

Citizen Deliberation in Germany: Lessons from the ‘Bürgerrat Demokratie’

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Abstract

Randomly-selected citizen deliberation procedures, often called mini-publics, are increasingly being integrated into representative democratic systems. Germany is no exception and has in fact been at the forefront of this ‘deliberative wave’ (OECD 2020). This article explores the capacity of large-scale federal-level mini-publics to strengthen democratic legitimacy by making democratic will-formation more inclusive, generating considered citizen judgements and connecting these to political authority and the broader public sphere. The article provides both a historical overview of citizen deliberation in Germany and an in-depth analysis of the pioneering case of the *Bürgerrat Demokratie*. This analysis shows mini-publics can produce more inclusive and considered citizen input into policy-making than more traditional citizen involvement processes, but does not suggest that mini-publics are a suitable means to redress the deficits created by declining election turnout. In addition, it argues that the *Bürgerrat Demokratie*, through a combination of civil society campaign expertise and an innovative, four-phase process design, provides some important lessons for how to better connect citizen deliberation processes to both political authority and the public sphere.

Keywords: *Bürgerrat Demokratie*; citizens’ assembly; citizen participation; deliberation; deliberative democracy; mini-public

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The rise of deliberative democracy has made citizen deliberation in the democratic will-formation process a key element of democratic legitimacy (Dryzek 2000; Warren 2017). This has provoked the creation of a range of innovative participatory-deliberative processes that aim to add more citizen deliberation into legislative and policy processes. The most prominent of these innovations are called deliberative 'mini-publics' (Elstub 2014; Harris 2019). Mini-publics come in a variety of different shapes and sizes, but share several core features, such as randomly selected participation and facilitated discussions (see OECD 2020 for a comprehensive overview). They range from small-scale 'Citizens' Juries' of between 15-25 participants to large-scale 'Deliberative Polls' of more than 500 participants. These deliberative mini-publics are rapidly spreading around the world (Dryzek et al. 2019) and this 'deliberative wave' (OECD 2020) has left its mark on the democratic system in Germany. Germany has been at the forefront of the wave, since in the 1970s Peter Dienel invented one of the first small-scale mini-publics, which he called 'Planning Cells'.

Germany, like many established democracies, has a legitimacy deficit. More than half of the population is dissatisfied with the current functioning of democracy, particularly socio-economically disadvantaged citizens (Decker et al. 2019). These citizens are significantly less likely to vote (Schäfer 2015) or participate in political parties. Surveys suggest more than three quarters of citizens are concerned by the problem of unequal political influence and distrustful of political parties as the sole institutional avenue of will-formation (Decker et al. 2019). The advocates of mini-publics claim they are a potential means for remedying these dysfunctions. By including a broader cross-section of the population in will-formation, providing avenues for citizens to reach considered judgements on important political issues, and connecting these considered judgements to the legislative and policy process, they can make them more responsive.

Strong public support for the introduction of more citizen deliberation in federal level politics is therefore not surprising. Surveys show widespread desire to make representative institutions more responsive to public voice by adopting more federal-level participation opportunities (Geissel et al. 2014), including a large majority in favour of the introduction of deliberative mini-publics (Decker et al. 2019). Political elites have become interested in this topic too: the 'Grand Coalition' Government promised an expert commission to investigate how citizen participation procedures can complement representative democracy (Federal Government of Germany 2018, 163), and the Bundestag

announced in June 2020 that it would commission a federal-level Citizen's Assembly on the topic of Germany's role in the world. This followed civil society experimentation with a pioneering Citizens' Assembly on the federal level, the 'Bürgerrat Demokratie' (Citizens' Assembly on Democracy). Citizen deliberation is thus set to become an important component of federal-level politics in Germany.

This article explores the potential of large-scale, federal-level mini-publics to strengthen democracy in Germany by scrutinizing the Bürgerrat Demokratie as a pioneering case. What does it tell us about the capacity of mini-publics to make democratic will-formation more inclusive, generate considered citizen judgements and connect these to decision-making authority? The article begins with a general overview of the use of mini-publics in Germany, charting the journey to the current point in time. It then outlines the regularly claimed objectives of mini-publics to foster inclusive and consequential citizen deliberation. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of the case of the Bürgerrat Demokratie, assessing how it performed on these objectives and drawing out lessons for future efforts at citizen deliberation. The article, accordingly, provides both a thorough documentation of this novel case, as well as evidence to inform a live issue in German politics: how to strengthen federal-level political institutions to make them more participatory and deliberative.

Citizen Deliberation in Germany: The Bürgerrat Demokratie in Context

The Bürgerrat Demokratie forms part of a long tradition of citizen deliberation in Germany. A recent OECD report (2020) suggested that, along with Australia, the Federal Republic has conducted the most deliberative mini-publics of any nation between 1986 and 2019. Nevertheless, the Bürgerrat Demokratie is a significant development in this tradition. It is the first national-level Citizens' Assembly exclusively initiated by civil society organisations (CSOs). This distinguishes the process from other deliberative initiatives in Germany in terms of its administrative level and number of participants as well as the commissioning organization and level of institutionalization.

Citizen deliberation in Germany has largely been shaped by the use of Planning Cells and Agenda21 processes. Planning Cells were developed by German professor Peter Dienel in the early 1970s. Along with citizens' juries (invented simultaneously in the US), they were the first form of deliberative mini-publics to be developed and have become an archetypal model (Elstub 2014; Setälä and Smith 2018; Harris 2019). They aim to increase governing capacity by bridging the gap between citizens and the political-administrative sphere by involving citizens in will-formation (Dienel and Renn 1995). Planning Cells have proved popular with public authorities, making them the most frequently used type of mini-public in Germany (Hendriks 2005; Smith 2009; OECD 2020). Unlike Planning Cells, Agenda21 processes do not meet all the definitional criteria of a deliberative mini-public, since they do not select their

participants through random selection. Still, their widespread adoption means they have been an equally important venue for citizen deliberation in Germany.

There are two significant differences between the Citizens' Assembly process, used for the Bürgerrat Demokratie, and the more commonly employed Agenda21 and Planning Cells. One is the number of participants involved in the deliberations: Citizens' Assemblies typically recruit more than 100 participants – the Bürgerrat recruited 160 – whereas Planning Cells restrict each cell to 25 people, running multiple cells in parallel. The second difference is that Planning Cells are normally conducted on the local level. There have been some on the state level – in Bavaria on consumer protection (Hendriks 2011, 108-129) and in Baden-Württemberg on volunteering and societal engagement – and some isolated examples of federal level planning cells – for instance, by the former Federal Ministry of Postal Service and Telecommunication on the future of the digital telephone, as well as by the Ministry of Research and Technology on new information technologies and national energy policies (Dienel and Renn 1995). Agenda21 processes have been even more locally focused. Following the 'Agenda21-resolution' established by the *UN Conference on Environment and Development* in 1992, which assigned particular importance to the local level, many procedures have been carried out in German municipalities. In contrast to the *ad-hoc* character of mini-publics in general and planning cells in particular, local Agenda21 processes are designed as long-term participatory processes for community organizing in order to implement sustainable development.

The Bürgerrat Demokratie is part of a growing trend of adopting deliberative mini-publics at higher-levels of government. On the state level, this includes a pioneering attempt to develop more institutionalized forms of deliberative participation in the state of Baden-Württemberg, which began implementing citizen deliberation in the legislative process and introduced a state-councilor on civil society and citizen participation in 2011. This was a direct consequence of difficulties with the infrastructure project 'Stuttgart21', which led to the adoption of a 'politics of being heard', with the participation of randomly-selected citizens employed to pursue "participatory lawmaking" (Brettschneider and Renkamp 2016).

There have also been other recent experiments to involve randomly-selected citizens in deliberative initiatives on the federal level. The Federal Ministry for Environment, Conservation and Nuclear Safety (*Bundesministerium für Umwelt, Naturschutz und nukleare Sicherheit*) is the most active proponent, seeing citizen participation as a necessary element in shaping environmental policies (Pfeifer, Opitz, and Geis 2020). These processes were often conducted on a similar scale to Citizens' Assemblies. In 2015 the Ministry initiated the 'Climate Protection Plan 2050' ('Klimaschutzplan 2050'), involving 472 randomly selected citizens in five cities throughout Germany (Faas and Huesmann 2017) and the 'ProgRes II' resource efficiency programme, involving 200 randomly-selected citizens. Four years

later, 250 citizens and 50 youth representatives were involved in 'ProgRes III'. There was also a process on the 'integrated environmental program 2030', and a permanent mixed assembly since 2016 in the 'national monitoring body on the selection process of a nuclear disposal site'. The Bürgerrat Demokratie should therefore be seen as part of an increasing tendency to adopt large-scale deliberative initiatives to influence federal level policy-making.

There is an important difference between the Bürgerrat Demokratie and previous federal processes: it was initiated, funded and run by CSOs. The local, state and federal level initiatives referred to above were initiated by executive or administrative actors in order to influence their own policy-making and implementation processes. The Bürgerrat Demokratie was intended to influence an expert commission on democratic reform, promised (but yet to be established) by the 'Grand Coalition' Government, but had no formal connection to the commission. The process therefore had a stronger connection to civil society and a weaker connection to political institutions than is typical of most other deliberation processes in Germany. This is a significant development because government-led mini-publics have been criticised for being too far removed from civil society, in the worst cases even crowding out bottom-up participation (Boswell, Settle and Dugdale 2015). Following the Bürgerrat Demokratie, the Ältestenrat¹ of the Bundestag initiated a Citizens' Assembly on the subject of Germany's role in the world (Deutscher Bundestag 2020a), the first legislative-initiated mini-public in Germany. This Assembly is to be modelled on the Bürgerrat Demokratie and run and funded by the same CSOs, marking a new hybridization between the legislative and civil society in conducting deliberative-participatory exercises (Deutscher Bundestag 2020b). This is indicative of increasing interest concerning the use of larger-scale deliberative mini-publics to complement the representative democratic process. As such, it is important to learn the lessons of the Bürgerrat Demokratie regarding what these initiatives can contribute to the democratic system.

Objectives of Citizen Deliberation

Inclusive Participation

A key objective of deliberative mini-publics is to address a well-documented problem in contemporary democracies: unequal participation. The fact that the wealthy and well-educated participate in politics substantially more than other socio-economic groups (Verba and Nie 1987; Dalton 2017) poses a challenge to the foundational concept of political equality. Under-representation of poorer and less-

¹ The 'Ältestenrat' is a committee that manages the processes and meetings of the Bundestag. It consists of the President of the Bundestag, the vice presidents and twenty-three representatives appointed by the parliamentary groups according to their distribution of seats in the parliament.

educated members of society is apparent in voting behaviour (Schäfer 2015) and is even stronger for more demanding forms of participation such as involvement in parties or citizens' initiatives. Mini-publics are designed to guard against this by replicating the diversity of the public in miniature. By using stratified random selection, they aim to recruit participants that reflect the population on salient characteristics. This attempt to expand the diversity of voices that influence policy formation and public debates, nevertheless, cannot be fully addressed through random selection. Since invitees can freely choose to accept or decline the invitation, the risk of selection bias remains. In addition, there are concerns that reproducing the public in miniature could reproduce the same structural exclusions as the broader public sphere, with marginalized groups included in too small numbers to really make their voices count. Mini-publics typically employ trained facilitators to reduce these forms of exclusion. Nevertheless, there is evidence showing that women and less-educated people can be disadvantaged regarding their actual contributions to discussions (Karpowitz, Mendelberg, and Shaker 2012; Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014; Gerber 2015). To understand whether processes like the Bürgerrat Demokratie can contribute to making citizen deliberation in Germany more inclusive, it is therefore important to examine who was selected to participate in the process in terms of sociodemographic as well as attitudinal representativeness, as well as whether there was relative equality of participation within the process itself.

Considered Judgement

A particular strength of mini-publics vis-à-vis other democratic innovations is that they arrive at considered judgements (Smith 2009). Deliberative democracy itself emerged from concerns that the prevailing liberal and elite conceptions of democracy paid insufficient attention to the quality of processes of will-formation (Dryzek 2000). Deliberative mini-publics were therefore designed to provide opportunities for citizens to reach considered judgements through the free and fair exchange of reasons in an environment structured to approximate ideal conditions for deliberation. This is intended to expand the breadth of inputs into political institutions beyond professionalized interest groups and experts by including a citizen perspective, whilst also ensuring this perspective is more substantial than 'raw' public opinion (Fishkin 2009; Setälä and Smith 2018). This is achieved through providing participants with sufficient time to deliberate, up-to-date information and expert witnesses to inform their discussions, as well as using ground-rules for discussion and trained facilitators to ensure mutually respectful exchanges. The claim is that 'when citizens are given the time, resources and support to learn and deliberate about public issues, they can engage with complex debates and collectively make considered judgements' (Escobar and Elstub 2017, 6). To learn the lessons of the Bürgerrat Demokratie for citizen deliberation in Germany, this article examines the timing, expert

information, and facilitation, using a combination of researcher observations of the process and participants' reported views in a post-event survey.

Consequences on the Political Process

The value of any deliberative initiative is partly determined by how consequential the deliberations are (Dryzek, 2009): do they have any tangible influence on public policies, for instance? To contribute considered citizen judgements into the democratic system and make it more inclusive, deliberation must be connected to the system, either working indirectly through the public sphere, or directly with representative institutions and administrative actors to achieve 'macro political impacts' (Goodin and Dryzek 2006). A significant criticism of mini-publics has highlighted their difficulties in making these connections (Dean, Boswell and Smith, 2020). The argument is that, commonly conducted as *ad hoc*, one-off processes, mini-publics do not become embedded in the regular political cycle, and the use of random selection also means that they are disconnected from civil society actors (Papadopoulos 2012; Pateman 2012). This concern has resulted in a growing focus situating mini-publics within a broader deliberative system (Niemeyer 2014; Curato and Böker 2016; Felicetti, Niemeyer, and Curato 2016), in particular, exploring their connections to representative decision-making processes (Hendriks 2016; Setälä 2017; Green, Kingzette, and Neblo 2019; Kuyper and Wolkenstein 2019). It has even been observed how deliberative-participatory processes are themselves becoming more system-like, operating multiple channels in order to achieve these connections (Dean, Boswell and Smith 2020).

Policy effects are not the only way that mini-publics can have impacts. As Jacquet and van der Does (2020) have highlighted, they can also have individual-level effects on the participants in the mini-public that radiate outwards, and structural effects on the political system, by shifting the mode of policy-making in a participatory-deliberative direction. Mini-publics can provide an 'educative forum', offering participants opportunities to listen to the interests and opinions of others, engage in reasoned and respectful discussion, and find compromises (Fung 2003, 340). They can strengthen political knowledge and interest (Fournier et al. 2011), as well as participants perceptions of their internal and external political efficacy (Farrell, O'Malley, and Suiter 2013; Knobloch and Gastil 2015). One indirect consequence on the political system is thus through strengthening participants' democratic capacities for long-term political engagement (Geissel 2012; Escobar and Elstub 2017), so that the participants take their own independent actions. To draw out the lessons from the Bürgerrat Demokratie for how citizen deliberation initiatives can be consequential, this article examines how the processes was designed to connect to political institutions and public debate, as well as support for participants to take their own actions.

The Process of the Bürgerrat Demokratie

The *Bürgerrat Demokratie*² is a multi-stage, citizen deliberation process tasked with considering means for reforming federal level democracy in Germany in order to improve public participation and public trust. The aim was to advance long-standing debates about supplementing the federal political system with direct democratic procedures (see, e.g., Grotz 2013; Mörschel and Efler 2013) and/or citizen deliberation procedures (see, e.g., Huber and Dänner 2018; Roth 2018; Geissel and Jung 2019). This debate was given renewed impetus by the ‘Grand Coalition’ Government’s announcement that it would ‘set up an expert commission in order to elaborate suggestions whether and how the well-proven parliamentary-representative democracy can be complemented by elements of citizen participation and direct democratic procedures’ (Federal Government of Germany 2018, 163). This motivated two CSOs – *Mehr Demokratie e.V.* and the *Schoepflin Foundation* – to initiate the *Bürgerrat Demokratie* with the aim both to provide input for the planned commission and showcase a prototype for citizen deliberation on the national level. Two consultancies – *IFOK GmbH* and *nexus e.V.* – were instructed to conduct the process, supported by an academic and civil society advisory council to ensure quality and independence.

The centrepiece of the process was the *Bürgerrat* – a Citizens’ Assembly that took place for four days across two weekends in Leipzig. The selection of a Citizens’ Assembly was inspired by the recent Irish Constitutional Convention, which had successfully deployed this technique to deliberate a range of contested constitutional questions (Farrell and Suiter 2019). It consisted of 160 citizens recruited by stratified random selection. Participants were tasked with deliberating the over-arching question of whether and how Germany’s representative democratic system should be supplemented by citizen participation and direct democracy. The programme was structured along seven themes: challenges of democracy, direct democracy, citizen participation, lobbyism, representativeness, online participation and combinatory models of democracy. Each theme began with plenary sessions containing presentations from and discussions with subject experts, followed by professionally facilitated small group deliberations. These small groups formulated recommendations which were collected and summarized by a team of seven participants supported by a team of editors. This produced 22 recommendations, which were voted upon by all the participants in plenary, then compiled into a citizens’ report (‘Bürgergutachten’³).

² Further information: www.buergerrat.de

³ <https://www.buergerrat.de/fileadmin/downloads/buergergutachten.pdf>.

The *Bürgerrat* comprised the second of four phases of the process; it was preceded by six *regional conferences* (*‘Regionalkonferenzen’*), held consecutively in Erfurt, Schwerin, Koblenz, Gütersloh, Mannheim and Munich. These six events were open for all interested citizens and additionally, the organisers invited CSOs and politicians of all levels. In each event, participants discussed potential issues and questions for the agenda of the *Bürgerrat* in small groups. Then, the results were prioritized by all participants to concretize the agenda for the *Bürgerat*.

Phase three – the *‘Day for Democracy’* (*‘Tag für die Demokratie’*) - was a public event to raise awareness of the *Bürgerrat* and its recommendations. All participants of the regional conferences and the citizens’ assembly were invited to Berlin, where the recommendations were handed over to the president of the Bundestag, Wolfgang Schäuble, and then discussed by delegates from all parties represented in the Bundestag.

Phase four, still ongoing, is the *implementation phase* (*‘Umsetzungsphase’*). In order to support the implementation of the recommendations, there were meetings of members of the *Bürgerrat* and representatives of the Bundestag and state parliaments, as well as chairmen of the parliamentary groups. To date 22 conversations have been held with politicians about the deliberative procedure and its outcome, as well as an online press conference summarising developments during first 100 days since the handover of the recommendations.

Table 1. Overview of the *Bürgerrat Demokratie* Process

PHASE 1 <i>June-August 2019</i>	PHASE 2 <i>September-October 2019</i>	PHASE 3 <i>15th of November 2019</i>	PHASE 4 <i>January-December 2020</i>
Regional conferences	Bürgerrat	Day for Democracy	Implementation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ involved: citizens, civil society representatives and politicians ▪ six conferences throughout Germany ▪ preparation of the <i>Bürgerrat</i> agenda 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ involved: 160 randomly selected citizens ▪ two weekends of deliberation in Leipzig ▪ developing a citizens’ report 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ involved: citizens, civil society representatives and politicians ▪ event in Berlin ▪ handover of the citizens’ report 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Meetings of the members of the <i>Bürgerrat</i> and politicians ▪ Résumé online press conference

Our below analysis considers all four phases of the *Bürgerrat Demokratie* process but the main focus is the centrepiece Citizens’ Assembly. This provides the foundation for our assessment of the capacity of deliberative mini-publics to strengthen federal level democracy through more inclusive participation and considered public judgements. The other three phases are analysed in terms of their contribution to connecting the *Bürgerrat* to the democratic system, which was their primary aim. Accordingly, the focus of our analysis mirrors the focus of the process. The data for this analysis is predominantly drawn

from data collected by the Democratic Innovations Research Unit, Goethe University Frankfurt’s scientific evaluation of the process (Geissel et al. 2019).

Analysis

Inclusive Participation

The Bürgerrat aimed to reflect the population of Germany in its composition by recruiting a stratified random sample of participants. The stratification process employed several socio-demographic categories – gender, age, education, migration background, size of municipality and region – to ensure a representative group of participants. Other best-practice techniques were also used to try to reduce the well-known issue of selection bias in the acceptance of the invitation to participate. Participants were sent personal invitations, endorsed by the President of the Bundestag to demonstrate the legitimacy of the process. Moreover, all participants received an honorarium of 300€ in total, plus costs of travel, food and accommodation.

The Bürgerrat was largely successful in generating a representative population sample according to the socio-demographic characteristics it employed for stratification. The composition of the group was very similar to the population in terms of gender, age, municipality and migration background (see Table 2). However, the highly educated were heavily overrepresented. The recruitment process also did not employ any attitudinal stratification criteria, but this information was collected as a part of the evaluation process. It showed an over-representation of those with high levels of political interest and of those who favoured a participatory conception of politics, for example: 45 per cent of the respondents of the Bürgerrat stated that citizens should decide important issues rather than politicians, while, according to a recent representative survey, 35 per cent of the population share this preference (ALLBUS 2018). This is concerning because, if the sample is attitudinally biased on the topic of the deliberations, then they may produce recommendations that would not be supported by the population.

Table 2. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Bürgerrat compared to the Population

	Members of the Bürgerrat ¹	Total population ²
Gender		

Male	49.0%	49.3%
Female	50.0%	50.7%
Diverse	1.0%	no data available
Age*		
16-25 years	16.0%	18.4%
26-40 years	23.0%	21.8%
41-65 years	41.0%	34.6%
65+ years	20.0%	25.2%
Level of education⁴		
still student	4.0%	3.6%
without secondary education	1.0%	4.0%
‚Hauptschulabschluss‘	7.0%	29.6%
‚Mittlerer Bildungsabschluss‘	26.0%	29.9%
‚Fach-/Hochschulreife‘	62.0%	32.5%
Migration		
migration background	22.0%	24.1%
Size of municipality		
< 5.000 inhabitants	13.0%	14.2%
5.000-20.000 inhabitants	19.0%	26.4%
20.000-100.000 inhabitants	24.0%	27.5%
100.000-500.000 inhabitants	14.0%	15.1%
> 500.000 inhabitants	30.0%	16.8%
Level of political interest (n=137)		
very strong interest	8.0%	11.2%
strong interest	39.4%	27.5%
medium interest	38.0%	45.7%
weak interest	12.4%	12.3%
not at all interested	2.2%	3.3%

¹ Data on gender, age, level of education, migration and size of municipality have been collected by the organizers. Data on the level of political interest has been collected by the evaluation team through surveys.

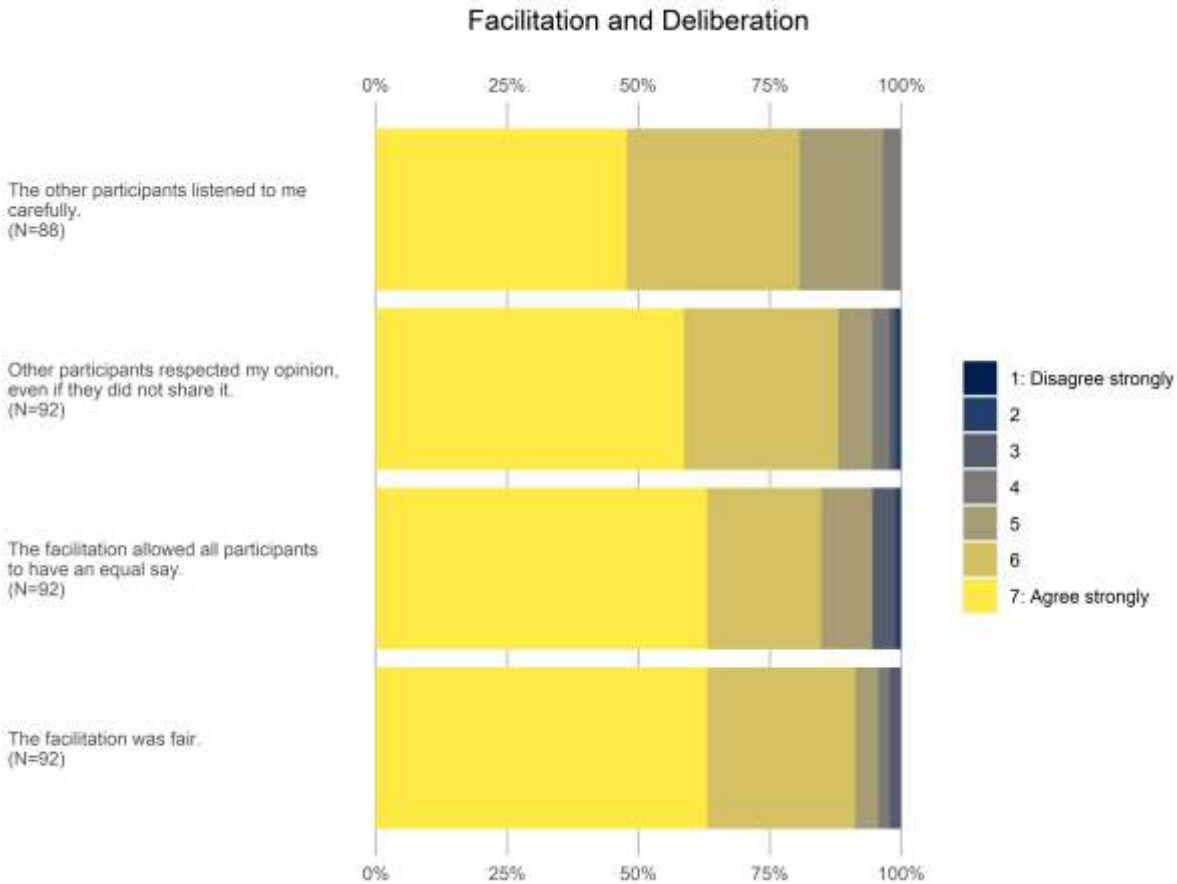
² Own calculation on the basis of Statistisches Jahrbuchs 2019, Fortschreibung des Bevölkerungsstandes, Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis 2019), ALLBUS 2018, Gemeindeverzeichnis-Informationssystem, Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis 2019).

*Data on the age refers to inhabitants at the age of 16 and older; data on the level of education refers to inhabitants at the age of 15 and older.

Overwhelming majorities of the respondents reported that the facilitation was fair and provided equal opportunities for everyone to speak (Figure 1). Similarly, the respondents reported that their deliberations with each other were characterised by honesty and respect for each other’s opinions (Figure 1). These assessments are supported by researcher observations of the deliberations. Though there was not the resource to observe every small group discussion, two observers followed a sample of these throughout the event, completing a standardised protocol that qualitatively assessed the inclusiveness of the facilitation and the participants’ exchanges with each other. These observations did not find any systematic exclusion of participants from the deliberations.

⁴ The ‘Hauptschulabschluss’ is the lowest secondary educational certificate. The ‘Mittlerer Bildungsabschluss’ is an intermediate certificate. The ‘Fach-/Hochschulreife’ is the highest certificate and qualifies students for entering universities or other tertiary education institutions.

Figure 1. Participant Assessment of the Inclusiveness of Deliberation



Source: Democratic Innovations Research Unit’s post-survey of the participants.

To understand whether citizens’ assemblies can foster more inclusive participation it is important to compare them to the performance of other relevant institutions, rather than an unattainable ideal of perfect inclusiveness. The over-representation of the highly educated and politically motivated is a well-known problem of citizen participation, which stratified random selection does not fully overcome (see also: Faas and Huesmann 2017, 30). Nevertheless, the evidence from the Bürgerrat Demokratie does suggest it mitigates the problem compared to open self-selection. The Regional Conferences that preceded the Bürgerrat used open, self-selection (with some stratification when they were oversubscribed), so provide a direct comparison of the two selection techniques. Whereas 62 per cent of the participants in the Bürgerrat were highly-educated, this increased to 80 per cent for the Regional Conferences. Similarly the *Bürgerrat* compares favourably to the Regional Conferences on political interest: 47 per cent of the *Bürgerrat* participants had a strong interest in politics compared to 90 per cent of the Regional Conference participants. The evidence does not, however, suggest that citizens assemblies can address the under-representation caused by eroding turnout in elections of those with a low education and low political interest. Only 4 per cent of the Bürgerrat participants reported not

voting in the last federal election, and the voting public is significantly more representative of the population than the Bürgerrat on these dimensions.

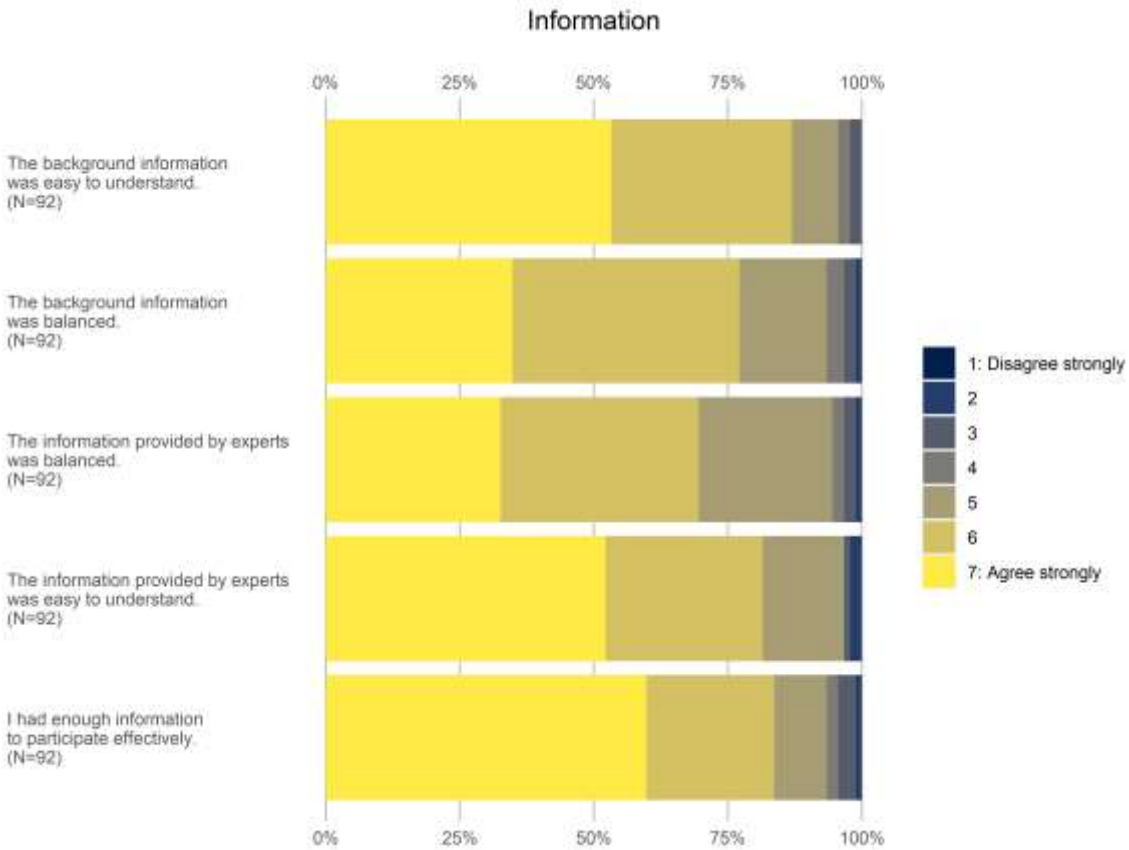
Citizens' assemblies, like the Bürgerrat, provide a promising avenue for making citizen participation more inclusive compared to more traditional forms of self-selected participation, yet there are a range of improvements that need to be made if they are to genuinely address deeper forms of political exclusion. This could include over-sampling in low income neighbourhoods in order to account for differential uptake of the invitation to participate. In addition, stratification should go beyond socio-demographic characteristics to include an attitudinal component, as, for instance, in the case of the UK Brexit Assembly (Renwick et al. 2017). This would not only ensure that people with diverse opinions on the topic under discussion are included but could also be used to ensure recruitment of those with different levels of political interest and behaviour.

Considered Judgement

The Bürgerrat employed all the common methods of mini-publics to support the deliberations of participants and ensure they reach considered judgements. Background information was posted to the participants before the meeting, each thematic topic included an expert input session with the chance for participants to discuss this information and ask questions, and professional facilitation aimed to ensure the full variety of participants' opinions were heard.

The high-level of participant satisfaction with the facilitation was already discussed in the previous section and equally large majorities approved of the background information and expert inputs (Figure 2). More than 90 per cent of the respondents said they found the background information and expert inputs balanced and comprehensible, reporting they had enough information to participate effectively in the deliberations. Documentary analysis and observations of the sessions mostly supported this positive assessment, but also revealed two issues.

Figure 2: Participant Assessment of the Quality of Information



Source: Democratic Innovations Research Unit’s post-survey of the participants.

The first issue was that the organizers struggled to attract experts critical of citizen participation, direct democratic procedures, and combinatorial models of democracy. Hence, the input by experts was unbalanced on these topics – for instance, the session on direct democratic procedures consisted of three proponents against one opponent. This was mitigated by the attempt of two of the academics to draw a balanced picture, and the fact that a comparison of the expert input and the table discussions showed that the participants also raised their own points on these subjects. Still, some common arguments against direct democracy were missing. This shows the difficulty of conducting a balanced discussion about participatory reform of democracy within a participatory process. There are obvious reasons that opponents of more participation would be reluctant to attend a participatory process to raise arguments against participation. Nevertheless, this issue is not likely to be so pronounced for other mini-publics on other themes, such as climate change, that are not so tightly connected with the nature of the process itself.

Researcher observations of the small-group discussion also revealed issues of deliberative quality. An in-depth analysis of selected table discussions (Author, forthcoming) showed that they did not engage with the full range of arguments before making recommendations. In addition, they tended to follow

a pattern of consecutive point-raising by participants rather than the back-and-forth exchange of reasons. Two elements of the process design contributed to this issue. First, the time for in-depth discussion was limited by the fact that seven topics were covered in four days. On average only 1.5 hours was spent on each complex topic. Due to the short amount of time and the format of the process, participants had less opportunities to exchange reasons and argue for and against recommendations compared to other citizen assemblies. Second, the output of the process was a bullet-point list of 22 recommendations accompanied by a vote tally of those for and against the recommendations, rather than a collective agreement on a specific solution, as for example in the British Columbia Citizens Assembly, which proposed a new voting system. This kind of output does not entail the same intensity of deliberation as reaching a collective agreement. Moreover, this was compounded when a final session to deliberate the recommendations before voting was cut.

Whether citizens assemblies contribute considered citizen judgements into the democratic system should therefore be understood as a matter of degree. The votes by the participants of the Bürgerrat in favour or against the 22 recommendations for democratic reform can definitely be viewed as informed by relevant considerations, much more so than the snap judgements of public opinion surveys and focus groups that are more commonly used to gauge public opinion. This citizen perspective also provides an informed input into will-formation that is different from professionalised interest groups or experts. In this case the value of the recommendations consists in the fact that informed citizens could agree almost unanimously on complex recommendations, rather than providing a specific solution to a political problem. Future deliberative initiatives could build on the strengths of the Bürgerrat by selecting a narrower topic and an output format more oriented towards encouraging practical reasoning. This appears particularly pertinent for the upcoming Citizens' Assembly on Germany's Role in the World, which is an extremely broad theme.

Consequences on the Political Process

The initial conditions for the Bürgerrat Demokratie to influence the political process appeared unpromising. As a civil society organised event it had no formal connection to government institutions, and the commission it originally intended to inform has never been established. Nonetheless, the process has achieved some notable successes. It provoked the aforementioned Citizens' Assembly on Germany's Role in the World, the first procedure to be initiated by a legislative-connected body. Furthermore, a session of the Bundestags Subcommittee on Civic Engagement subsequently discussed

the use of citizens' assemblies for parliamentary advice⁵. In addition, it has been cited as an influence by a growing number of local climate assemblies and has built a network for further projects. As such, the Bürgerrat provides a number of important lessons for future attempts at consequential citizen deliberation.

The centrepiece Citizens Assembly did not follow the "Irish-model" of integrating political representatives directly into the deliberations, but it did connect to politicians in other ways. The former Prime Minister of Bavaria, Günther Beckstein acted as Chairperson, attending all four days of deliberation and using his influence to advocate for deliberative processes in the media. Moreover, the president of the Bundestag, Wolfgang Schäuble, acted as patron for the process, both by endorsing the invitation letters to participants and receiving the recommendations of the Bürgerrat at the 'Day for Democracy', a public event at the Bundestag. These connections have proved important. Wolfgang Schäuble, for instance, was instrumental in securing the backing of the legislature for the forthcoming Citizens' Assembly on Germany's Role in the World.

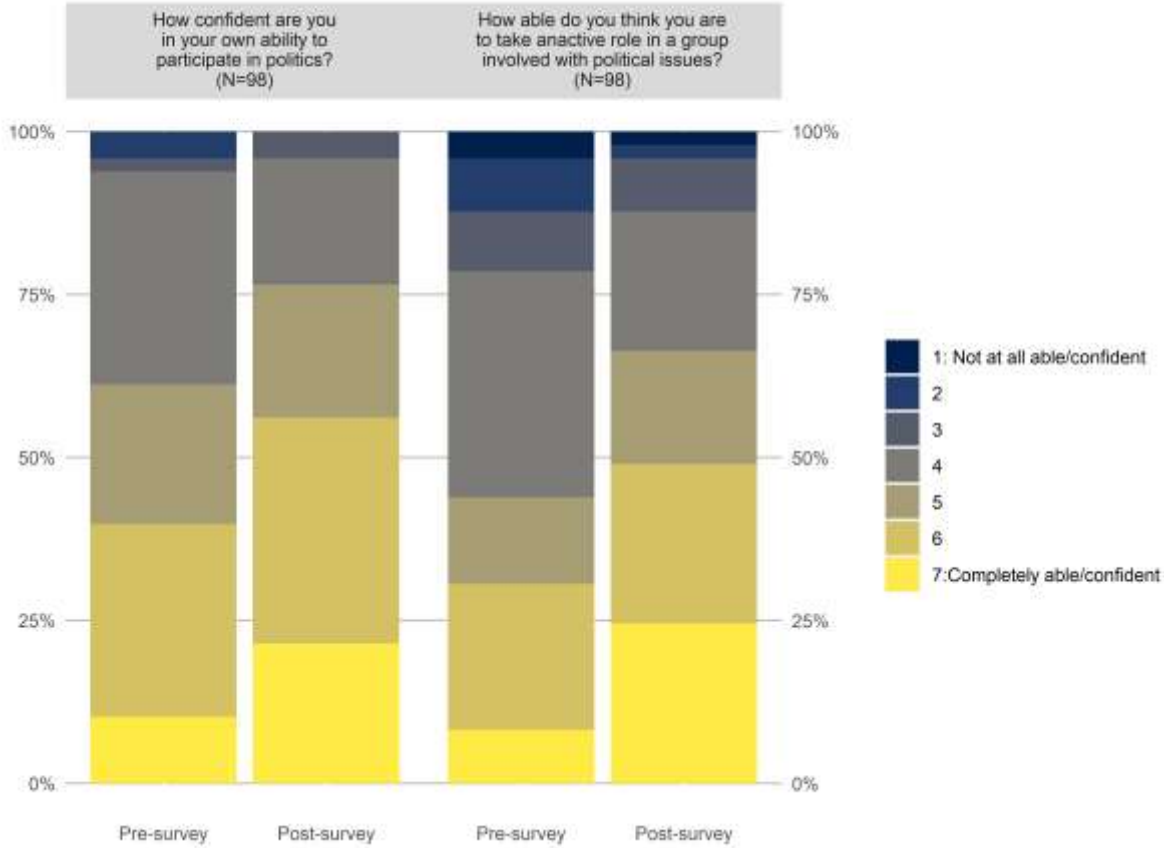
As aforementioned, the design of deliberative mini-publics is increasingly becoming more complex, incorporating multiple stages in order to improve connections to important stakeholders (Dean, Boswell and Smith, 2020). The four-phase design of the Bürgerrat Demokratie pioneered some interesting developments in this respect. The six Regional Conferences that comprised the first phase not only performed an agenda-setting function, but also built a constituency of stakeholders in the process. Politicians of all levels were invited. Many members of state parliaments, the Bundestag, and Heads of Divisions attended these events, including prominent figures like the Prime Minister of Thuringia, Bodo Ramelow, and the Chairman of the CDU/CSU Parliamentary Group, Ralph Brinkhaus. Invitations were also extended to CSOs, drawing on the organizers' extensive networks. All participants in the Regional Conferences were kept updated about the Bürgerrat and later invited to participate in the third phase, the Day for Democracy, to discuss the results of the Bürgerrat. The first and third phases thus worked to involve interested stakeholders who, by the nature of random selection, were excluded from the Bürgerrat, functioning to better connect the Bürgerrat to political representatives and civil society.

The multi-phase design was accompanied by extensive public relations work to drive interest in the Bürgerrat and promote its recommendations. Media analysis uncovered more than 400 print, online, radio and TV reports on the process (as of 22.11.2019). This included articles in leading newspapers such as the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, the Süddeutsche Zeitung and Die Zeit. The majority of the media attention focused on the Bürgerrat, but the Regional Conferences were also covered in their

⁵ For more information see: <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2020/kw41-pa-buergerschaftliches-engagement-793926>.

own right and, following an eye-catching, large-scale public art demonstration outside the Bundestag, the Day for Democracy was featured on the prime-time TV news show, Tagesschau. As is often typical with media reporting of Citizens' Assemblies, much media coverage concentrated on the novelty of randomly-selected citizen participation, rather than the recommendations themselves. However, this is less of an issue for the Bürgerrat than other processes since some of the recommendations were to introduce and institutionalise more randomly-selected citizen participation. The public relations work was thus successful in attracting media attention to new forms of participation, however; it remains beyond the scope of this article to understand the extent this translates into public awareness or public pressure to adopt these forms of participation.

Figure 3. Pre- and post-Bürgerrat Internal Efficacy of Participants



Source: Democratic Innovations Research Unit pre- and post-survey of the participants.

The Bürgerrat also impacted the democratic capacities of individual participants, as observed in other mini-publics. Comparison of pre-event and post-event survey responses found respondents' self-

perception of their capacities to participate increased (Figure 3). Participants additionally reported greater willingness to participate in some common political activities, such as voting and signing petitions. Attitudinal changes have been matched with actions. Some participants have acted on their own initiative to promote the implementation of the Bürgerrat's recommendations and push for more participation in local and regional politics. These efforts have been supported by the organizers of the Bürgerrat Demokratie. For instance, some have contacted representatives of their respective constituency to discuss their experience with the procedure. Overall, there have been 22 meetings with representatives of state parliament as well as the Bundestag.

Though it is difficult to attribute a direct causal effect, it does appear the Bürgerrat had consequences on the political process, most notably in encouraging discussion of new forms of federal level participation in both the Bundestag and the media. The recognition by the commissioners and organizers that extensive work was needed before and after the Assembly to achieve this produced a design and campaigning strategy that was able to connect to political representatives, civil society and the media through informal strategies of influence, despite a lack of formal connection to any government institution. This provides a useful lesson for future citizen deliberation initiatives. The importance of developing and sustaining a campaign around a citizens' assembly is rarely addressed in the academic literature on these processes. Yet this proved to be a significant strength of commissioning by CSOs with expertise in developing strategies for informal influence. A deliberative process directly organised by a public authority with the power to implement the recommendations of the deliberation has no need to generate public pressure in order for its recommendations to receive attention. Formally institutionalised processes may therefore more efficiently translate recommendations into policy, but at the expense of generating a broader discussion of the recommendations in the public sphere. Hybrid approaches, where political representatives or public authorities work together with CSOs to commission and organize mini-publics, as is being adopted by the upcoming Assembly on Germany's Role in the World, could fruitfully combine a formal connection to political institutions with civil society expertise in generating informal influence.

Conclusion

This article has explored the capacity for deliberative mini-publics to strengthen democracy in Germany by fostering inclusive citizen participation that transmits considered citizen judgements to political representatives and into public debate. The analysis of the specific case of the Bürgerrat Demokratie, Germany's first ever civil-society-led citizens' assembly on the federal level, supports previous findings that citizens assemblies are a promising method for making citizen participation more

inclusive and considered (Dryzek et al. 2019; Escobar and Elstub 2017; Smith 2009). It demonstrated that random selection can produce a more representative set of participants than processes which adopt open, self-selection. And facilitated, deliberative processes supported by expert evidence provide citizens with a better opportunity to arrive at considered judgements than more common forms of gauging public opinion such as opinion polls and focus groups.

It is, nevertheless, important not to over-exaggerate these claims. The evidence from the Bürgerrat does not suggest it overcame deeper forms of political exclusion, for instance; by attracting large numbers of non-voters. If mini-publics are to counter growing political alienation, apparent from declining turnout in elections and declining trust in political institutions, then they need to put additional focus on overcoming selection bias to attract politically alienated people to participate. The adoption of attitudinal and political behaviour dimensions into the stratification process would be a first step towards addressing this. Similarly, the capacity for producing considered judgements could still be expanded. The upcoming Citizens' Assembly on Germany's Role in the World aims to build on the Bürgerrat by being a test case for how mini-publics can support parliamentary work (Deutscher Bundestag 2020a). It should not be forgotten that politicians commonly begin from a position of scepticism concerning whether citizen participation can respond to the genuine complexity of political agendas (Dean 2019; Hendriks and Lees-Marshment 2018). Balancing the breadth of the agenda with the time available for discussion and producing outputs that solve specific problems (as, for instance, suggested by the OECD 2020) is likely to prove important in convincing parliamentarians that mini-publics can perform this kind of advisory function.

A notable consequence of the Bürgerrat Demokratie has been to stimulate other similar processes in Germany. Because the topic of deliberation was itself participatory reform of democracy, it is difficult to disentangle structural effects from policy effects in this case: is it the recommendations of the participants that are being followed or did the process act as showcase for citizen deliberation? Either way it does appear that there is support for adopting the participants' recommendation in favour of greater institutionalisation of mini-publics. The current trajectory for these processes in Germany, therefore, shows some similarities with developments in Ireland, which also began with a civil society experiment in 2011, followed by formally institutionalised processes that combined citizens assemblies with parliamentary debates and national referendums. However, Germany cannot simply copy the Irish model of institutionalisation since the Basic Law makes no provision for federal level referendums on policy questions. Germany must find its own model, and there are already attempts to work out a systemic approach which can guide this process (for example: Nanz and Leggewie 2018; Geissel and Jung 2019; Rohr et al. 2019). A more formal connection to political authority would have its benefits in making transparent how participants' recommendations are to be implemented. Still, moves to

institutionalise should not privilege connections with political institutions over connections with the broader public sphere. One important lesson of the Bürgerrat is that civil society involvement brings networks and campaigning capacity that is an important element in securing these latter forms of connection. The German experience with citizen deliberation will for the foreseeable future continue to provide a rich seam for both research and practical experimentation to understand the alternative approaches of “systems-oriented democratic innovations” (Dean, Boswell and Smith 2020) and how these alternatives may differently interact with the various elements of the democratic system.

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