

BAK10: Comparative Democratic Politics

Week 13 - Democratic Innovations

Leonardo Carella

The Plan for Today

- Can we make democracy work better with different institutions?
- Democratic innovations: letting the people decide?
- Democratic design: semi-parliamentarism as a “new” form of government?

What are democratic innovations?

“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.” (Elstub and Escobar, 2019)

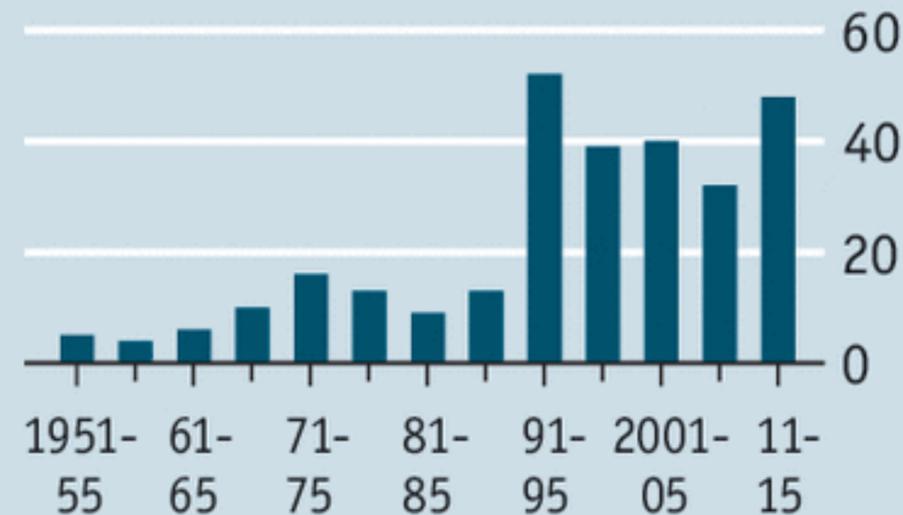
- Generally complementary to existing representative democracy frameworks.
- Response to decline in institutional trust in the past ~30 years.



What are democratic innovations?

Referendums

Number in Europe

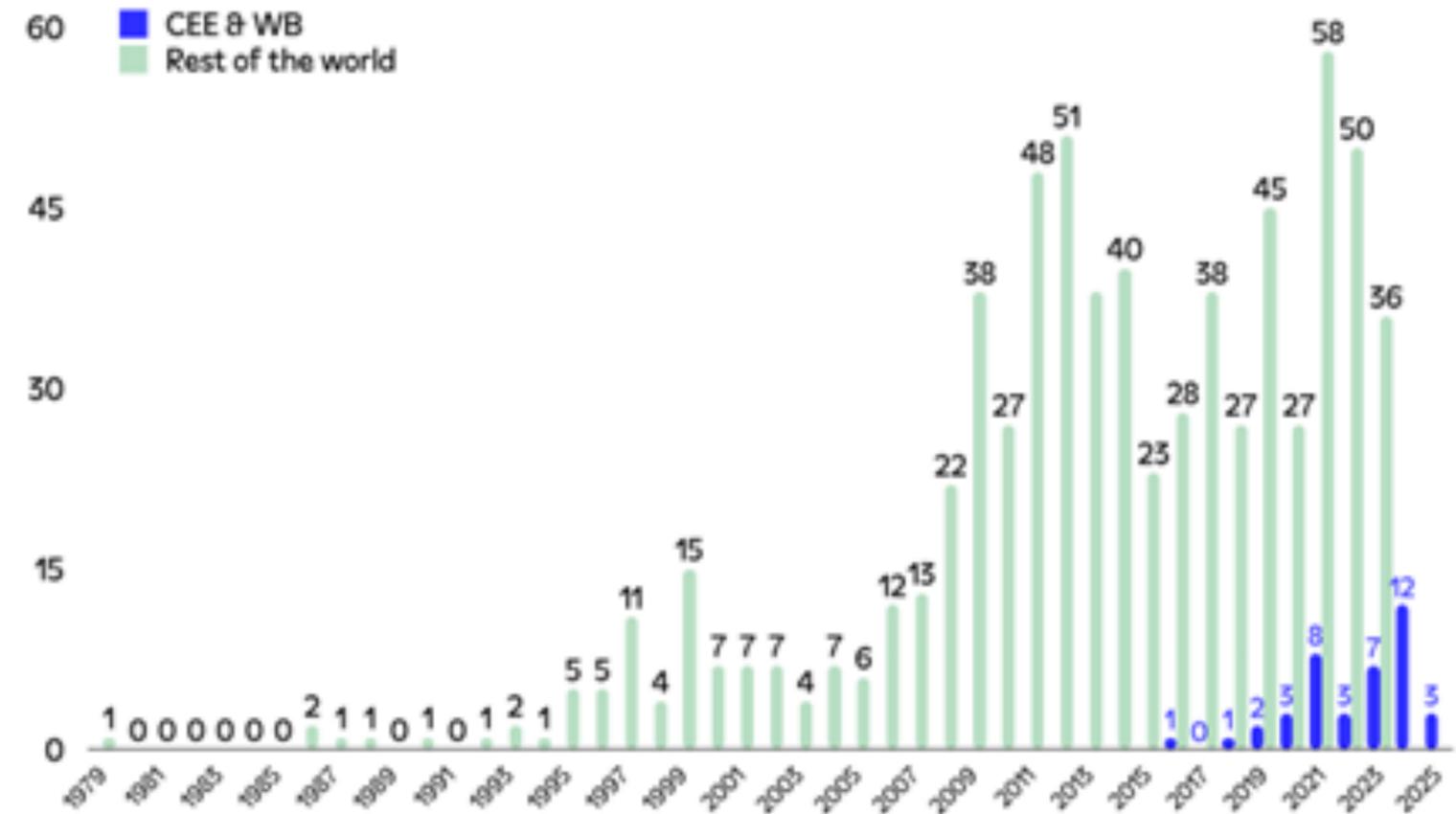


Number of representative deliberative processes per year, 1979 – 2025

CEE&WB - 40
Rest of the world - 713

Note: n=752; Data for the rest of the world for 2024-2025 is unavailable and only preliminary for CEE & WB.

Source: OECD Deliberative Democracy Database (2023) complemented by desk research and qualitative interviews.



What are democratic innovations?

- **Deliberative mini-publics:** randomly selected citizens deliberate on policy issues and make recommendations.
- **Participatory budgeting:** residents directly decide how to allocate part of a public budget at the local level.
- **Referendums, citizens' initiatives, recalls:** *not new*, but more common and with new features, which combine traditional direct democracy with deliberative and participatory institutions (e.g. citizens' initiative review).



The Traditions in the Innovation

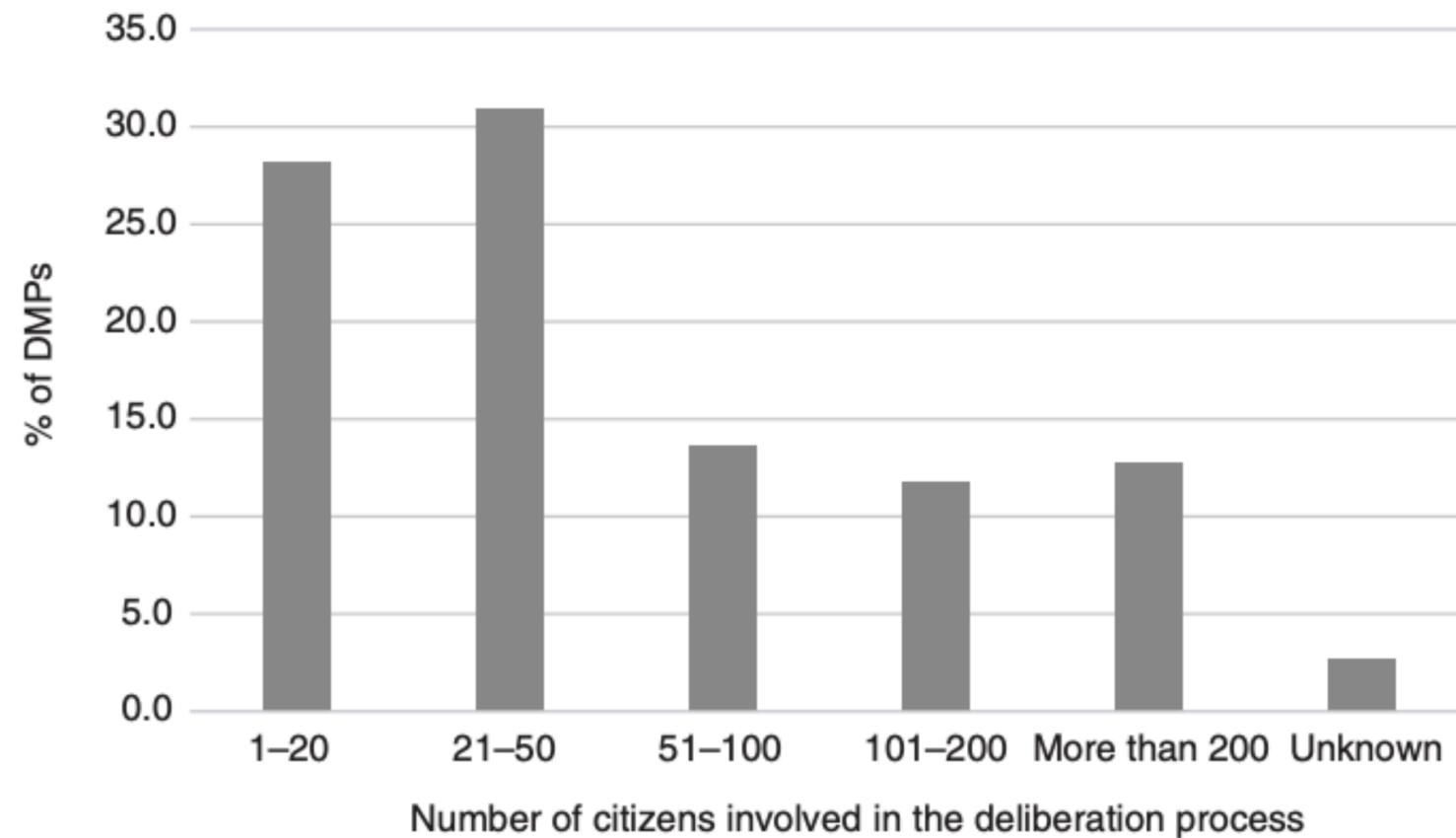
- **Direct democracy:** people themselves should make decisions on laws and policies, rather than electing representatives to do it for them
- **Participative democracy:** citizens' input should extend beyond voting.
- **Deliberative democracy:** decision-making should be based on informed discussion, reasoning, and debate; not just preference aggregation.
- **Sortition:** if democracy means rule *by the people*, then a random sample of citizens can represent the people, just as much as (and perhaps better than) representatives chosen via elections.

Deliberative Mini-Publics

- Randomly selected groups of a few dozens to a few hundred citizens, tasked with listening to evidence, learning, deliberating among each other and advising or deciding on a policy or issue. Sortition > deliberation > aggregation
- Usually concerned with discrete policy remits, but in some cases (most notably, in the German-speaking Community of Belgium) institutionalised as permanent or semi-permanent, multi-issue review bodies.
- From purely consultative role to “soft” binding-ness (mandatory consideration by parliament, formal advice prior to referendums).

Deliberative Mini-Publics

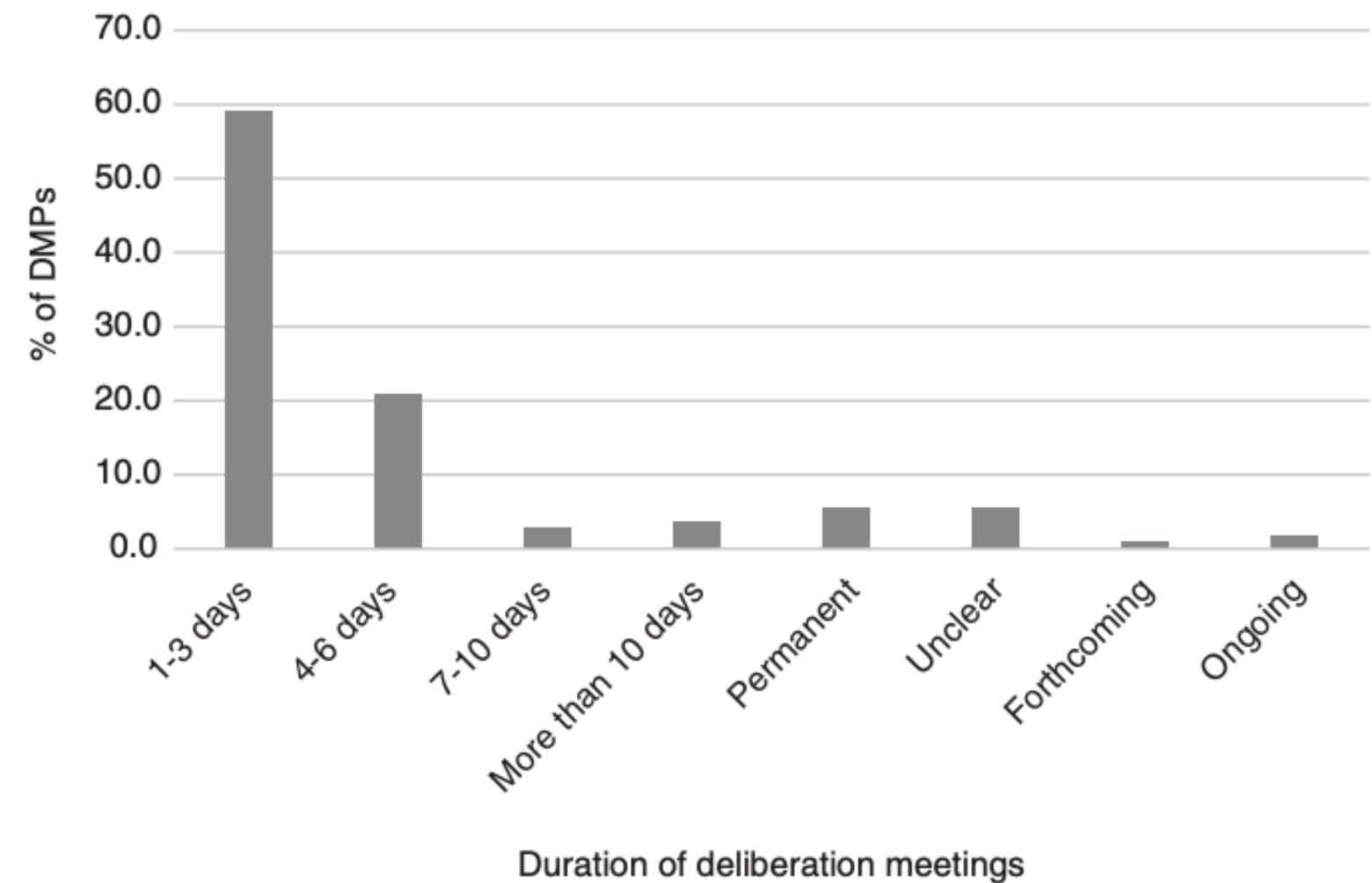
Figure 2.1: Distribution of DMPs held in Europe according to the number of citizens involved (2000–20)



Note: Five DMPs have been removed from the POLITICIZE inventory because the exact number of citizens who took part in the deliberative process is unknown.

Source: POLITICIZE inventory of mini-publics in Europe (2000–20).

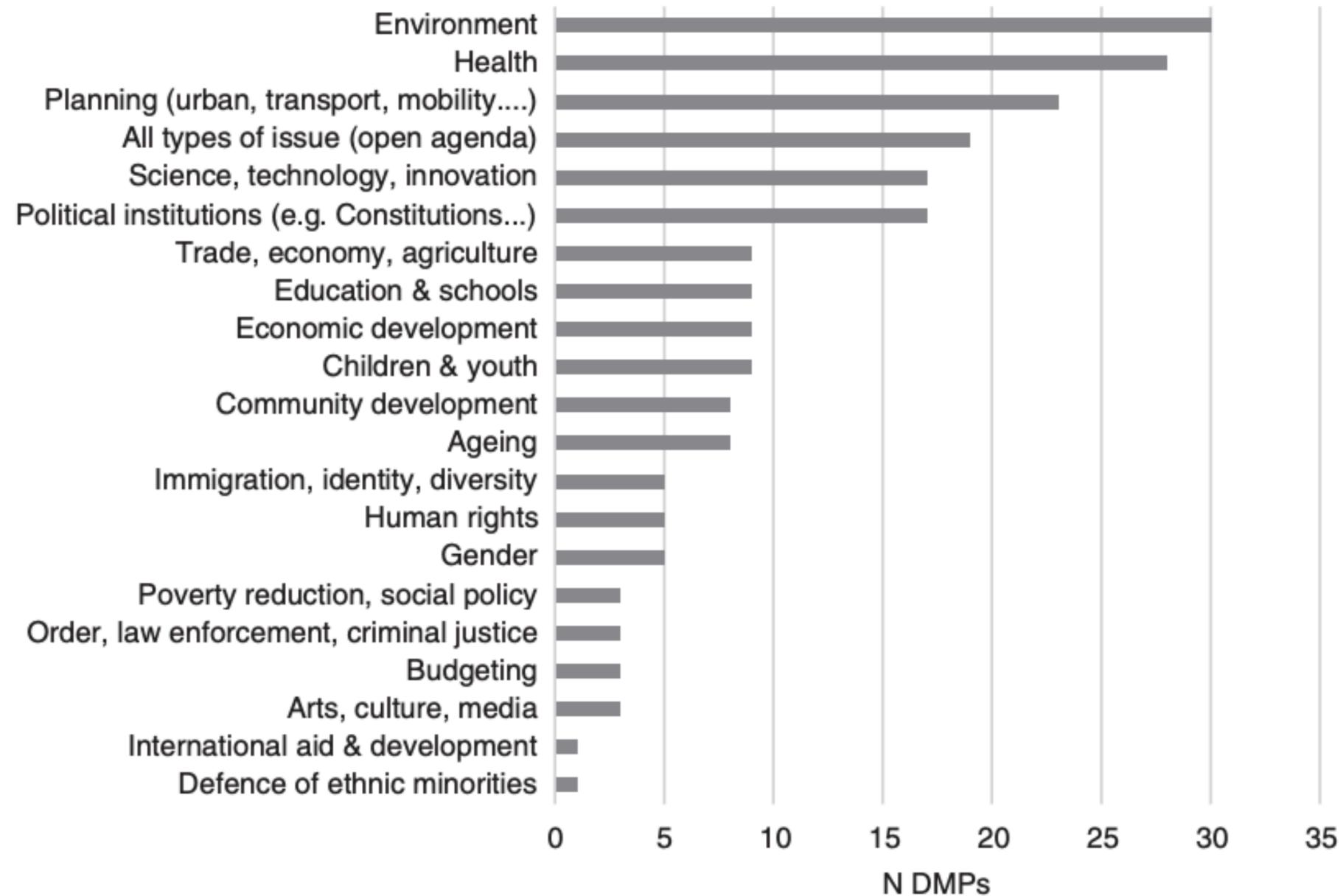
Figure 2.2: Distribution of DMPs held in Europe according to the duration of the deliberation process (2000–20)



Source: POLITICIZE inventory of mini-publics in Europe (2000–20).

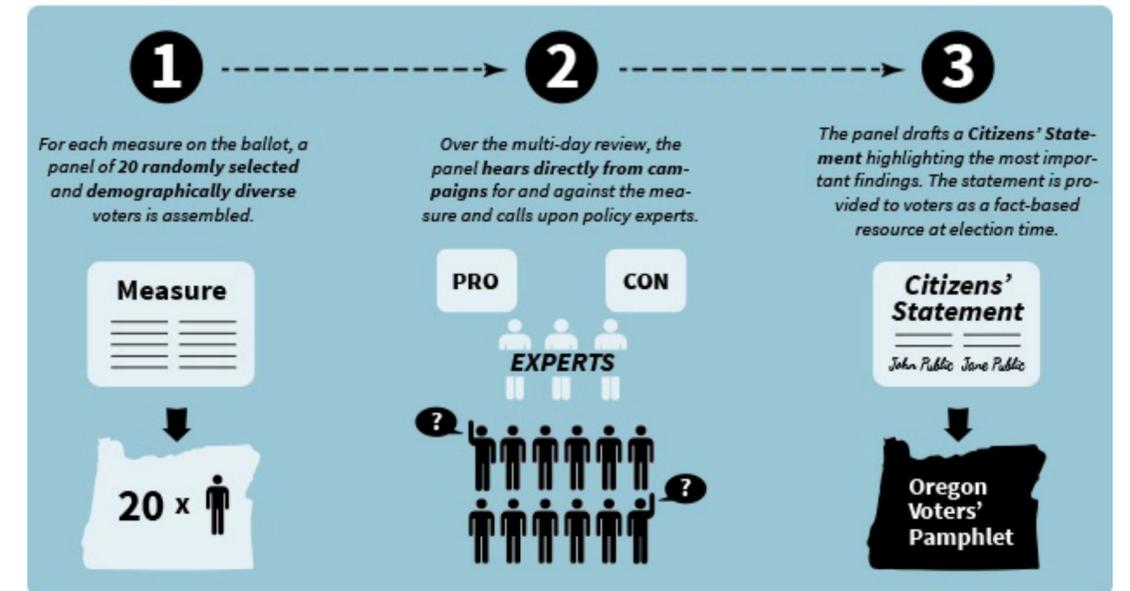
Deliberative Mini-Publics

Figure 2.3: Policy issues covered by the DMPs in Europe (2000–20)



Deliberative Mini-Publics

- **Citizens' Initiative Review:** established with the aim of providing the recommendations of ordinary citizens on referendums.
- **Deliberative Polls:** large random samples, polled before and after deliberation, to demonstrate learning processes in a high-quality debate setting. Often televised.
- **Citizens' Assemblies:** large-scale, long-running DMPs, involving public/expert hearings and open submissions.



AMERICA
in **ONE ROOM**
CLIMATE and ENERGY



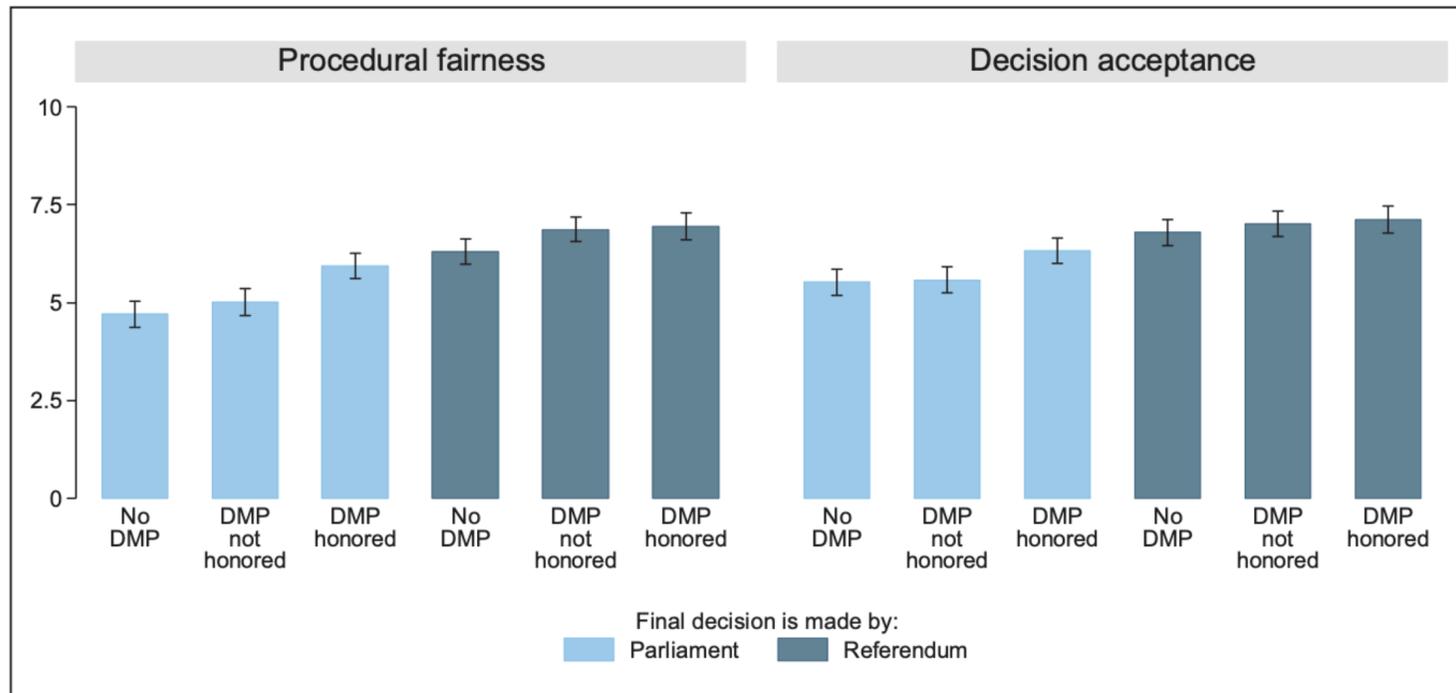
CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY
ON ELECTORAL REFORM

Participatory Budgeting

- Originated in Porto Alegre, Brazil (1989) and now used in thousands of cities worldwide
- Normally, community members cooperate with elected officials to draft a short-list of projects to spend a pre-determined portion of the municipal budget, which is then put to a public vote.
- Authorities implement the chosen policies: the decisions are (to various extent) binding, but often originate from low/unequal participation.



Promises of Democratic Innovation



- Address declining trust, by increasing procedural transparency/fairness.
- Reduced polarisation and develop civic learning: participants become more reflective and “disagree better”.
- Better-quality decisions through informed deliberation.

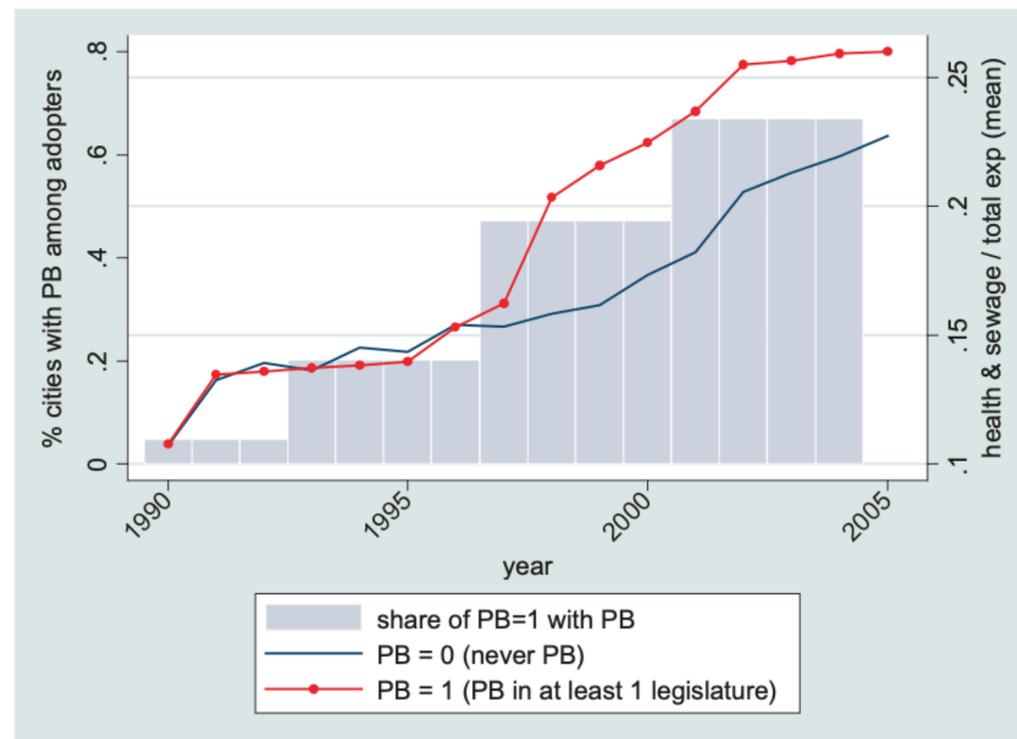


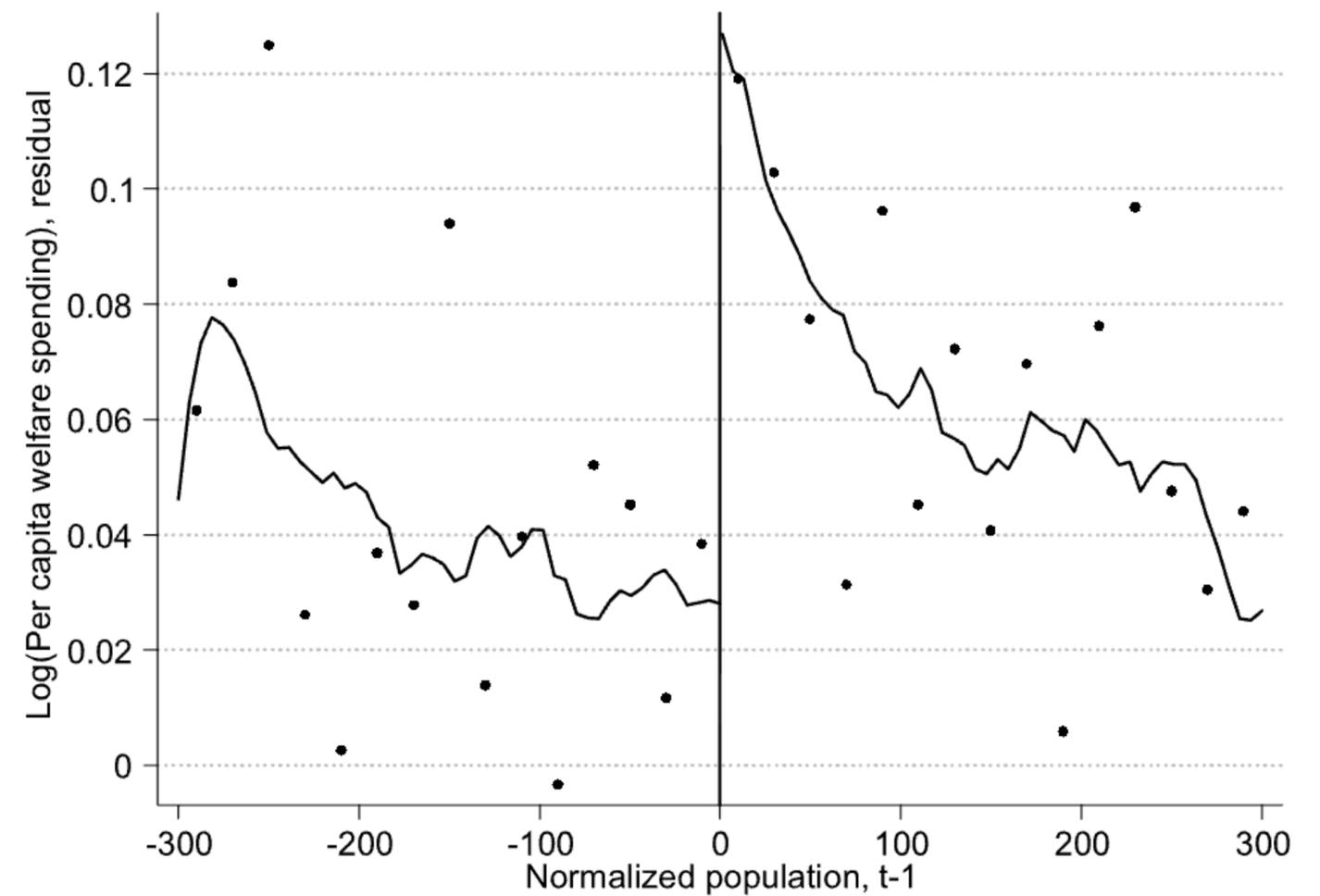
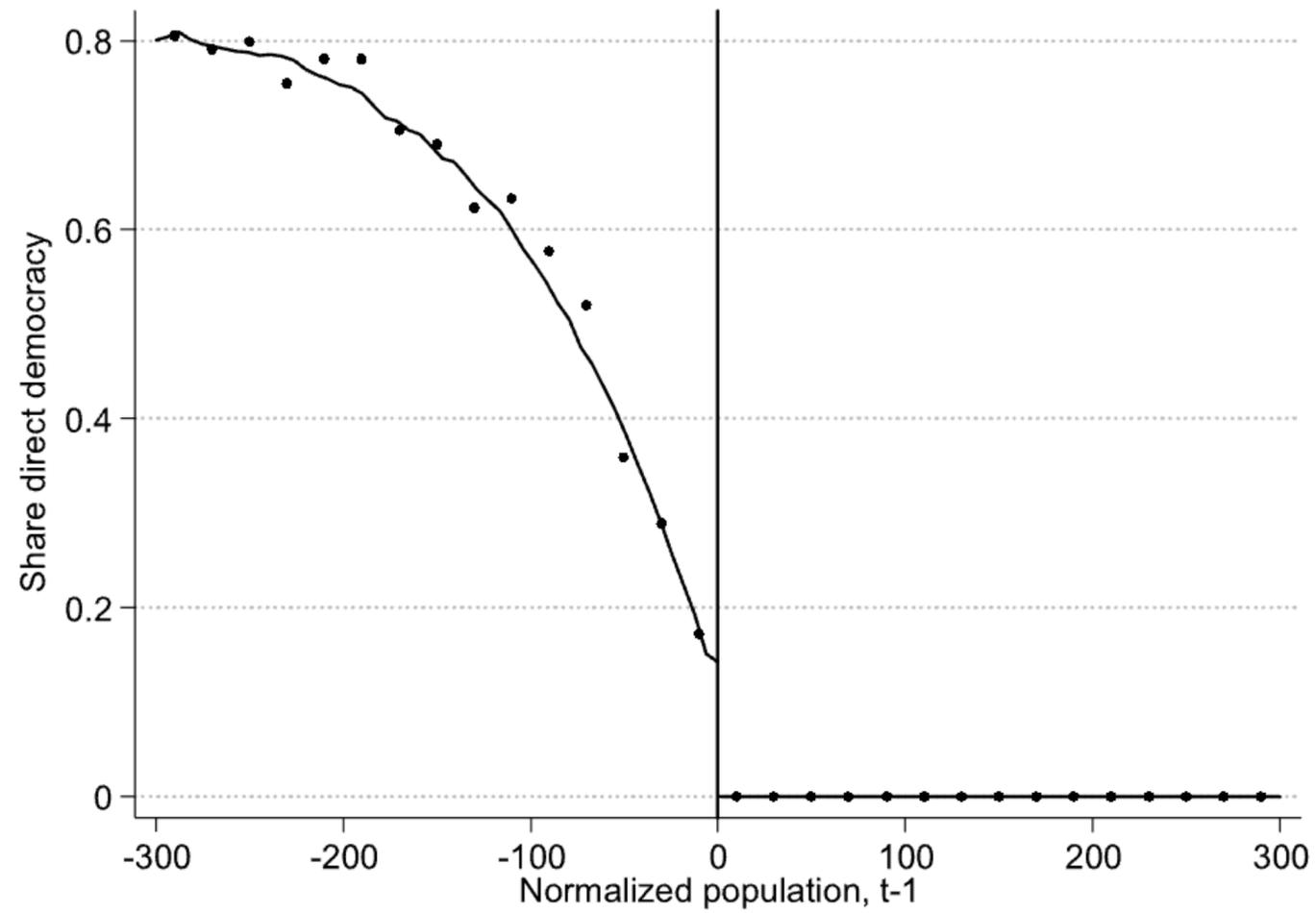
Figure 4. Evolution of municipal expenditures share in health and sanitation: adopters (PB = 1) vs. non-adopters (PB = 0).

- Germann, M., Marien, S., & Muradova, L. (2024). Scaling up? Unpacking the effect of deliberative mini-publics on legitimacy perceptions. *Political Studies*, 72(2), 677-700. Gonçalves, S. (2014). The effects of participatory budgeting on municipal expenditures and infant mortality in Brazil. *World development*, 53,

Criticism: Elite Capture

I have difficulty suppressing the uncharitable thought that there may be an element of bad faith in the deliberative-democracy movement generally [...] I think that what motivates many deliberative democrats is not a love of democracy or a faith in the people, but a desire to change specific political outcomes, which they believe they could do through argument, if only anyone could be persuaded to listen, because they are masters of argumentation. [...] I sense a power grab by the articulate class whose comparative advantage is—deliberation. (Posner, 2004)

Criticism: Elite Capture



- Hinnerich, B. T., & Pettersson-Lidbom, P. (2014). Democracy, redistribution, and political participation: Evidence from Sweden 1919–1938. *Econometrica*, 82(3), 961-993.

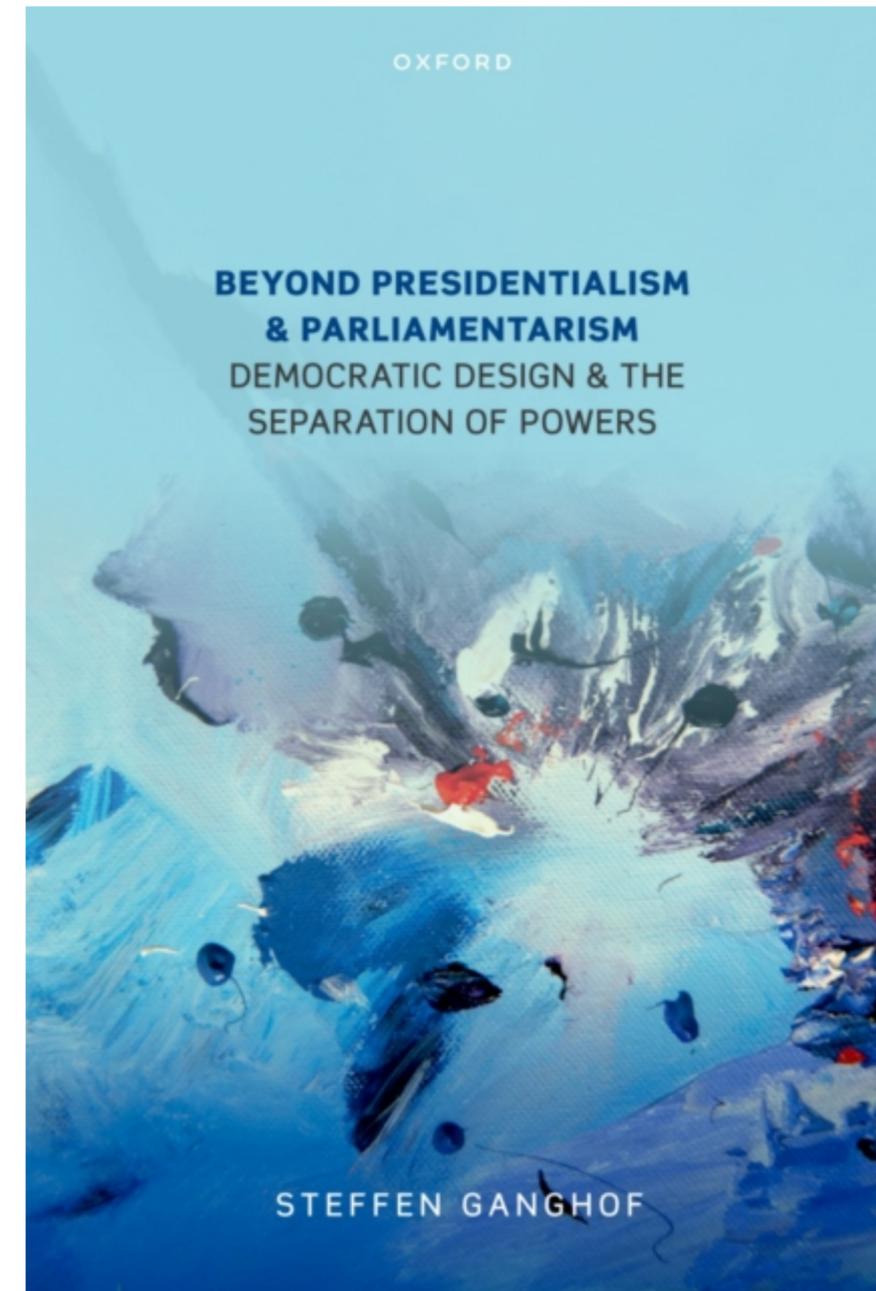
Criticism: Elite Capture

- “The elite may have been more able to exercise more de facto political power in direct democracy than in representative democracy for several reasons. First, the lack of (pro-poor) political parties in direct democracy made it harder for the citizens to solve their collective action problems [...] Second, the chairman of the town meeting, often a member of the elite, had great agenda setting power. Third, many decisions at meetings were taken by an open vote, which made it easier for the elite to rely on intimidation.” (Hinnerich and Pettersson-Lidbom, 2014)



Semi-Parliamentarism

- An exercise in democratic design that is at once **more** and **less** ambitious than deliberative/participatory innovations: remains **within the remit of representative democracy**, but with a new form of executive-legislative relationship.
- Ganghof proposes semi-parliamentarism both as a desirable innovation and as a new form of government of that has its closest real-world applications in Australia and Japan.





Semi-Parliamentarism

- Separation of powers between the executive and the legislature may be a good thing, but the concentration of executive power in a single person is what is truly bad about presidentialism.
- The solution: have separation of power within the legislature:
 - A “Lower” Chamber, which gives or revokes confidence in the executive, elected via a majoritarian system, so the government is stable.
 - An “Upper” Chamber — **without** confidence prerogatives but with otherwise full powers over legislation — elected via proportional representation.



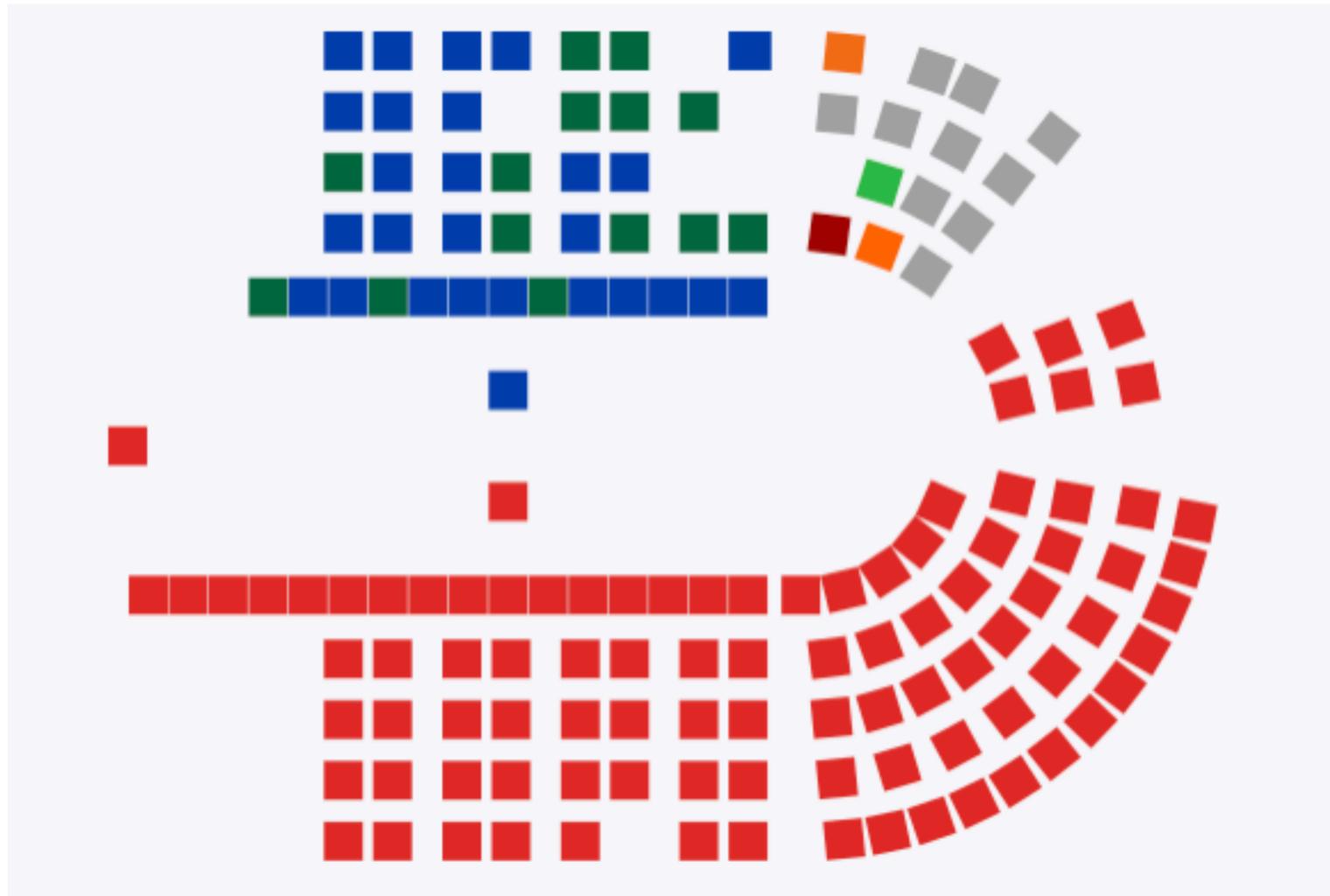
Semi-Parliamentarism

- Advantage over (semi-)presidentialism: **separation of power without personalism.**
- **Potential** advantages over parliamentarism:
 - “Majoritarian” parliamentarism reduces the party system artificially, provides little checks on the executive, produces disproportional influence on decision-making.
 - “Proportional” parliamentarism are increasingly complex to manage: clarity of responsibility is unclear and multi-party coalitions can be rigid and inefficient.
- Under semi-parliamentary rule, you have majoritarian-type executives in a **permanent minority status** in the (proportional) Upper House, where the executive must find majorities on an issue-by-issue basis: proportional influence, but coalitions can be flexible and governments stable, as the Upper House has no confidence authority.

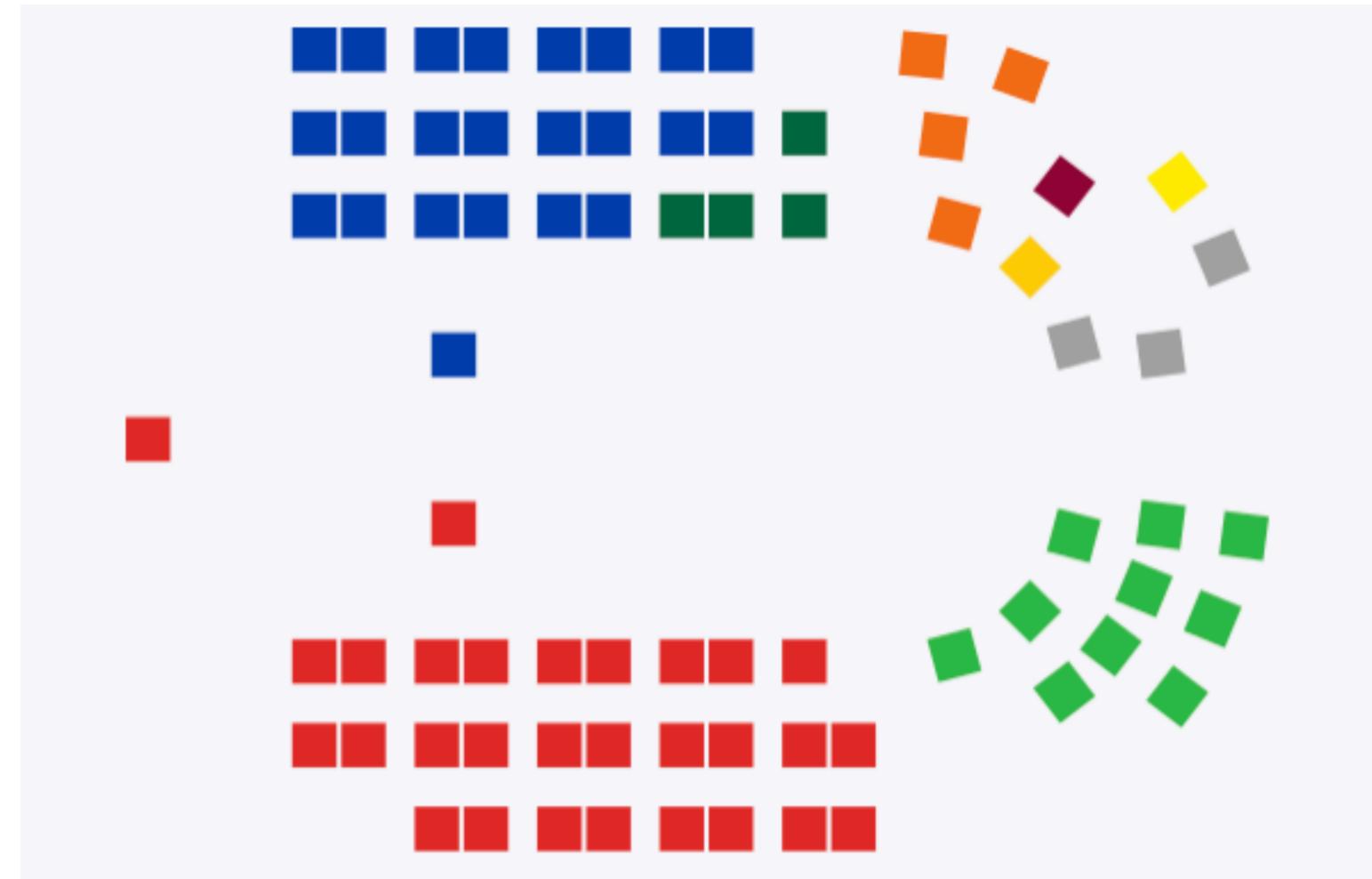


Semi-Parliamentarism

Australian House of Representatives



Australian Senate





Semi-Parliamentarism

- For Ganghof, semi-parliamentarism “enables voters to make a clear choice between competing cabinet alternatives, while also being fairly represented in an issue-specific or policy-specific process of deliberation and legislative decision-making.”
- But is it sustainable in the face of executive aggrandisement?
- Are there risks of reproducing deadlock patterns of presidentialism?
- Are flexible policy coalitions better than rigid coalition package deals?

A Few Final Thoughts

- Democratic innovations and democratic design should be, in my view, a part of the conversation on how to make democracy more resilient and effective.
- Many of the worst manifestations of democratic backsliding are due to vulnerabilities of institutions that were designed for the politics of the past.
- But we should be wary of calls for “more and better democracy!”: democracy is a contested concept onto which people project very different ideals. And very often there are inescapable trade-offs between these ideals.

**Thank you very much
For your kind attention**

...and good luck with your essays!

Leo