

Case Studies on the Role of Mini-Publics for Policymakers

Jie Yang

University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

Abstract: This essay examines the role of mini-publics in enhancing policy legitimacy and the effectiveness of policy implementation through a comparative analysis of two case studies: deliberative polling on energy futures in Vermont, USA, and democratic consultation meetings in the Xinxing community, Dongying, China. The essay explores how mini-publics, as democratic innovations, contribute to policy-making by engaging citizens in decision-making processes, ensuring inclusivity, and providing policymakers with a broader range of public needs. It also considers the different functions and outcomes of mini-publics in representative democracies and authoritarian contexts, highlighting their potential to complement existing political structures and enhance public trust in governance. The analysis concludes that while mini-publics offer significant benefits in both democratic and authoritarian settings, their long-term impact on political systems may vary depending on the broader context of governance and public engagement.

Keywords: Democratic Innovations; Mini-publics; Representative.

1. literature Review

Democratic innovations come in many forms, such as deliberative democracy, participatory budgeting, and referendums. These institutional mechanisms also vary in form, for example, town hall meetings in the USA, participatory budgeting processes in Brazil, and e-democracy initiatives in India [1]. Mini-publics are widely discussed in the practice of democratic innovation. For instance, citizen juries, consensus conferences, and deliberative polls involve a relatively small number of individuals and have different objectives; some primarily provide advisory services, while others have the capacity to directly or indirectly shape public policy [2]. Mini-publics are not only widely used in representative democratic countries but are also experimented with to some extent in societies under authoritarian influence. Despite various limitations, these trials play a positive role for policymakers from the perspectives of the legitimacy of policy formulation and the effectiveness of policy implementation. Therefore, this essay will discuss two cases: the deliberative polling on the future of energy in Vermont, USA, and the democratic consultation meetings in Xinxing community in Dongying, Shandong Province, China, to analyze the benefits of mini-publics to policymakers in terms of policy legitimacy and effectiveness in policy implementation.

Mini-publics were initially proposed by Fung (2003) as various forums that gather citizen groups to deliberate on specific political issues. Sometimes, the term is used to describe forums open to all citizens, such as participatory budgeting [3]. However, this essay argues the benefits of mini-publics to policymakers. Smith (2009) also views deliberative mini-publics as democratic innovations in his research [1]. Some critics argue that traditional deliberative democracy, especially in the form of large-scale citizen assemblies, with its emphasis on rationality and consensus, may marginalize vulnerable groups because democratic deliberation in such environments could be dominated by those with higher education or dominant groups [4]. Kuyper and Wolkenstein (2019) believe that mini-publics, by directly

allowing people to participate in policy-making, are crucial not for the final vote but for allowing citizens to express their needs in decision-making [4]. Since mini-publics are smaller and participants often come from the same community or industry, inclusivity may be ensured, making policy discussions smoother and theoretically allowing for thorough discussion of each individual's needs. Additionally, in the policy-making process, mini-publics can also serve as a trustworthy source of information for the public. Setälä (2017) argues that due to the distrust of the government prevalent in society, or the one-sided views presented in government propaganda, it is challenging for the public to access accurate information [5]. Mini-publics can act as a source of political trust of a specific type. When the public has access to them, the reasoning processes of mini-publics can help citizens understand and critically reflect on the arguments supporting and opposing different policy options [6]. This helps to rebuild public trust in the government and can enhance the effectiveness of policy implementation.

2. Research Objectives

Since the essay discusses the benefits of mini-publics to policymakers in terms of policy legitimacy and the effectiveness of policy implementation, it is necessary to discuss the legitimacy of integrating the concept of mini-publics with 'policymakers'. A political system typically needs three elements to demonstrate legitimacy: citizens must have political rights and power to engage in activities including voting, vetoing, and organized dissent; the interests and values of individuals participating in democratic activities should be communicated to form a collective agenda and will; and the collective will needs to become a binding decision [7] [4]. In democratic countries, these three elements are usually executed by party-centered representative democracies acting as policymakers [4]. Mini-publics, in themselves, are a respect for citizen rights and powers in representative democracy, where citizens not only possess political power but also have the capability to use these powers. Secondly, representative democracy can elevate the results of democratic deliberation into collective will through legal acts,

with legislative bodies serving as the channel through which collective will is transformed into a binding decision. Therefore, theoretically, integrating the concept of mini-publics with 'policymakers' has legitimacy. In authoritarian countries, like China, which is discussed as a case study, although democracy has certain flaws, this legitimacy still exists [8]. However, how this legitimacy is manifested and its specific effects will be discussed in the detailed case analysis later in the essay.

This essay will employ a case study approach to systematically assess and compare the benefits of mini-publics to policymakers in terms of policy legitimacy and the effectiveness of policy implementation. The specific cases include deliberative polling on the future of energy in Vermont, USA, and democratic consultation meetings in the Xinxing community in Dongying, Shandong Province, China. Smith (2019) suggests several methodological aspects for case studies on democratic innovations, including a detailed description of the political, social, and historical background of the cases, the specific forms and implementation processes of the democratic innovations studied, and an analysis of their effects [1]. Therefore, during the case study process, this essay will need to analyze the background, implementation process, and outcomes of the two selected cases, specifically in terms of the benefits to policymakers regarding policy legitimacy and effectiveness of policy implementation. Additionally, it will compare the practices and specific outcomes of mini-publics in representative democracies and authoritarian countries. Furthermore, according to Mansbridge et al. (2012), discussions on democratic innovations need to address how democracy can involve a broader public in discussions traditionally limited to small groups through social media, news reporting, and public forums [9]. This essay will attempt to complement the discussion with considerations on how information technology can enhance the role of mini-publics in policy-making.

3. Case Study of Mini-Public Collectives in the United States

The first case is the deliberative polling on the future of energy in Vermont, USA. The background of this case was that before deciding on Vermont's future energy choices, faced with two major electricity contracts expiring in 2007, the Vermont Department of Public Service wanted to consider public opinion. Therefore, they conducted a survey of randomly selected participants. The aim of this event was to decide what type of energy should predominantly meet Vermont's electricity needs after 2012, including whether to increase reliance on wind, hydro, and nuclear power, and whether to opt for large centralized energy facilities or smaller decentralized ones [10]. The selection of participants was done through random telephone sampling, with a total of 750 respondents interviewed by phone and invited to participate in the deliberative poll [11]. According to the report by Luskin et al. (2008), participants were informed that they would have the opportunity to express their opinions on important policy issues concerning Vermont and potentially connect with fellow Vermonters from different regions through television or newspapers [11]. Additionally, they were assured that they would be accommodated in a nice hotel for the weekend of the voting. Furthermore, each participant would receive a stipend of \$150.

Looking at the early organization of the deliberative polling on the future of energy in Vermont, USA, this form of mini-publics offers several advantages to policymakers. Firstly, mini-publics can correct some of the flaws of legislative (partisan) politics, especially the deficit in representing the affected public. This deliberative poll was essentially aimed at correcting or compensating for the deficiencies in traditional representative democracy or government administrative and decision-making capabilities. According to Kuyper and Wolkenstein (2019), while legislative committees are elected, geographically representative, and susceptible to pressure from special interest groups, mini-publics are randomly selected, descriptively stratified, and not targeted by interest groups [4]. In sectors closely tied to interest groups like energy, legislative bodies may be influenced by local or other regional energy companies, thus overlooking public will. Organizing deliberative consultations with randomly selected citizens can avoid excessive involvement of energy companies in policy-making, thus freeing the government from the influence of interest groups. Since it fully respects the political rights of the public, it embodies legitimacy from the start of policy-making and reduces social problems that may arise from low public approval after decisions are made through legislation. Moreover, providing participants with good accommodation and \$150 in support might be a reasonable choice when conditions permit [11]. This financial support could be attractive to less educated people or those from remote areas, groups that are often marginalized in democratic consultations. This reflects that because mini-publics are smaller in scale, the costs can be directed towards more detailed aspects, including financial support to attract easily marginalized social groups. This could enable policymakers to access a broader range of public needs.

A total of 146 participants attended the deliberative poll on the future of energy in Vermont, held at the University of Texas at Austin. The first part of the event involved brief presentations by relevant experts, followed by a question-and-answer session with the participants. Subsequently, each participant was randomly assigned to a group, with a total of 13 groups, averaging 11 to 12 participants each [11]. Each group was facilitated by a neutral moderator, who was responsible for guiding the discussion. Due to the random sampling method used, the diversity and range of opinions among participants were expected to be maximized. The main purpose of the group discussions was to enable participants to share their views, listen to each other, and learn from one another, with the expectation that this would lead to an increase in everyone's knowledge and reflection on the issues discussed [10]. Discussions within the groups focused solely on exchanging opinions and did not advocate for voting, thus ensuring that discussions were open and that no ideas were suppressed by majority rule. Notably, before the formal deliberative sessions began, the local government had uploaded relevant materials to an online platform for participants to review and discuss with their families and friends [10].

From the process perspective, dividing participants into smaller groups and advocating against voting within these groups ensures a degree of inclusivity among the mini-publics, and the involvement of experts may have a positive effect on enhancing the scientific basis of decision-making. When different deliberative settings, such as citizen groups, expert panels, and public media, collectively influence the policy

agenda, the outcomes are usually more comprehensive and inclusive, thereby enhancing the legitimacy of the policy and public acceptance [9]. Additionally, according to research by Elstub and Escobar (2019), public involvement through digital platforms or direct dialogue with deliberative bodies can expand the inclusiveness of deliberative democracy and improve decision-making transparency [12]. The online materials uploaded by the local government before the formal discussions to some extent expanded the scale of democratic deliberation without adversely affecting the mini-publics, instead increasing inclusivity. Therefore, for the decision-making itself, when the opinions within the participating mini-publics are fully discussed, the public involved in the discussions will already have their understanding of the policy. When the policy is finally implemented, the acceptance by the citizens will be higher, and they will support and maintain the policies implemented with public participation. For policymakers, this means that policy implementation will receive more public support compared to decisions made directly by representative bodies, thus enhancing the effectiveness of policy implementation.

4. Case Study of Mini-Public Collectives in China

Another case is the democratic consultation meetings in Xinxing community in Dongying, Shandong Province, China. Attempts with mini-publics in China began gradually in the 1990s, initially with villagers' deliberative meetings in rural areas, and gradually expanded to urban community discussions about water and electricity fees, park admission prices, and infrastructure development [13]. The Xinxing community in Dongying, Shandong Province, China, is an affiliate community established by the state-owned enterprise Sinopec, and it began operation in the 1990s. Due to issues such as aging water and electricity lines in residential buildings, insufficient parks, and conflicts among residents within the community, the local Communist Party organization began to host democratic consultation meetings in 2020 [14]. According to Participedia (2022), the first meeting was held in 2020 and employed stratified sampling by age to select participants, ultimately choosing 60 people from within the community. Before the formal meeting started, community organizers promoted the event by posting posters and announcements and collected topics for the upcoming meeting through social media and offline surveys [14]. The formal meeting was similar in format to the first case of deliberative polling on the future of energy in Vermont, USA, dividing the 60 participants into groups of ten to discuss issues related to community space utilization, pet welfare, and community road improvements [14]. A second meeting took place a week later, which invited representatives from professional agencies to finalize the solutions identified in the first meeting, discuss details and funding use, and answer questions raised by the participants [14].

The trial of mini-publics deliberation in Xinxing community, Dongying, Shandong Province, China, could provide legitimacy and effectiveness for policymakers, especially within the context of authoritarian politics. The core purpose of incorporating mini-publics in authoritarian politics is to enhance legitimacy. This integration allows the government to utilize the benefits of public deliberation, including improving the transparency of the decision-making process and public participation, while still maintaining strict

control over power without relinquishing centralized authority [15]. Attempts with mini-publics, like those in Xinxing community, may be suitable for Chinese policymakers to some extent because they involve genuine participation from the public, who have a decisive role in decision-making, thereby enhancing the legitimacy of the decisions themselves. On the other hand, due to the small scale of participation and its limitation to grassroots political areas like villages and communities, it is easier, as He and Warren (2011) mentioned, for authoritarian politics to restrict the scope and topics of possible discussions, ensuring they align with the national macro policies and strategic objectives [15]. Additionally, mini-publics can enhance the efficiency of policy implementation. As people participate in the deliberation process of mini-publics, they gain some understanding of the policy-making process, and due to community publicity on social media and the availability of relevant information, the public gains confidence in the transparency of policy formulation. This participation process, by embracing the public's understanding and use of opportunities within authoritarian politics, enhances their belief in the potential of their political actions, thus maintaining and supporting the policies established by the community. Moreover, organizing mini-publics can have a positive effect on enhancing citizens' understanding of and participation in the political process, helping policymakers to form a more open and responsible government image. Under authoritarian politics, the potential result is that the public might support those policies not introduced through mini-publics [8]. Therefore, mini-publics like those organized in the Xinxing community of Dongying, Shandong Province, China, can provide some degree of help to policymakers in terms of the legitimacy and effectiveness of policy implementation.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the two cases demonstrates that mini-publics show similarities in their form when reflecting the benefits to policymakers in terms of policy legitimacy and the effectiveness of policy implementation, though there may be differences in purpose and degree. Firstly, both cases selected for this essay exhibit characteristics of a small scale, and the topics discussed are focused on specific areas such as energy and community planning. The small scale of participants, potentially from the same field, facilitates smoother internal group discussions and allows for thorough discussion of individual interests, showcasing the inclusivity advantages of mini-publics [4]. Secondly, because inclusivity is ensured, more people, particularly marginalized groups such as the less educated, elderly, and women, are able to participate in democratic decision-making. This not only allows policymakers to capture a broader range of public needs but also enhances the legitimacy of the policies. Additionally, public participation in democratic decision-making helps them understand the policy-making process, and since public influence in policy decisions is heightened, there may be greater social support during the final implementation of the policy. Another point to note is that in integrating mini-publics with internet platforms, on the one hand, public opinion collection is not limited to a small scale; on the other hand, this approach to making information transparent can help increase public confidence in policymakers.

The ways in which mini-publics manifest benefits to

policymakers in terms of policy legitimacy and the effectiveness of policy implementation may differ in purpose and degree between these two cases. According to Kuyper and Wolkenstein (2019), when the operation of political parties is near optimal, mini-publics should be non-authoritative (because political parties adequately serve authoritative functions), and in this context, mini-publics serve as a supplementary means to provide additional public opinion for an already healthy democratic society [4]. Their research also suggests that modern party systems often fail to fulfill some democratic functions, and where party structures cause only minor systemic issues, mini-publics need to act as a corrective mechanism, one important way being the integration of mini-publics within authoritative institutions [4]. In the case of Vermont, USA, it can be observed that the local government used mini-publics as a supplement to public opinion and did not integrate these mini-publics into authoritative institutions, aiming to enhance the legitimacy of decisions and gain broader social support. However, in terms of extent, if mini-publics are not integrated into authoritative institutions, there is some controversy over whether the results of democratic discussions can be fully enacted into law [11]. Therefore, whether policymakers can avoid excessive interference from interest groups through mini-publics when elevating collective will into binding decisions is a potential issue. From the perspective of authoritarian politics, policymakers often use the deliberative process as a strategy to enhance policy legitimacy and improve decision quality. In this way, deliberation is no longer a symbol of democracy but becomes a means to enhance government efficiency and maintain social stability [15]. From this standpoint, mini-publics like those in Xinxing community in Dongying, Shandong Province, might satisfy the legitimacy required by policymakers and gain public support, as the public genuinely participates in democratic decision-making and receives transparent information during the process. However, from a long-term perspective, the benefits of mini-publics as a form of democratic innovation for Chinese policymakers may be limited. One reason is that with ongoing trials of democratic innovation, there may arise a need for more open democratic politics under authoritarian rule [15]. In such cases, whether the state will continue to support the currently existing small-scale democratic innovations at the national level will be a test. Additionally, due to the strict control of media by authoritarian governments, on one hand, the government could use mini-publics merely as tools for political propaganda without focusing on substantive content [8]. On the other hand, whether the public can access genuine information before discussions or whether they are ideologically restricted during the discussions could pose

challenges for policy-making.

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