of their micro-qualities but also because of the way in which the forum is placed in the macro context.

Our analysis shows that deliberative innovation should aim at playing a greater role as a deliberation making component of a system. At very least, deliberative innovators be aware that introducing mechanisms (such as voting) that give forums a greater decision-making function involves epistemic difficulties (particularly, in communicating deliberation contents) and greater legitimacy challenges. Deliberative forums are best thought of as discursive inputs into the wider system, rather than poor proxies for democracy. On the basis of our case studies it is possible to identify at least few general recommendations to envision forums with a stronger discursive function. First, deliberative events should be included in policy making processes as early as possible. Inserting deliberative forums at a late stage reduces the ability of citizens to explore the various solutions to political issues, and facing them with binary (referendum like) choices seems a particularly problematic perspective in this sense. Relatedly, deliberative forums should be introduced when there is a chance that potential recommendation may be acted upon, which may be more and more difficult to do as time for a final decision approaches. Second, deliberative forums should not be inserted as one off event in the context of a deliberative system. Doing so, in fact, seems insufficient to redress the problems that may exist in systems. Instead, forums should be introduced as a part of a broader process of deliberative capacity building where different issues can be dealt with in different spaces and stages of policy making (Goodin, 2005). Third, whilst partisans play an important role in deliberative systems (Hendriks et al., 2007), partisan channels should not be the only one in charge of the circulation of deliberations’ outcomes. Rather, whenever possible it may be advisable that citizens’ deliberation is communicated as directly as possible to the rest of the citizenry.

Conclusions
To date, theorists and practitioners of deliberative democracy have devoted a great deal of effort to developing good quality deliberative processes. This attention to micro aspects of deliberation has been increasingly challenged by a focus on macro aspects. That is, in the aftermath of the systemic turn in deliberative democracy, it is increasingly clear that the interaction between mini-publics and their contexts are an integrating part in the effort to build successful deliberation. This paper sought to bridge both perspectives to shed a light on the complex ways in which the interaction between micro and macro elements affects the ability of mini-publics to contribute to systemic deliberation. In light of our analysis of two case studies we argue that mini-publics may give a greater contribution to the deliberative system if they focus on their discursive function, instead of claiming decision-making roles. This implies a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between aggregation and deliberation. Aggregation mechanisms may be necessary at some stage in the deliberative system but they are certainly not the natural outcome of mini-public deliberation. If anything, voting could play an instrumental role during deliberation. We have also identified some measures that may help mini-publics to play a greater discursive function in the system: Including mini-publics in early stages of the decision making process, as parts of a comprehensive effort of deliberative reform rather than isolated experiments, taking care that the conclusions of the deliberative assembly.

References


