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**Political Trust and Democratic Innovations:  
State-of-the-Art Report**

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This deliverable provides a state-of-the-art report highlighting how democratic innovations can help rebuild political trust and legitimacy, and more specifically addressing the potential of each type of democratic innovation to expand political trust and/or counter distrust.

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## **Introduction**

### **Report summary**

The objective of this state-of-the art report is to define the methodological framework for a system of democratic innovations. Democratic innovations encompass various institutional instruments aimed at enhancing citizen involvement in political decision-making. They draw upon either direct or deliberative democracy, allowing the entire citizenry or a segment of citizens to be consulted prior to decision-making or to make decisions themselves. This report addresses the potential of each type of democratic innovation to expand political trust and/or counter distrust. It explains the mechanism by which democratic innovations serve as trusted proxies, enabling citizens to formulate informed judgments about the trustworthiness of the political system. It highlights the key role of the sociopolitical background of participants and non-participants in the trust-building process at both micro- and macro-political levels. The report also examines a number of contextual factors that significantly influence the capacity of democratic innovations to foster political trust.

## 1. Background

### *How declining political trust endangers liberal democracies*

The wealth of comparative data now available offers compelling evidence of a sustained decline in political trust across European democracies over the past five decades. This trend is a matter of deep concern for democracy scholars and political leaders alike. **Political trust is universally recognised as a fundamental pillar of democratic governance.** At its core, the principle of representation hinges upon the bedrock of trust between the governed and those in positions of authority. The confidence that citizens place in their political institutions is crucial for ensuring stability, legitimacy, and cooperation within any political framework. Moreover, political trust plays a pivotal role in facilitating governmental action, even amidst divergent viewpoints and disagreements (Easton, 1975; Putnam, 1993; van der Meer, 2017; Welzel et al., 2019). As aptly put by van der Meer and Zmerli (2017, p. 1), political trust “functions as the glue that keeps the system together and as the oil that lubricates the policy machine”.

However, it should equally be acknowledged that **a healthy dose of scepticism, or mistrust, is inherent in liberal democracies**, rooted in the necessary freedom to scrutinise and constrain those in positions of power (Warren, 2018). In fact, the presence of “critical citizens” (Norris, 1999, 2011), who have high expectations of their political systems and hold their representatives accountable, is indicative of a robust democratic culture. Critical citizens not only exhibit a strong commitment to democratic values but also demonstrate a greater tendency to identify and punish systemic normative violations within democratic regimes. Additionally, they show a reluctance towards political radicalism, which contradicts their postmaterialist values (Dalton & Welzel, 2014). What is problematic, according to many scholars, is **when scepticism or mistrust evolves into widespread distrust and cynicism** (see, e.g., Norris, 2022; van der Meer, Tom & Zmerli, 2017).

The burgeoning disenchantment with democracy and the prevailing cynicism towards political authority present numerous challenges to our political frameworks. As evidenced by WP2 (Norris, 2023; Tufis, 2023) and WP5 (Cabada & Charvat, 2023) of TRUEDEM, the erosion of political trust coincides with a marked decrease in political engagement, a substantial lack of governmental legitimacy, hindrances in policy adoption and implementation, and a deepening of political polarisation, manifesting as heightened distrust across ideological and partisan lines. Moreover, declining political trust frequently goes hand-in-hand with a surge in anti-political sentiment and support for populist movements and leaders, who are increasingly perceived as the sole alternative by citizens disillusioned with party politics. Nonetheless, despite strong signals of a democratic malaise or regression, most survey data indicates **widespread endorsement of democratic values among European citizens**, even though the extent to which this is true among younger generations remains a moot point (Foa & Mounk, 2017; Wuttke et al., 2020). It is predominantly **the manner in which representative democracy is practised**, rather than the concept itself, which sparks criticism and distrust (Hooghe et al., 2017).

### *More trust begets more participation – and vice versa*

**Political trust and political participation** have been pivotal variables in the field of political science since at least the 1960s. However, the intricate nature of the connection between the two remains a subject of scholarly debate. This complexity arises from the fact that the **relationship is**

**not unidirectional and is likely mediated by other factors** such as political efficacy, interest, and knowledge (Gabriel, 2017).

Numerous studies lend credence to the widespread assumption that **low political trust is inversely correlated with conventional participation**, such as voting, and **positively correlated with unconventional forms of political engagement**, including protests and signing petitions—activities often associated with system-challenging behaviours (Inglehart, 1977). These alternative modes of participation, whether legal or illegal, are predominantly observed among those dissatisfied with the political status quo (Braun & Hutter, 2016; Eder & Katsanidou, 2015; Muller et al., 1982; Norris, 1999). However, empirical evidence suggests that, among the most distrustful individuals, only those with high political efficacy—i.e., who feel capable of understanding politics and believe their voices matter—are inclined to engage in unconventional political acts (Finifter, 1970; Hooghe & Marien, 2013).

Conversely, the notion that **high political trust correlates positively with conventional participation**, such as voting, remains questionable. While this hypothesis enjoys considerable support (Carstens, 2023; Gabriel, 2017; Marien et al., 2010; Zmerli et al., 2007), some studies have found no discernible correlation between these variables. This discrepancy likely stems from the fact that, while individuals satisfied with their political institutions are more inclined to participate through traditional avenues, some among these confident citizens may perceive the **political system as functioning so effectively that they do not feel the need to engage** (Dalton & Welzel, 2014; Gabriel, 2017).

Thus, it appears that political trust influences individuals' propensity to participate through intricate and mediated pathways. Furthermore, the correlation may be bidirectional: **the experience of political participation itself, whether conventional or unconventional, strongly or weakly institutionalised, could foster the acquisition of norms, skills, and behaviours conducive to political trust.**

The extensive body of literature on these subjects underscores the centrality of understanding political trust in the study of political participation. Nonetheless, empirical research is still needed to further clarify the mechanisms underlying this correlation. Crucially, the question of the **relationship between political trust and new forms of democratic governance, including greater citizen participation and decision-making, remains largely overlooked.**

#### *Political trust and democratic innovations*

Extant research underscores the critical role of political trust in democratic governance and its impact on political engagement. In particular, the robustness of democratic principles is inversely correlated with levels of political trust, especially in nations characterised by lower-quality governance (Hooghe et al., 2017; Zmerli & Hooghe, 2013). Within this framework, scholars have mostly explored **political trust as a determinant of support for democratic innovations**. Low levels of political trust tend to diminish backing for representative democracy while amplifying support for democratic innovations in the broad sense, particularly forms of direct democracy that enable better monitoring and control over elected officials (Bowler et al., 2007; Christensen et al., 2016; Dalton et al., 2001; Ouattara et al., 2023; J. Pilet et al., 2022).

**The reverse influence of democratic innovations on political trust** is a burgeoning yet underexplored area of inquiry (Karlsson et al., 2021). Democratic innovations are now increasingly perceived as avenues for enriching democracy by endowing citizens with enhanced civic virtues and

fostering increased political participation (see, e.g., Fishkin, 2018). Many **advocates of democratic innovations also argue that they yield “positive side effects” on political trust** (Grönlund et al., 2010). This report endeavours to assess this potential: **what outcomes can be anticipated from democratic innovations concerning political trust?** Moreover, what insights can empirical evidence provide regarding the actual consequences of democratic innovations on levels of political trust? Through our literature review, we aim to identify the principal mechanisms and prerequisites that may enable democratic innovations to bridge the trust gap between citizens and political institutions. In addition, we highlight the limitations and potential adverse consequences of democratic innovations. Ultimately, this report seeks to deepen our understanding of **what democratic innovations can and cannot achieve in terms of fostering political trust and revitalising democracy.**

## 2. Methodology

WP9 is primarily focused on evidence-informed policy-making, in line with the TRUEDEM commitment to embedding high-quality evidence into public interventions at all levels of government. This initial deliverable sets out to establish a comprehensive framework for democratic innovations, paying particular attention to such practical criteria as requirements, conditions, and their applicable contexts. To achieve this goal, we have drawn on existing research to craft an **up-to-date report that sheds light on how democratic innovations can foster political trust.**

Our approach entailed three distinct stages. Firstly, we conducted a **scoping review, gathering approximately three hundred references mainly from academic sources.** This review was structured into four key sections: a central section addressing democratic innovations and political trust, two sections delving into theoretical and methodological considerations, and a concluding section devoted to policy implications. The scoping review also dedicated a section to examining the socio-political consequences of democratic innovations.

This initial phase enabled us to better organise key ideas and concepts. Surprisingly, the literature to date has largely overlooked the issue of political trust stemming from the design and adoption of democratic innovations. Presumably, this oversight is due to the fact that **democratic innovations are primarily perceived as mechanisms to enhance civic skills and political engagement,** fostering respect for the democratic process, awareness of others, and the cultivation of good citizenship values. The scoping review also afforded us insights into the underlying mechanisms at work.

Subsequently, we expanded the scoping review to develop a **conceptual framework exploring the interplay between political trust, political efficacy, and democratic innovations.** In addition, we conducted a review of existing case study databases to increase our understanding of the varied uses and impacts of democratic innovations.

## 3. Democratic innovations, a promise of democratic renewal

### *Definition*

Democratic innovations are widely regarded as a mechanism for breathing new life into outdated representative democracies. Following Smith’s seminal work (2009, p. 1), they are usually perceived as “institutions that have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen

participation in the political decision-making process”. In their recent *Handbook on Democratic Innovation and Governance*, Elstub and Escobar (2019, p. 14) define democratic innovations as **“processes or institutions that are new to a policy issue, policy role, or level of governance, and developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence”**. The roots of this interest in democratic innovations can be traced back to the resurgence of democratic theory in the 1960s, when early proponents of participatory democracy began advocating for a “politically active citizenry” at the core of the political system to “democratize democracy” (Pateman, 2012). Since the 1990s, deliberative democracy theory and practice have sought to both deepen and reimagine participatory democracy, with a focus on discourse and communication. The term “democratic innovations” has gained increasing traction among theorists and practitioners since the early 2000s (Elstub & Escobar, 2019a). Over the past three decades, there has been a notable uptick in the adoption of various processes, ranging from deliberative methods to direct democracy (OECD, 2020). These processes are tailored to **enrich and broaden citizen involvement in the political decision-making process, diverging from conventional elite-dominated institutional structures**.

The surge of interest in democratic innovations has become so pronounced that one of the most comprehensive crowdsourcing platforms, [Participedia](#), has documented over two thousand two hundred case studies. Furthermore, there is a plethora of databases and platforms providing easily accessible and invaluable resources, such as the [OECD Deliberative Democracy Database](#), collecting representative deliberative processes on a country basis since 1979; [Participo](#), a digital space of exchange for public servants, practitioners and academics; [Politicize](#), an inventory of deliberative mini-publics that took place in Europe between 2000 and 2020; [MiniCon](#), a database offering an overview of academic publications on mini-publics; [Direct Democracy Database](#), covering how direct democracy is implemented across the globe; and [LATINNO](#), a research project documenting participatory innovations in Latin America.

Democratic innovations encompass both deliberative and direct democratic processes—forms of democratic innovations that involve citizen engagement, but which differ in their approaches and mechanisms. For many advocates, neither deliberative nor direct democracy is intended to replace representative democracy, but rather to complement and enhance it. **Deliberation, direct participation, and delegation to representatives can be creatively combined at different stages of the decision-making process** (McLaverty, 2009; Parkinson, 2006; Saward, 2000).

#### *The “deliberative wave”: improving collective decision-making*

A substantial body of research has discussed what is commonly termed the “deliberative wave”. Deliberative democracy prioritises well-informed and reasoned discussions among citizens as the foundation for decision-making. In this model, the emphasis is on establishing forums for dialogue and debate where citizens can exchange ideas, deliberate on issues, and collectively reach decisions. Deliberative processes typically entail structured discussions designed to promote mutual understanding, respect for diverse viewpoints, and logical argumentation. The objective is to reach decisions that are not only legitimate but also thoroughly justified and representative of the public interest.

Accordingly, **deliberative democracy serves to deepen and reframe participatory democracy by placing civic deliberation at its core.** Deliberative methods give precedence to active civic involvement, where citizens' voices shape the policy-making process. Its advocates posit that discourse and the exchange of rational arguments and diverse viewpoints result in improved (i.e., more efficient, inclusive, legitimate, and equitable) collective decision-making. Deliberative processes are thus often presented as tools to offer guidance to decision-makers, while also enhancing citizens' capacities, promoting the inclusion of diverse social groups and interests in the political system, and more generally increasing its accountability, effectiveness, and legitimacy.

*Direct democracy: giving back control*

Once elected, representatives might perceive their position as a personal privilege rather than a public duty, often putting the interests of privileged elites above those of everyday citizens. Direct democracy has, to some extent, been embraced as a way to counteract this inclination. It emphasises the direct involvement of citizens in decision-making processes. In this model, citizens play an active role in shaping policies and making decisions, through devices often binding consultation to legislation and action, thereby safeguarding collective interests from potential neglect or betrayal by political elites. The focus is on **empowering citizens to directly influence government action and policy, ensuring they have a voice in decisions affecting their lives** and communities, purportedly leading to greater acceptance of decisions and greater trust in government and elected representatives. Although some versions of radical democracy propose citizen-centered institutions without parties (Geissel, 2022; Landemore, 2020), others see direct democracy more as an adjunct to representative democracy, giving citizens more say over questions of general interest but leaving political parties their linkage role of channelling citizens' aspirations and mobilising voters (see, e.g., Wolkenstein 2024).

In a nutshell, while deliberative democracy and direct democracy both share the goal of enhancing citizen engagement in democratic processes, they differ in their approach. **Direct democracy emphasises direct participation and decision-making by citizens, whereas deliberative democracy emphasises reasoned dialogue and deliberation as the basis for democratic decision-making.** Yet, in practice, direct and deliberative methods frequently complement each other and **can be employed sequentially or concurrently.**

*Overview of democratic innovations: theoretical v. real-world categorisations*

The field of democratic innovations is highly dynamic and encompasses a diverse array of processes that vary in terms of format, participants, mandate, deliberation techniques, and more. Clear typologies and common categories are essential not only for conceptual clarity but also because different democratic innovations may yield distinct political outcomes, such as levels of trust. Elstube and Escobar (2019) have proposed categorising democratic innovations according to four key features: **participants' selection method** (election, sortition, self-selection, etc.), **mode of participation** (listening, voting, discursive expression, etc.), **mode of decision-making** (aggregation of preferences, bargaining, deliberating) and **extent of power and influence** (advise and consult, co-governance, or direct authority). Furthermore, democratic innovations vary in terms of the level of governance (local, national, international), the type of policy area or issue at stake, and the stage of the policy-making process involved. Taken together, these criteria give rise to **four families of democratic innovations:**



- **Mini-publics**, in which “a sub-group of citizens [...] engage with experts, witnesses, advocates, stakeholders and one another, in facilitated informed deliberations on a given matter, and publicly present their opinions and/or recommendations” (Harris, 2019, p. 47). Citizen assemblies and juries or consensus conferences are examples of mini-publics.
- **Participatory budgeting**, which usually relies on self-selection and places citizens as (co)decision-makers on public spending issues, usually at the local level.
- **Referendums and citizen initiatives**, which rely on voting and aggregating individual preferences, can be held at the national or local level, at the initiative of governments, legislatures, or citizens themselves, and can be advisory or binding.
- **Collaborative governance**, which includes “public forums, collaborative partnerships, various participatory arrangements that seek to enable cooperation and coproduction between citizens, public authorities and stakeholders” (Elstub & Escobar, 2019a, p. 27).

Scholars widely acknowledge a significant overlap among various democratic practices, with increasing hybridisation facilitated by digital participation and the exchange of expertise, practitioners, and designs. Participatory and deliberative forms of democracy often intersect in practice, despite their theoretical distinctions. For instance, the renowned British Columbian Citizens’ Assembly incorporated mini-publics, public forums, and a referendum (Warren & Pearse, 2008).

Interestingly, a recent study applied advanced statistical techniques to analyse real-world democratic innovations using one of the largest crowdsourcing platforms, the [Participedia](#) database. It identified four clusters that somewhat align with theoretical expectations (Veri, 2022):

- The first cluster centres on **deliberative discourse-centric democratic innovations**, emphasising processes like citizen juries and citizen initiative reviews. It resonates with the fundamental tenets of deliberative democracy, stressing interactions among participants and decision outputs based on consensus.
- The second cluster pertains to **participatory talk-centric democratic innovations**, encompassing worker councils, participatory budgeting, and citizen participatory programmes. This cluster includes assemblies of appointed or elected representatives, potentially lacking full demographic inclusion and not requiring reason-giving from every participant.
- The third cluster encompasses **mass participatory democratic innovations**, including crowdsourcing, community philanthropy, participatory grant-making, and various forms of protest. These practices entail widespread participation but limited interaction among participants, often lacking a structured decision-making process, with participants primarily proposing specific claims or contributing to pre-proposed solutions.
- The fourth cluster focuses on **direct and vote-centric democratic innovations**, such as referendums and online voting. This cluster centres on decision-making processes where participants express their preferences directly through voting, without requiring active engagement in discourse or deliberation.

#### *A wide range of actors*

A substantial number of **practitioners, non-governmental organisations, and networks are closely involved in the field of democratic innovation**. Their active engagement offers valuable insights into best practices and provides a wealth of resources that could be beneficial and

informative. These actors contribute to the advancement of democratic processes by sharing practical experiences, facilitating dialogue, and fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders. Their efforts play a crucial role in promoting inclusive, transparent, and effective democratic practices, ultimately enhancing the quality of governance and citizen participation.

Yet, **state demand for democratic innovations has led to the emergence of a competitive market for services, working in conjunction with government actors** (often at their request) to produce, certify, and thus rationalise the implementation of devices related to participatory and direct democracy. This is similar to international standardisation processes in public action, which rely on the involvement of private actors and the marketing of certification expertise. While the characteristics of this competitive market vary from one country to another –in the United States it is primarily linked to the private sector and foundations (Lee, 2015), whereas in Europe it is more rooted in public procurement and the reconfiguration of activist networks (Mazeaud & Nonjon, 2018)–, it consistently accompanies the production of democratic innovations. Some critical approaches to democratic innovations have notably drawn attention to the fact that outsourcing to professional actors is also **a way for institutions to sidestep the question of the social demand that democratic innovations are likely to address**. The institutionalisation of public participation offerings allows public authorities to produce participatory mechanisms from pre-constructed audiences, without genuinely considering their purpose. Thus, it has also been argued that **the institutionalisation of government participation in democratic innovations has gradually been shaped to ensure their decisional neutralisation**. In particular, the very methods of steering participation could reveal the growing concern that state actors may not be obliged, in any way, to take into account proposals emanating from participatory mechanisms (Mazeaud & Gourgues, 2023).

*Filling the trust void: high hopes in democratic innovations and some reasons to be sceptical*

The fact remains that theorists and practitioners alike have high expectations of democratic innovations. Beyond simply enhancing citizens' participation in the political process, these innovations are expected to benefit civic virtues in various ways. Potential outcomes include an increase in interpersonal trust, tolerance, empathy, political knowledge, interest in politics, and readiness for political action. Furthermore, theorists and practitioners suggest that **democratic innovations may positively impact political trust**.

Deliberation, in particular, is conceptualised as a means to reshape individual preferences and values and foster a more collective understanding of complex political matters. Through discussions that require justifications and the consideration of diverse arguments, deliberation is seen as an advanced form of political learning and reasoning, enabling individuals to reach a shared understanding of their common interests. The notion that increased citizen involvement enhances trust in democracy dates back to early research on participatory democracy (Pateman, 1970). Scholars propose that **participation in deliberative processes equips individuals to assess the trustworthiness of the political system and elected officials, at both local and national levels**. For instance, engaging in policy deliberations can improve citizens' understanding of the intricacies of the political process, fostering greater trust in both institutions and representatives. Specifically, participants in deliberative processes are expected to experience a significant increase in trust towards legislative bodies, as such engagements help them to grasp more clearly how political

decisions are made, potentially enhancing trust in the mechanisms and individuals central to representative democracy (see, e.g., Grönlund et al., 2010). More generally, participating in deliberative processes may empower citizens to critically evaluate the political system, leading to healthy trust or mistrust rather than cynical distrust.

Scholars examining direct democracy also anticipate ancillary benefits, including an increase in civic values and education, in participation, in political interest, knowledge and efficacy (for a review, see Bauer & Fatke, 2014). This is partly because democratic innovations such as citizen initiatives and referendums provide political parties with a continuous platform and contribute to citizens' engagement by disseminating party cues more frequently (Gherghina & Silagadze, 2021; Ladner & Brändle, 1999). The implementation of direct democracy mechanisms is also likely to **bolster political trust, as citizens are more prone to perceive their voices as directly influential and political elites as responsive**. As a result, direct democracy has been found to reduce the satisfaction gap between electoral winners and losers (Leemann & Stadelmann-Steffen, 2022).

In addition, it is usually posited that inclusive democratic innovations hold promise in re-engaging disaffected citizens—individuals characterised by low levels of political interest, efficacy, and trust, often disproportionately represented among those with lower educational attainment and income levels. By amplifying the voices of marginalised and distrustful citizens, **democratic innovations may serve not only to enhance overall political trust but also to bridge trust gaps among social strata**.

Ultimately, there appears to be a consensus-driven optimism that engaging in or simply being aware of democratic innovations could augment citizens' satisfaction with democracy, thereby bolstering trust in and legitimising the political system. However, critical theorists have outlined several reasons for remaining sceptical as regards the ability of democratic innovations to address the democratic malaise (Font & Blanco, 2007; Geissel & Newton, 2012; Hammond, 2021; McLaverty, 2009). Extant literature on democratic innovations has revealed a tendency to **attract individuals who are already politically active and trusting**, often representing socially dominant groups (Geissel, 2012). Moreover, there is concern that they may be **leveraged by political elites or parties to bolster legitimacy** while postponing the resolution of a controversial issue or reaffirming decisions already made elsewhere (for referendums, see Silagadze & Gherghina, 2020). Scholars have highlighted the risks of depoliticisation and technocratic tendencies, as democratic innovations may inadvertently empower experts (Mazeaud & Gourgues, 2023). What's more, democratic innovations often **lack control and autonomy over their own agendas** and exert limited influence on political decisions, with political elites potentially cherry-picking among citizens' proposals (Fernandez Martinez et al., 2023; Font et al., 2018; Font & Smith, 2019).

Deliberative and direct democratic innovations each possess **their own set of limitations**. While the former processes may involve a restricted number of participants focusing on narrow topics, democracy mechanisms of the latter type, like referendums, tend to lack substantive deliberation and may not significantly enhance citizens' ability to make informed judgments (Bua, 2012). Lastly, given that democratic innovations have primarily been implemented in an experimental, short-term, and localised manner thus far, there are questions over their capacity to effect lasting change in terms of citizens' trust and the political system.

Hence, **democratic innovations should not be viewed as a panacea for the political trust crisis in representative democracies**. As Elstob and Escobar explain (2019b, p. 7), it is necessary to “go beyond the uncritical optimism of some advocates of democratic innovation, while avoiding the complacency of those who think that the status quo is acceptable”. This, in particular, means that the way democratic innovations shape citizens’ perceptions of the political system and their role within it is contingent upon a number of internal and external factors. These factors are addressed and explored further in the report.

#### **4. Empirical evidence on the relationship between democratic innovations and political trust: the key role of political efficacy**

Can democratic innovations live up to their normative promises? A recent meta-analysis of the literature on deliberative mini-publics suggests a positive, albeit nuanced and cautious, response (Jacquet & van der Does, 2021). On the one hand, the overarching finding indicates that **citizens harness their assessments of democratic innovations to formulate broader political conclusions**, thereby influencing political trust. From this standpoint, democratic innovations wield influence at both the micro-political and macro-political levels. On the other hand, **the virtuous effects of democratic innovations on political trust depend on the scale at which they are analysed**, whether in terms of the effects on the participants themselves or the broader impact on the general public.

As further expounded below, **political efficacy plays a key role in the process by which democratic innovations enhance political trust**. Political efficacy, a significant aspect of individuals’ belief systems, refers to a lasting sentiment or disposition with which individuals approach political challenges and situations. Alongside trust, political efficacy stands out as one of the most critical indicators of the overall health of democratic systems. When people feel able to understand politics and believe their voices matter, they are more inclined to engage in democratic activities. Political efficacy encompasses two dimensions: internal efficacy, which relates to individuals’ self-perception of their ability to grasp and participate in political processes, and external efficacy, which pertains to their sense of influence over government actions. Both internal and external political efficacy are crucial variables for understanding trust in government. When citizens believe that their participation matters, they are more likely to engage with and trust their government (Craig et al., 1990; Iyengar, 1980).

##### *Democratic innovations as trusted proxies*

In democratic societies, the expectation is for citizens to make well-informed decisions on collective issues. However, given the vastness and intricacy of modern societies, even the most attentive citizens cannot feasibly stay fully informed about every collective decision affecting them. Democratic theorists increasingly view **democratic systems as necessitating a division of cognitive labour**, wherein citizens delegate decision-making to others. While this reliance on representatives has been a cornerstone of modern democracies, the institutional support for citizens to make informed trust decisions is often inadequate (Warren, 2018). And external factors, such as rising inequality, tend to undermine political trust by lowering citizens’ political efficacy and perceptions of the fairness of the democratic process (Bienstman et al., 2024).

However, beyond trust in public institutions and selective trust in representatives, there exists another crucial dimension coined as “facilitative trust” (Geisler, 2023; MacKenzie & Warren, 2012; Warren & Gastil, 2015). This type of trust refers to the need for **trusted agents and institutions which streamline, facilitate, and enhance citizens' ability to make political judgments by alleviating their cognitive load**. Facilitative trust agents offer distilled information and various shortcuts, essentially serving as proxies for information. Ideally, these agents aid citizens in making well-informed political judgments with minimal cognitive effort.

Scholars suggest that **democratic innovations can serve as these trusted proxies, enabling citizens to formulate informed judgments about the trustworthiness of the political system** (MacKenzie & Warren, 2012; Warren & Gastil, 2015). At the individual level, participants in democratic innovation processes are likely to update their political beliefs and assimilate new information regarding the trustworthiness of the political system. Typically, when consulted and given the opportunity to discuss political matters by means of a deliberative device, citizens will develop internal and external political efficacy. Similarly, the implementation of direct democracy mechanisms like referendums may bolster external political efficacy, as citizens perceive their voices as directly influential and political elites as responsive. All in all, when **participants in democratic innovations express satisfaction with both the outcomes and the process, their sense of political efficacy is reinforced, thereby potentially increasing their level of political trust**, particularly towards the government and political institutions.

The mechanism can be summarised as follows: citizens use their evaluations of democratic innovations as a basis for forming broader conclusions about the political system. Consequently, interactions among participants in deliberative mechanisms, and participation in direct democracy mechanisms, serve as signals that prompt citizens to reassess their pre-existing beliefs regarding the trustworthiness of both fellow citizens and the government. Likewise, non-participants (i.e., the wider public), upon learning about the existence of such democratic innovations, may also use them as “cues” to form judgments about political matters and evaluate the political system.

*The mechanism at the micro level: policy feedback on participants*

Empirical evidence indicates that **deliberative processes can have various transformative effects on individual participants**. In particular, several case studies suggest that democratic innovations enhance participants’ support for citizen involvement in policy-making, stimulate their discursive engagement, increase political knowledge, and might influence attitudes on the discussed topics. Research on deliberative mini-publics in Finland, conducted by Grönlund et al. (2010), reveals that, on average, participants acquire knowledge about the issue at hand, exhibit heightened levels of satisfaction with democracy, and develop increased trust in the institutions of representative democracy. Deliberative polling is a “gold standard” from this point of view (Mansbridge, 2010). As demonstrated by Fishkin and others (Eggins et al., 2007; Fishkin, 2012; Luskin et al., 2014), deliberative polls not only foster political learning but also instil in participants a perception of fair treatment, an increased interest in politics, and a willingness to cooperate and engage politically. By the same token, intensive deliberative innovations like citizens’ assemblies enhance participants’ knowledge, promote more informed and consistent opinion- and decision-making, and marginally increase social trust as well as political interest (Blais et al., 2008; Fournier et al., 2011). Further empirical findings indicate that participation in local democratic innovations is associated

with attitudes legitimising democratic values and increased support for democratic principles (Johnson, 2015).

However, as stressed by a number of scholars (see, e.g., Grönlund et al., 2010; Jacquet & van der Does, 2021; Morrell, 2005), **evidence in the literature regarding the impact of deliberative innovations on political trust and efficacy remains mixed thus far**. While some case studies indicate that participating in a democratic innovation is likely to boost political trust and efficacy (Boulianne, 2019; Eggins et al., 2007; Grönlund et al., 2010; Johnson, 2015; Volodin, 2019), others have not found deliberative approaches to have any impact on trust and external political efficacy—i.e., whether citizens’ views and preferences wield influence over the political process (Åström et al., 2017; Blais et al., 2008; Morrell, 2005; Siebers et al., 2019).

Even though the number of empirical studies is, to the best of our knowledge, more limited, the same would seem to be true for direct democracy, whose effects on political trust can also be mixed. Dyck and Lascher (2009) confirm the pivotal role of political efficacy but state that its impact is limited. They maintain that **voters with greater exposure to direct democracy do not feel any more efficacious than those with less exposure**. However, the nature of the correlation between the use of direct democracy and external efficacy seems to differ among voters, with a notable positive correlation among uninformed voters. Concerning internal efficacy, as direct democracy usage rises, non-voters and the politically uninformed feel less internally efficacious, while voters and individuals with higher political awareness feel more internally efficacious.

Why do democratic innovations fail to consistently activate political efficacy? It is highly plausible that when individuals are exposed to divergent viewpoints, and have their own perspectives challenged by others, this might actually diminish their sense of external efficacy. Moreover, the impact of participation in a deliberative event or in a referendum might not be long-lasting. Post-event surveys among mini-public participants indicate a quick return to previous trust levels and a resumption of “business as usual” (Boulianne, 2018, 2019). In other words, **participation in a democratic innovation might be too exceptional to trump other sources of political socialisation and durably alter citizens’ trust judgments** (Font & Blanco, 2007). Some scholars, having surveyed citizens before and after their participation in democratic innovations, found that not only was there no overall gain in political trust observable, but participation also led to **the reinforcement of pre-existing attitudes**—previously trusting citizens became even more trusting, while previously distrustful citizens became even less trusting (Åström et al., 2017; Karlsson et al., 2021).

*The mechanism at the macro level: spillover effects on the wider public*

There is an ongoing debate about whether democratic innovations can indeed fulfil their normative promises by wielding a broader societal impact, whether through their direct impact on public policies, their indirect impact on civil society, or their more discursive impact on the public sphere (see, e.g., Jacquet et al., 2024). Unless they affect not only participants but also the wider public, democratic innovations possess limited influence on the trust relationship between those who govern and those who are governed.

On the one hand, it is conceivable that non-participants may **lack a compelling rationale to trust the recommendations stemming from a deliberative device**. Since all participants are equally fellow citizens, non-participants may lack a specific basis to presume a greater convergence of

interests with the majority of participants, over the minority, on any particular occasion. On the other hand, some scholars argue that **individuals who did not participate but are aware of these innovations are likely to perceive the government as more responsive, potentially leading to higher levels of political trust**—a phenomenon conventionally labelled as a “spillover effect”. The notion of “spillover” originates from participatory democratic theory and refers to the effects of participation in a mini-public on participants’ roles as citizens in the broader political system (Pateman, 1976).

Political theorists’ explanations for how deliberative devices could influence public opinion align with this notion. They are typically presented as full-fledged accounts of “trust” or “opinion cues” rather than vague signals providing potentially ill-informed judgments. For instance, MacKenzie and Warren (2012) argue that properly designed deliberative mini-publics can serve as “objects of public trust”, with members’ competence achieved through deliberation and alignment of interests between participants and the general public being central to their explanation. Thus, **even non-participants should have strong grounds to presume a convergence of interests with the majority of participants who are also fellow citizens.**

In a similar vein, Warren and Gastil (2015) claim that deliberative mini-publics can serve as trusted sources of information, enabling citizens to make more informed and effective judgments compared to professional politicians and other alternatives. Gastil further describes deliberative mini-publics as sources of “cues” that could supplement or improve upon the cues citizens receive from partisan sources like politicians or interest groups (2000, 2014; Már & Gastil, 2021). Similarly, Fishkin et al. contend that a deliberative mini-public’s endorsement of a ballot initiative acts like an “informational shortcut” for voters, influencing their support for the initiative by indicating that it received approval from a random sample of people after thorough deliberation (Luskin et al., 2014, 2022). However, it is important to keep in mind that **non-participants may not necessarily have the same expectations or criteria for evaluation as participants.** Non-participants are usually supportive of deliberative forums but they prefer them to be constrained, without enforceable decisions, capable of showing clear majorities in favour of their recommendations, and able to intersect with more conventional representative institutions (Goldberg & Bächtiger, 2023).

**Deliberative democracy thus has the potential to boost political trust on a broader scale, since external observers treat the conclusions of a deliberative device as informative of what they themselves would think if they were better informed and had deliberated on the issue.** Non-participants are willing to endorse these conclusions because they “trust” the participants in the mini-public, believing their interests to be well-aligned and the participants, having deliberated about the issue, to be better informed.

Normative expectations are similar for direct democracy. Some have warned that enabling citizens to bypass or override their elected representatives through direct legislation could lead to officials avoiding tough decisions, rather than working to address public demands. Thus, direct democracy may undermine the authority of established institutions, instead of bolstering their legitimacy (Dyck, 2009; D. A. Smith & Tolbert, 2004). Supporters of direct democracy nonetheless maintain that **initiatives and referendums compel governments to adjust their policies to reflect majority opinion, thereby enhancing public trust in established institutions.** There is, indeed, strong evidence that direct democracy raises the public’s level of interest and participation in civic affairs

(Bowler et al., 2002; Mendelsohn & Cutler, 2000). Hence, in addition to the benefits for public policy, direct democracy has educative effects on the citizenry. As mentioned above, this is partly because devices like referendums provide parties with platforms enabling them to better promote their ideas. In particular, partisan cues communicated by political elites during referendum campaigns exert a strong influence on voters, especially those with little prior information (Bowler & Donovan, 1998; Gherghina & Silagadze, 2021). Even though direct democracy does not automatically boost political efficacy, it may lead to other favourable secondary outcomes, such as enhancing voter turnout by drawing attention to ballot measures, raising awareness of upcoming referendums, and motivating people to cast a vote (Dyck & Lascher, 2009).

While democratic innovations have the potential for a “macro-political impact” (Goodin & Dryzek, 2006), it is worth noting that **empirical results on the nature of this impact remain tentative** due to the limited body of research and the methodological challenges associated with this issue (Jacquet et al., 2023). Boulianne (2018, 2019) found that being informed about mini-publics affects support for some policies but not others, with respondents who were informed reporting higher levels of political efficacy and a sense of legitimacy in the political system. These findings substantiate the notion that the general public’s attitude on policies and trust in the political system might be affected by deliberative tools: knowing about the existence of a mini-public seems to impact citizens’ attitudes and preferences but also their external political efficacy and trust. Ingham and Levin (2018) share similar findings, suggesting that deliberative mini-publics can also influence public opinion, especially among relatively uninformed citizens, but their effects turn out to be limited in extent and magnitude. More specifically, mini-publics can influence citizens’ attitudes on political issues on which they do not have strong pre-existing opinions. In a nutshell, although deliberative innovations may potentially constitute information shortcuts and trusted proxies, **there are not enough quantitative studies providing statistically significant results to confirm their spillover effects on political trust** among the wider public.

Research addressing **the relationship between direct democracy and political trust also yields mixed results**, with effects that are sometimes negative (Dyck, 2009), sometimes not significant (Hug, 2005), or sometimes indirect (Citrin, 1996). Some argue that inconclusive results stem from inadequate theoretical distinctions. Bauer and Fatke (2014), for instance, differentiate between the mere availability of direct democratic rights and their actual utilisation. They find that, although **the presence and robustness of direct democratic rights bolster political trust by empowering citizens as veto players**, capable of exerting greater control over political trustees, the **practical application of direct democratic tools diminishes political trust because it signals that political authorities in need of correction cannot be trusted**. In a similar line of inquiry, exploring Swiss cantons, Freitag and Ackermann (2016) highlight that personality traits moderate the impact of popular votes on the inclination to trust cantonal authorities. More precisely, extensive use of direct democratic tools reduces institutional trust among individuals with high levels of agreeableness. This implies that agreeable individuals tend to interpret a large number of ballot measures as indications of political and societal discord, which results in an increased sense of political distrust.

Overall, these mixed results concerning the impact of democratic innovations on both participants and the wider public clearly indicate a need for further investigation into the actual conditions under which they can enhance political trust in practice. The **major consistent finding is that**



**democratic innovations can affect non-participants' attitudes on some policy issues and tend to motivate them to support and engage in democratic innovations—which might indirectly enhance political trust.** Most scholars studying the effect of democratic innovations on non-participants underline the fact that these limited results might be explained by the general public's overall low awareness of existing democratic innovations, either because they are too occasional, or because they are not sufficiently publicised.

## 5. Democratic innovations and trust-building: under what conditions?

The absence of a clear consensus in the academic literature about the effects of democratic innovations on political trust suggests that **distinct types of innovation, along with their unique designs, produce different outcomes among citizens.** Furthermore, these outcomes are contingent upon the sociodemographic background of participants and non-participants, as well as their pre-existing beliefs. The following sections examine the real-world circumstances and influential factors that condition whether democratic innovations can truly fulfil their promise of rejuvenating democracy.

### *Who participates, who trusts? Moderating factors related to individuals' evaluations*

Participants' predispositions play a significant role, especially concerning their levels of trust. It is well-established that individuals' preferences and expectations regarding the political system influence their trust levels (Hooghe et al., 2017). Studies on democratic innovations further reveal that participants' generalised attitudes towards democracy and their **evaluations of institutional processes are often reinforced by their participation experiences.**

For instance, Åström et al. (2017) found that democratic innovations do not affect all citizens uniformly: participants who were initially distant from the political system tended to become even less trusting after engaging in a local e-petitioning experiment in Sweden. Likewise, Karlsson et al. (2021) identified a negative confirmation bias among participants in the 2012 Estonian Citizens' Assembly who held negative predispositions regarding the state of democracy in their country before taking part in a democratic innovation. However, while negative reinforcement is more common than positive reinforcement, instances of positive change outnumber negative ones: **participants who do revise their assessment of the political system's trustworthiness tend to view it more positively** (Åström et al., 2017).

Procedural satisfaction, referring to participating citizens' contentment with the participatory process of democratic innovations, is of paramount importance. If participants perceive that their claims are unfairly handled—including rules such as internal sortition, rotation, and limited mandates (Owen & Smith, 2018)—, they are more likely to negatively revise their beliefs about the political system in light of this assessment of the procedure. Many scholars reckon that **individual-level assessments of procedural fairness wield the most influence on trust in the political system** (Åström et al., 2017; Christensen et al., 2016; Johnson, 2015; Karlsson et al., 2021).

Outcome satisfaction, measuring participants' contentment with the outcome of a democratic innovation, also matters. While some studies suggest that positive changes in trust are more likely when participants achieve their preferred outcome, others indicate that participants may accept not attaining their preferred outcome as long as they perceive the process as fair and politically neutral. Pilet et al. (2022) stress that support for deliberative democracy is only partially influenced by

participants' expectations regarding the policy outcomes from deliberative citizens' assemblies. This suggests that **while deliberative citizens' assemblies offer hope for re-engaging disengaged citizens, this hope is often contingent upon the expectation of a favourable outcome.**

To sum up, as Christensen et al. (2015, p. 38) put it, "outcome and process satisfaction both shape developments in political attitudes among participants". Yet, based on the existing literature, it is unclear which one has the strongest effect on political trust, indicating that outcome and process satisfaction are intertwined.

#### *A matter of design? Moderating factors related to institutions*

The type of democratic innovations implemented is also of great significance. Deliberative or direct democratic innovations may yield different outcomes on political trust, and their impact hinges on various factors such as the duration of the process, its political framing, the issue at hand, the connections between citizens' participation and the decision-making process or the selection procedure for example.

Empirical studies offer insights into the four following factors. Firstly, as mentioned above, **if democratic innovations are to influence participants' and non-participants' trust levels, the process must be transparent and fair.** Democratic innovations themselves must demonstrate trustworthiness to be capable of generating trust (Christensen et al., 2016; Font & Blanco, 2007). Participants and non-participants tend to develop trust when they consider that democratic innovations have followed a fair procedure, encompassing a purpose, selection criteria, rules, and outcomes that are transparent and equitable. Secondly, democratic innovations appear to influence participants more strongly (in terms of political learning and political efficacy) if they **last for longer periods and involve more intensive deliberation** (Talpin, 2012). Furthermore, based on a citizen deliberation experiment in Finland, Grönlund et al. (2010) argue that mini-publics engineered to culminate in **a consensual statement or decision** (rather than a simple majority vote) elicit greater impacts on political learning, trust, and efficacy. This is because achieving consensus requires participants to engage in more intense, focused, and inclusive discussions rather than merely vote on the issue. Additionally, mini-publics appear to have more pronounced effects on the general public's trust levels if they are prolonged and **institutionalised, sponsored by public institutions** (Boulianne, 2018).

#### *From participation and deliberation to decision-making: moderating factors related to mandate and consequentiality*

Unless democratic innovations transition beyond pilot phases and become institutionalised, they are unlikely to enhance citizens' political efficacy and trust, on a large scale, significantly or enduringly. The issue of consequentiality, or the impact of these innovations in the long run, is a subject of debate but has not been widely researched to date. Early studies have revealed that recommendations from mini-publics are often selectively adopted, while more recent research suggests that **democratic innovations may be hampered by their lack of an agenda-setting function** (Bua, 2012; Font et al., 2018; Font & Blanco, 2007; McLaverty, 2009).

It is crucial to point out that most studies which found democratic innovations to have no or only limited effects on political trust and external efficacy were based on case studies where these instruments had no impact on decision-making. The absence of effect can therefore be attributed

equally to the experimental or fictive nature of the process, and to political elites' lack of willingness to consider participants' decisions in the policy process (Åström et al., 2017; Boulianne, 2019; Christensen et al., 2015). Yet, there is a scholarly consensus that **the lack of control over their own agendas makes democratic innovations vulnerable to cherry-picking and manipulation** by political elites (Font et al., 2018; Font & Smith, 2019; Vrydagh, 2023).

Similarly, drawing on a number of crowd-sourced cases from the [Participedia](#) database, Smith et al. (2015) found that the more deliberative mini-publics are, the less policy impact they tend to have. What this means is that the mixed and/or negative results in the literature on democratic innovations and trust could be explained by their frequent absence of tangible outcomes in the current state of their use by political actors. **Democratic innovations with more agenda-setting and decision-making capacities might therefore have stronger effects on political trust.** In particular, mini-publics more likely enhance perceptions of legitimacy among the general citizenry when their recommendations are implemented (Germann et al., 2024).

Accordingly, another critical issue is whether democratic innovations are organised top-down, designed for policy appraisal, and do not challenge the preferences of political elites, or whether they include bottom-up organisation, allowance for policy development, and non-alignment with elite preferences. In a recent study on mini-publics, Arnold and Bächtiger (2023) highlight that **mini-public recommendations are mainly taken up when they align with preferences of political elites**, when mini-publics are authorised to make recommendations and when they are supported by political authorities. Criteria such as issue complexity or issue salience, size or format (face-to-face vs online) do not have any effect on mini-public uptake. Yet, the likelihood of mini-public recommendations being implemented does not depend on whether a mini-public is limited to policy appraisal or whether politicians are involved in the process.

This suggests a **partial top-down approach to mini-public success**, but is also a reminder that political trust depends on how citizens are able to negotiate the implementation of mini-publics' outputs (Junius, 2023) and engage in their design together with elected officials who usually perceive power-sharing instruments as challenging their legitimacy (Bowler et al., 2002; Gherghina, Close, et al., 2023; Jacquet et al., 2022; Matthews, 2023; Rangoni et al., 2023). As it turns out, **a mini-public garners greater political support when its recommendations are fully embraced by the government**, but generates less support when its suggestions are disregarded (Van Dijk & Lefevere, 2023).

*When and why use democratic innovations: moderating factors related to contexts or countries*

Finally, the political context and frequency of use of democratic innovations also seem to have a significant impact on citizens' trust. Based on a case study of an online crowdsourcing process initiated in Estonia as a response to a political scandal, Karlsson et al. (2021) argue that **democratic innovations implemented in times of political crisis and heightened distrust might actually have counterproductive effects**, especially if participants are not satisfied with the process. In the same vein, analysing the French Great National debate and the ensuing Citizens' Convention on Climate, both initiated in times of heightened political distrust after the Yellow Vests' grassroots protests, Blondiaux (2021, p. 93) notes that "when institutionalized participatory democracy is nothing more than a pretense, it can only generate frustration and reinforce doubts about authority".

As far as direct democracy is concerned, empirical evidence on Swiss cantons suggests that a high availability of different forms of referendum is correlated with higher political trust, with citizens feeling that they have the potential to influence politics. However, frequent use of referendums in practice might have the opposite effect: **repetitive referendums might lead citizens to think that politicians are not trustworthy and need to be monitored** (Bauer & Fatke, 2014; Bowler et al., 2007).

The mitigated impact of democratic innovations on political trust is partly due to the fact that contexts of political crisis are also contexts of intense political and social polarisation. Studying a mini-public organised in Ireland on a contentious issue (the region's constitutional future), Van Dijk et al. (2023) show that the **most polarised individuals are more likely to question the legitimacy of democratic innovations**. These limitations are important amid widespread distrust and rising polarisation in Europe.

Additional political factors thus come into play, starting with **how democratic innovations are politically framed**. Political instrumentalisation occurs to an extent in all European countries (see, e.g., Arhip-Paterson, 2021; Vrydagh, 2023). Yet, this issue is particularly significant in Central and Eastern European Countries (CEECs) where **political parties tend to use democratic innovations for electoral purposes** (Gherghina, 2019). For instance, the Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Alliance has been found to use referendums to gain political advantages in Hungary (Oross & Tap, 2021; Van Eeden, 2019). It is worth noting that although evidence on democratic innovations in CEECs is scarce (Gherghina et al., 2021), a few case studies hint at positive results. Surveying participants in a local participatory budgeting experiment in Ukraine, Volodin (2019) shows a significant increase in political trust. This indicates that **democratic innovations also have the potential to enhance political trust in hybrid regimes with low levels of political trust and trust in democracy**.

## 6. Who supports democratic innovations?

Identifying the citizens who support and advocate for democratic innovations is a crucial issue. Democratic innovations can only fulfil their promise of democratic renewal if they succeed in attracting and engaging those citizens who feel excluded from a political system they distrust. The literature on political trust indicates that two groups typically exhibit the lowest levels of trust. On the one hand, **critical citizens**, often highly educated, with middle- or high-income levels, are more politically engaged and have high expectations of democracy (Dalton & Welzel, 2014; Hooghe et al., 2017; Norris, 2011; Warren, 2018). On the other hand, **disaffected citizens** are less educated, with lower incomes, and are more likely to support populist radical right parties or to abstain from voting than to cast a ballot for mainstream parties (Hernández, 2018; Mauk, 2020; Walsh & Elkink, 2021; Webb, 2013).

Regarding the sociological background of individuals attracted to democratic innovations, two competing hypotheses are present in the literature. According to the first hypothesis, democratic innovations draw in “engaged citizens” who have a keen interest in politics and are eager to participate more actively. In contrast, the second hypothesis suggests that these innovations attract “enraged citizens”, who harbour deep distrust in representative democracy and advocate for alternative

systems (Bowler et al., 2007). This dichotomy is usually called the **“cognitive mobilisation”** or **“political dissatisfaction” alternative** (see, e.g., Schuck & de Vreese, 2015).

**Political predispositions also influence the legitimacy of democratic innovations and the potential enhancement of trust.** Warren and Pearse (2008) demonstrated that within the British Columbian Citizens’ Assembly, citizens emphasising grassroots movements’ wisdom tended to focus on the ordinariness of Assembly delegates. Conversely, voters sceptical of grassroots movements tended to value the delegates’ expertise. However, both subgroups generally acknowledged the Assembly’s legitimacy. These findings suggest that the ideological underpinnings of democratic innovations may speak differently to critical citizens and to their disaffected counterparts.

Moreover, the reinforcement of participatory democracy can be approached from two competing political perspectives: the pluralist interpretation, which focuses on the expression of diverse opinions and interests without challenging the foundational principles of liberal democracy; and the monist view, which prioritises the majority principle and advocates for unrestricted citizen involvement in the decision-making process (Piccolino & Puleo, 2023). While the pluralist approach sees deliberative processes as enhancing democratic decision-making without questioning liberal democratic principles, the monist stance criticises representative democracy for potentially distorting popular will. As a result, **critical citizens with post-materialist values endorsing a pluralist outlook are expected to be more in line with deliberative democracy.** Conversely, **disaffected citizens holding strong populist attitudes align with the monist perspective and are more supportive of direct democracy.**

However, it is worth adding that **the link between ideology and engagement in democratic innovations is not automatic.** Populist voters are more supportive of direct democracy, albeit to a lesser extent in Eastern Europe where populist parties are more electorally successful (Rojon & Rijken, 2020). Yet, support for referendums does not seem to be a decisive factor in populist voting (Rooduijn, 2018). And even though participation in a participatory budget has been found to diminish populist attitudes (Theuwis & Kindt, 2024), **voters aligned with a populist radical right ideology do not demonstrate a greater inclination to participate in direct-democratic voting** (Bowler et al., 2017; Trüdinger & Bächtiger, 2023). Alongside a pronounced sense of distrust towards institutions and party politics, this lack of correlation between support for direct democracy and political participation could stem from the relatively low emphasis that populist parties place on referendums within their manifestos, as well as their tendency to avoid specifying particular democratic innovations to be subjected to popular vote (Gherghina, Pilet, et al., 2023; Gherghina & Pilet, 2021).

#### *Support for deliberative instruments*

Consistent with the “enraged citizens” hypothesis, deliberative mechanisms have been found to garner support from individuals with lower levels of education, a diminished sense of political competence, and anti-elite sentiments. Regarding disadvantaged groups, women and youth tend to exhibit higher levels of support compared to the general population. Within these two subgroups, support for deliberative mechanisms is influenced by factors similar to the broader population, except for political interest, which increases support for deliberative democracy (Talukder & Pilet, 2021). Furthermore, although they often express indifference, **disaffected citizens are more**

**receptive to the empowerment and detachment of deliberative forums** compared to more loyal citizens (Goldberg & Bächtiger, 2023).

These findings are somewhat at odds with actual participation in deliberative devices, where an overrepresentation of educated citizens with high levels of trust and participation is often observed. Research has shown that deliberative devices based on voluntary participation are subject to **participation biases**: they tend to attract individuals who already exhibit trust in the political system, possess high levels of political interest, and actively participate in public affairs—typically, these individuals are more educated and financially secure (see, among others, Binnema & Michels, 2022; Fung, 2015; Geissel, 2012; Pape & Lim, 2019; Walker et al., 2015). The **most engaged citizens** (with high levels of education and income, strong political participation and high democratic expectations) **are more inclined to support deliberative instruments, but at the same time more likely to spot democratic failures in their country** (Dalton & Welzel, 2014). While, among dissatisfied individuals, attitudes towards deliberative processes are primarily fuelled by negative perceptions of elected politicians, among more engaged citizens attitudes towards deliberative processes are positively **driven by faith in the political competence of their fellow citizens** (Talukder & Pilet, 2021).

This suggests that **disaffected citizens who support the notion of deliberative democracy may not necessarily feel inclined to participate when given the opportunity**. Interestingly, some studies have underlined that citizens with the lowest levels of trust are also the most sceptical towards democratic innovations, regardless of their design (Christensen et al., 2015). This finding is significant in the context of widespread political distrust, indicating that **democratic innovations alone may not be sufficient to convince the most distrustful citizens of the system's trustworthiness**. This underscores the need for continued efforts to enhance the legitimacy of deliberative democracy, especially among the most marginalised groups, in order to bridge the trust gap.

#### *Support for direct democratic instruments*

Public expectations for more opportunities to participate in public decision-making often coincide with extensive support for direct citizen voting on policy decisions. As such, political dissatisfaction correlates with a growing preference for direct democracy, as **citizens suspicious of government express greater support for increased participation opportunities**, particularly in affluent democracies. In particular, citizens who harbour suspicions about political institutions seek **greater control over the discretion delegated to their representatives** (Bowler et al., 2007; Carman, 2010; Webb, 2013). Thus, support for referendums as a democratic principle appears strongest among those most disenchanting with the political system, since these individuals often feel they lack a voice through referendums (Bowler & Donovan, 2019). The high level of support among disadvantaged groups for direct democracy mechanisms can be explained by the perception that referendums offer a way to provide an equal voice to all, while citizens may fear that deliberative innovations still favour the most resourceful and advantaged individuals (Talukder & Pilet, 2021). Conversely, voters of the incumbent party and already trusting citizens place less importance on referendums (Bowler & Donovan, 2019).

Scholars have emphasised that approval of direct democracy can be found not only among losers in the political process but also among politically **engaged individuals with high levels of education who are dissatisfied with the way elected officials fail to address popular demands**

(Bowler & Donovan, 2019; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015). However, as mentioned above, this likely reflects more what they perceive as shortcomings in representative democracy rather than a desire for a fully participatory form of democracy. Supporters of referendums tend to view them more as **a means to monitor political elites than as a tool to make decisions themselves and transform democracy.**

In short, deliberative and direct democracy do not appeal to the same citizens for the same reasons. **Support for democratic innovations may indicate a strong dissatisfaction with representative democracy, as much as it may hint at an interest in a more participatory and inclusive democratic system** (Bowler et al., 2007). Therefore, empirical evidence suggests that the “engaged v. enraged citizens” hypotheses should not be viewed as mutually exclusive (Rojon & Pilet, 2021). **Individuals advocating for the most radical democratic innovations, such as sortition in politics, possess a combination of political efficacy, interest, and dissatisfaction with politics.** Indeed, to advocate for a drastic overhaul of the political system and ambitious democratic innovations, individuals must simultaneously have confidence in their own political capabilities and entertain doubts about the competence of political elites to enact effective change (Bedock, 2020; J.-B. Pilet et al., 2023).

## 7. Adverse effects and avenues for more effective democratic innovations

Acknowledging the potential adverse effects of democratic innovations on political trust is essential, especially when they are the subject of strong initial normative investment contrasting with a low or negative result. Firstly, for those participating, **involvement in deliberative devices may detrimentally impact political efficacy.** Typically, when deliberations tackle complex issues without offering positive reinforcement, they can diminish self-efficacy and political trust. In addition, exposure to opposing viewpoints may spark doubts over one’s own beliefs or the efficacy of group deliberation itself. This phenomenon is linked to the “enclave” effects observed when like-minded individuals engage in discussions (see, e.g., Grönlund et al., 2015). Social pressures often lead individuals to adopt the majority’s stance, regardless of its accuracy. Conversely, **individuals may resist new but relevant information and stick to their original beliefs.** Consequently, participation in deliberative devices may not translate into increased political engagement and trust, especially if the issue of conflicting viewpoints and how to overcome them has not been taken seriously.

Secondly, by design, democratic innovations may exclude disenfranchised groups. Numerous studies have highlighted an overrepresentation of educated, middle-aged, and politically sophisticated citizens among participants in democratic innovations, especially when self-selection is involved. Even when efforts are made to mitigate this bias in participant selection, disenfranchised citizens who overcome significant entry barriers to participate may experience frustration and disillusionment due to internal power dynamics within the deliberating publics. **To engage disenfranchised individuals effectively, it is imperative to provide positive and rewarding feedback,** boosting their sense of efficacy (Spada, 2019).

Thirdly, **democratic innovations may exacerbate mistrust if participants are dissatisfied with the process or outcome.** In contexts where political distrust is rife, these innovations may prove counterproductive, reinforcing pre-existing negative attitudes about the trustworthiness of the

political system. This risk is particularly pronounced when democratic innovations are used in an instrumental or partisan manner by policy-makers, or when political elites cherry-pick among citizens' recommendations (Font et al., 2018; Vrydagh, 2023). Some have observed a trend towards state control of participation, which neutralises the decision-making power and transformative potential of democratic innovations (Gourgues & Mazeaud, 2022; Mazeaud & Gourgues, 2023). This is a concern, because a democratic innovation that fails to influence political decisions may diminish participants' external and internal efficacy and foster heightened cynicism among both participants and the wider public.

Moreover, scholars caution against the proliferation of democratic innovations that are short-term or experimental and lack substantial impact on the broader political system and decision-making processes. Others have highlighted a broader phenomenon of **bureaucratisation of democratic innovations**, accompanied by an increase in the power and influence of technocrats and experts over participatory and deliberative processes, potentially at the expense of citizens' empowerment. These dynamics collectively risk further undermining citizens' trust in the democratic system and political elites.

Several studies underscore the risk of perceiving democratic innovations as panaceas for democratic malaise. From a pragmatic standpoint, it is indeed wise to view them more as a therapy than as a cure (Citrin, 1996). On a more optimistic note, recognising their adverse effects can guide the development of instruments and mechanisms that would be genuinely capable of enhancing the trust link between citizens and the political system, as well as rejuvenating liberal democracies. To achieve this, several approaches can be considered. The central issue of citizens' role in the process itself warrants attention: while most existing innovations "invite" or "activate" citizens, more "empowering" processes could afford participants **better control over the agenda and the design of democratic innovations themselves**. Attentive consideration must also be given to participant selection in democratic innovations, considering representativeness not only in socio-demographic terms but also politically, in terms of the **plurality of interests**. Lastly, the broader incorporation of democratic innovations in the political system must be determined democratically. This entails in-depth thought about the links between democratic innovations and decision-making, as well as **better integration of the advantages inherent in the representative, deliberative and direct models of democracy**. Unless the frequency, scope, and mandate of democratic innovations are expanded, their impact on political trust is likely to remain limited.

## 8. Conclusion

This state-of-the-art report, based on a limited yet burgeoning literature, presents a conceptual framework aimed at better understanding the relationship between democratic innovations and political trust. Firstly, it sheds light on the mechanisms and mediating factors involved in the nexus between democratic innovations and political trust. Democratic innovations are found to **bolster political trust by fostering a perception among participants (and the broader public) that they have a meaningful voice** in the political system. What's more, these innovations serve as information cues, with **participants and the wider public using evaluations of deliberative or direct processes as benchmarks for assessing the democratic system more broadly**.



Secondly, this report reveals that the anticipated impacts at both the micro-political level (on participants) and the macro-political level (on the wider public) are not consistently borne out empirically. While **democratic innovations undeniably exert positive effects at the micro-political level**, enhancing participants' sense of political efficacy and thereby fostering increased political trust, the durability and consistency of these positive effects vary significantly. **At the macro level, evidence is mixed** regarding the ability of democratic innovations to boost political efficacy and restore trust, particularly among the most distrustful citizens.

Finally, this report explores the conditions under which democratic innovations can enhance political trust. Factors such as **participants' profiles, duration, mode of deliberation, process transparency, frequency, implementation context, mandate, and linkage with decision-making all contribute to the positive or counterproductive effects** of democratic innovations. The report thus goes beyond the sometimes-idealised vision of a citizen with high democratic expectations who would therefore be motivated to engage in public affairs. **Not all citizens want to participate or transform the system, but most share a common desire to have more control over decisions themselves or at least to better control the decisions of their representatives.**

Several limitations merit acknowledgment. Firstly, the literature on democratic innovations and trust-building tends to concentrate on **a limited number of countries** from Western Europe and North America, and prominent cases that have received more academic scrutiny than others. It is essential to note the underrepresentation of several countries, particularly those in Central and Eastern Europe, in the literature and major databases (Gherghina et al., 2019). This gap is striking given the proliferation of democratic experiments in new democracies like Poland and Slovakia, countries confronting de-democratisation threats like Hungary and Romania, and transition countries or former transition countries, including Ukraine. Additionally, despite promising progress, evidence remains incomplete, with only a **limited number of studies yielding consistent and significant results**. Research designs often lack ex-ante and ex-post investigations necessary for robust measurement of democratic innovations' effects on citizens (Jacquet & van der Does, 2021). In particular, distinguishing finely between various types of democratic innovations and discerning the specific effects of different designs on citizens remains a challenge. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognise the existence of a **"positive bias"** (Boulianne, 2019) and **"failure to examine failures"** (Spada & Ryan, 2017) in the literature on democratic innovations, which predominantly reports significant and positive outcomes. Finally, while this report primarily relies on studies making use of survey data and quantitative methodologies, there is a need for mixed methods approaches, as qualitative data may better capture nuances in the effects of democratic innovations on citizens' attitudes and trust judgments.

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