



Deliberative Committees

A new approach to deliberation between citizens and politicians in Brussels

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shortcut
What it's all about

New form of Citizens Assembly: Belgium pioneering in deliberative democracy

In recent years, Citizens Assemblies have spread rapidly throughout Europe. A group of randomly selected citizens deliberatively develops concrete political recommendations. This basic concept of a Citizens Assembly was innovated in Brussels. In 2019, the Brussels Regional and Community Parliaments were the first parliaments to integrate Citizens Assemblies into the heart of their functioning. On a permanent basis, three times a year, 45 citizens and 15 parliamentarians work together on a specific topic. They meet on five weekends or more, debate together, and formulate common recommendations, which are then followed up by both the parliamentarians and the Brussels government. Including citizens that usually do not participate in political debates is fundamental in this process.

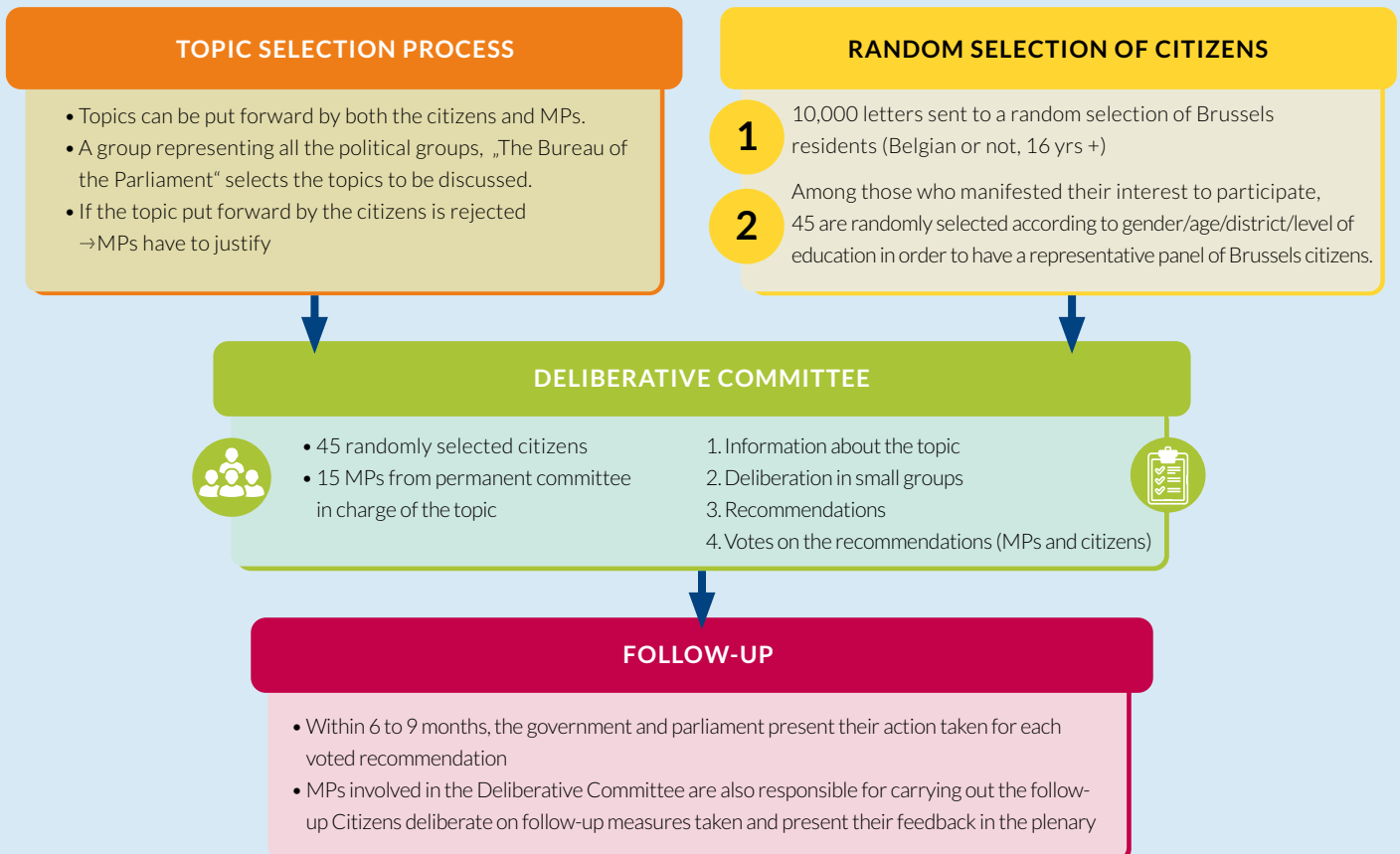
The Deliberative Committee is the name given to this new deliberative model whose strengths include:

- **Quality:** Political decisions improve greatly when citizens are directly involved in finding common solutions.
- **Inclusivity:** Randomly selected citizens have their direct say in the decision-making process. Different measures to foster equality between participants are implemented.
- **Permanence:** The Deliberative Committees are an integral part of parliamentary regulations that allow the process to be constantly evaluated and adjusted.
- **Obligation to follow-up:** The commitment to follow-up on the agreed recommendations is given.



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How it works

Deliberative Committees in Brussel



Experience with five Deliberative Committees available

TOPICS

Five Deliberative Committees have already taken place:

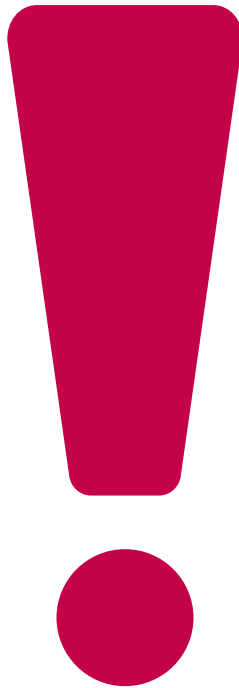
- ▶ 5G deployment in Brussels
- ▶ Homelessness
- ▶ Citizens' participation in times of crisis
- ▶ Biodiversity in the city
- ▶ Work-linked training

COMPENSATION

73,00 € / day per citizen

INCLUSION

Daycare for children so that single parents may attend.
Buddy system allowing those that do not speak French or Dutch to come accompanied by a relative.



IMPLEMENTATION OF MODEL

3/8 parliaments have already integrated Deliberative Committees in their regulations:

- ▶ Brussels Region Parliament
- ▶ Brussels French Speaking Parliament
- ▶ Parliament of Wallonia

EVALUATION*

95% of MPs stated that the citizens contributed to the effective and constructive discussions.

82% of citizens feel they have a better understanding of the political system.

*Average of the evaluation of all Deliberative Committees.

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Good to know

This is why MPs are involved

MPs are experts of political functioning and are the ones who ultimately implement the recommendations. They are indispensable for the involvement in a parliamentary committee. The Deliberative Committees are evidence of a big shift: MPs and citizens collaborate and seek common ground together instead of opposing one another. Citizens present their everyday experiences, perspectives and knowledge. Politicians are experienced policy makers and legislators. They understand the constraints, the pitfalls and the language of policy making; they can guide the citizens through the legislative process. Observation of the process has proven that there are many benefits when citizens and politicians work together.

The likelihood that recommendations are implemented has definitely improved. The MPs that were witness to the deliberations—and voted for the recommendations—are the same politicians that do the follow-up. The gap between citizens and their representatives closes and helps to build trust. The combination enhances the confidence of citizens who have been selected via democratic lottery. They are more likely to accept an invitation letter to participate, anticipating that their recommendations are more likely to take effect. Politicians become fierce advocates of change and help improve democracy from the inside in a collaborative effort alongside citizens.

This is how to avoid politicians dominating deliberation

In order to avoid power disbalance, the ratio of 1 MP to 3 citizens helps to counterbalance the inherent dynamics of dominations in the discussions with politicians. The deliberations take place in small groups of 7 to 8 participants with skilled facilitators to warrant equal participation and avoid political pressure.

In addition, a targeted training for MPs—with a focus on core values such as active listening, co-creation and respecting other people's opinions—is offered. 97% of the participants (citizens and MPs) stated that the debates were conducted in a respectful manner and under the consideration of everyone's opinion.

Why the follow-up is so important

The Deliberative Committees put the follow-up of recommendations at the heart of the process. According to the OECD—“Catching the Deliberative Wave” report—too often this is a missing link within citizens’ assemblies.

The follow-up session, which takes place 6 to 9 months after the vote on the recommendations (see diagram of the Deliberative Committee), does not distance itself from the deliberative format. Indeed, in order to avoid opposition between the whole process, during which citizens and parliamentarians take a collective position after deliberation and the follow-up—which would place the citizens in an individual position, a moment of deliberation among citizens is foreseen.

To be more precise, the follow-up session begins with a presentation by the parliamentary rapporteurs and the competent ministers about what has been done—recommendation by recommendation—after which the citizens discuss collectively and deliberate on the political follow-up before presenting in the plenary their (dis)satisfaction and points that require further attention. It is important to note that citizens are also compensated for this session.

The fact that the process is permanent and that the MPs involved are the ones carrying out the follow-up is a major asset. The MPs not only know the recommendations, but they also know the information and arguments making it more likely that they understand the importance of the follow-up and ultimately introduce legislative bills to implement the recommendations.

Given that the implementation of new policies can often take longer than 6 months, participants can read up on legislative proposals that have come from their work by looking at www.democratie.brussels.

The Deliberative Committees close the gap between citizens and their representatives, produce good policy recommendations and ensure a reliable framework for the implementation.



**The future
of democracy**



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What's next?

Lessons learned

The Deliberative Committees are continuously evaluated. Initial improvements have already been made: limitation of the number of recommendations, presence of topic related experts at each stage to improve the quality of the deliberation. The next barriers that could be broken in order to strengthen the process:

- Changing the constitution to allow a common weight in the votes between citizens and parliamentarians (right now, the citizens’ votes are only consultative).
- Developing “citizenship leaves” to free up working time and not limit the sessions to weekends and evenings.
- Integrating the publics that are the furthest from participation: homeless people, undocumented migrants and the severely disaffiliated people.

Sources and further reading

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