USING PARTICIPEDIA TO STUDY THE IMPACTS OF MINI-PUBLICS

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ABSTRACT
This paper reflects on the authors’ ongoing research investigating the impact of mini-publics using Participedia data. Participedia is a crowd-sourced, open source database documenting democratic innovations around the world where contributors can upload text, data and documentation recording cases of democratic innovation. Drawing on documents and case narratives provided in Participedia, we studied the impacts of five citizens’ juries in South Australia. These cases took place as part of a state government program emphasising the importance of involving the public in political decision-making. Yet, the broad impacts of these citizens’ juries remain unclear. We find that despite various limitations, Participedia offers a useful starting point for qualitative researchers to compare and contrast different aspects of participatory processes taking place in non-ideal settings. In this paper, we present our initial findings from Participedia on the impacts of the South Australian citizens’ juries, and consider the merits and limitations of using Participedia for qualitative research.

Keywords: Australian politics, citizens’ jury, democratic innovation, mini-publics, Participedia.

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INTRODUCTION

Existing literature on democratic innovations and in particular, mini-publics, tends to focus on ‘cause celebre’ case studies (Smith et al 2015:244; Spada and Ryan 2017). The focus on exemplary cases has benefits for both scholars studying these cases and the practitioners who are interested in the application of these cases in other contexts. Positive stories, such as the recent citizens’ assembly in Northern Ireland (Suiter 2018) motivate many to learn more from these processes, apply them in other contexts, or consider ways of scaling up their positive effects. However, this focus also risks distorting the benefits of such processes (Bächtiger et al 2014:235).

The Participedia database has the potential to counter this effect. Participedia is an ambitious project to document and analyse democratic innovations and participatory processes around the world. It was founded by a group of democracy scholars who noted more than ten years ago the emergence of a variety of processes in different settings that were not well documented or understood (Fung and Warren 2011). The Participedia project emerged as an attempt to respond to this ‘shallow’ understanding (Fung and Warren 2011) by creating an open source database to document cases, methods and organisations relating to democratic innovations. Participedia provides data that is freely accessible to researchers for study. Data comes in two forms: a textual narrative comprising a description of a case, alongside fixed field data categorises the cases by asking the contributor to enter their knowledge of the case through a series of ‘tick box’ options. The database is also crowd-sourced, with anybody able to create an account and upload information to the site. Whilst contributors may be the organisers of a process, they are more often researchers, students and members of the Participedia team.

The open nature of the database creates certain challenges for researchers wishing to use the data, such as the variety in quality and quantity of data available for each case. We consider these challenges in greater detail as part of our analysis. However, this has also created opportunities to expand and enhance our understanding of democratic innovation. The variety of contributions highlights how democratic innovation can occur in non-ideal settings, outside of stable democratic institutions and initiated by civil society actors, social movements or activists (Parry, Alver and Thompson 2019: 441; Piper and von Lieres 2015). However, this is an ongoing effort and the database currently retains a Western bias.

Through Participedia’s effort to document democratic innovations of all shades, Participedia includes not only well-known success stories such as the British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly on electoral reform (Participedia 2017), but also captures cases that are that are not well known or studied in existing research (Smith et al 2015). Whilst documentation on many of these cases exists outside of Participedia, the database provides a central access point to cases that otherwise might not be visible to researchers precisely because they are not stand-out cases. Moreover, Participedia case entries provide a basic descriptive value that is sometimes missing from academic research on democratic innovations, where the focus tends to be on analysis rather than description of the processes. Participedia provides a basic narrative for each case which can be used as a springboard for further research.

So far research using Participedia has focused on analyses with large n case studies (Smith et al 2015; Gastil et al 2017). The data has been used for both qualitative and quantitative analysis using case narratives as a basis for content analysis (e.g. Gastil et al 2014) and in structured data that can be downloaded as a dataset (e.g. Gastil et al 2017).
We suggest that it also offers a useful tool for close qualitative analysis of the cases, offering a novel way of engaging with some of the pressing issues in the literature on democratic innovations. In this paper, we focus on the question of impact, and how Participedia data can be used to study it.

The paper is structured in three sections. We first describe how impact has been traditionally understood in relation to mini-publics and how existing research has used Participedia to examine it. We then present our analysis of a series of citizens’ juries in South Australia (SA) which illustrate how Participedia data can be used for qualitative research on the broad impacts of mini-publics. Finally, we discuss the potential benefits that Participedia can offer qualitative researchers, and the challenges that arise from using crowd-sourced data in this way.

USING PARTICIPEDIA TO STUDY THE IMPACTS OF MINI-PUBLICS

Public engagement and deliberative mini-publics are on the rise in contemporary democracies (Hendriks and Carson 2008; Lee 2015). This trend is reflected in the Participedia database, which currently documents cases of democratic innovation from around the world. A large proportion of these fall into the category of the deliberative mini-public: processes combining a quasi-random sample of citizens, relatively small in number, coming together to deliberate on a policy issue (Smith 2012; Ryan and Smith 2014; see also Fung 2003). Alongside documented cases, Participedia also contains a growing barrage of organizations, methods and tools associated with the practice of deliberative and participatory democracy, confirming the relevance Caroline Lee’s (2015) focus on the growing public engagement industry (see also Hendriks and Carson 2008) and its relation to contemporary democratic realities.

Australia exemplifies this trend, with deliberative mini-publics popping up in various forms across the country since the late 1990s (Hendriks and Carson 2008; Parry, Alver and Thompson 2019). In 2013, the state of South Australia (SA) pursued a public engagement framework that explicitly purports to bring citizens into government decision-making (Government of South Australia 2013; 2015). Under a Labor leadership, the state government has introduced a raft of engagement initiatives including travelling cabinet meetings (Participedia 2016e), online forums and consultations and community budgeting (Participedia 2016f).

Much of the literature on deliberative mini-publics has focussed on how and why these processes should or should not be used to enhance democratic and deliberative capacity (e.g. Fishkin 2009; McKenzie and Warren 2012; Niemeyer 2014; LaFont 2015; Parkinson 2003; Pateman 2012). This scholarly work has yielded important lessons for the practice of deliberative mini-publics: the potential trade-offs between inclusion and epistemic fruitfulness in deliberation (Bächtiger, Setälä and Grönlund 2014); between deliberation and democratic legitimacy (Chambers 2009; Parkinson 2003).

A further key question surrounding deliberative mini-publics is the impact of these forums beyond the confines of one-off, isolated cases. Literature on impact in this field tends to focus on whether or not mini-publics are institutionally embedded in the system, and the extent to which they shape policy decisions (Goodin and Dryzek 2006; Smith et al. 2015). In other words, deliberation is considered to be contributing to democracy only ‘if it is linked to binding decisions’ (Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019: 14).
This understanding of impact has already been investigated using Participedia data. Smith et al (2015; see also Gastil et al 2017) use Participedia data to analyse a large sample of cases to explore the relationship between deliberative design and policy impact, amongst other variables. In their study of 304 Participedia cases (available at the time of analysis), Smith et al (2015:253) find that

The deliberative design of public engagement and policy influence appear to be orthogonal to each other—a potentially gloomy finding for many deliberative theorists and practitioners who often place great emphasis on integrating deliberative designs into political decision-making processes.

In other words, processes recorded as both deliberative in design and consultative in purpose appear to have relatively little policy influence. Whilst these findings show ‘interesting patterns of associations’ (Gastil et al 2017:1) relating to impact, the statistical analysis of the 304 cases undertaken by Smith and colleagues does not tell us about the context in which such cases took place, or the potential complexity underlying the impact of deliberative mini-publics (Ercan et al 2017). In this paper we demonstrate how exploring the context and detailed descriptions provided in Participedia can further our understanding of impact. We do this through an interpretive analysis of a small number of case studies. While establishing formal mechanisms of impact between mini-publics and political decision-making process is crucial, it is only one facet of impact. Goodin and Dryzek (2006)’s study of mini-publics offers a promising starting point to explore the impacts of mini-publics more broadly. Goodin and Dryzek rightly argue that impact comes in various forms including: ‘in the form of actually making policy, being taken up in the policy process, informing public debates, market-testing of proposals, legitimation of public policies, building confidence and constituencies for policies, popular oversight, and resisting co-option’ (Goodin and Dryzek 2006:219).

In this paper, using this broader perspective on impact as our analytical framework, we explore the impact of a series of mini-publics in South Australia reported in Participedia. We adapt Goodin and Dryzek’s framework as a ‘ready-made coding system’ (Saldaña 2009) to code and categorise the information provided by Participedia on these cases in order to analyse the impacts of our case studies. Goodin and Dryzek’s modes of macro-political impact are actually making policy, policy uptake, informing public debates, market testing of proposals, legitimating policy proposals, building confidence and constituencies, popular oversight, and resisting co-option. We have adapted and further developed these nodes for our analysis. ‘Actually making policy’ and ‘being taken up in the policy process’ have been merged into a single node because in Australia, mini-publics are not formally empowered with decisional authority and therefore any policy impact is technically the result of recommendations being then taken up in the formal policy process. ‘Informing public debates’ is conceived by Goodin and Dryzek primarily as media coverage of deliberative mini-publics informing and stimulating public debate on the issue under discussion. We further develop this mode of impact to consider different facets of public debate that may be shaped by the impact of deliberative mini-publics. Similarly, we consider ‘confidence building’ to include not only building the confidence and civic capacity of participants, but how the citizens’ juries have shaped confidence and trust in the government. ‘Popular oversight’ has not been included in our analysis because it is not relevant to the South Australian cases; the citizens’ juries do not monitor the provision of existing government services, but ask jurors to review proposed recommendations.
Our analysis relies on reports generated by practitioners, government and agencies, citizen jurors and observers of the five Citizens’ Juries in South Australia that have been uploaded to Participedia. We also draw on the case narratives; each case narrative provides a textual description of the case and contains hyperlinks to additional webpages, reports and documents. Whilst the amount of detail and sources available for each case vary, there is sufficient material to provide a foundation for close analysis of the SA mini-publics. A total of 82 documents were downloaded into QSR International’s NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis software for analysis, including the Participedia case narratives. These documents included final jury reports, independent evaluations, government media releases and responses, media coverage, and reports and research notes produced by practitioners involved in the organisation of the mini-publics.

CASE STUDIES: CITIZENS’ JURIES IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

In recent years, the state of South Australia (SA) pursued a public engagement framework that explicitly purports to bring citizens into government decision-making (Government of South Australia 2013). Under a Labor leadership, the state government introduced a raft of engagement initiatives including travelling cabinet meetings (Participedia 2016e), online forums and consultations and community budgeting (Participedia 2016f).

Between 2013 and 2016, the SA state government (then under the Labor Party) initiated five deliberative mini-publics over four public engagement processes. Given the resources required to run a mini-public, it appears that the government viewed such processes as an essential component of public engagement. However, it is unclear how deliberative mini-publics were envisaged in relation to the broader political system. Mini-publics in Australia legally cannot be formally empowered to actually make policy (Goodin and Dryzek 2006: 225), which indicates that Smith et al’s ‘gloomy finding’ on consultative processes and policy impacts is pertinent to the SA cases. Moreover, the SA mini-publics were not formally embedded into the broader political system, but a series of one-off processes. This has led scholars to suggest that such cases may just be ‘forms of token participation, expected to provide legitimation for the government’ (Grönlund et al 2014:3). Despite the relevance of these questions, South Australia remains largely unstudied by scholars of democratic innovation and deliberative democracy. Studying these cases allows us to appraise the subtle impacts of this type of deliberative mini-public.

The cases studied are listed in Table 1 below. They are treated in our analysis as four cases, but the nuclear engagement process included two individual citizens’ juries with slightly different functions; the first jury was mandated with deciding the most relevant issues for subsequent discussion and consultation, the second jury with making a final recommendation.
### TABLE 1: CITIZENS’ JURIES IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Citizen’s Jury 1</th>
<th>Citizen’s Jury 2</th>
<th>Citizen’s Jury 3</th>
<th>Citizen’s Jury 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Full process title</strong></td>
<td>Creating a safe and vibrant Adelaide nightlife</td>
<td>Sharing the Roads Safely</td>
<td>Dog and Cat Management</td>
<td>Get to Know Nuclear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Referred to in paper as</strong></td>
<td>safe nightlife</td>
<td>safe roads</td>
<td>dog and cat</td>
<td>nuclear engagement process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of jurors</strong></td>
<td>43</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>50 + 328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question given to jurors</strong></td>
<td>How can we ensure we have a vibrant and safe Adelaide nightlife?</td>
<td>Motorists and cyclists will always be using our roads. What things could we trial to ensure they share the roads safely?</td>
<td>Last year in South Australia over 10,000 unwanted dogs and cats were put down. The State Government recently announced some reforms to dog and cat laws. What further measures can we introduce or trial to reduce the number of unwanted pets?</td>
<td>Jury 1: What are the parts of the Nuclear Fuel Cycle Royal Commission’s Report that everyone needs to discuss? Jury 2: Under what circumstances, if any, could South Australia pursue the opportunity to store and dispose of nuclear waste from other countries?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Documents analysed</strong></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Primary mode/s of impact</strong></td>
<td>Confidence building, Informing public debates</td>
<td>Taken up in policy, Informing public debates</td>
<td>Legitimating policy, Market testing policy</td>
<td>Market testing policy, Resisting co-option, Confidence building (negative)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ANALYSIS: IDENTIFYING THE IMPACTS OF SA CITIZENS’ JURIES

In what follows, we outline the result of our qualitative coding and analysis, and present the impact of the SA Citizens’ Juries under six categories: policy impact, informing public debates, shaping policy by market testing, legitimating policy, confidence building and resisting co-option.

Policy impact. In Australia, mini-publics are not formally empowered to make authoritative decisions (Parry, Alver and Thompson 2019), precluding the possibility of ‘actually making policy’ (Goodin and Dryzek 2006: 225). Therefore, in our analysis we look for policy impact in terms of the uptake of any citizens’ jury recommendations in the policy process; the extent to which recommendations were accepted by the government. The mini-publics in SA did receive a guarantee of response from the state government prior to the process. However, given that the citizens’ juries were all instigated by the government and in some cases asked to provide a recommendation on a specific policy proposal (such as the mandatory de-sexing of dogs and cats), this is unremarkable in itself.

The policy uptake of citizens’ jury recommendations appears significant with the government supporting the majority of the recommendations from the safe nightlife, safe roads and dog and cat juries (Participedia 2016a; 2016b; 2016c). Whilst the implementation of individual policies is more difficult to track than the acceptance of recommendations, the government provided quarterly updates on the progress of implementation (Participedia 2016a).

It is worth noting however that for both the safe nightlife and safe roads juries, stakeholders and bureaucrats were critical of the jury recommendations on the basis that a number of them were already being implemented or planned by the government and other agencies (Participedia 2016a; TACSI 2014). This indicates a potential problem with the design of the jury. An independent evaluation found that bureaucrats and stakeholders were not closely involved and that the jury did not appear fully aware of what the government was currently doing. This resulted in somewhat redundant recommendations from the jury that were already in place (TACSI 2014: 39).

The nuclear engagement process departed from previous South Australian citizens’ jury designs in the use of two separate juries and much broader public engagement activity. A Royal Commission report provided an initial investigation and report into the nuclear fuel cycle and the feasibility of extending SA’s involvement in it through the establishment of a nuclear waste storage facility. The engagement process that followed was designed to consider the Royal Commission report, rather than the issue directly. The final government response was to the Royal Commission report (Get to Know Nuclear 2016), rather than to the jury directly. A further complication was the government’s explicit support for the establishment of a nuclear storage facility, which was ultimately rejected by the second citizens’ jury.

Whilst the government eventually shelved the nuclear proposal, it is difficult to establish whether the jury outcome was the decisive force. Immediately following the jury’s verdict, the government proposed to ‘continue to encourage discussion and remain open to pursuing this opportunity for South Australia’ (Get to Know Nuclear 2016) and put forward the idea of a state-wide referendum to have the ultimate deciding say, with affected Aboriginal communities having a final veto. This came despite a report from the Aboriginal Human Services Sector that had already explicitly rejected the proposal, and a lack of Aboriginal consent being a central concern for the final citizens’ jury report (Aboriginal Human Services Sector 2016: Citizens’ Jury on Nuclear Waste 2016; Washington 2016). Several months later, the proposal was finally dropped with Premier Jay Weatherill citing the Liberal Party’s vehement opposition and subsequent lack of bipartisan support as the driving factor behind his decision (ABC News 2017) – not the jury verdict.
Whilst the policy uptake of South Australia’s citizens’ juries paints a relatively positive picture, a closer look suggests that the reality is more complex. Although the majority of recommendations from the safe nightlife, safe roads and dog and cat juries were supported by the government, a number of recommendations were apparently covered by existing government initiatives, leading to disappointment that juror recommendations were not ‘more radical ideas’ (TACSI 2014:26). The nuclear engagement process also raises doubts about policy impact. Although ultimately the jury’s verdict was upheld, it remains unclear how much the mini-public influenced the final decision.

The macro political impact here was also undoubtedly influenced by the drama surrounding the micro politics of the jury, with anti-nuclear jurors apparently pressuring other jurors and campaigning within the jury (Carson 2017; Russell 2017). As well as undermining the deliberative process, this may have also had an impact on external perceptions of the jury and its credibility. This indicates not only that micro-deliberative processes are influenced by the macro context (Hendriks 2006) but also that micro deliberative conditions may shape the macro-political impact of a process.

The provision of contextual information and background highlights the benefit of using Participedia entries for interpretive analysis. The variety of documents, and thus perspectives, in each case helps us understand the complexities underlying what appears superficially to be a positive policy uptake. Whilst Participedia also provides fixed-field data on outcomes such as policy impact, further material is needed to help researchers understand the nature of that policy impact.

**Informing public debates.** Goodin and Dryzek (2006) conceptualise the impact on public debates primarily as media coverage of mini-publics raising public awareness and the process stimulating public interest in the topic at hand. We explore this further, suggesting that mini-publics can also inform public debate through attempting to educate the public, raising awareness of deliberative processes, and agenda-setting.

Jurors from the safe roads citizens’ jury chose to create a public document, ‘the library of ideas’ to present all the findings and ideas that were collated as part of the process, in the hope that it ‘might help another community in another place to begin their journey towards the safer sharing of roads’ (Citizens’ Jury Report 2014:5). The safe roads jury is also cited as having successfully used social and traditional media to engage with a wider public in discussion on the topic:

> once people from social media were actively brought into the process and at times the physical space, it was harder to dismiss them as ‘just crazy or attacking’. Instead it opened up a space for them to be seen differently - as people passionate about the issues, willing to listen, and wanting to also contribute as part of a deeper process (TACSI 2014:14).

The second, decisive jury from the nuclear engagement process revealed the extent of public concern about Aboriginal consent over the issue. The lack of Aboriginal consent was a central factor in the jury’s rejection of the proposal (Washington 2016). The emphasis on Aboriginal consent can be seen as not only informing public debates, but informing decision-makers of public debate: ‘this shows them a landscape of opinion based on reasoned and informed debate among diverse citizens’ (Russell 2017).

Conversely, the process was criticised on the basis that the South Australian public and the jury did not sufficiently understand the complexities of the nuclear storage debate, undermining the final verdict. An explicit aim of the
process was an attempt to educate the public about the topic and the Royal Commission Report (Nuclear Fuel Cycle Royal Commission Consultation and Response Agency 2016). This is distinct from informing public debates because it implies that the public are uninformed and must be informed from above, by a dictated source of authority – the Royal Commission Report and related evidence. Following the conclusion of the engagement process, some critics suggested that the issue was too complex for everyday citizens to understand (Richardson 2016) and that ‘there remains a paucity of knowledge in the community’ (Nuclear Fuel Cycle Royal Commission Consultation and Response Advisory Board 2017:6).

Our analysis shows that mini-publics can also inform public debates beyond the topic under discussion. They have the potential to raise awareness of mini-publics and democratic innovation itself. This appears to be the case for the safe nightlife and safe roads citizens’ juries, with a number of reports offering details on the process and benefits of the citizens’ jury process (McGuire 2014; Starick 2014). Government reports and an independent evaluation of the safe nightlife and safe roads juries also emphasise the distinctive aspect of the citizens’ jury as an approach to engaging with citizens. Coverage from the nuclear engagement process is more mixed; the government was criticised for putting such a high-stakes issue to a Citizens’ Jury (Richardson 2016) although some reports are explicitly supportive of the process itself (Paine 2016).

The nuclear engagement process also provides an example of using mini-publics as a form of agenda-setting. For the most part, mini-publics have an agenda decided prior to the commencement of the process (O’Flynn and Sood 2014: 52). The nuclear engagement process followed Dahl’s (1989: 340) suggestion of holding an agenda-setting mini-public, followed by another on the major issues identified. Calvert and Warren (2014:209) suggest that this may help in combating problematic frames exacerbated by polarising issues, where ‘such polarisation makes it difficult if not impossible, or actors to agree on anything’. Whilst the first, agenda-setting nuclear jury appeared to escape this problem, it also had a ‘non-polarising remit: to examine the Royal Commission report and identify areas of concern that the whole of South Australia would wish to discuss’ (Carson 2017).

**Shaping policy by market testing.** Mini-publics may serve decision-makers by ‘market testing’ policies, providing policymakers with an answer as to whether a policy can be ‘sold’ to the public (Goodin and Dryzek 2006: 228). As Goodin and Dryzek point out, this can result in a positive or negative response. The latter is seen most clearly in the nuclear engagement process and in particular, the government’s subsequent response. The final jury’s report describes the nuclear storage facility as an ‘agenda of the government’, based on their conclusion that the arguments in favour of the facility disregarded a lack of consent and faulty economic reasoning (South Australia’s Citizens’ Jury on Nuclear Waste 2016: 4). Following the nuclear engagement process the government ‘having considered all of the community feedback... decided that discussion should continue on a proposed nuclear waste facility’ (Weatherill 2016). The ‘no’ that emerged from the second citizens’ jury arguably created ‘a strong imperative to temper this [the government’s] enthusiasm going forward, and in particular to pay ongoing attention to social licence in this sensitive area, including among indigenous communities.’ (Russell 2017). The nuclear engagement process served to highlight both public mistrust in the evidence base for the proposal and the importance of Aboriginal consent. The process served to demonstrate that the nuclear storage policy could not be easily sold to the South Australian public.

**Legitimating policy.** Mini-publics can contribute to the perceived legitimacy of a policy when they provide informed consideration and support from a representative group of the local population. This is perhaps one of the greatest appeals of holding a deliberative process; given a randomly selected mini-public purports to represent the views of
the wider community, the resulting recommendations may have greater credibility in the eyes of the public than if produced by policymakers and public servants (McKenzie and Warren 2012; South Australian Government 2014). Various examples of legitimating policy can be seen in the safe nightlife, safe roads and dog and cat citizens’ juries in South Australia, although this was not always perceived positively in documents analysed. The recommendations from the safe nightlife jury duplicated existing or planned policy to a large extent. However, this does not appear to be quite a case of legitimating policy proposals, as an independent evaluation of the process found that the jury was not always well informed of current policy developments, leading them to suggest initiatives that were already underway.

Legitimation can also be gained from the support of key stakeholders in a deliberative process. Marking an improvement from the nightlife jury, the safe roads jury involved relevant interest groups throughout the process; the resulting recommendations bore some resemblance to planned policy or proposals suggested by interest groups, offering additional validation for stakeholders as well as government (TACSI 2014: 22). This was also seen in the dog and cat jury, where the policy of mandatory de-sexing had been recommended by interest groups (Government of South Australia 2015: 6). The resulting policy amendments do not constitute straightforward policy impact because they were based primarily on proposals already made by the statutory agency attached to the issue, who also convened the jury (Participedia 2016c). Moreover, some of the recommendations that were suggested by the jury alone have not been taken forward, such as the recommendation to pilot a trap, neuter, release (TNR) program for feral cats and the suggestion to legislate to increase the acceptance of tenants with pets. Neither were taken up by the government. The failure of these original recommendations from the jury to gain any real traction could be interpreted by observers as further evidence of legitimating policy, rather than creating it. This was the conclusion in the formal evaluations of the safe roads and safe nightlife jury (TACSI 2013; 2014).

The democratic legitimacy or otherwise of deliberative mini-publics is a well-worn debate in the scholarly literature given their relatively small numbers (e.g. Lafont 2015; Parkinson 2003). Some deliberative fora seek large, statistically representative samples in an attempt to counter this critique, such as the Deliberative Poll (Participedia 2009). The second jury in the nuclear engagement process attempted this with a jury of 350, which led to greater perceived legitimacy but also resulted in an unmanageable deliberative process (Carson 2017). Interestingly, members of this jury even doubted their own legitimacy as the voice of the community, recognising that ‘many in our community have not participated in the citizens’ jury process, many in the community think it is irrelevant’ (Citizens’ Jury on Nuclear Waste 2016: 27) as well as citing doubts about the transparency and accountability of the process.

Confidence building. Deliberative mini-publics can affect confidence in a number of ways, for different groups involved. Goodin and Dryzek (2006) refer to the empowerment that can result from participating in a deliberative mini-public in both a psychological and sociological sense: the civic benefits of participation. Evaluations from the SA juries illustrate these effects; jurors reported ‘feeling more affinity to the political system, of having a sustained interest around the issue they tackled, and feeling more likely to be become involved in future engagement’ (TACSI 2013: 4). Similarly, jurors discussed the benefits of thinking beyond their own self-interests and taking into account the perspectives of differently situated others (TACSI 2013).

As well as the empowerment experienced by participants themselves, the safe nightlife citizens’ jury – the first in South Australia - provided an opportunity for bureaucrats to gain confidence in citizens’ capacity to deliberate. Witnessing the process firsthand demonstrated not only citizen capacity, but the empowerment and sense of responsibility taken on by citizen jurors and how seriously they took their charge. Some bureaucrats reflected on their previous engagement
practices and how, having observed the jury process, they could have handled engaging with citizens better. This resulted from recognising the limitations of viewing themselves as the sole experts (TACSI 2013: 22).

Deliberative mini-publics also have the potential to both build and erode confidence in government. The nightlife jury was the subject of some scepticism due to its timing, right before a state election. This negatively impacted how experts perceived the value of the jury and the government’s motivations for holding it (TACSI 2013: 30). Having taken important lessons from this, the safe roads jury took place in a lower-risk political environment and adapted a more flexible model with jurors having more control over the process, building confidence and trust in the government’s intentions (TACSI 2014:15). Having the jury organised and facilitated by independent organisations like DemocracyCo and newDemocracy Foundation also contributed towards greater trust in the process. Nonetheless, despite having confidence in the process, lingering distrust in government to actually implement jury recommendations remained at the dog and cat jury (DemocracyCo 2015).

Less confidence was shown in the nuclear engagement process. The jury’s final report expresses a lack of trust in the government related to the process, compounded by the government’s poor track record of engaging with SA’s Aboriginal communities. The government’s past actions towards Aboriginal communities opened up a broader and deeper conversation about the significance of mistrust and the need to make amends for it. This further highlights that mini-publics are designed within a particular historical and political context, which can potentially evoke past injustice. Therefore, although attempts were made to elicit involvement from SA’s Aboriginal communities, this was done within a vacuum that failed to respond to or make amends for past injustices that lay outside the immediate remit of the engagement process but were nonetheless highly relevant for the affected communities.

Deliberative mini-publics impact confidence in a range of ways, beyond the civic capacity building typically associated with participation. These processes also have the potential to shape confidence in government. It remains to be seen how experience from the nuclear engagement process will impact confidence and trust in any future deliberative mini-publics in South Australia.

Resisting co-option. The final verdict delivered by the second jury in the nuclear engagement process – a ‘no’ to the proposed nuclear storage facility – came as a surprise to anti-nuclear campaigners and lobby groups (Russell 2017). The lack of trust in the process and the perception that the decision had already been made meant that ‘no’ campaigners were convinced that the outcome was pre-determined in favour of the proposal (Carson 2017). The fact that the final verdict went against it may be an example of resisting co-option. Co-option occurs when opponents of a policy or proposal are brought into a consultation process: ‘co-optive arrangements can deprive these groups of any legitimacy for continuing opposition to the policies, once they have been approved by processes in which the groups have participated’ (Goodin and Dryzek 2006: 236-7). A strong sense of resistance is seen in the jury’s final report, particularly with regard to the lack of Aboriginal consent and the government’s apparent persistence in pursuing the proposal. In addition to this resistance, there is also a suspicion of the possible co-option of Aboriginal communities: ‘a few jurors voiced concern that there would be an attempt at “wearing down” of the communities involved by repeated consultation’ (Citizens’ Jury on Nuclear Waste 2016:19). However, deliberative mini-publics are unsuitable for co-option due to their unpredictable nature – it is not clear in advance how citizen participants will develop positions during deliberation (Goodin and Dryzek 2006:237; newDemocracy Foundation 2016:4). The difficult process of the nuclear engagement process’s second jury demonstrates this unpredictability. In addition, this outcome actually provided evidence of the jury’s independence from government, despite accusations to the contrary (Carson 2017; Participedia 2016d).
On the one hand, the nuclear engagement process demonstrates how deliberative mini-publics can resist co-option from government. On the other hand, from the available evidence it is possible that some co-option took place within the jury itself. Carson (2017) and Russell (2017) report on the difficulties encountered during the second, large jury:

This led to the nightmare of the ‘red dots’— dots designed to signify NO — which began to appear on name tags. A faction emerged within the jury in the later stages, and this faction wanted to make a statement of intent... As the process unfolded a notable number of jurors began to feel intimidated by this collective (Carson 2017).

Whilst a jury so large increased the risk of jurors forming blocs (Carson 2017), other factors may have contributed to factionalisation. In particular, one minority report from the jury’s final report voiced concerns that the jury selection process had allowed for bias in the sample, because the recruitment process was begun after the question had been announced publicly. It is unclear the extent to which the factionalisation and campaigning within the jury may have actually resulted in co-option. Nonetheless, it provides a compelling example of the perils of deliberation such as group polarisation (see Sunstein and Hastie 2008).

CONCLUSION: REFLECTIONS ON USING PARTICIPEDIA FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

In this paper we presented our ongoing project exploring the impacts of mini-publics drawing on the data provided in Participedia. We used and built upon Goodin and Dryzek’s (2006) modes of macro-political impact as the basis our analysis. Our analysis shows that the SA cases had impact in a variety of different, subtle ways beyond policy effect. We show that an apparently high rate of policy uptake belies a more complex picture. In each case, a majority of recommendations from the jury were ultimately taken up by the state government, but underlying reasons vary.

We conclude our paper by reflecting on the benefits of using Participedia in qualitative research, and the limitations we faced.

• Participedia case entries help to capture the complexity of participatory processes. Case entries provide a single entry point into the depth and complexity of deliberative mini-publics in practice.
• Participedia case entries synthesise a variety of perspectives. Entries contain multiple perspectives from stakeholders, government reports, practitioners, media coverage. Participedia recognises that knowledge of democratic innovations is created and sustained by a range of different actors (Gastil et al 2017), and the range of documentation in a case entry recognises this. Each entry is thus a synthesised overview, enabling a greater understanding of the dynamics and context of a mini-public.
• Participedia case narratives enable a holistic view of participatory processes. Case narratives offer aspects of deliberative design as well as broader political effects and implications of the case, enabling a holistic view of how micro and macro aspects of a mini-public can shape impact. Researchers can code and analyse these narratives systematically to study aspects of participatory practices using various research methods including quantitative content analysis (e.g. Smith et al 2015; Gastil et al 2017) or the more interpretive/qualitative approach taken here.
• Understanding ‘failed’ processes is crucial for qualitative researchers as well as for normative theorists. The variety of cases on Participedia offers a further advantage to qualitative researchers. Although literature on democratic innovations has begun to take note of ‘failed’ processes (Smith et al 2015), the emphasis remains on either exemplary cases (Spada and Ryan 2017) or normative questions such as how mini-publics should be embedded into wider political systems. The SA cases examined here fit neither of these suits, and as a result risk being neglected by scholars. An explicit focus on failed processes, (or the failed aspects of processes) can also assist scholars of deliberative democracy with the task of normative theorising. Only by identifying failures in deliberative processes, researchers and practitioners can develop fresh ideas on how deliberative processes may be designed and conducted in a more democratic way (Hajer 2005).

• Participedia data helps to understand the dynamics of participatory processes taking place in non-ideal settings. Pointing out the limited impact of participatory processes, some scholars argue it is unlikely that ‘a few isolated mini-publics in a particular constituency is going to produce any significant – or, perhaps even – effect on public discussion, let alone facilitate the development of deliberative capacity’ (Niemeyer 2014:191). Yet in reality, it is under these non-ideal settings that deliberative mini-publics are taking place. This is particularly so in Australia, where the past decade or more has seen the proliferation of this type of deliberative mini-public (Parry, Alver and Thompson 2019), Participedia aims to document democratic innovations in all their forms: even the banal. This is also in line with the emerging research on deliberative democracy that emphasises the discrepancy between ideal and real settings and calls researchers to investigate the unique contribution of the non-ideal settings to the realisation of deliberative democracy beyond mini-publics, at the large scale (Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019). Qualitative analysis of Participedia cases can help advance this research agenda.

There are also some challenges and limitations we encountered in our qualitative study of citizens’ juries reported in Participedia. Below we outline some of these limitations.

• The amount of data available for analysis varies. Our analysis is limited to the information sourced from Participedia. One challenge in this context is that the number of available documents increases with each jury over time. This may reflect a growing public interest in SA’s deliberative processes – with an increase in media coverage of the event – or the government’s increased efforts to document the process and outcomes of the engagements. However, it may simply reflect the variation in Participedia data, an inevitable reality of crowd-sourced data. Whilst content is moderated and curated by Participedia’s editing team, the variation in detail and quantity of information remains. This makes systematic comparison across cases difficult given the variety in available documentation.

• The content of data available for analysis may change. A related challenge is the dynamic nature of Participedia data. Since it is open-source, the information on which our analysis is based is subject to change: to be updated, altered or deleted. From one perspective, this weakens the reliability of our analysis and its claims.

• Participedia might not provide sufficiently rich qualitative data. The extent of information contained in a single case entry is inherently limited. Qualitative researchers might find this frustrating, especially when the quality and detail varies significantly across cases. This potentially limits the robustness of any findings if insufficient information is unavailable and weakens possible conclusions. As a crowd-sourced database, Participedia aims for researchers to contribute to entries themselves, which could go some way to filling this gap. In addition, as a qualitative researcher will rarely rely on a single source of information for analysis, we suggest that Participedia serves well as a good starting point from which researchers can delve further into cases and conduct further independent data collection. This data could also then be added to Participedia to further enhance the database.
Clearly, these challenges are not unique to qualitative research. Questions of reliability and robustness are also central for research using Participedia data quantitatively. One way to deal with these challenges and enhance the database for both quantitative and qualitative research would be to supplement entries with additional data such as interviews with relevant actors. While Participedia data can be used to develop a ‘helicopter’ view of the participatory landscape within which researchers operate, additional material would enhance the robustness of any research using Participedia data, whilst adding value to the database itself.
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