Small-Scale Deliberation and Mass Democracy: A Systematic Review of the Spillover Effects of Deliberative Minipublics

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Abstract

Deliberative minipublics are popular tools to address the current crisis in democracy. However, it remains ambiguous to what degree these small-scale forums matter for mass democracy. In this study, we ask the question to what extent minipublics have “spillover effects” on lay citizens—that is, long-term effects on participating citizens and effects on non-participating citizens. We answer this question by means of a systematic review of the empirical research on minipublics’ spillover effects published before 2019. We identify 60 eligible studies published between 1999 and 2018 and provide a synthesis of the empirical results. We show that the evidence for most spillover effects remains tentative because the relevant body of empirical evidence is still small. Based on the review, we discuss the implications for democratic theory and outline several trajectories for future research.

Keywords

minipublics, deliberative democracy, spillover, systematic review, PRISMA

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**Introduction**

Many scholars, political pundits, and citizens nowadays seem to find that there is something wrong with the functioning of mass democracy (Dryzek et al., 2019; Papadopoulos, 2013; Przeworski, 2019). Some of them claim that part of the solution to the crisis of democracy is to implement “institutions that have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process,” that is, to introduce democratic innovations (Smith, 2009: 1; Sørensen, 2017). According to their advocates, democratic innovations could solve many of the problems associated with the current crisis: they could reinstate trust in political institutions, inform voting at Election Day, stimulate citizen involvement, and improve the quality of public debate (Fung, 2003; Geissel and Newton, 2012; Smith, 2009). In this paper, we assess to what extent one specific class of democratic innovations lives up to such promises: deliberative minipublics.

Minipublics are discussion forums of lay citizens that are (quasi-)representative of the population at large (Goodin and Dryzek, 2006). Examples include the consensus conferences pioneered by the Danish Board of Technology in the 1980s, Deliberative Polling®, and citizens’ juries (Gastil and Levine, 2005). If we are to believe their advocates, these short, small-scale instances of deliberation can and should have *lasting effects on participating citizens* as well as *effects on citizens that do not participate* (Dryzek, 2010: 169; Niemeyer, 2014; Smith and Wales, 1999: 305). These potential effects range from increases in knowledge to opinion shifts, changes in political behavior, and, for example, elevated trust in political institutions. Based on surveys administered before and just after minipublics, preceding research shows that minipublics tend to have such transformative effects on participants in the short run (Dryzek et al., 2019; Gastil, 2018). Yet, it remains ambiguous to what degree these effects last and scale up to the wider public.

This article offers a first systematic review of minipublics’ spillover effects. We borrow the notion of “spillover” from participatory democratic theory to refer to the effects of participation in
a minipublic on participants’ lives as citizens in the wider political system (Pateman, 1970). This means that we are interested in the question to what degree the effects of participation measured right after a minipublic last once participants return to their lives outside of the minipublic. This question is especially pertinent for arguments advancing that minipublics should take place on a regular basis, allowing all citizens to go through the experience at some point in their lives (Niemeyer, 2014). Following recent work in democratic theory, minipublics’ effects may also spill over to other citizens, that is, citizens that do not participate in a minipublic (Goodin and Dryzek, 2006). The question to what degree and how minipublics affect the wider public is crucial for assessing their role from a systemic perspective, that is, how they relate to other sites of political discussion and opinion formation (Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012). These two ways of thinking about minipublics’ spillover effects on lay citizens lead to the following research questions:

1) To what extent do minipublics have long-term effects on participating citizens?

2) To what extent do minipublics affect non-participating citizens?

In the following, we first summarize ongoing normative debates about the roles political theorists expect minipublics to fulfill in democracies. We then describe how we conducted the systematic review and introduce a new framework to conceptualize minipublics’ spillover effects. Next, we describe the results for each of the two types of spillover effects. We show that the empirical evidence for most spillover effects is still tentative and/or mixed. Nonetheless, we do find several consistent findings that suggest that minipublics can have long-lasting effects on participants as well as have discernable effects on non-participants. In the discussion, we summarize the key findings of the review, reflect on the implications for normative theory, and suggest several ways forward to improve our understanding of minipublics’ spillover effects.
The Normative Debate

Early on, political theorists mostly viewed minipublics as laboratories to test key assumptions in deliberative democratic theory. Minipublics functioned as a means to show that deliberation is feasible in the real world and that small-scale instances of deliberation can give us a glimpse of what an informed public would look like (Fishkin, 1996). Empirical research followed suit and assessed to what extent minipublics change and inform the opinions of the citizens involved (for a review, see Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019). This produced a body of evidence that largely confirmed the theoretical desiderata (Curato et al., 2017). However, in the wake of the systemic turn in deliberative theory (Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012), dissatisfaction with such isolated, small-scale exercises in deliberation increased (Chambers, 2009). The question arose in what ways minipublics involving only a fraction of the public could and should matter for the functioning of large-scale democracies.

By now, certain democratic theorists have advocated minipublics as institutional fixes for a wide range of problems plaguing mass democracies, ranging from political polarization to declining trust in political institutions (e.g. Dryzek et al., 2019; Geissel & Newton, 2012).¹ Most of all, they view minipublics as tools to aid collective will formation (Bächtiger & Goldberg, 2020; Warren, 2017). They generally argue that minipublics could aid the public to form considered opinions via a ‘spillover’ of their beneficial effects to the wider public (Curato, Vrydagh, & Bächtiger, 2020). This may occur directly as non-participating citizens come to view deliberation in a minipublic as an exemplary form of political discussion (Niemeyer, 2014). Indirectly, minipublics can stimulate public deliberation as they make citizens gain knowledge about a policy issue, feel more politically efficacious, or come to understand that even well-informed citizens like them disagree about the issue (Lafont, 2020; MacKenzie & Warren, 2012; Niemeyer, 2014). Others
argue instead that minipublics’ recommendations should serve as shortcuts for the wider public to make decisions, most notably at Election Day (see the discussion in Curato, Vrydagh, & Bächtiger, 2020). Here, minipublics are expected to directly change citizens’ minds. While this “shortcut” approach to minipublics has been criticized for bypassing the public (Lafont, 2020), according to some it remains a realistic “second-best” option given practical obstacles to mass deliberation (Fishkin, 2020).

Another type of spillover that connects minipublics to the wider polity are long-term effects on minipublic participants. Political theorists have less frequently argued that minipublics should have lasting effects on participants. This is most probably because such effects would only matter for mass politics if minipublics were to take place on a regular basis, exposing thousands if not millions of citizens to the experience of minipublic participation (Niemeyer, 2014). Notwithstanding the current sporadic occurrence of minipublics, some have already argued that minipublics, just like any other participatory mechanism, should (also) have lasting educative effects on participating citizens, most notably in terms of making them “good citizens” (Font & Blanco, 2007: 576; Grönlund et al., 2010).² Whereas minipublics are mostly hoped to affect deliberation and voting among non-participants, their desired long-term effects on participants, then, relate to a much wider range of democratic practices, such as how citizens relate to each other and organize themselves politically (what Warren (2017) calls “recognizing” and “joining”). Empirical research on current minipublics, then, can give one a first indication as to whether minipublics could engender such long-term effects at all and, in turn, inform our expectations about their mass-scale effects if they were institutionalized in the future.

At this point, it remains unclear to what extent minipublics live up to these normative expectations. On the one hand, their brevity and small size seem to make both types of spillover effects unlikely. As Luskin et al. (2002: 484) point out with regard to deliberative polling, “On the
grand scale of things, after all, this is a relatively mild intervention. A few weeks’ elevated reading, chatting and thinking, intensified by a couple of days’ focused discussion, can make some difference but cannot fully remedy a lifetime’s inattention.” Likewise, the vast majority of citizens has only limited exposure to a minipublic’s proceedings and results, making it unlikely that they will be profoundly affected by the minipublic. On the other hand, some empirical studies seem to counter these arguments (Boulianne, 2018; Brown, 2006: 213; Ingham and Levin, 2018a). The ambiguity of these findings makes it difficult to judge the practical value of minipublics to accommodate the aforementioned normative positions. The rest of the paper therefore systematically assesses the existing empirical evidence for minipublics’ spillover effects.

Data and Methods
Existing reviews of minipublics’ spillover effects have made valuable contributions by structuring the literature (Boulianne, 2019; Gastil, 2018; Goodin and Dryzek, 2006). However, they have several important limitations. First, they are limited in scope in the sense that they have focused on a limited set of spillover effects. This means that they do not allow for an assessment of the full breadth of minipublics’ potential spillover effects. Second, existing reviews seem to have either given priority to certain methodological designs or to have excluded particular designs altogether. This means that existing reviews likely miss insights from some types of empirical studies (mostly qualitative ones). Third, and most importantly, they have not relied on a transparent and systematic literature search and selection process. This means that they may have missed relevant studies, potentially biasing the conclusions derived from the review (see Dacombe, 2018). We seek to address these limitations by basing our review on a corpus of publications constructed following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) protocol (Liberati et al., 2009). This protocol offers a standardized way to systematically report on the
search, selection, and synthesis of empirical literature and has been widely applied in the social sciences (e.g. de Vries et al., 2016; Ritz et al., 2016). Key elements include the formulation of a reproducible electronic search strategy, a description of selection criteria, and an overview of coded data items (i.e. variables).

**Search and Selection Process**

The review relies on an original database on minipublic research recently constructed (MINICON) (for more information, see Jacquet and van der Does, 2020). MINICON covers research on minipublics until the end of 2018 (N = 394). It is based on a search in Scopus (last search in June 2019), one of the largest social science databases. We opted for a database search rather than an examination of top journals in the field (cf. Spada and Ryan, 2017) because we expected research on minipublics to be published regularly outside of mainstream political science journals, given the rapid increase in studies of minipublics since the 2000s (Thompson, 2008: 498). The search in Scopus was based on the title, keywords, and abstract. It included the following search terms and operators:

- ‘mini-public*’ OR ‘minipublic*’ OR ‘mini-populus’ OR ‘minipopulus’ OR ‘deliberative poll*’ OR ‘planning cell*’ OR ‘citizen* jur*’ OR ‘citizen* assembl*’ OR ‘citizen* panel*’
- OR ‘issue* forum*’ OR ‘twenty-first century town meeting*’ OR (‘consensus conference*’ AND ‘deliberat*’).

Figure 1 provides a summary of the search and selection process. The initial search retrieved 1,455 publications. We then excluded publications from the review because they did not meet technical criteria (i.e. duplicates, non-English, non-peer-reviewed, no access) (N = 124) or were not in line with our definition of a minipublic (N = 937). We defined minipublics as forums that involve
structured discussion among unorganized lay citizens and attempt to make ‘some claim to representativeness of the public at large’ (Goodin and Dryzek, 2006: 221) by engaging citizens through a process of random selection and/or targeted recruitment.

For the present review, we only selected those publications that offer empirical evidence for a minipublic’s (lack of) spillover effects on lay citizens. Such spillover effects include (a) long-term effects on participants and/or (b) effects on non-participants. The former criterion required the evidence to be based on a “delayed post-test” (Hall et al., 2011), that is, a post-minipublic measurement taking place later than at the closing of the event. The latter required evidence for effects on non-participating citizens. Such empirical evidence could include any of the following: (1) reference to empirical results published in other studies (Secondary); (2) qualitative evidence, including both unstructured observations and structured qualitative inquiries using, for example, semi-structured interview materials (Qualitative); and (3) survey or experimental evidence (Quantitative). The use of these criteria resulted in a final corpus of 60 publications to be included in the review, with 41 publications dealing with long-term effects on participants and 30 with effects on non-participants. A full list of included publications is available in Table A.2 of the Online Appendix. To enhance the transparency of the selection process, the online database contains information on our decisions regarding each of the selection criteria for all of the 1,455 publications we initially retrieved via Scopus.
Figure 1. Overview of Search and Selection Process

Coding and Reporting of Effects

We first coded several relevant aspects of the studies’ research designs. For studies dealing with long-term effects on participants, we coded the amount of time between the minipublic and the delayed measurement. For studies of non-participant effects, we coded the number of non-participating citizens in the respective sample. We also took note of the measure used to study the respective spillover effect, and coded several background variables at the level of the minipublic
(i.e. the year and country in which the minipublic took place, its duration, and the topic it dealt with). For the quantitative studies, we kept track of the (non-)use of a relevant control group.

To provide more substantive insight into the effects, we grouped each of the two types of spillover effects into five categories (Table 1). We based this categorization on an iterative process, going back and forth between the literature and the applied categories until we identified a parsimonious way to map the literature. We regularly discussed the coding and resolved disagreements through discussion to enhance reliability (for a similar procedure, see De Vries et al., 2016; Ritz et al., 2016).

Although the process was largely inductive, the categories link to several key debates and empirical trends relevant to the current crisis of democracy. The category *Evaluation of democracy and politics* groups variables at the heart of most diagnoses of the current democratic malaise, including citizens’ (dis)satisfaction with democracy and their appraisal of various forms of democratic decision-making (Dalton and Welzel, 2014). *Community attitudes* relates to communitarian analyses of the crisis of democracy, which emphasize a decline in social capital and civic duty (Putnam, 2001). *Policy preferences and voting intentions* touches upon concerns in theories of public opinion and deliberative democracy about how informed citizens’ policy preferences are as well as the consistency of their preferences with underlying value judgments (Fishkin, 2009). This also links to *Knowledge, internal efficacy, and skills* in the sense that some may argue that the crisis of democracy is partly due the fact that citizens do not have the requisite information to make considered judgments or that they lack the skills to make their voices heard (Dryzek et al., 2019; Pateman, 2012). Finally, *Civic and political engagement* relates to concerns with shifts in political participation patterns in Western democracies (Dalton, 2008).

Importantly, the categories also link back to the normative discussion regarding the projected role of minipublics in solving specific democratic problems (Warren, 2017). The latter
three categories allow us to assess the degree to which the wider public is inclined to follow minipublics’ recommendations and/or to learn, become more politically efficacious, and engage in deliberation. The former two categories are more relevant for claims that minipublics can transform participants’ more general outlook on politics and society in the long term, notwithstanding the relevance of the other categories for minipublics’ long-term effects.

Finally, in terms of reporting, we summarize the secondary and qualitative evidence in a narrative form. We summarize the quantitative evidence at the level of the survey items used to assess the effects of the respective minipublics. We follow other recent reviews on minipublics’ quantitative effects in that we only report on (a) the average difference or change in respondents’ scores on a survey item, for which (b) the publication included a statistical significance test (cf. Boulianne, 2019). This way, we are able to provide an overview of the (relative) number of survey items that, on average, reach a conventional level of statistical significance ($p < 0.05$). In less technical terms, it means that we assess the number of survey items that, on average, show a significant effect on non-participants, on the one hand, and participants in the long term, on the other hand. Further details on all variables and effects are available in the Online Appendix (Sections 1 and 3).
### Table 1. Coding of Minipublics’ Spillover Effects: Categories and Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Variables*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluation of democracy and</strong></td>
<td>General appraisal of politics and democracy, and appraisal of specific</td>
<td>General evaluation of politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>politics</strong></td>
<td>decision-making procedures and actors.</td>
<td>Satisfaction with democracy and/or politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Support for various decision-making arrangements</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>External political efficacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Political trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluation of political institutions and policy-makers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Political interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community attitudes</strong></td>
<td>How citizens relate to their community and fellow citizens.</td>
<td>Civic duty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Political tolerance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Social trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Belief in others’ preparedness to act collectively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Policy preferences and</strong></td>
<td>Support for and importance attached to public policies, and voting</td>
<td>Support for and/or importance of policy proposals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>voting intentions</strong></td>
<td>intentions.</td>
<td>Voting intentions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge, internal efficacy,</strong></td>
<td>Learning, feeling of being able to participate effectively in politics,</td>
<td>Issue knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>and skills</strong></td>
<td>and skills.</td>
<td>Procedural learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Internal efficacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Practical skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Civic and political</strong></td>
<td>Actual and hypothetical willingness to engage in collective activities.</td>
<td>Willingness to act politically or civically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>engagement</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Voting behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Civic engagement (e.g. involvement in collective issues, saving electricity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Discursive engagement (e.g. giving talks in community, discuss minipublic issue with others)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Political engagement (e.g. voting, campaigning)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* For the specific measures and effects, see Tables A.4 and A.6 in the Online Appendix.
Data

Figure 2 shows the trend of empirical research on minipublics’ spillover effects over time, covering twenty years of research (1999 – 2018). It shows a steady increase in studies of both types of effects since the mid-2000s, although research on non-participants remains slightly less common. Table 2 provides further details on the 60 studies included in the review. Research on spillover effects has covered over thirty-four minipublics taking place between 1992 and 2015 in eleven countries. It has a clear geographical bias with only one study dealing with minipublics taking place outside of a Western context (Japan) (Mikami, 2015) – even though we know that minipublics have also taken place in countries as diverse as Uganda, Mongolia, and China (Fishkin, 2018). Zooming in on the two types of spillover effects, we note, first, that research on long-term effects on participants is more diverse than research on the effects on non-participants. Whereas empirical evidence regarding the former covers over twenty-six minipublics carried out between 1992 and 2015 in eleven countries, evidence for the latter kind of effects covers fifteen minipublics conducted between 1997 and 2014 in six countries. We similarly observe that research on long-term participant effects is substantively more diverse than research on non-participant effects, with the former paying more attention to citizens’ general appraisal of politics and democracy and their community attitudes.

The studies also show variation in terms of exactly how long after the minipublic effects are monitored (participants) and how many citizens are part of the studied sample (non-participants). For long-term participant effects, the lag between the minipublic event and the used measurement point varies considerably across studies: from two weeks (Einsiedel and Eastlick, 2000) to several years (Jacquet, 2018; Parkinson, 2006a). For non-participant effects, the number of non-participating citizens varies from a single citizen (Mikami, 2015) to over five thousand
citizens (Ingham and Levin, 2018b). We provide the details in the Online Appendix (Tables A.3–6). In the following, we report on the substantive findings of the review.

**Figure 2.** Cumulative Number of Publications on Minipublics’ Spillover Effects (1999 – 2018)
Table 2. Overview of Studies of Minipublics’ Spillover Effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation of democracy and politics</th>
<th>Long-term effects on participants</th>
<th>Effects on non-participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N studies</td>
<td>N minipublics*</td>
<td>Countries**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community attitudes</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All entries are based on the information available in the publications included in the review.

* For some studies with evidence for multiple minipublics, it was not possible to provide a specific number. These are counted as 1 in the number reported in the table, supplemented by ‘+’. Studies that refer to fictitious minipublics are included in the count; those that do not refer to a (set of) specific minipublic(s) are not.

** ISO Alpha-2 country codes, except for EU (European Union). † Range of years in which the studied minipublics took place.
Table 3. Summary of Quantitative Effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Short- (T2-T1) vs. long-term (T3-T2)</th>
<th>Long-term (T3-T1)</th>
<th>Non-participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Effect N (CG)</td>
<td>Effect N (CG)</td>
<td>Effect N (CG)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Null</td>
<td>43 (0)</td>
<td>Null 38 (4)</td>
<td>Null 30 (30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintained</td>
<td>26 (5)</td>
<td>Mixed 2 (1)</td>
<td>Mixed 15 (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faded</td>
<td>6 (0)</td>
<td>Significant 15 (6)</td>
<td>Significant 16 (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reversed</td>
<td>11 (0)</td>
<td>Missing 43</td>
<td>Missing 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3 (0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Maintained</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
<td>% Significant 27.3%</td>
<td>% Significant 26.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>98 (5)</td>
<td>98 (11)</td>
<td>61 (58)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Entries reflect the number of reported effects. Based on survey items for which the relevant publications included a test for statistical significance of the average effect (14 publications for long-term effects; 8 publications for non-participants).

CG: Number of reported effects based on a comparison with a control group (for long-term effects: from T1 to T3).

Null: No statistically significant effects observed (p > 0.05); Maintained: T2-T1 significant and T3-T2 is insignificant, or both T2-T1 and T3-T2 are significant in the same direction; Faded: T2-T1 significant but T3-T1 is insignificant; Reversed: T2-T1 and T3-T2 are both significant but go in opposite directions; Other: significant effect from T2 to T3 that was not yet observed from T1 to T2, or unclear reporting on the significance of a long-term effect; Mixed: Effect assessed in multiple ways, with both significant and insignificant results; Significant: p < 0.05.

T1: Recruitment survey (if not available, start of the minipublic); T2: End of the minipublic; T3: Delayed follow-up survey.

For further technical details, see Section 2 of the Online Appendix.
Figure 3. Summary of Significant Quantitative Effects
Proportion of effects per category maintained/significant (see Table 3). Numbers reflect the number of effects per category used to calculate the proportion. EDP: Evaluation of Democracy and Politics; CA: Community Attitudes; PPVI: Policy Preferences and Voting Intentions; KIS: Knowledge, Internal Efficacy, and Skills; CPE: Civic and Political Engagement. Full details reported in Table A.1 of the Online Appendix.

Long-Term Effects on Participants
Do minipublics have long-term effects on participants? Judging by the secondary evidence, the answer is yes (for contrary evidence, see Font & Blanco, 2007). These studies indicate that minipublics can have a lasting impact on participants’ interest in politics (Brown, 2006), political engagement (Cheyne & Comrie, 2002; Johnson, 2015; Lenaghan, 1999; Mikami, 2015; Smith, 2009; Smith & Wales, 1999, 2000), issue knowledge (Green, 2006; Luskin et al., 2002), policy attitudes (Goodin, 2012), and choices at Election Day (Fishkin et al., 2000; Fishkin, 2018). However, once we turn to the more detailed quantitative and qualitative evidence, it becomes clear
that the existing evidence does not allow one to draw firm conclusions about minipublics’ potential to have durable effects on participating citizens. Overall, the existing body of evidence tends to lack clear replications across minipublics as well as common measures of key concepts to reach robust conclusions (see Online Appendix Section 1 for details). Note also that quantitative designs often lack a control group over time (Table 3), making it difficult to ascertain to what degree the respective effects indeed resulted from participation in the minipublic.

Substantively, the quantitative evidence offers a sobering outlook on minipublics’ potential to transform participants. Table 3 displays a summary of the effects reported in the fourteen studies in our corpus that include statistical significance tests for 98 survey items that tap long-term effects. It shows that around one in four (27.3-29.2%) of the reported effects reaches a conventional level of statistical significance ($p < 0.05$). Figure 3 offers more insight into the effects per category of spillover effect. The figure contains two panels that summarize long-term effects on participants. The left-most panel shows the results for those effects derived from a comparison between the average change from the recruitment survey at T1 to the end of the minipublic at T2, on the one hand, and the average change from T2 to the follow-up survey at T3, on the other hand. Here, we assessed the proportion of survey items for which a significant change was reported from T1 to T2 and for which this effect either remained unchanged or gained in strength in the same direction from T2 to T3 (what we refer to as ‘maintained’ in Table 3 and Figure 3). The middle panel in Figure 3 shows the results for effects derived from a direct comparison between respondents’ scores on survey items at T1 and T3. It displays the proportion of survey items that showed a significant average difference between T1 and T3 (‘significant’ in Table 3 and Figure 3).

These two panels in Figure 3 communicate two main messages. First, minipublics can have significant, long-lasting effects on participants, but these effects are not always present or significant. Second, what we know about these effects tends to be based on a limited number of
survey items and empirical studies. In fact, Figure 3 even somewhat exaggerates the number of significant effects, given that *within studies* many of the effects are significant only for a specific operationalization of the respective variables. Similarly, we often do not observe consistent findings *across studies* for the same kind of spillover effect (see Online Appendix Section 1 for illustrations). Nonetheless, coupled with the existing qualitative evidence, we can hint at several consistent findings in terms of what minipublics seem to achieve.

The evidence suggests that minipublics consistently lead to a long-term increase in support for citizen involvement in policy-making. Furthermore, minipublics appear to stimulate the long-term discursive engagement of participants. Such discursive activities include participating in public debates, advising family members, and, for example, giving talks in the workplace (Christensen et al., 2017; Einsiedel and Eastlick, 2000; Guston, 1999; Hall et al., 2011; Jacquet, 2018). Finally, minipublics tend to change participants’ long-term views *on at least some issues* and to enhance their political knowledge *in some respects*. On the one hand, the quantitative evidence indicates that, generally, some opinion changes endure over time (20-35% of all survey items, see Figure 3) whereas others do not or are, in fact, reversed (e.g. Fishkin et al., 2015; Hansen & Andersen, 2004). We observe the same for the few quantitative studies that report on long-term knowledge gains. On the other hand, qualitative studies suggest that quantitative measures might underestimate the effects in two ways. First, when participants are asked open questions, they seem to make firmer statements about long-lasting changes in opinion and knowledge (Einsiedel and Eastlick, 2000; Guston, 1999; Mikami, 2015; Stafinski et al., 2014). Second, qualitative accounts suggest that learning and opinion changes often do not merely pertain to the short list of items that tends to feature in quantitative studies. They show that participants’ opinions may also shift with regard to an issue *in general* and that learning may occur with regard to the *overall* functioning of
politics and public policy-making -also in the long term (Einsiedel and Eastlick, 2000; Guston, 1999; Jacquet, 2018; Prosser et al., 2018).

**Effects on Non-Participants**

To what extent and how do minipublics influence the wider public? Again, the secondary evidence paints a somewhat rosy picture. Minipublics are reported to increase non-participants’ feelings of political efficacy (Gastil, 2018), enhance their issue knowledge (e.g. Gastil, 2014; Ingham & Levin, 2018b), change their opinions on policy issues (e.g. Goodin & Dryzek, 2006; Goodin, 2008), and affect their choices in the voting booth (e.g. Fishkin, 2018; Gastil, 2018; Gastil and Richards, 2013; Lucardie, 2013). Most of the secondary evidence refers to celebrated minipublics such as the British Colombia Citizens’ Assembly and the Oregon Citizens’ Initiative Review (see Table A.5 in the Online Appendix). The available quantitative and qualitative evidence in our corpus demand one to qualify these conclusions.

The eight quantitative studies that provide statistical significance tests show that average effects on non-participants are significant for 16 of the 61 survey items (27.1%) (Table 3). Nearly all of the assessed effects rely on a comparison with a control group (94.9%) not exposed to the ‘treatment’ (e.g. reading a minipublic’s recommendations). Yet, with the partial exception of *Policy Preferences and Voting Intentions*, the existing quantitative literature covered by our review contains too few studies per category of spillover effects to draw robust conclusions about minipublics’ effects on non-participants. For example, the seventeen effects for *Knowledge, Internal Efficacy, and Skills* summarized in Figure 3 come from only two studies (Gastil et al., 2018; Richards, 2018) and the eight effects for *Evaluation of Democracy and Politics* come from three studies (Boulianne, 2018; Mao & Adria, 2013; Richards, 2018). Similarly, few publications
in our corpus provide qualitative evidence for effects on non-participants. Several publications do contain qualitative evidence for effects on voting behavior, but this evidence remains largely anecdotal (see Online Appendix Section 1 for details). Nevertheless, bearing in mind the limited amount of available evidence, we do observe two consistent findings. Similar to long-term opinion effects on participants, surveys (and survey experiments) suggest that minipublics tend to change the minds of non-participating citizens, but not always on all policy issues (e.g. Boulianne, 2018; Gastil et al., 2018; Ingham and Levin, 2018b). What is more, there is some converging evidence that minipublics tend to stimulate the wider public to engage in and support discursive activities, ranging from minipublic participation to informal political discussions (Guston, 1999; Mao and Adria, 2013; Mikami, 2015; but see Parkinson, 2006a).

Discussion

What role can deliberative minipublics play in addressing the crisis of democracy? Minipublics are popular institutional tools to address the ills of current mass democracies and have even become part of “an expanding consultancy market” (Hendriks & Carson, 2008). The enthusiasm surrounding the use of minipublics begs the empirical question to what extent they actually do provide a cure for the democratic malaise. The goal of this article was therefore to assess minipublics’ (lack of) spillover effects on lay citizens. This is not only relevant from the viewpoint of political theory, it is also crucial for setting realistic expectations with regard to the practical functioning of minipublics.

In contrast to preceding narrative reviews (Gastil, 2018, Goodin and Dryzek, 2006), we conducted a systematic review to minimize bias in the search and selection of the literature on minipublics’ spillover effects and, hence, in the conclusions drawn about the state of the art on the
topic (Dacombe, 2018). Our review spans 60 studies that provide evidence for the spillover effects of more than 34 minipublics that have taken place between 1992 and 2015 in 11 countries. In brief, our results show that most of the evidence is still mixed and that we lack replications and consistent measures of spillover effects across studies to reach robust conclusions. References to previous empirical studies often are focused on positive results and, in light of the available quantitative and qualitative evidence, seem to paint an overly optimistic picture of minipublics’ potential to leave a mark on mass publics (cf. Spada & Ryan, 2017). We should add to this that what we know about spillover effects is based nearly exclusively on evidence derived from Western contexts. Given certain pronounced differences in political, social, and cultural context between Western and non-Western countries (for example in terms of deliberative culture) (Dryzek, 2009; Sass and Dryzek, 2014), conclusions about minipublics’ spillover effects may differ markedly once other contexts are included.

Taken together, our results therefore spell caution for making big claims about the kind of spillover effects one may reasonably expect from minipublics. At this point, we observe three broadly consistent findings. The first concerns minipublics’ potential to spread (support for) deliberation. On the long term, participants tend to become more supportive of organized public debates and citizen involvement and become more inclined to discuss politics, both formally and informally. We find similar, yet less robust, evidence for non-participants. The second consistent finding is that participants in the long term tend to gain at least some knowledge, whether about the issue at hand and/or the policy process more generally. Third, minipublics tend to change the opinions of at least some citizens, on some issues. This applies to both participants on the long term and to non-participating citizens.

Nevertheless, given the limitations of the current body of evidence, these three conclusions remain tentative. This is important for the normative accounts we discussed at the beginning of the
paper. Our results underline that democratic theorists at this point do not have the requisite empirical evidence at their disposal to assess what minipublics can achieve in practice and, hence, which normative goals are reachable (and how). Put differently, whether one hopes that minipublics will improve public will formation or that they will function as schools for democracy, the existing empirical evidence does not yet convincingly demonstrate to what extent minipublics are effective tools to tackle these democratic problems (cf. Warren, 2017).

In addition, we need to underline that it remains difficult to forecast to what degree and how these findings on ad-hoc minipublics would extrapolate to more institutionalized minipublics that could take place regularly or receive a more formal role in the decision-making process. We believe that the existing empirical literature allows one to move beyond mere theoretical argumentation and thereby to make more plausible statements about their potential spillover effects. At the same time, projections about institutionalized minipublics that do not yet exist, of course, should be treated with caution, as at this point we simply cannot corroborate such empirical predictions given the lack of evidence on real-life cases of institutionalized minipublics.

In the rest of the discussion, we first address the main methodological limitations of the review and then focus on ways to improve our empirical knowledge on minipublics’ spillover effects, not in the last place to inform normative theory.

**Limitations of the Review**

We acknowledge that the review itself is subject to several limitations. First, in terms of scope, our review relies on English-language publications featuring in academic journals and books retrieved through a database search. While there are good reasons to believe that the database search retrieved most of the relevant academic literature (see Papaioannou et al., 2010), we acknowledge
that no database search will ever retrieve all relevant publications. Analytically, our review has examined to what degree minipublics in general have spillover effects on lay citizens. However, minipublics differ considerably in their design and the political context in which they operate (Paulis et al., 2020). To illustrate, in our corpus, minipublics took up between one and around 26 days, dealing with topics as diverse as food biotechnology, crime and punishment, and state reform (see Online Appendix, Tables A.3 and A.5). What is more, the type of outcome produced by a minipublic (say, a recommendation, vote, or list of arguments) is likely to matter too for the type and magnitude of spillover effects one might expect (see the discussion on cultivation below). The general conclusions on minipublics’ spillover effects, therefore, may mask variation depending on minipublics’ design features and the context in which they operate.

**Looking Ahead: Scope, Measures, and Mechanisms**

We suggest three trajectories to further our understanding of minipublics’ spillover effects. First, we encourage future research to look into the spillover effects of minipublics taking place in non-Western contexts in order to reduce the current Western bias in this field of research. Second, future evaluations need to look critically at the measurement of these spillover effects in several respects. The qualitative studies included in the present review show that quantitative measures may underestimate the effects because of a narrow operationalization of key constructs, such as citizens’ political knowhow. At the same time, future research could profit from more consistency in the employed measures to facilitate cross-study comparisons and knowledge accumulation. Finally, we encourage a critical reflection on the size of the measured effects – that is, what constitutes a meaningful spillover effect? Importantly, qualitative evidence suggests that sometimes the absence of significant average effects in survey studies might mask that some citizens are deeply
transformed by a minipublic (e.g. Hall et al., 2011). This is important to take into account at a methodological level but also raises the theoretical question what qualifies as a meaningful spillover effect.

Third, future research could try to provide further insight into the mechanisms driving minipublics’ spillover effects. Whereas we have focused on the question to what degree minipublics have various spillover effects, such research could deepen our understanding of how such effects come about. This is particularly pertinent for the normative discussion about how minipublics should be linked to the larger political system if one wants them to produce specific types of spillover effects. We point towards three potential mechanisms.

First, the mechanism central to long-term effects on participants is socialization, defined as “the patterns and practices by which individuals engage in political development and learning, constructing their particular relationships to the political contexts in which they live” (Sapiro, 2004: 3). Future research could assess under what conditions mini-publics function as critical events in citizens’ political socialization trajectories and try to explain differences in this respect across individuals (cf. Flockhart, 2005; Sapiro, 2004: 11). It could also profit from a stronger link with theoretical work on participatory democracy for which this type of spillover has traditionally been of central concern (see the discussion in Greenberg et al., 1996).

Turning to the question how minipublics affect non-participants, we note that the most common mechanism described in the literature is what we refer to as cultivation—a term taken from media studies to denote effects of exposure to the viewing of an event (e.g. Shrum, 2001). Generally, this mechanism is thought of in minipublic research in terms of exposure to a minipublic’s conclusions via TV broadcasts (such as in Deliberative Polling) or a voting pamphlet (such as in the Citizens’ Initiative Review). Future studies could attempt to provide further details on this mechanism by clarifying why exactly such exposure leads to various spillover effects. For
example, to what extent does it depend on citizens’ trust in the minipublic (Mackenzie and Warren, 2012); the eventual distribution of preferences among the minipublic’s participants (Ingham and Levin, 2018a); the degree to which citizens view the minipublic as an “exemplar” of how to discuss political affairs (Niemeyer, 2014); or the information on the ballot or in the TV broadcast and how that is framed (Parkinson, 2006b)?

Qualitative contributions point towards an additional mechanism that may explain how non-participating citizens are affected: contagion. We borrow this term from sociology to denote “contact between members of the population who have [i.e. participants] and have not yet adopted [i.e. non-participants]” (Strang and Tuma, 1993: 614). The existing evidence already shows that such contagion occurs via participants’ social networks and their activities in public spaces after minipublics (e.g. Einsiedel and Eastlick, 2000; Mikami, 2015). A question for future research is how prevalent such activities are and what they mean for spillover effects on non-participants.

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Supplementary Information

The Online Appendix for this article is available with the manuscript on the Political Studies website. The dataset is available at: https://osf.io/qn5sm/.

Notes

1. This is not to say that there has been no criticism of the use of minipublics as tools to address the crisis of democracy (e.g. Achen & Bartels, 2016; Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002).

2. Others have used the argument that minipublics do have lasting effects on participants in defense of their use and implementation (e.g. Smith & Wales, 2000: 60).

3. Reviews of minipublics’ spillover effects are still sparse. Most reviews of the empirical literature on minipublics and deliberative democracy have so far focused instead on their short-term effects on participants (e.g. Delli Carpini et al., 2004; Michels, 2011).

4. Goodin and Dryzek (2006) mainly discuss minipublics’ effects on the attitudes of non-participating citizens. Boulianne (2019) focuses her review specifically on long-term effects on participants in terms of institutional trust and political efficacy. Gastil (2018) focuses predominantly on minipublics’ effects on non-participants. While Gastil’s (2018: 283) review also deals with several studies of long-term attitudinal effects on participants, the review is far from exhaustive in this respect too.

5. Boulianne (2019) only includes quantitative studies that “report statistical tests.” Gastil’s (2018) discussion of minipublics’ effects on non-participants equally appears to exclude qualitative studies.
6. Boulianne (2019) does seem to have conducted a more systematic review on the aforementioned effects. Yet, the search and selection process is not communicated transparently in the respective article.


8. Bibliometric studies suggest that such rapid growth makes it likely that research on minipublics would reach well beyond the established political science journals (Sengupta, 1992).

9. We required ‘consensus conference*’ to be complemented with ‘deliberat*’ because otherwise the number of retrieved documents increased by several thousands. A scan of these additional documents revealed that this was because in medicine a consensus conference refers to a meeting of experts (see Einsiedel and Eastlick, 2000: 325).

10. Note that the quantitative evidence for spillover effects in our corpus exclusively consists of effects assessed by means of survey questions. Our way of summarizing the quantitative evidence only fully excludes two studies: one for long-term participant effects (Isernia & Smets, 2014) and one for non-participant effects (Gastil et al., 2014). See Section 2 of the Online Appendix for details.

11. The two ways of assessing long-term effects on participants are not mutually exclusive. Some publications reported changes across all time points. These are included in both of the assessments of the quantitative long-term effects. The two panels in Figure 3, therefore, should be read in tandem. The same goes for the two columns in Table 3.

12. Future research could apply alternative search strategies, such as contact with relevant experts and citation searches (cf. Liberati et al., 2009); include ‘grey’ literature on minipublics, such as
evaluation reports published by governments or private firms (cf. Michels, 2011); and include publications written in other languages. Analytically, future reviews could examine in more detail under what conditions minipublics (do not) have spillover effects, for instance through a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) of existing case studies (Rudel, 2008).

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