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LIMITS TO REPRESENTATION: UNDERSTANDING POLITICIANS' PERSPECTIVES ON CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES IN THE NETHERLANDS

Unraveling Considerations on Deliberative Citizen Participation

Lisabelle Busscher

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Supervisor:	Aksel Sundström and Frederik Pfeiffer
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Abstract

While politicians are key actors in decision-making around the implementation of citizens' assemblies (CAs), little is known about their perceptions of these deliberative participation tools. This study aims to develop our understanding of how politicians reason about CAs and what considerations influence their perception, guided by the following research question: *How do politicians reason about citizens' assemblies, and which considerations influence these perceptions?* The study analyzes in-depth interviews with Dutch politicians to corroborate and develop the three I's framework developed by Christoph Niessen (2023). The results show that, although this existing theory helps understand politicians' perceptions, it does not include all thematic considerations found in the interviews. Consequently, the key contribution of this thesis is the expansion and improvement of this framework with new considerations that emerged during the analysis. Particularly on what *level of government* the CA is implemented and what an *appropriate topic* is to hold a CA on prove to be important considerations in politicians' reasoning on CAs that are not covered in the three I's framework. Another essential contribution is the empirical exploration of an understudied aspect of deliberative democracy: the perspectives of political elites. The findings offer a nuanced understanding of the considerations influencing politicians' perceptions of CAs, providing practical guidance for policy-makers and practitioners in enhancing democratic effectiveness. Overall, this study advances our knowledge of deliberative democracy perceptions and offers insights into what shapes the future of citizen participation and deliberative democracy.

Keywords: *Deliberative Democracy, Politicians, Citizens' Assembly, Citizen Participation, the Netherlands*

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Introduction

A trend of democratic backsliding can be seen across the globe: distrust towards political institutions, decreasing party affiliation, the emergence of anti-democratic responses, and rising populism are only a few of the challenges representative democracies currently face (Dryzek et al., 2019; Farrell & Field, 2002; Goldberg & Bchtiger, 2023; Lafont et al., 2021; Mair, 2006). In response to this democratic crisis, democratic innovations using citizen deliberation have gained traction amongst civil organizations, politicians, and policymakers, as they seem promising for increasing legitimacy and trust in government and tackling complex societal issues (Delgado, 2023).

The increased attention to deliberative democracy, termed a 'deliberative wave' by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2020), has prompted a 'deliberative turn' among political theorists (Goodin, 2008). While early research focused on normative and organizational aspects of deliberative democracy tools, contemporary scholarship embraces multiple perspectives, including perceived legitimacy, citizens' viewpoints, and political elites' attitudes. This more holistic perspective is critical because it provides insight into the potential of democratic innovations in solving the so-called 'democratic legitimacy crisis' (Boulianne, 2019).

Although there is growing interest for democratic reform, bringing about change within established democratic systems remains challenging. Herein, political elites' degree of support for proposed democratic reforms is of crucial importance to its success (Vrydagh & Caluwaerts, 2023; Jacquet et al., 2022). Despite this, little is known about political leaders' attitudes and considerations toward deliberative democracy tools (Macq & Jacquet, 2023). This indicates a need for a better understanding of politicians' perceptions and preferences of democratic processes, as they are critical actors in shaping public opinion and the success of democratic innovations in society (Junius et al., 2020; Gherghina et al., 2023).

In response to this gap, this study explores the perceptions and considerations of politicians regarding citizens' assemblies (CAs), a prominent deliberative participation tool. While existing research has predominantly focused on citizens' views of CAs (Junius et al., 2020; Koskimaa et al., 2023; Gherghina & Geissel, 2020; Pilet et al., 2023a; Van Dijk et al., 2023), limited attention has been given to how politicians perceive these processes and the factors influencing their attitudes towards them (Macq & Jacquet, 2023).

Empirical studies on politicians' perceptions of CAs are scarce, with notable exceptions. Niessen's chapter in the *Handbook of Citizens' Assemblies* provides an excellent overview of when elected officials do or do not support CAs captured in a conceptual framework (Niessen, 2023). This thesis builds on that chapter, using Niessen's three I's framework – *ideas, institutions,* and *interests* – as

the basis to further develop theory on what considerations influence politicians' perceptions of CAs. These insights into politicians' perceptions of CAs are crucial for understanding the future of CAs and the variation in implementation of CAs across political contexts.

Delving deeper into the decision-making processes surrounding CA implementation is essential for creating insights into the dynamics of democratic governance, enhancing our understanding of democratic reform, and contributing to more effective strategies for democratic renewal. Moreover, these insights elucidate the potential of this democratic innovation and its integration into existing democratic systems. Ultimately, politicians decide whether CAs will be proposed and enforced, making understanding their perspectives and reasoning imperative. To provide insight into the potential of CAs, understanding politicians' views and reasoning on CAs is decisive. Therefore, the central research question of this study is: *How do politicians reason about citizens' assemblies, and which considerations influence these perceptions?*

Exploring this question in a national context is beneficial for understanding how deliberative processes operate within diverse democratic cultures and political systems. As highlighted by the European Committee on Democracy and Governance, there is no "one-size-fits-all script for running a deliberative process" (CDDG, 2023, p.4), given the variations in democratic cultures across countries. Moreover, so far no research has scrutinized politicians' considerations in a country or region *before* CAs have been institutionalized, indicating a need to explore that context (Rangoni et al., 2023). The Netherlands is one of the few Western European democracies that have no recent experiences with CAs. By focusing on the Dutch context, this study contributes to identifying strategies tailored to the Netherlands' unique democratic landscape. While cautious of generalizing findings from this Dutch context, this study strives to provide insights that possibly can elucidate other contexts and countries as well.

With this research, I aim to provide a deeper understanding of influential considerations and reasoning that shape politicians' perceptions of CAs; it does not assess the normative dimensions of deliberative democracy innovations. Instead, I seek to uncover different considerations that influence politicians' perceptions of CAs. Given the limited literature on politicians' views regarding CAs, I draw insights from the few studies that evaluate politicians' perceptions, complemented by literature on other groups' perspectives on CAs and politicians' attitudes toward other democratic innovations. In this regard, I try to understand the impact of these considerations on politicians' perceptions and develop the theoretical foundations underlying their views on CAs.

Drawing insights from qualitative research conducted in the Netherlands, where interest in CAs has grown, this study examines the nuances of politicians' attitudes towards deliberative democracy innovations. I use these interviews not only to corroborate Niessen's framework but also to find themes

not yet included and develop it further. Through 13 in-depth interviews with Dutch politicians, the research finds that while the three I's framework by Niessen (2023) is helpful in understanding what influences politicians' perceptions of CAs, the framework does not cover all considerations that prove to be important in their reasoning on CAs. The empirical data shows that – amongst others – the *level of government* on which the CA is implemented and the *appropriate topic* to hold a CA are important considerations that influence politicians. By providing a deeper understanding of the considerations shaping politicians' views on CAs, this research contributes to ongoing debates about the future of democratic governance. Ultimately, it recognizes the pivotal role of political leaders in shaping the trajectory of democratic reform (such as the introduction of CAs in political systems) and highlights the importance of understanding politicians' perspectives in their choices regarding designing strategies for democratic renewal.

Literature Review

Deliberative democratic theory is one of the most active areas in political theory research (Dryzek, 2007). Therefore, while acknowledging the opulence of literature on deliberative democracy, this chapter seeks to comprise only the relevant theories and studies that can guide the research question on politicians' views on CAs and what considerations may influence these perceptions of CAs. First, deliberative democracy theory and its enhanced effect on solving complex policy problems are introduced. Then, deliberative mini-publics, including CAs, are discussed, and findings from relevant literature are presented.

Deliberative Democracy

The representative democratic system that many Western countries enjoy is praised as the best form of government due to the high democratic values such as free speech, free and fair elections, and freedom to organize (Von Stein, 2022). However, this form of democracy is questioned across disciplines on its capacity to handle pressing issues such as climate change, polarization, and populism (Goldberg & Bächtiger, 2023). Moreover, citizens are increasingly dissatisfied with their representation and the ways they can participate in democracy, and citizens' trust in government is alarmingly low (Dryzek et al., 2019). Consequently, political scientists and alike claim that representative democracies are experiencing a 'crisis of legitimacy' (Boulianne, 2019).

Governments seek new ways to improve citizen representation and participation and legitimize their power and position in society. Deliberative democracy has been introduced as a "salve on the wounds" of representative democracy (Gherghina et al., 2023, p.233). Deliberative democracy is a political theory that focuses on deliberation as a core ideal in a democratic system, where deliberation is understood as reasoned discussion, respect, and shared understanding (Willis et al., 2022). More elaborately, deliberation can be defined as: "mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern" (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p.1). In practice, this takes the form of an organized process in which citizens come together to discuss political issues aiming to enhance mutual understanding, come to a consensus, and provide policy recommendations, drawing from "considered judgment, based on good evidence and free and fair collective discussion" (Willis et al., 2022, p.3). Deliberative democrats argue that the democratic innovations that deliberative democracy has to offer are crucial tools to address democratic deficits (Curato et al., 2021).

The literature on deliberative democracy has been rapidly growing, and the topic has been gaining substantial attention in the last two decades within and outside academia: the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has dubbed it as a "deliberative wave" (2020). This movement is characterized by improving ways to facilitate citizen participation through new institutions and redesigning existing ones that move away from a vote-centric towards a voice-centric conception of democracy (Farrell & Field, 2022). These institutions' participatory procedures allow citizens to discuss pressing policy issues and influence public policy-making and are seen as tools to fight the 'crisis of legitimacy' (Boulianne, 2019; Goldberg & Bächtiger, 2023). Deliberative democrats consider citizens' active participation a democratic goal and challenge the notion that ordinary citizens are not competent enough to influence policy-making, but instead consider citizens as good problem-solvers when coming together in a deliberative setting (Curato et al., 2021; Dryzek et al., 2019).

Deliberative democracy thus challenges the democratic realist perception that understands the electoral process as the key instrument to establish legitimacy for political decision-making (Willis et al., 2022). Instead, a broader conception of democracy is adapted, where deliberative innovations are an addition to, not a replacement of, the representative democratic system and allow for more careful consideration of all aspects of the considered issue and more legitimate policy outcomes (MacKenzie, 2018).

Deliberative Democracy and Complex Policy Problems

A prominent argument favoring deliberative democracy is its potential to handle sensitive and complex policy issues. This is a reaction to the notion that the representative democratic system is increasingly questioned as it is a cumbersome state apparatus that lacks the capacity to act quickly on societal problems that require urgency (MacKenzie, 2021).

Particularly, the mismatch between democracy and environmental policies is highlighted in recent literature. Political scientists argue that the democratic political system is not able to respond adequately to the climate crisis. Due to its complexity, urgency, and intangibility, the effects of climate change are far away in both space and time for most European democracies, and consequently, the issue lacks (political) salience (Giraudet et al., 2022). MacKenzie argues in his book *Future Publics: democracy, deliberation, and future-regarding collective action* that democracies are not built to take future generations' interests into account: "Democracies tend to focus on the present not when they are working badly but when they are working well" (MacKenzie, 2021, p. 6). The explanations for this democratic failure can be summarized into four categories: 1) the (low) degree of representativeness of citizens in democratic decision-making, 2) how expert and scientific knowledge and advice is (not) used in the political process, 3) temporality: the difficulty to consider long term problems and to include future people's interests in

decision making, and 4) influences of power and entrenched interests on decision making (Willis et al., 2022). All these limitations are said to be alleviated through using citizen participation tools based on deliberative democracy.

Citizens' Assemblies

The key contribution of deliberative democracy theory is the tools it provides to establish deliberative processes in democracy. Elstub and Escobar (2019) define these democratic innovations as institutions and processes that are "developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation, and influence" (2019, p. 11). Deliberative mini-publics (DMPs) are a subset of these innovations and have in common the random selection process of citizens as participants and deliberation as the mode of operation (Farrell & Field, 2022). DMPs are defined as "carefully designed forums where a representative subset of the wider population come together to engage in open, inclusive, informed, and consequential discussions on a particular issue" (Curato et al, 2021, p.3).

A fundamental aspect of DMPs is the effort to engage participants, aiming to achieve a level of statistical representation reflective of the broader population affected by the issue (Curato et al., 2021). Typically, this representativeness is facilitated through a sortition process involving a random selection of citizens (Pilet et al., 2023a). Examples of DMPs include citizens' juries, planning cells, deliberative polls, and citizens' assemblies, each varying in the number of participants, time of process, and output (OECD, 2020). There is a significant variation between the roles (consultive or binding) and impacts (degree of influence on policies) of DMPs (Jacobs & Kaufmann, 2021). Often, the role of these deliberative processes is only of a consultative nature, meaning the mini-publics do not have decision-making power, and their influence only goes so far.

The non-binding nature of the mandate of DMPs allows for political elites to treat the recommendations however they please, often resulting in cherry-picking of recommendations (Vrydagh & Caluwaerts, 2023; Giraudet et al., 2022) and disregarding the process outcomes (Jacobs & Kaufmann, 2021). This can further decrease trust in the government and its perceived legitimacy, as citizens might feel not taken seriously (Boulianne, 2019). To address these issues, some advocate for granting DMPs greater decision-making power (Giraudet et al., 2022) based on positive experiences with the quality of policy recommendations from previously held DMPs (Curato et al., 2017; Jacquet et al., 2022).

Democratic innovation has become a buzzword in recent years (Elstub & Escobar, 2019). However, Núñez et al. (2016) observe an inertia in implementing democratic innovations among political elites, meaning it might be more talk than action. An explanation for this can be the lack of incentive to

structurally change the power structures in the ones benefiting from this system. Nonetheless, a significant number of DMPs have taken place in recent years. (See the POLITICIZE data set by Paulis et al. (2021) for a comprehensive overview.)

DMPs have been presented as promising tools to bridge the gap between citizens and political elites (Vrydagh et al., 2023), particularly through establishing a stronger connection between citizens and policy outcomes via increased and deepened citizen participation (Smith, 2009). The main arguments in favor of implementing DMPs are based on the assumptions that they contribute to a legitimate, accountable, and well-informed basis for decision-making (Gooding & Dryzek, 2006; MacKenzie & Warren, 2012). DMPs are seen as a potential bridge between responsiveness and responsibility in democracy, an interaction between citizens and politicians that has weakened since the "era of party decline" (Farrell & Field, 2022, p.298).

Much literature focuses on the umbrella term of deliberative mini-publics (DMP). However, this research will focus specifically on CAs, as they are the most prominent form of DMPs: no other form of citizen participation has yet been given the level of influence on political processes (Smith, 2009). Furthermore, this study benefits from choosing a policy instrument well-known by the research participants: CAs – *burgerberaden* – are the most prominent form of DMP in the Netherlands, as they have been subject to (political) debates in recent years. CAs differentiate from other DMPs in a few subtle ways. CAs combine a large number of participants, investment in time and effort of all groups involved, and a relatively significant impact on policy outcomes on the topic (Suiter & Reuchamps, 2016). Moreover, CAs are characterized by their (attempt to) statistical representativeness of the population through weighted drawing of citizens (Pilet et al., 2023a).

CAs have been an increasing research topic in recent years. Apart from studies on the normative and instrumental aspects, research has investigated opinions on and acceptance of CAs, mainly focusing on citizens using quantitative methods (a.o. Pilet et al., 2023a). Other groups that have been studied are stakeholders, dissatisfied citizens, politicians, policy-makers, participants, non-participants, and initiators (Goldberg et al., 2020; Jacobs, 2024; Jacquet et al., 2022; Vrydagh et al., 2023). In their study on the attitudes of MPs towards different uses of sortition, Jacquet et al. (2022) conclude that an in-depth understanding of elected politicians' reasoning on various forms of democracy has yet to be revealed.

Although the literature on deliberative democracy and CAs is mostly very positive, this thesis aspires to present a more nuanced view of the perceived advantages and disadvantages of this democratic innovation. The way CAs are presented as a panacea for the ills of representative democracies (Gherghina et al., 2023) needs a realistic evaluation to discover their potential. Insights in politicians' reasoning on CAs are crucial for understanding this potential and its integration into existing democratic systems. Politicians are the gatekeepers who decide which policies are adopted and implemented (Gherghina et al.,

2023). Furthermore, politicians' willingness to cede some of their policy-making power to average citizens is critical in determining the future of CAs (Junius et al., 2020). The interplay between these arguments in favor and against implementing CAs from a politician's viewpoint creates a dynamic that calls for further investigation. To provide insight into the potential of CAs, understanding politicians' views and reasoning on CAs is decisive. The theory chapter below elucidates considerations that influence these perceptions.

Theory

Politicians' Perspectives on Citizens' Assemblies

This chapter provides an overview of considerations that influence politicians' positions on CAs identified in previous literature. Since deliberative democracy is a relatively new field, research is quickly emerging, yet much is still to be explored. Where previous research has mainly scrutinized instrumental aspects (Devaney et al., 2020), normative ideals (Dryzek et al., 2011), participant' perspectives (Jacquet, 2019), and non-participants' perspectives (Goldberg, 2021), little research has dived into political elites' positions on deliberative democracy and deliberative innovations' place in democracy (Macq & Jacquet, 2023). In this chapter, the perceived advantages and disadvantages of CAs and other points of consideration from politicians' point of view are elucidated, either based on assumptions in the literature or on empirical findings in related research.

Recently, Christoph Niessen developed a conceptual framework that categorizes elected officials' attitudes and factors that might influence those attitudes towards CAs in his chapter in *De Gruyter Handbook of Citizens' Assemblies* (2023). This thesis builds on this invaluable work as well as expands and integrates other critical theories and concepts that are overlooked to provide a deeper understanding of how these factors influence politicians' perceptions.

The few studies on political elites' perspectives have attempted to provide structure and clarity in this complex network of interacting concepts by establishing profiles of discourses, or creating ideal-type positions (Niessen, 2023; Rangoni et al., 2023; Junius et al., 2020; Pálsdóttir et al., 2023). This thesis uses the framework of the three I's – ideas, institutions, and interests – to categorize, identify, and understand influential factors. Hall (1997) introduced the three I's framework, which became prominent in political economy and policy sciences. For example, Niessen (2023) and Junius et al. (2020) use this framework to clarify this multidimensional web of factors influencing people's thoughts and opinions on CAs. Below, these three dimensions are discussed to elucidate explanatory factors for politicians' views towards CAs.

Ideas

Multiple explanatory factors influence politicians' perceptions of CAs that are related to political ideas. Based on previous literature, the following ideational factors are identified: 1) political ideology, 2) view of representative legitimacy, 3) view of political capacity, and 4) complementarity to representative democracy. However, to understand politicians' views on CAs, it is important to situate this deliberative

tool within the public participation spectrum. For this, the participation ladder introduced by Arnstein is used as a guiding framework.

Arnstein's (1969) influential 'Ladder of Citizen Participation' is one of the most widely used models in academic and non-academic public participation literature. The ladder represents the different degrees of influence, power, and agency that citizens may have on the policy-making process (see Figure 1). Politicians' views on the appropriate role of citizens in the democratic process result in different conceptions of democracy. A limited role for the citizens, where voting for representatives is the only interaction with the policy process, translates to an elitist perception of democracy. Contrastingly, awarding citizens more power in the policy process implies a participatory perception of democracy (Koskimaa et al., 2023). These views influence the role politicians see for CAs in the democratic process and can result in variance in the implementation of decision-making power granted to CAs across countries and contexts.

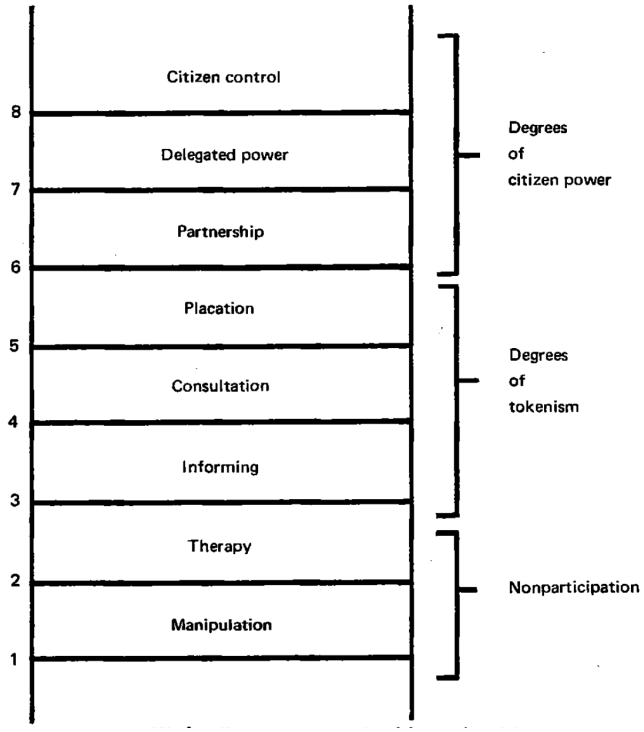

Figure 1: *Eight Rungs on a Ladder of Citizen Participation from Arnstein (1969, p.217)*

Views on the electoral system and how much citizen input into the law-making process is optimal are critical aspects of one's view on political representation (Gherghina et al., 2023). Vandamme (2023) categorizes CAs in his typology of democratic innovations as 'enhancing representation through sortition', where he emphasizes the emergence of "representation *beyond* elections" in participation theory (p.11). CAs challenge the assumption that representation should be exclusively assured through

elections, thereby challenging traditional electoral legitimacy (Vandamme, 2023). This, however, depends on the nature of CAs and their attributed decision-making power: the difference between *enhancing* or *replacing* electoral representation determines the tension between the two modes of representation. While elections are in place to single out the 'best' representatives, the sortition is based on the premise that every citizen is equally capable of political judgment (Vandamme, 2023). This may result in politicians feeling threatened by their legitimacy by a competing form of representation, as found in elected representatives in Belgium by Rangoni et al. (2023). Moreover, implementing complementary forms of representation next to electoral representation might suggest that politicians cannot be trusted and that the electoral system is lacking (Vandamme, 2023).

Moving to the ideational factors found in literature, first, various research studies have found that political ideology influences politicians' perceptions of CAs. Junius et al. (2020) demonstrate that as parties like the Greens promote grassroots politics, they are more likely to support deliberative innovations embodying this type of political organization. Similarly, Núñez et al. (2016) emphasize that, historically, the labor movement and parties with post-materialist values hold a participatory view of democracy, indicating a more positive attitude towards CAs. Parties at the extreme ends of the ideological spectrum are also likely to support stronger citizen participation to diminish the power of the traditional powerful 'elites' (Núñez et al., 2016). However, research finds that left-wing parties favor deeper citizen participation than conservative or right-wing parties (Junius et al., 2020). Accordingly, Gherghina et al. (2023) find that deliberation is supported by the ones that find diversity and representation of voices, interests, and ideas – especially of under-represented groups – are important in the decision-making process.

Secondly, politicians' view on representative legitimacy significantly influences their conception of CAs. For example, Pálsdóttir et al. (2023) find that Iceland's politicians strongly believe that elections are the right way to achieve legitimate political representation, irrespective of their ideological beliefs. This study also demonstrates that politicians expect people to directly contact their representatives, join political parties, or utilize political institutions to voice their opinions instead of expressing them through deliberative processes (Pálsdóttir et al., 2023). Vrydagh et al. (2023) describe how stakeholders in a political process perceive themselves as "the most legitimate owners of the issue, thanks to their representativeness and expertise" (p.108). This finding likely also applies to politicians as they assert their legitimacy on elected representation and specialized knowledge of governance and public affairs. In addition, Junius et al. (2020) state that members of parliaments' own legitimacy perceptions determine their support for deliberative processes, whereas higher perceptions of their own legitimacy decrease the support for deliberative processes. This emphasizes the belief that politicians gain political legitimacy through the electoral process as the only way to legitimately achieve representative political power.

However, politicians who believe there is a gap between politicians and citizens, indicating that they do not legitimately represent them, are positive towards deliberative events and consider them to help restore legitimacy in the democratic system (Junius et al. 2020). This political legitimacy is argued to stem from the random selection of participants and the belief that high quality of deliberation results in better policy (Jacobs & Kaufmann, 2021).

Another important consideration in the discussion on representative legitimacy is the accountability and authorization mechanisms. Cristina Lafont (2015) is widely known for her criticism of representation through deliberative democracy. She argues that deliberative innovations are democratic shortcuts and that there is a lack of accountability between its participants and the rest of the population. According to Lafont (2015), deliberative democracy processes reduce rather than increase democratic legitimacy, e.g. through 'blind deference' in non-participants and bypassing the will of the broader public. This and other related criticisms might influence politicians' perceptions of CAs, strengthen the belief that political representation can only be achieved through elections and that these elected representatives have the mandate to "decide the course of action, the extent to which they listen to citizens, and how best to pursue their political agenda" (Pálsdóttir et al., 2023, p.16).

Thirdly, politicians' view of the political capacity of citizens greatly influences their perception of CAs. The perceived competence of CA participants has been found to be an important factor affecting how citizens view deliberative mini-publics (Geisler, 2023) and how politicians view CAs (Rangoni et al., 2023). Negative views of citizen competence correspond to the elitist conception of democracy, where citizens' willingness and capacity to handle complex political issues are being questioned (Jaquet et al., 2022). Political elites holding this view argue that low competence can harm policy-making and the equality of democratic representation, as policy-making requires special experience and knowledge on the topic discussed (Koskimaa et al., 2023). These political elites often see themselves as experts on the issue and have a sense of 'ownership' over the discussed topic, further weakening their willingness to share power in the decision-making process (Koskimaa et al., 2023).

This also touches upon politicians' ideas around good citizenship, which entails a well-informed public and high citizen participation in the democratic system. Citizens' competence and knowledge of policy topics are found to be improved through deliberative democracy practices (Richards et al., 2022). Particularly, issue-specific knowledge and understanding of each other's arguments improve, and well-facilitated deliberation can spark attitude change (Richards et al., 2022). When these qualities are important to politicians, they are more likely to support CAs.

Fourth and last in the category, Niessen (2023) distinguishes the extent to which one sees CAs as complementary to the traditional representative democracy as a factor influencing politicians' perception. This is also highly connected with one's view on the current system of representative democracy and

whether this is considered sufficient and/or functioning, which will be discussed in the *institutions* section below. Farrell & Field (2022) suggest that the repeated use of CAs in many cases indicates that at least some politicians see them as an enhancement to the policy process in those contexts. When politicians do not perceive CAs as complementary, Niessen (2023) argues that their view is likely either negative or disruptive. Proponents of the latter believe that the current system is lacking and needs drastic changes in order to have legitimate rule.

Furthermore, Macq and Jacquet (2023) find that the dominant conception of democracy in a given context is critical to the success of the implementation of CAs and its complementarity to the current system. An exclusive and centralized tradition of policy-making (e.g., France) leads to disregarding CAs, while CAs are more welcomed when policy-making traditions depend more on citizen consultation (e.g., Denmark). When applying this to the Netherlands, the Dutch political landscape is characterized by a culture of consensus-building and stakeholder engagement. These characteristics suggest that there may be a greater openness to incorporating tools like CAs into the decision-making process. However, the Dutch political culture is also known for its complex coalition dynamics, which may complicate the implementation and integration of CAs.

Institutions

Influential considerations of an institutional nature are 1) experiences with current institutions, 2) socialization, and 3) experience with, or expectations of, CAs. Firstly, existing literature on who supports deliberative democracy innovations shows that this is often related to how one experiences the current system. Here, a larger dissatisfaction with the status quo relates to more support for democratic innovation. Especially research on dissatisfied citizens (Gherghina & Geissel, 2020; Goldberg et al., 2020), as well as on dissatisfied politicians (Gherghina et al., 2023), finds a strong correlation between dissatisfaction with the existing representative system and the support of alternative models of representative democracy. In addition, politicians who contest the established system of representation, like members of populist parties or those endorsing a stronger public engagement, also favor participatory mechanisms in representative democracy (Gherghina et al., 2023). Deeper citizen participation is promoted as a countermeasure for the shortcomings of the representative democratic system, particularly among populists and progressive democrats (Koskimaa et al., 2023). Notably, the ‘losers’ of democracy – in contrast to the ones benefiting from the status quo – are more likely to support a stronger voice of the people and participatory mechanisms (Goldberg et al., 2020; Pilet et al., 2023b). This leads to the conclusion that the position one has in the system (benefitting from the status quo, e.g. being in the coalition) determines that person’s support for stronger citizen participation.

Second, the degree of political professionalization and socialization influences politicians' views on CAs. The amount of time one has spent in office has proven to be an influential factor in their support of alternative modes of decision-making (Niessen et al., 2019). One explanation for this is that over time, politicians become increasingly attached to their function, and democratic innovations might be perceived as threatening to their functions' stability and power (Jacquet et al., 2022). This same result was found on the party level: younger parties are more often advocating for an increase in citizen participation in representative democracy than old established political parties (Núñez et al., 2016). Furthermore, the acquisition of specific skills throughout the years in office increases professionalization levels as well as socialization, further increasing resistance to change (Rangoni et al., 2023). Bowler et al. (2002) find that longer-serving legislators more strongly oppose change. Consequently, they suggest that an influx of new legislators would open up a window of opportunity to change institutional rules.

Third and last, the actual experience or held expectations of CAs can affect politicians' perception of these CAs. This effect is found in citizens who heard about deliberative citizen forums and citizens who had negative experiences with deliberative citizen forums, where the latter is more negative about these tools than the former (Goldberg & Bächtiger, 2023). Politicians' knowledge and experiences with CAs vary widely depending on their context. Pálsdóttir et al. (2023) found that Icelandic politicians had limited information on deliberative practices despite CA implementation in the nation. This suggests a reluctance in politicians to inform themselves when they do not consider the issue salient and reflects a reluctance in the government to inform politicians on policies that are implemented. Conversely, Beswick and Elstub (2019) found that political leaders in the UK are often open to stronger (deliberative) public participation processes, primarily based on knowledge of anticipated benefits like more diverse and representative policies.

Moreover, expectations regarding the organizational aspects of CAs can also shape perceptions. The quality of the CA design significantly influences expectations, as proved by participants in a Belgian mini-public who emphasized the importance of selection procedures, citizen involvement, and agenda openness (Vrydagh et al., 2023). Negative expectations of the organization of CAs are likely to negatively affect politicians' perception of CAs, especially when they are aware of the difficulties associated with poorly organized CAs. Therefore, understanding both the experiential and anticipatory dimensions of CAs is crucial for comprehending politicians' attitudes toward these deliberative processes.

Interests

This section concerns the personal strategic interests of politicians. Here, the following factors influence politicians' perception of CAs: 1) power, 2) acceptance of policies, 3) popularity, and 4) outcome favorability. Firstly, democratic innovations such as CAs might alter the traditional distribution of power

in a political system (Niessen, 2019), which presumably has a significant impact on the perspective of the traditional powerful politicians. The authority of politicians in the decision-making processes is restricted by these innovations through the redistribution of power from elected representatives to citizens (Núñez et al., 2016). Herzog (2016, in Núñez et al., 2016) emphasizes this concern and raises the question of why politicians would be willing to support and implement these tools as they could undermine their own sphere of influence and power base. Similarly, Macq and Jacquet (2023) conclude that, while politicians might be appreciative of better or more citizen participation, they support this on the condition that these processes are purely advisory.

Moreover, politicians might perceive power in politics as a zero-sum game, meaning that the power gained by one actor is lost by the other (Vrydagh et al., 2023). In the case of CA participants gaining power in the policy-making process, politicians might fear losing power over this process. However, research by Koskimaa et al. (2023) shows that there is little difference between elected and non-elected policy makers in the level of support for stronger citizen involvement, indicating that the power politicians gain when being elected is not of significant influence on their preferences. As most CAs predominantly have an advisory role in the policy process and are not undermining politicians' decision-making power, politicians are rarely directly affected by them and are said to have little incentive to oppose them (Koskimaa et al., 2023).

Secondly, citizens' acceptance of policies is widely assumed to increase when CAs are used to design them. It is in the politicians' interest to have high compliance with policies and to ensure 'social acceptance' of policies (Dryzek & Tucker, 2008). Citizens who perceive policies are being followed might be more likely to trust and support the government. In addition, the success of policies is a measure of politicians' competence, effectiveness, and responsiveness to public needs. Conversely, failure to achieve public support or high compliance may erode public support, spark political backlash or social unrest, and diminish re-election chances. The belief that deliberative processes improve the support for public decision-making and policies is often one of the key reasons for the implementation of these tools (Jacobs & Kaufmann, 2021). However, this goal might not necessarily be as easily achieved through CAs as many deliberative democrats claim (Jacobs & Kaufmann, 2021).

Third, closely related to the previous point, is the opportunity to increase one's popularity. Showing support for deliberative tools might increase popularity and attract votes (Núñez et al., 2016; Pálsdóttir et al., 2023), and Bowler et al. (2002) advises future research to explore how elites respond to popular demand for democratic changes. Junius et al. (2020) found that representatives who are unsure about their future in politics are more in favor of citizen participation. Creating or supporting more engagement opportunities for citizens is a pathway for politicians to increase their popularity, assuming the population favors stronger participation (Pálsdóttir et al., 2023). Furthermore, many deliberative

democracy scholars emphasize the depolarizing quality of deliberation and claim that CAs can counteract populism (Dryzek et al., 2019; Richards et al., 2022). This belief is based on research on the psychological dimensions of deliberation (see Richards et al., 2022), which shows that deliberation induces social learning across deep social divides and promotes positive attitudes towards outgroup members and the public good (Dryzek, 2005; Kenter et al., 2016). Assuming CAs might have this effect can be a reason for populist politicians to oppose these deliberative tools, as they might fear a decrease in popularity. However, research by Jacobs (2024) finds that CAs can actually increase populist attitudes, resulting in a more nuanced perspective on CAs' capabilities to limit polarization and populism. Contrarily, positioning yourself as a strong supporter of deliberative democracy might also be a political tactic. Bargaining for 'more' democracy as a politician or political party is a way for parties to "portray themselves as more 'democratic' and progressive" than their opponents (Macq & Jacquet, 2023, p.159).

Furthermore, CAs can be a way for politicians to stay clear from sensitive topics (Farrell et al., 2019). By avoiding these topics, politicians can distance themselves from potentially controversial or polarizing issues. Their argumentation for this relies on the claim that the representative group of CA participants is more reflective of public opinion rather than driven by political agendas and the election cycle (Farrell et al., 2019). Benefits can reduce the risk of backlash or criticism from society and presenting policy decisions as CA outcomes, which allows them to deflect blame for unpopular decisions.

Finally, various studies find that outcome favorability significantly influences politicians' perception of CAs. Jacobs (2024) finds that outcome favorability matters in support of democratic innovations in his research on the effect of CAs on populist attitudes. A study by Pilet et al. (2023a) shows that citizens' support for greater forms of citizen participation processes is at least partly driven by self-interest. This finding can likely be applied to politicians' support for these processes, as Vrydagh and Caluwaerts (2023) argued, who state that pre-existing policy preferences influence politicians' decisions surrounding CAs. Politicians' support for CAs before implementation might be influenced by outcome favorability to a lesser extent when the topic of the CA is not set yet. However, CA outcomes are thought to be more progressive and inclusive as opinions have been found to shift towards a progressive and cosmopolitan direction after deliberation (Maier & Bächtiger, 2023). For example, the Irish Assembly's recommendations on abortion were surprisingly progressive compared to the overall rather conservative nature of Irish politics (Farrell et al., 2023). As a result, politicians of more progressive or leftist parties might be more likely to favor deliberative citizen participation and use this strategically, as their outcomes are likely to be (more) progressive than public opinion without deliberation.

Analytical framework

The following analytical framework (Table 1) is developed based on the work by Niessen (2023) and expanded based on relevant literature presented in this theory section. This framework is used to assess possible considerations influencing politicians' perception of CAs based on relevant literature and to analyze the empirical data, as elucidated in the methodology chapter below. The descriptions per category describe what considerations need to be expressed by politicians to show that specific category.

Category	Description	Literature
Ideas		
Political ideology	In favor of grassroots politics, a participatory view of democracy, political parties at the extremes of the spectrum, supporting diversity and representation of voices, interests, and ideas in the policy process, and left-wing parties are more likely in favor of CAs	Niessen, 2023; Junius et al., 2020; Núñez et al., 2016; Gherghina et al., 2023
View of Representative Legitimacy	Support of legitimacy of representativeness through the electoral system, belief in expressing opinions through the representative democratic system, and legitimacy through specialized knowledge on governance and public affairs negatively affect CA perceptions	Niessen, 2023; Pálsdóttir et al., 2023; Vrydagh et al., 2023
View of political capacity	Low perceived competence of CA participants, questioning of citizens' willingness and capacity to handle complex issues, and the belief that low capacity can harm policy-making negatively influence CA perceptions. Believing CAs improve good citizenship enhances CA perceptions	Niessen, 2023; Geisler, 2023; Rangoni et al., 2023; Jacquet et al., 2022; Koskimaa et al., 2023
Complementa-rity to the current system	Belief that CAs are complementary to, or enhance, the current system, or holding a disruptive view in order to improve democratic system using CA	Niessen, 2023; Farrell & Field, 2022
Institutions		
Experience with current institutions	Dissatisfaction with the current system and discontentment with the established system positively affect CA perception and vice versa	Niessen, 2023
Socialization	Spent time in office, age of party one is representing, degree of professionalization increase opposition to change	Niessen, 2023
Experience with or	Positive experiences, knowledge, or expectations of CA outcomes/impact positively affect CA perception. Concerns about CA design or experience with poorly	Niessen, 2023

expectations of CAs	designed CAs negatively affect CA perception	
Interests		
Power	Losing power, less influence on policy processes, in favor of only advisory recommendations, value of political input in decision-making	Niessen, 2023; Núñez et al., 2016; Herzog, 2016; Vrydagh et al., 2023; Koskimaa et al., 2023
Acceptance of policies	High compliance to and social acceptance of policies, increase in trust and support in government, avoid political backlash and social unrest	Jacobs & Kaufmann, 2021
Popularity	Gaining popularity by facilitating stronger citizen participation (for citizens who are in favor of participation), avoiding deliberation due to its progressive outcomes, or initiating CAs to steer clear of sensitive topics	Núñez et al., 2016; Pálsdóttir et al., 2023; Junius et al., 2020
Outcome favorability	Pre-existing policy preferences when the CA topic is known, or expecting progressive outcomes when the CA topic is not known	Niessen, 2023; Jacobs, 2024; Vrydagh & Caluwaerts, 2023; Farrell & Field, 2022

Table 1: *analytical framework to assess possible considerations influencing politicians' perception of citizens' assemblies based on relevant literature*

Methodology

This chapter elucidates the methods used in this thesis. First, the methodological approach is discussed, followed by the data collection, analysis, case selection, and ethical considerations.

Methodological approach

A qualitative research design is adopted to gain an understanding of politicians' perspectives and underlying considerations on CAs in the Netherlands. One of the key advantages of qualitative methods is that they allow for uncovering deeper motivations of the research participants, which is inaccessible without comprehensive qualitative analysis (Talpin, 2019). As Richard Fenno states: "We need political scientists to go take a first-hand look at our politicians and report back to us. [...] For only we can persist in attaching observation to theory" (1986, p.14). This emphasizes the contribution of this research to political sciences, as politicians are often overlooked and understudied in this field (Hunter, 1995).

During in-depth interviews, which were chosen as the main research method, rich and detailed data was gathered. In-depth interviews are an appropriate method for this study as they fit the aim of gaining a deeper understanding by providing thick descriptions of the variations in perceptions of CAs. The research uses inductive as well as deductive aspects to study the considerations behind politicians' perceptions, meaning that the analysis is partially based on theory and further expanded through empirical findings (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). This approach is further elucidated in the data analysis section below.

Interviewing political elites can be challenging due to a lack of accessibility and a small sample population, leading to smaller research samples and an understudied sample population (Hunter, 1995; Richards, 1996). Another challenge is posed by the time constraints faced by politicians, which decreases opportunities to set up interviews with them (Mikecz, 2012). Consequently, getting in contact with and organizing interviews with politicians is relatively time-consuming compared to other sample populations and requires persistence and patience (Peabody et al., 1990; Bakkalbasioglu, 2020). Nonetheless, the benefits of interviewing high-level politicians outweigh the connected difficulties, as politicians are relatively understudied. Hence, this study contributes to 'studying up' by decreasing the asymmetries in the distribution of knowledge and providing new information on this relatively understudied group in political science (Hunter, 1995).

Another challenge in using (elite) interviews is that participants are not necessarily required (and expected) to be objective or provide an absolute truth (Berry, 2002). However, as highlighted by Richards (1996), the purpose of elite interviewing is not to establish a definite truth in a positivist manner but rather

for political scientists to gain insight into the mindset of the actors who have influenced society and their subjective analysis of specific times or situations. Therefore, in the context of this research, the absence of objectivity is not considered a drawback, as the aim is to explore politicians' subjective views and reasoning to understand their subjective truths.

Data collection

The interviews follow a semi-structured design, leaving room for follow-up questions and allowing for flexibility during the interviews. Semi-structured interviews often lead to better outcomes and provide a better understanding of the experiences and opinions of the participants (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). The interviews can be characterized as respondent interviews since this study focuses on eliciting respondents' perceptions, opinions, and the reasoning behind these views. The interviews were held online either through Zoom or Microsoft Teams. These meetings were recorded with consent, and subsequently, the records were transcribed by the researcher.

The selection of interviewees is based on maximum variation, purposeful sampling to ensure representation of a diversity of perspectives, and information-rich interviews to maximize understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Based on previous research and recommendations on sample sizes for qualitative interview studies, the aim was to conduct between 10 and 15 interviews (Guest et al., 2006). The 13 interviews that were conducted ensure enough empirical data to provide meaningful insights while also considering feasibility of this project. An overview of the participants can be found in Appendix IV (Table 3).

A decisive inclusion criterion is that the research participants must be active as elected representatives in the Netherlands. Aiming to cover a wide range of political beliefs and backgrounds, politicians from all political parties were contacted. Both politicians on the national and regional levels were approached to attain a diverse sample. Conveniently, elected officials are generally easy to reach in representative democracies, as citizens must be able to contact them to ensure legitimate representation. However, national politicians are more difficult to personally access than regional politicians due to their full schedules and personal assistants who filter their emails and interview requests.

As this research tries to uncover politicians' perceptions of CAs *before* implementation, no previous institutionalized CAs in a politician's sphere of influence are a strong prerequisite. Therefore, desk research was conducted to filter out provinces in the Netherlands where no previous CA had taken place: Flevoland (the smallest province of the 12 provinces of the Netherlands) was found to be the only province where, to date, no CA has taken place. The members of the Provinciale Staten (Provincial Council) were contacted, and five council members agreed to an interview. On the national level, all (150)

members of parliament (MPs) were contacted. Their reactions were mostly rejections or referrals to the party's representative of the Ministry of Internal Affairs committee, which is concerned with topics such as strengthening democracy. Ultimately, 8 MPs agreed to an interview, making the total number of interviews 13.

A detailed interview guide (see Appendix I) with questions and possible follow-up questions was provided to ensure consistency across interviews and guarantee comparable data. The interview questions were based on the theoretical section and previous literature, aiming to retrieve rich information and insights from the interviewees. The semi-structured nature of the interview allowed for adaptation to the given answers, asking for clarification where needed, and freedom to deviate from the interview guide to better suit the flow of the conversation. The interviews had a duration of 20 to 30 minutes and consisted of eight to ten critical questions with room for expansion, as recommended for political elite interviews by Peabody et al. (1990). Before the interview, the interviewee was given information about the aim, process, and handling of the data through an information sheet and a consent form to be signed by the interviewee (Appendix II and III). The interviewees were again asked for their consent to record at the start of the interview.

Data analysis

A methodological approach that combines data-driven and theory-driven analysis is employed to analyze the qualitative data from the interview transcripts. This approach aims to strike a balance between inductive and deductive methods, following the line of codebook thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2022), and is suited for studying perceptions of particular groups. The empirical data collected through the interviews – in the form of transcripts – are coded in NVivo using an analytical framework as guiding categorization for the code structure.

A preliminary analytical framework was made based on the literature review and the theoretical chapter (see Table 1). Niessen's work (2023) serves as the foundation for the categorization, supplemented by additional literature to refine and enhance the framework in alignment with the theory described in the previous chapter. After familiarization with the empirical data, the data is coded in an iterative, organic process: the preliminary categorization of the analytical framework is used to code the data, and this framework is further developed according to the findings during the analysis by adding relevant concepts and themes that emerged: these themes are (part of) the *output* of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Although ideally, multiple coders analyze the empirical data to increase coding reliability (Braun & Clarke, 2022), within this study, it was only feasible for one researcher to go through the data 2 to 3

times, thereby aiming to strengthen the analysis and decrease the risk of missing any relevant information as much as possible (Thompson, 2022). Finally, the quotes extracted and organized within NVivo according to the revised framework are utilized to illustrate and support the presentation of the results in the following chapter. Herein, each category includes a balanced discussion of data extracts and interpretation of the findings in that category (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Case selection

This research takes the form of a single case study, allowing for an intense and in-depth investigation of Dutch politicians' perceptions of CAs. The form of a single case study focusing on the Netherlands was chosen for the following reasons: first, conducting a single case study allows for an in-depth analysis of a specific context and a thorough exploration of nuances and dynamics surrounding politicians' perceptions within the Dutch context. As mentioned, the need to study a country-level context where no previous CAs have been recently implemented justifies the focus on the Netherlands. Second, while the research focuses on a single country, the findings from this case can be compared and contrasted with existing literature and experiences from other contexts. Third, the feasibility of the study was also considered in choosing this study design to manage resources better, access participants, streamline data collection and analysis, and maintain the overall quality of the research. Herein, one key factor is the Dutch nationality of the researcher and the experience and knowledge of the Dutch democratic system, which facilitated easy navigation in the Dutch context and awareness of national nuances. Moreover, the Dutch nationality of the researcher lowered the threshold for participants to agree to interviews, as they could be conducted in their native language. Lastly, the decision for a single case study is beneficial to offering practical insights and recommendations for policymakers, stakeholders, and practitioners interested in deliberative democracy and public participation tools. The research outcomes could inform decision-making processes around CAs in the Netherlands and beyond.

The Netherlands, well-known for its longstanding transition of political pluralism and participatory governance, offers a rich and dynamic context to investigate politicians' perceptions of CAs. Situated in Western Europe, the Netherlands has a strong democratic system characterized by a multiparty system, proportional representation, and an active civil society. The Dutch political landscape is marked by a consensus-building and collaboration culture, making it an interesting case for investigating attitudes towards participatory mechanisms such as CAs.

Ethical considerations, reliability, and validity

Special attention was given to the anonymity of participants, given their position and vulnerability as public persons, and their obligations towards their political parties (Alvesson, 2011). Since a decisive factor in this study is the freedom that participants experience during the interviews to speak their minds, participants were ensured of the anonymity of their responses before and during the interview. Moreover, a consent form and information sheet were sent to the participants prior to the interview. Additional measures taken to safeguard the anonymity of participants involve refraining from storing interviews and transcriptions on cloud platforms, excluding personal or identifying details from interview excerpts, and avoiding descriptions of complete reports of participants.

The reliability of the research is strengthened by collecting rich data, consistent and systematic data collection and analysis, and detailed documentation of the research process. These measures ensure that the findings are replicable and consistent, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the research outcomes. However, the level of transferability of the findings is limited as politicians' perceptions and considerations towards CAs are highly dependent on context (historical, political, institutional, and cultural).

Validity is ensured by basing the questions, measures, and analysis on established literature and theoretical frameworks. This ensures that the study addresses relevant aspects and constructs in the field, enhancing the validity of the findings. Moreover, transparency regarding subjective assumptions and methodological choices further strengthens the credibility of the research (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). The study maintains its integrity and validity by acknowledging and openly discussing potential biases or limitations inherent in the research process (see Discussion). However, it is crucial to recognize that while efforts are made to minimize subjectivity, research is inherently influenced by the perspectives and interpretations of the researchers, which should be considered when interpreting the results.

Results

This chapter presents the findings of the study. Firstly, the results are organized according to the predefined categories in the analytical framework outlined in the theory section. Secondly, the themes and patterns of considerations that emerged during the analysis that do not fit within the provided three I's analytical framework are discussed. Lastly, these new considerations discovered in this research are integrated with the original analytical framework to create an updated framework, which includes the main finding per category, aiming to offer a clear overview of the results. Taken together, these results contribute to answering the research question by providing insight into politicians' reasoning on CAs and descriptions of considerations they express when discussing CAs. Moreover, it contributes to the literature on politicians' perceptions of CAs by developing theoretical understanding of their considerations.[1]

The Three I's

This section shows the findings related to the three I's introduced in the theoretical chapter: first, *ideas* (political ideology, view of representative legitimacy, view of political capacity, and complementarity to representative democracy), then *institutions* (experience with current institutions, socialization, and experience with, or expectations of, CAs), and lastly, *interests* (power, acceptance of policies, popularity, and outcome favorability). However, some general observations can be made before diving into the findings per category. The analysis shows that not all three I's are equally represented in the interview data. Notably, the *interests* category is relatively absent: politicians did not express many considerations regarding power, acceptance of policies, popularity, or outcome favorability when discussing CAs in the interviews. Contrastingly, during the analysis, it became clear that politicians primarily used arguments in the *ideas* category of the analytical framework, and many considerations regarding CAs are connected to politicians' ideas on – amongst others – representative legitimacy and political capacity. This could be attributed to the nature of politicians' argumentation style, as they often need to 'sell' their ideas to citizens to gain votes, and they are used to connecting their statements to ideological views. Considerations under the *institutions* category also proved to be of significant influence on politicians'

[1] This chapter follows the analytical framework and presents the research's findings per category of the analytical framework, followed by the considerations that do not fit in the analytical framework. Each category is introduced using a heading, and complementary quotes are presented to illustrate politicians' thoughts and statements that fall under that category. The quotes can be recognized by the quotation marks and an empty line between paragraphs. When sentences or parts of a quote are left out of a quote, it is marked with [...]. Where necessary, the interview question or the context of the answer is given in *italics*. To clarify what certain clue words mean, the topic that is referred to in a quote is provided within parentheses. As the interviews are conducted in Dutch, the quotes are translated and – where necessary – adjusted for clarity by deleting repetitions words or language/grammatical errors.

perceptions of CAs. The analysis shows that the effect of the category 'experience with current institutions' prevails throughout the interviews. This shows that the context a politician finds themself in significantly affects their views and opinions.

The three I's are presented in order of influence on politicians' reasoning on CAs: first, ideas, then institutions, and lastly, interests. However, while a considerable part of the interviews could be coded using the three I's framework, not all considerations fit under these categories. The analysis shows that other considerations are significantly present in politicians' reasoning on CAs: these novel findings are presented in the subchapter below under 'new considerations.'

Ideas

This section presents the considerations classified under the ideas category. These considerations significantly affected politicians' reasoning on and perceptions of CAs. The analysis showed that politicians' views on representative legitimacy and political capacity are particularly important and seem at the core of most politicians' expressions on CAs.

Political ideology

Political ideology proves to be an essential factor influencing politicians' perceptions of CAs. In most interviews, politicians brought up arguments in favor or against CAs that touched upon their political ideology. When taking the politicians' political parties into account throughout the analysis of their interviews, a general trend could be observed. Generally, those situated at the more extreme ends of the political spectrum tend to favor direct democracy, such as referenda. Conversely, members of conservative parties often express satisfaction with existing modes of citizen participation, while progressive politicians tend to advocate for stronger citizen involvement, for example, through CAs. Interestingly, politicians positioned in the center of the political spectrum show a surprisingly positive attitude to democratic innovations like CAs. When asked what they perceived to be of influence in forming their opinion on CAs, one politician emphasizes the influence of their own ideological beliefs:

> "I come from a social movement and I think citizen participation in general is very important. I think it should be institutionalized in one way or the other. [...] so I think CAs are a very nice form to institutionalize citizen participation."

Throughout the interviews, ideological influences are evident, with politicians citing norms and values as guiding principles. Inclusivity emerges as a key consideration, with CAs seen as a tool for representing the diverse interests of all citizens. Moreover, many politicians note a growing trend towards stronger

citizen participation. A contradicting view against stronger citizen participation, however, was expressed by one politician. They argue that a lack of citizen involvement is positive, as it indicates contentment with the status quo. Here, they emphasize their liberal ideology and note that more obligations in the form of a CA do not fit their worldview.

> "We do have a certain vision of the government, you know. Well, a clear vision of how a government should function. It should be autonomous. It has really been given a task and responsibility. And you do not leave that to a CA."

Contrastingly, others see CAs as a means of empowering people to influence policy, and they believe that policy is often written by people not representative of the entire society. Notably, these considerations frequently intertwine with politicians' beliefs regarding representative legitimacy, which will be discussed below.

View of Representative Legitimacy

Ideas on representative legitimacy and how to best organize democratic representation were dominant topics throughout the interviews. The opinions within this category varied substantially: from the traditional view that entails an appreciation of the electoral system that is currently in place, where the elected representatives are believed to be the only legitimate decision-makers, to a disruptive view where stronger citizen participation should have more power in the democratic system and decision-making processes. The nuances of the two sides of the debate can be seen in many of the interviewee's responses:

> "On one hand, I think it is good to represent the opinions of the citizens as accurately as possible, and a CA is useful for that because it allows you to specifically ask about a certain topic and what their opinion is. On the other hand, in the Netherlands at least, we have a democracy where you vote for your representatives, and they should ideally represent the voice of the people."

One politician tied their concept of legitimate representation to their assessment of political capacity, contending that political decision-making is too complicated. They emphasized the core tenet of representative democracy, asserting that elected representatives should retain their role as decision-makers and that CAs cannot replace them. Many politicians insisted that CA recommendations must undergo scrutiny by politicians before implementation, underscoring their perceived authority in the policy process. Some respondents praised the existing representative democratic system in the Netherlands for its checks and balances and procedural safeguards, such as the separation of powers. Others defend their

view that CAs' outcomes can solely be advisory due to the mandate that politicians have to make all ultimate policy decisions due to institutional organization. The traditional view of some politicians is summarized concisely in this quote on the perceived advantages of the current system compared to the perceived weaknesses of CAs:

> "People have agreed to choose representatives who speak on their behalf and make decisions on their behalf. That is truly a reflection of the population. [...] Whereas a CA never is. It can never truly be representative because it contains all sorts of biases. Both in finding the people who participate and in the way decision-making or ideas are presented. [...]. It is a very vulnerable form of participation."

Contrasting to the results above, many other respondents are in favor of stronger citizen participation and assess the current system as insufficient for legitimate representation. The timely testing of whether the elected representatives are still the people whom the citizens want as their representatives is underscored as a democratic strength and a source of representative legitimacy. This testing is said to be incorporated in CAs.

> "*Can you see CAs as an addition to the electoral system?*
> Yes, I think so, because a lot happens in society in those four years. [...] Many themes, like abortion, equal rights, and equal pay for women, are all topics that I believe you cannot say once every four years or once every so many years is enough. No, because the reason why we (elected officials) are in this position is the mandate we receive from citizens. But that means that you have to test if it still matches."

One politician emphasized a preference for direct democracy instead of deliberative democracy to increase citizen participation and better representation. This view is based on the idea that CAs are not accessible for every citizen to voice their opinion due to time constraints and the limited number of participant spots.

View of political capacity

Within the category of views on political capacity, there are broadly two sides to the debate. On the one hand, politicians believe citizens to be capable of making sound policy recommendations. On the other hand, politicians believe policy-making is too complex for citizens. Below, some quotes are presented to illustrate both sides of the debate, and a third category that falls between the two sides is elucidated.

Citizens are capable of making good policy recommendations

On this side of the debate, most arguments emphasize that citizens know best what issues they experience and what they need to mitigate them, especially in contrast with the people in government who do not have this knowledge based on life experiences.

> "*Do you think citizens are capable of making good policy recommendations?*
> I think they can as one of the best. [...] They would not choose fancy words. They would not choose expensive solutions. They will just tell you how it is, where it stands, and what their needs are. We (politicians) only speculate about needs. [...] I think precisely those people – because they say it as it is – can make the best recommendations."

Middle ground, more nuanced opinions

Many interviewees explained their doubts and concerns that influence their views on the political capacity of citizens. Respondents questioned citizens' ability to see the bigger picture in complex issues, stating that subjects directly affecting citizens are a better topic for CAs. In addition, citizens' ability to take into account others' perspectives is debated, as well as their ability to resist getting swept up in the back and forth and the urgency of the moment. Here, politicians are thought to be the ones trained in these qualities, making them more capable.

Policy issues are too complex for citizens

On this side of the debate, politicians believe they are better qualified to handle complex policy problems, and citizens have less competence or capacity to do that. One respondent describes how policy issues need to be explained in the simplest terms in order for citizens to understand them and perceives complex policy issues to be black-and-white, making it difficult for CAs to find solutions, as politicians "even struggle to do this." In addition, the amount of experience and expertise that politicians gain over the years is often brought up as an essential reason why politicians are better suited to make policies surrounding complex problems.

> "Ultimately, you are also dealing with the knowledge and expertise of people who have been working here for a long time. [...] You consider all perspectives. That means you also consider the perspective of the citizens. And you weigh them. You simply assess the pros and cons. And you need to be able to argue well for all perspectives. Explain why you choose one thing over another."

Complementarity to the current system

Most of the interviewees considered CAs to be complementary to the current democratic system. Within this view, there were varying degrees of support. A relatively strong opinion was expressed by one of the respondents:

> "*Do you think CAs are a good addition to the traditional electoral system?*
> I think it really should be mandatory. [...] in case of major and impactful changes in legislation, routinely establish a CA, not only at the beginning but also in the middle and during implementation. [...] Because the bureaucracy of the government means that you only amend legislation once every four years, which means it can systematically go wrong for four years."

Some politicians pointed out that the short election cycle and the pressure to be re-elected influence politicians to focus on easy scores, thereby neglecting long-term issues, and thought of CAs as a good addition to this system to alleviate these shortcomings. Furthermore, some interviewees pointed out the deadlock present in the democratic apparatus and the potential benefits that CAs could offer for this. These benefits are thought to create breathing space, steer the conversations in a different direction, and simply try something else as the current debate on some complex issues is stuck.

The particular task of a CA influenced some politicians' views on complementarity to the current system. Their support depends on the task of the CA in the policy process: CAs are endorsed at the beginning of this process but are not welcomed to make ideological choices, as this is the task of political parties. As long as CAs do not replace this ideological part of the democratic system, these politicians perceive CAs as a good addition to the current system.

Institutions

Generally, considerations regarding institutions in this category seem to greatly influence politicians' perceptions of CAs, and a significant part of the interviews touched on these topics.

Experience with current institutions

In every interview, the politicians' experiences with the current institution were repeatedly brought up and appeared to influence their perception of CAs. Here, experiences can broadly be divided into two sides: on the one hand, experiences are negative, leading to the belief that there is a need for change. On the other hand, a few politicians state that the current way of taking citizens' opinions into account is

sufficient and that there is no need to change anything about the system of representation. Lastly, politicians mentioned various times the influence of (social) media on the current democratic system.

Negative experience with the current institutions

Many respondents express dissatisfaction with the current level of citizen involvement in decision-making, highlighting low participation opportunities, late involvement, a top-down approach, and a lack of listening to citizens' experiences and expertise. These respondents desire a shift towards more inclusive and reflective policymaking processes.

> *What do you think of the current way in which the opinion of citizens is taken into account in political decision-making?*
>
> "Very insufficient, weak, basically just 0.0 actually.[...] I always say: you can graduate from university, and that is fine. But there are also just people among us in our society who have graduated from the University of Life in the field of the childcare benefits scandal, in the field of WMO, in the field of dealing with the UWV, in the field of falling between the cracks when the municipality does not understand what to do with you. That is also very valuable knowledge."

Positive experiences with the current institutions

Politicians with a positive view of how the current institutions work emphasize the current ways that allow citizen participation. They perceive positive trends of increased citizen involvement in decision-making processes, acknowledge the opportunities for citizens to voice their opinions, and assume citizens know how to make themselves heard.

> "I think it can always be better, but I personally think it is generally going well. And people also know how to make themselves heard by politicians. People know how to express themselves. So there are also enough opportunities to influence the debate and decision-making from the people themselves."

(Social) Media

One politician highlights the increased use of (social) media as very influential on the working of current institutions and politics. They observe that meetings in parliament often prioritize making statements for media attention rather than genuine conversation and understanding, while behind the scenes, politicians engage in constructive discussions and can reach compromises across party lines.

Socialization

Socialization and professionalization are not found to substantially influence politicians' perceptions of CAs. Many of the politicians in the study were relatively new to their roles due to recent changes in the government (elections in December 2023). One politician mentioned that people have an increasing attachment to their positions if they stay longer in function; however, this is not related to their stance on CAs but rather to the working of representative democracy itself. Another politician said that their life experiences and surroundings influence their views. However, politicians who have been in office for a long time seem less supportive of CAs because they believe their expertise and knowledge are crucial in decision-making and think citizens might not fully understand complex issues, which makes it closely related to the category of 'views on political capacity' described above.

Experience with, or expectations of, CAs

As CAs are not implemented on a national level in the Netherlands yet, the majority of this category is based on expectations surrounding CAs. On a provincial level, politicians seem to be quite informed about the (positive) results of CAs held in other provinces in the Netherlands. On the national level, politicians base most of their expectations on (scientific) literature and information provided by experts.

Organizational concerns were substantially brought up and appear to be among politicians' most significant considerations. Organizational concerns can be divided into two main categories: 1) representativeness and 2) handling of CA outcomes. These two subcategories will be first elucidated, and subsequently, other considerations based on experience with or expectations of CAs will be discussed.

Representativeness

The concerns regarding representativeness entail various elements. One politician expressed skepticism, suggesting that even with methods like weighted lotteries, there is suspicion of manipulation. Others echoed this sentiment, noting that the same active individuals tend to dominate CAs while the majority of citizens remain unheard. They emphasized that those who join CAs are often articulate and skilled, leaving out those who are less engaged or distrustful of the government. Many respondents express doubt that CAs can ever truly represent the population due to biases in participant selection and decision-making processes.

> "It is also questionable which people actually respond to a CA invitation. The degree of its representativeness cannot be fully determined beforehand, and even afterwards, you do not know, because not everyone is interested or willing to attend."

Handling of CA outcomes

Another significant concern is the handling of the CA outcomes. Some politicians expect it further undermines citizens' trust when policy recommendations are not taken seriously. Respondents stressed the importance of respecting the CA process and its outcomes and ensuring that recommendations are not disregarded. It is emphasized that managing expectations about the implementation of CA recommendations is crucial, as not all suggestions may be fully adopted, which could affect participants' and citizens' trust in the process.

> "The government must know that it is an instrument to which they are bound and that what is shared is not without consequences. The recommendations are not optional."

Other expectations of CAs

There are a few other distinct expectations regarding CAs that influence politicians' perceptions. Some politicians express concerns about the time and resources needed for CA processes, noting potential delays in decision-making and increased costs. Others express curiosity about the contributions CAs could make to the democratic system as the sole reason for piloting them in select municipalities to explore their benefits. Additionally, the quality of facilitation within CA processes is emphasized as a crucial prerequisite for support, with effective facilitation seen as essential for fostering productive deliberation. For both supporters and critics, the overall quality of the organization of a CA was one of the largest concerns affecting their CA perception.

> "In CAs, there are often people with a quite strong, firm view on things. For instance, in the ____, they really had a clear picture of where to go: 'We really need to do that.' And the strength and the imagination with which they conveyed their story, and how they presented their story. It determined whether it was adopted by the rest of the group."

Interests

As aforementioned, considerations regarding politicians' interests were less dominant in the analyzed data. Politicians did not express many personal benefits or disadvantages they associate with CAs. Within this category, a higher acceptance of policies was the only consideration clearly related to politicians' own interests; this was not as apparent for other considerations.

Power

When looking at what politicians said on power issues related to CAs or stronger citizen participation tools in general, the analysis shows that they do not directly bring up their own considerations related to (losing) political power. However, most interviewees were against giving CAs the mandate to make binding policy recommendations. They believe that the government should take on the role of ultimate decision-maker and weigh all perspectives in this decision. This can be connected to considerations relating to power, as it seems they do not want to assign their power to citizens. However, it was unclear whether politicians connected this to fear of losing power or based this opinion on, for example, their view of representative legitimacy.

Acceptance of Policies

The promise that CAs ensure larger support of the policies implemented by the CA is mentioned multiple times. The general expectation is that policies enjoy higher acceptance amongst citizens when they follow out of a CA, often based on information and experience politicians learn about from other places. Furthermore, some respondents believe that the deliberation process itself ensures wider support, as multiple perspectives are taken into account and people better understand the different sides of a problem. The inclusion of a wider diversity of perspectives is said to limit backtracking of policies that are not supported.

> "That people, at least that's my experience in these kinds of processes, can better understand each other's perspectives. And I also think that, ultimately, decisions are made that are more widely supported. And as a result, they will also be implemented more successfully."

Popularity

Although not explicitly voiced, considerations regarding popularity could be noticed in comments by various politicians. These revealed the belief that citizens appreciate politicians who listen to their concerns and ideas. However, an increase in politicians' popularity is explained not to be the goal of listening to citizens but rather as a core task of their function as representatives. This is also reiterated by one respondent who emphasizes this basic function of democracy:

> "We are, of course, a democratic system. And if citizens indicate that they would like to have more influence on decision-making, then you should go along with that, in my opinion."

Outcome Favorability

Although not mentioned as affecting the interviewees themselves, one politician did state they sense a level of fear in colleagues for receiving policy recommendations from citizen participation processes that they do not like.

> "I often notice a certain level of hesitation to involve people more actively. Because imagine receiving undesirable outcomes. [...] I think people are often a bit afraid of that. But I think, if you really do not want a certain outcome, it is not part of the decision-making process anymore because the decision is already made."

New Considerations

This section discusses other considerations that influence politicians' perceptions of CAs in the interviews. These considerations are not covered in the analytical framework, meaning new themes emerged during the analysis of the interview transcripts. These 'new' considerations are a key finding in this research and a novel contribution to Niessen's conceptual framework (2023).

Appropriate topic

Throughout the analysis of the interviews, different views on which topics are appropriate to include in CAs were noticed. Two broad themes in this debate are, on the one side, the belief that CAs are useful for big, complex, and long-term (policy) issues. On the other side, politicians believe that CAs are suitable for smaller, 'easier' topics that are closer to citizens' everyday lives. Another difference in belief was whether CAs are appropriate for polarized issues.

Complex issues

Some respondents advocate for CAs to tackle significant, complex, long-term societal issues. They believe CAs can provide effective solutions and guidance for challenges like climate change, societal integration, and long-term planning.

> "I think CAs are a very good system… Especially regarding the larger challenges that we are facing, to make guiding statements there. And to come up with solutions. So, in that way, a CA could be very effectively utilized, in my opinion."

Additionally, there is recognition that certain topics, such as climate policy, are well-suited for CAs because politicians may not always prioritize the long-term interests of citizens over short-term political agendas. CAs are here perceived to offer an opportunity for citizens to contribute to decisions that impact future generations and the overall livability of society. However, some respondents expressed concerns about the difficulty in obtaining a balanced representation of opinions, particularly on polarized issues that parliament is also struggling with, indicating that not all topics are considered suitable for CAs.

Smaller issues

Conversely, others argue that CAs are better suited for smaller, more manageable topics directly impacting citizens' everyday lives. They suggest issues like accessibility or healthcare, which have practical implications and are closely tied to citizens' basic needs, are more appropriate for CAs.

Level of Government

Closely related to the considerations described above (appropriate topic) is the level of government that politicians believe to be best for CAs. Some politicians describe how topics of CAs will differ due to the differences in the sphere of authority in policy-making. A few respondents suggest that CAs can function effectively at different government levels for varying topics and degrees of polarization of the policy issue. However, at the local level, CAs are generally perceived to work better due to practical, less ideological matters, allowing for easier consensus-building. At the national level, challenges are thought to arise due to a larger pool of participants and heightened ideological conflicts. A minority of the interviewees considered CAs favorable at a national level.

> "At the local level, it somehow works better and has more success than at the national level. Because local topics are more practical and less ideological. You can reach a consensus more quickly. Organizing things at the national level is much more difficult due to a larger pool of people to deal with. So, I think it is particularly valuable at the local level."

Goals of CAs

The different indirect outcomes that politicians associate with CAs are an important determinant of their support for CAs. These goals or reasons for CA implementation varied amongst politicians: where one clearly stated that the only goal of a CA must be good policy recommendations, others also mentioned the underlying reasons for restoring faith in politics and closing the gap between politicians and citizens. Many goals partly overlap with each other, so this section is not meant to make a strict categorization but rather show that politicians have various reasons to (not) support CAs based on associated goals.

Better representation

The hope that CAs lead to better representation is often expressed and seems intrinsically motivated by the belief that better representation is desirable. These politicians see CAs as a means to ensure that a broader range of perspectives, including those of underrepresented groups, are considered in policy making. Who precisely these underrepresented groups are varies per respondent.

> "The largest group of voters that is never taken into account is the gray middle ground. And precisely with things like CAs, with the random selection of people, you can reach out to that gray middle ground. And you can also involve them. So, that is definitely an advantage."

Although many politicians emphasize that this ideal of better representation is reached using a CA, the need for stronger representation and closing the gap between citizens and politicians is watered down in one interview. This respondent suggests that while some perceive a gap between citizens and politicians, the speaker believes it may be exaggerated. They argue that representatives are accessible and there is diversity among them.

Citizens feeling heard

Another important anticipated advantage of CAs expressed by some politicians is that citizens will feel more heard and valued in the political process. By involving citizens in assemblies, these politicians hope to counteract perceptions of political disengagement.

> "I think another advantage is that citizens really feel heard, so to speak. Because that is what you often hear nowadays, that they do not feel heard. And you can counteract that in this way."

Increasing trust

The potential advantage of increasing citizens' trust in government or politicians is mentioned various times as a consideration towards supporting CAs. This is different from 'acceptance of policies' (in *interests*) or other considerations, because here, politicians focus specifically on citizens' trust in the wider governmental system and the working of representative democracy. They suggest that governments can strengthen connections and rebuild trust by including citizens in the decision-making process, engaging in dialogue, and responding to their needs.

> "I think that involvement is very important, that you engage in dialogue. To gain trust, but also to get input. And this way, you can respond to the needs of your citizens."

Limit polarization

While less frequently mentioned, a few politicians see CAs as a means to limit polarization on contentious issues and garner support for controversial decisions. This is based on the belief that CA participants will deliver less extreme policy recommendations and that citizens will approve this way of policy-making instead of the traditional way.

> "*What would be the most important reasons for you to implement a CA?*
> In any case, reducing polarization of topics and ensuring more support for controversial decisions."

High-quality policy recommendations

Two interviews highlighted the belief that CAs' primary objective should be to generate high-quality policy recommendations and better decision-making processes rather than solely focusing on bridging the gap between politicians and citizens.

> "CAs should always have the goal to generate good decision-making. And as a byproduct, you naturally contribute to closing the gap. But it should not be a goal in itself, I think."

Improving current participation tools

Three politicians expressed that the current participation tools should first be improved before another tool is added to the toolbox of citizen participation policies. They believe that maximizing the effectiveness of established methods of citizen engagement should be prioritized.

> "What I find very important is that citizens also simply start making much better use [...] of the established methods that already exist."

Outcome quality

Concerns are raised about the quality and practicality of policy recommendations generated by CAs. Some politicians question the feasibility of implementing CA outcomes if they conflict with existing laws or regulations.

> "One disadvantage I think might be that – ultimately – you cannot do anything with the advice."

Place in the policy process

Politicians have varying beliefs about the best place for a CA in policy and decision-making. While most envision CAs best suited at the early stages of policy design to gather diverse perspectives and identify societal problems effectively, others see value in using CAs at different stages of policymaking, including after policy formulation, for feedback and refinement.

> "It is incredibly important to hear the voice of the citizens. The question is just at what moment and how do you do that?"

Updated framework of considerations

Below, the new considerations found in this research are merged with the analytical framework to provide an improved overview of all considerations politicians have regarding CAs that influence their perceptions of this policy tool (Table 2). The main findings from the interviews are presented per category, resulting in a comprehensive overview.

Category	**Main findings**
Ideas	
Political ideology	- Progressives tend to support stronger citizen involvement, while conservatives favor existing modes of participation. - Centrists often show positive attitudes towards democratic innovations like CAs. - There is a growing trend towards stronger citizen participation across ideologies, although some politicians argue against it, citing contentment with the status quo and concerns about disrupting existing governance structures.
View of Representative Legitimacy	- Views on representative legitimacy varied, with some favoring the existing electoral system and others advocating for stronger citizen participation. - Some politicians believe elected representatives should make all policy decisions, viewing CAs as incapable of accurate representation due to biases. - Conversely, others support CAs as a means to ensure ongoing representation testing and advocate for their inclusion alongside the electoral system.
View of political capacity	- Views on citizens' capacity to make policy recommendations range from confidence in citizens' competence to skepticism about their ability to grasp complex issues. - Concerns are raised about citizens' capacity to understand and deliberate on complex policy matters, and some argue politicians do have these competencies.
Complementarity to the current system	- CAs are generally considered complementary to the current democratic system, with varying degrees of support. - Support for CAs depends on their role in the policy process and the democratic

	system and the perceived flexibility of the current system.
Institutions	
Experience with current institutions	- Politicians' perceptions of Citizen Assemblies (CAs) significantly influence their experiences with current institutions. - Dissatisfaction with current levels of citizen involvement in decision-making is common, with calls for earlier involvement and genuine listening. - Some politicians express positive experiences with current institutions, acknowledging existing opportunities for citizen participation and increased involvement in decision-making.
Socialization	- Limited influence of socialization and professionalization on perceptions of CAs is observed. - Experience with parliamentary democracy and citizen assemblies may shape opinions on CAs. - Politicians with more experience in office tend to be less supportive of CAs, believing their expertise is crucial for decision-making.
Experience with or expectations of CAs	- Expectations regarding CAs are based on experiences with similar processes and information provided by experts. - Concerns about the representativeness of CAs and the handling of their outcomes are prominent among politicians. - Significant considerations include organizational concerns, such as good facilitation and time and resources.
Interests	
Power	- Politicians generally retain ultimate decision-making power and may hesitate to relinquish it to citizens. - While this stance can be connected to power considerations, it is unclear whether politicians fear losing power or base their opinion on views of representative legitimacy.
Acceptance of policies	- Politicians' expectations suggest that policies resulting from CAs may enjoy broader support due to inclusive deliberation processes.
Popularity	- Listening to citizens is seen as a core democratic function rather than a means to increase politicians' popularity.
Outcome favorability	- Fear of undesirable policy outcomes from CAs may influence politicians' support for or against such processes, but it has not proven to be an influential consideration.
New Considerations	
Appropriate Topic	- Views on appropriate topics for CAs vary, with some advocating for tackling big, complex, and long-term issues like climate change.

	- Others argue that CAs are better suited for smaller, more manageable topics impacting citizens' everyday lives. - Debate exists on the suitability of CAs for polarized issues.	
Level of Government	- CAs are perceived as more effective at the local level due to practical issues and quicker consensus-building. - Challenges are expected at the national level, including a larger pool of participants and heightened ideological conflicts. - A minority of respondents favor CAs at the national level, while others emphasize their effectiveness at the local level.	
Goals of CAs	Better representation	- Politicians express hope that CAs lead to better representation by considering a wider range of perspectives. - Closing the gap between politicians and citizens is often expressed as a goal
	Citizens feeling heard	- Some politicians anticipate that CAs will make citizens feel more heard and valued in the political process. - Involving citizens in assemblies is seen as a way to address perceptions of political disengagement and increase trust in government institutions.
	Increasing trust	- Politicians mention the potential advantage of CAs in increasing citizens' trust in government or politicians through including citizens in decision-making processes and engaging in dialogue.
	Limit polarization	- Some politicians view CAs as a tool to limit polarization on contentious issues by garnering support for controversial decisions by involving citizens in the decision-making process.
	High-quality Policy Recommendations	- Some politicians emphasize that CAs' primary objective should be to generate high-quality policy recommendations and decision-making processes.
Improving current participation tools	- Some advocate enhancing existing participation tools before introducing new ones like CAs, prioritizing the effectiveness of established methods of citizen engagement.	
Outcome quality	- Concerns were raised about the quality and practicality of policy recommendations generated by CAs, questioning their feasibility if they conflict with existing laws or regulations.	
Place in the policy process	- Range of beliefs regarding the best place for CAs in policy and decision-making process.	

	- Envisioned as most suitable at the early stages of policy design to gather diverse perspectives.

Table 2: *overview of research findings on considerations influencing politicians' perception of citizens' assemblies*

Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings and research. First, the results are reviewed, and their generalizability is scrutinized. Second, the research is placed in a broader context, elucidating its contributions and implications. Furthermore, reflections on the project's challenges and limitations are provided, followed by suggestions for future research.

Review of Key Findings

This study successfully addressed the central research question concerning how politicians reason about CAs and the considerations influencing these perceptions. Rather than advocating for the implementation of CAs, the aim of this research was to provide a descriptive analysis of politicians' considerations regarding them. By testing the analytical framework and identifying new considerations, this research contributes to deepening our understanding of politicians' thinking regarding CAs as well as fostering theory development in this field.

The main takeaway from the analysis is that while the analytical framework based on Niessen's (2023) conceptual framework and other relevant literature helps understand politicians' reasoning on CAs, it does not cover all types of considerations. Therefore, the key contribution of this research lies in the improved and extended categorization of considerations influencing politicians' perceptions regarding CAs and adds valuable context to the discourse on democratic innovations. Particularly, the *level of government* on which a CA is implemented and the *appropriate topic* to hold a CA on prove to be important considerations in politicians' reasoning on CAs. Other found considerations that do not fit in the three I's framework are the different *goals of CAs* politicians associate with CAs, the view that *current participation tools* first *need to be improved* before implementation of new tools, the concern that the CA's *outcome quality* is not sufficient, and varying beliefs on what the best *place in the policy process* is for CAs. Some of these considerations are partially found or described in other related research, although the significance of these factors is largely overlooked in these studies. For example, the *level of government* a CA is implemented at is recognized to be of influence by Dryzek & Tucker (2008), as they describe that true representation becomes more challenging when the CA is supposed to represent a larger group of citizens. This is also highlighted in the work of Lafont (2015), who states that CAs undermine democratic legitimacy when there is a small group of participants that is not statistically representative, though claiming representativeness based on the presence of a wide variety of worldviews and social characteristics.

Comparing the study's results with the factors present in Niessen's (2023) conceptual framework reveals that politicians' considerations regarding CAs extend beyond considerations related to personal gain. For instance, the significance of power and popularity often emphasized in existing literature (Bowler, 2002; Núñez et al., 2016; Pálsdóttir et al., 2023) appears to be less pronounced. The interviewed politicians consider listening to citizens' preferences to be a core task of their democratic representation rather than a means to increase their popularity. Regarding the *ideas* and *institutions* category of the three I's framework, this study confirms the importance of these factors in politicians' reasoning on CAs. One particular paramount concern for the interviewed politicians is the selection bias that might be present in the CA participant group.

Comparing this study's results with the literature on politicians' perspectives on CAs and other closely related topics shows that current knowledge is possibly not sufficiently integrated, as no previous work – to the authors' knowledge – demonstrates a complete account of what influences politicians' CA perspectives. This is not surprising as deliberative democracy and CAs are a relatively new field, and politicians' views on this are relatively understudied. In most recent works on politicians' ideas on deliberative democracy innovations, not all aspects are taken into account simultaneously or merged in one comprehensive overview. This research fills that gap and develops a thorough overview aiming to cover all possible considerations regarding CAs.

As this research only examines Dutch politicians in a single case study, its results are insightful yet not widely generalizable. It is important to remember that this research was conducted in the Netherlands, as this context is crucial for interpreting the results. The cultural, historical, and political context of the Netherlands profoundly shapes politicians' views and perceptions, which means that for any other context, other cultures, histories, norms, and values will influence politicians' considerations regarding any democratic innovation. Therefore, conducting this study in any other country would likely result in significantly different results. Nevertheless, the study's overview of considerations can be used as a basis for analysis of other contexts as well.

Broader context, implications, and contributions

The findings of this study align with the observed trend of governments and stakeholders being increasingly interested in stronger citizen participation, specifically deliberative democracy. The interviewed politicians in this research were often positive about deliberative processes and showed an interest in the benefits associated with CAs. This finding, however, is somewhat conflicting with other empirical literature that mostly shows elected officials to be skeptical of deliberative citizen participation (e.g. Pálsdóttir et al., 2023). Yet, in line with previous research, this study finds that the interviewed

politicians envision CAs as purely advisory with no decision-making power, indicating that their positive attitude is conditional on, for example, the CA's position in the democratic system.

Moving forward, the findings of this study can have significant implications for both theory and practice. The improved understanding of politicians' perceptions of CAs contributes to existing theories of deliberative democracy and political representation. While previous literature has identified various factors influencing perceptions of CAs, this research has enriched this understanding by uncovering additional considerations that shape politicians' attitudes toward democratic innovations. These new considerations, as additions to the conceptual framework of Niessen (2023), can help future research understand politicians' reasoning on CAs and the influences of different considerations that form their opinions.

Moreover, the findings challenge some prevailing assumptions in the literature, particularly regarding the role of power dynamics in politicians' views on CAs. Contrary to expectations, fear of losing political power was not a dominant concern among the politicians interviewed, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of politicians' attitudes towards democratic reforms. The nuanced perspective that this study provides contributes to a more comprehensive theoretical framework for analyzing political decision-making processes in the context of democratic innovations.

Practically, the gained insights can inform policy-makers and practitioners in their decisions on the implementation and designing of CAs. Here, the nuances of politicians' considerations and the variety in perceptions can help practitioners understand the complexities of the debate surrounding democratic innovations, guiding them on how to handle these topics surrounding politicians as key actors in policy processes. Again, this study's aim is not to address the normative aspects of deliberative democracy but rather to provide an understanding of what is important to politicians and how they perceive CAs before implementation. This knowledge can contribute to avoiding wasting government resources, enhancing democratic effectiveness, and providing "a sense of what may work, how, when, and why – and what may be difficult" (Dryzek, 2007, p.4).

Challenges and Limitations

This research is not without limitations. Considering the rapid growth of theory, research, and practice in deliberative democracy, this thesis acknowledges that it was not feasible to cover every aspect of this evolving field comprehensively. The study demonstrated recognition and understanding of the extensive body of work while critically synthesizing only the elements relevant to its focus.

Regarding the sample group, there may be a selection bias, potentially skewing conclusions toward a generally positive perception of CAs among politicians. Some political elites may have declined

the interview invitation or refrained from responding due to potential concerns about expressing unpopular opinions (Richards, 1996). Despite efforts to ensure anonymity, fear of backlash for expressing dissenting views may have influenced responses to the interview invitation.

In addition, while the sample size is appropriate for the scope of this research, not all political parties were reflected in the interview participants. Consequently, this study only reflects those interviewed and does not provide an exhaustive overview of the whole variety of politicians and their worldviews currently in office in the Netherlands. However, this research focuses not on research perceptions related to political parties but rather on exploring a more general view. Taken together, any other interview participants would lead to different study results, either due to selection bias or representing different worldviews. Moreover, conducting this study in another country or having different interview participants might lead to different results through the emergence of different considerations than the ones that emerged from this study's analysis.

Furthermore, it is essential to keep in mind that politicians are likely to give socially desirable answers in the interviews. This poses a challenge to uncover their actual underlying reasoning, especially in the case of egoistic considerations regarding CAs. This challenge could have influenced the findings in a way that politicians' personal interests are less prominently found in the interviews and might explain the modest representation of the considerations under the *interest* category.

Interviewing politicians before the implementation of CAs in their political context raises the expectation that they have limited knowledge on the topic. This could lead to less insightful and superficial answers based on speculative arguments. However, this is not a limitation of this study because it aims to uncover politicians' perceptions and considerations when they do not yet have extensive experience with CAs. Nevertheless, this proved to be not an issue in this study, as the interviewees showed to be remarkably up-to-date on the advantages and disadvantages of CAs and the general contents of the debate around CAs.

Future research

This thesis, by necessity, focused on a specific scope but has shed light on several avenues for worthwhile research on related topics. While this study addressed a specific research gap, there is a strong need for continued research on politicians' perceptions of CAs and deliberative democracy and the considerations that influence these perceptions. This research focused on politicians, leaving out other influential actors such as policy-makers. Future studies could delve into the perceptions of these stakeholders, whose perspectives are crucial for the successful implementation of CAs and other democratic innovations. Similarly, exploring citizens' perceptions towards CAs using qualitative methods could provide a more

comprehensive understanding of the potential challenges and opportunities associated with these mechanisms.

Further refinement of the research findings of this study might also be an interesting endeavor, which was outside the scope of this research project, and could explore further categorization of the new considerations, or explore overarching themes within them. Some suggestions for future work are focusing on better integration of the new considerations into the three I's framework (e.g. is *improving current participation tools* fitting under the *institutions* category?), or on finding overarching themes in the new considerations (e.g. can *level of government* and *place in the policy process* be placed under an umbrella category, for example, 'place of implementation'?).

Furthermore, while this study provides insights into the Dutch context, comparative research in other contexts is needed to assess the generalizability of the findings. Investigating how perceptions of CAs vary across different political systems, cultural contexts, and levels of governance could enrich our understanding of the factors shaping attitudes toward deliberative democracy. In addition, longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of attitudes toward CAs over time could also provide relevant insights. For example, understanding how perceptions of CAs change in response to evolving political dynamics and socio-economic conditions could inform more adaptive and effective strategies for promoting democratic governance and strengthening democracy in general.

Although this study includes politicians from multiple levels of governance, an investigation into how perceptions of CAs differentiate per level of governance is not included. This might be insightful on the role of scale in shaping attitudes towards deliberative democracy. Comparing perceptions among national, regional, and local politicians could shed light on the factors influencing support for CAs at different levels of government.

In conclusion, while this research has provided important insights into politicians' perceptions of CAs, there is still much to learn about the complexities surrounding these mechanisms. By addressing these gaps in our understanding, future research can contribute to a more nuanced and informed debate on the role and potential of CAs in democratic governance.

Conclusion

> "Deliberative democracy is not a hypothesis that can be falsified, nor is it a model, but rather a project, to which theorists, researchers, citizens, and activists alike can contribute." (Dryzek, 2007, p.12)

This study embarked on a comprehensive exploration of politicians' perceptions of CAs within the Dutch political landscape. This research uncovered valuable insights into the considerations influencing politicians' views on CAs through in-depth interviews with a diverse group of politicians.

The central research question guiding this study was aimed at understanding how politicians reason about CAs and the considerations shaping their perceptions. Through careful analysis of interview data using an analytical framework based on relevant literature, several key themes emerged and showed that the analytical framework was incomplete. Consequently, one of the critical contributions of this thesis is the development of a comprehensive overview of politicians' considerations on CAs that influence their perceptions and reasoning. The categories of the three I's – ideas, institutions, and interests – did not cover all the considerations that emerged in the interviews. Adding these new considerations (appropriate topic, level of government, goals of CAs, improving current participation tools, outcome quality, and place in the policy process) to the three I's framework provides insights into better understanding what influences politicians' perceptions on CAs.

The interviewed politicians' general attitude towards CAs can be described as positive and curious about the potential benefits the deliberative process promises. However, not all participants had this outlook: there was a spectrum of perspectives among politicians, ranging from skepticism to strong support, influenced by factors such as political ideology, experience with current institutions, perceived goals of CAs, and perceptions of representative legitimacy.

One key contribution of this research is its empirical exploration of a relatively understudied aspect of deliberative democracy: the perspectives of political elites. By gaining insights directly from those who hold positions of power and influence within the political system, this study fills a critical gap in the literature and offers relevant practical implications. The findings provide policymakers, scholars, and practitioners with a nuanced understanding of the opportunities and challenges associated with implementing CAs as a form of democratic innovation.

Furthermore, this research highlights the importance of context in shaping politicians' attitudes towards CAs. With its unique cultural, historical, and institutional factors, the Dutch political landscape significantly influences politicians' considerations. While the findings offer compelling insights into the

Dutch context, they also underscore the need for context-specific approaches when implementing democratic innovations in other jurisdictions.

In conclusion, this research adds a valuable piece to the puzzle of understanding politicians' perceptions of CAs. By delving into the intricacies of political decision-making and politicians' attitudes toward democratic innovations, this study advances our knowledge of deliberative democracy and offers practical insights for fostering citizen participation in governance. As we continue to navigate the complexities of modern democracy, studies like this provide invaluable guidance for shaping more responsive political systems. While it is debatable whether CAs are sufficient to counter the 'democratic legitimacy crisis' (Boulianne, 2019), they might offer a potential first step toward addressing these challenges.

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Appendix I: Interview Guide

Introduction

1. Are you okay with recording this interview? I will delete the recording once I have finished the research project
2. [Introduce research, aim, and methodology]
3. Do you have any questions before we start?

Warm-up questions

4. Could you please give a brief introduction on how long you have been in politics?
5. What is your experience with citizens' assemblies?

View on CAs

6. What is your opinion on citizens' assemblies?
    a. *Could you elaborate on that?*
7. What do you see as the advantages of CAs?
8. What do you see as the disadvantages of CAs?

Views on citizen participation and democratic system

9. What is your perspective on the current method of incorporating citizens' opinions into political decision-making?
10. Do you think CAs can complement or challenge traditional political decision-making processes?
11. What role do you believe CAs should have in political decision-making?
12. Do you believe CAs are capable of making good policy recommendations?
    a. Should their recommendations be advisory or binding?
13. What challenges do you foresee in implementing the recommendations of CAs?
14. What influences or forms your opinion on CAs?

Looking ahead

If possible time-wise

15. How do you envision the role of CAs in the Dutch political landscape in the future?

Conclusion

16. Is there anything you would like to add to your previous answers?
17. Are there any topics that we have not discussed but you believe are important for this research and would like to add?

Closing

[Thank interviewee for their time]

Appendix II: Consent Form

Consent to the processing of special categories of personal data for educational purposes at the University of Gothenburg

Students at the University of Gothenburg may need to process personal data in their education, e.g. when carrying out individual projects, essays or field studies, and sometimes special categories of personal data or information about legal offences needs to be processed. Special categories of personal data under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) include, for example, data concerning ethnic origin, health or political opinions. These data are considered to need special protection. To be sure that the processing is done in a way that does not violate your privacy or your rights according to GDPR, you need to consent to the processing. It is voluntary for you to participate in the student's project. You can withdraw your consent at any time until the work has been submitted.

The student will process the following data about you

The student has ticked the data that the student will process about you:

☐ethnic origin
☒political opinions
☐religious or philosophical beliefs
☐membership of a trade union
☐health
☐a person's sex life or sexual orientation
☐genetical data
☐biometric data used to uniquely identify a person
☐data relating to criminal offenses

Contact details and information about the project (to be completed by the student)

Course code	SK2532
Titel of the student's project	Master Thesis: Politicians' Views on Citizens' Assemblies
Name of the student	Lisabelle Busscher
Email of the student	gusbusscli@student.gu.se

Consent

I consent to participation in the project carried out by the student as described above.
I consent to the processing of my personal data in the project mentioned above.
I have read the information presented together with this consent form.

Signature	Date
Name clarification	Contact information (Email and/or phone number)

Supplement information

The University of Gothenburg is the data controller for the data processed about you. If you have questions about the specific processing, you can contact the student who has collected the data. The student has filled in his/her/their name and contact details on the previous page.

If you have questions about the processing or have complaints, you can also contact the university's Data Protection by email dataskyddsombud@gu.se. If you want to read more about how the University of Gothenburg processes personal data in general, you can visit https://www.gu.se/en/about-the-website/processing-personal-data.

Appendix III: Information Sheet

Information on the processing of personal data for educational purposes at the University of Gothenburg

The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) requires that you receive information about how your personal data is processed. This document describes how the processing takes place and what rights you have as a data subject.

Who is responsible for the processing of your personal data?

The University of Gothenburg is the data controller for the processing carried out by students in the context of their studies.

If you have questions about the processing, you can contact the student who carries out the processing **(to be filled in by the student).**

Course code	SK2532
Titel of the student's project	Master Thesis: Politicians' Views on Citizens' Assemblies
Name of the student	Lisabelle Busscher
Email address of the student	gusbusscli@student.gu.se

Legal basis and purpose of the processing

According to chapter 1 §2 of the Higher Education Act (1992:1434), the university has a mission to organize education. This means that the university has the right to process personal data on the legal basis of public interest when it is necessary to fulfil its educational mission according to article 6.1 e GDPR.

This also means that individual students process personal data for educational purposes. Students process personal data in their education, e.g. when carrying out individual projects, essays or field studies. In these cases, the student must formulate an explicit and limited purpose for the project. The student has filled in the purpose of the project below.

Purpose for the student

The purpose of this thesis is to understand politicians' perceptions of Citizens' Assemblies. The persons participating in this research are national, regional and local politicians in the Netherlands. The types of personal data that will be processed in the research are the participants their names and their personal opinions and perceptions.

Method of collection

Below, the student has ticked the method(s) that will be used for data collection in the project.

☐Image or video recording
☐Sound recording
☐Survey
☒Interview
☐Observation
☐Other method, describe it here:

Who will be able to access the personal data?

Only the persons involved in the project that the student is conducting for educational purposes at the University of Gothenburg will be able to access your personal data. This means, for example, that the student and a possible supervisor of the student will have access to your personal data.

Data can be requested under the principle of public access to official records

Your personal data or documents containing your personal data may, if submitted to the university by the student, be subject to a request in accordance with the principle of public access to official records. This means that individuals can request access to official documents and thus gain access to information in which your personal data appears, if these are not covered by confidentiality. These requests are handled in accordance with the priciples of the Freedom of the Press Act (1949:105) and the Public Information and Privacy Act (2009:400).

Students are encouraged not to submit information about you that can identify you directly (name, contact details, etcetera) when submitting their finalised work. This way, it will in most cases only be possible to request indirect personal data about you from the university.

For how long will the personal data be processed?

Your personal data will only be processed for the duration of the student's work for educational purposes. After the project has been completed, the student will delete the personal data. However, this does not apply to data that has been submitted to the university and which thus becomes a official document (see above).

Will your personal data be processed outside the EU/EEA?

As the result of the university's activities, the university may transfer personal data to third countries; i.e. to countries outside the EU/EEA. In such circumstances, special legislation applies. In these cases, the university will take all reasonable legal, organizational and technical measures required to achieve an appropriate level of protection for the personal data. A transfer to the US may occur when the student is

using the text editing and file storage tools provided by the university. The university uses Microsoft for these services.

Your rights according to GDPR

GDPR states that individuals have a number of rights. The most relevant rights are listed below. If you want to read a more detailed description of your rights according to GDPR, please visit https://www.gu.se/en/about-the-website/processing-personal-data.

Right of access (register extract)

As an individual, you have the right to once a year, free of charge, request information about what personal data the university processes about you. Contact us via dataskydd@gu.se to request an extract of your personal data from us.

The right to be forgotten

As an individual, you have the right to have your personal data erased in cases where the personal data is no longer needed to fulfil the purpose for which it was collected (the right to be forgotten).

There may be other legislation stating that personal data cannot be erased, in which case this legislation applies and the data cannot be erased.

In cases where there are legal obstacles to the deletion of personal data, the university will limit the processing of these personal data to only include processing to the extent that there is a legal basis for.

The right to object to processing

As an individual, you have in certain cases the right to object to the university processing your personal data. If there are no compelling reasons for the university to continue processing the personal data, such as to fulfil legal requirements, the university will cease processing.

Contact details for the Data Protection Officer

If you have questions about the specific processing, you can contact the student who collected the data. The student has filled in his/her/their name and contact details under the heading "Who is responsible for the processing of your personal data?" in this document.

If you have questions about the processing or have complaints, you can also contact the university's Data Protection Officer, by email dataskyddsombud@gu.se.

If you want to read more about how the University of Gothenburg processes personal data in general and a detailed description of your rights according to GDPR, please visit https://www.gu.se/en/about-the-website/processing-personal-data.

You have the right to complain to the Swedish Authority for Privacy Protection (IMY)

If you believe that the university processes your personal data in violation of GDPR, you have the right to file a complaint with the Swedish Authority for Privacy Protection, IMY. Further information on how to make a complaint can be found on the website of IMY, www.imy.se/en.

Appendix IV: Sample Information

The following political parties are represented in the empirical data of this research:

Political Party	**Level of Government**	**Number of interviewees**
Partij voor de Arbeid (PvdA)	Provincial	1
Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij (SGP)	Provincial	1
	National	1
GroenLinks / Partij voor de Arbeid (GL/PvdA)	National	3
Forum voor Democratie (FvD)	National	1
Nieuw Sociaal Contract (NSC)	National	2
Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (VVD)	National	1
GroenLinks (GL)	Provincial	1
Partij voor de Dieren (PvdD)	Provincial	1
Sterk Lokaal Flevoland (SLF)	Provincial	1
Total		**13 interviewees**

Table 3: *overview of participants*