

SHIELDING DELIBERATION 150 CITIZENS AT A TIME? COMPETING NARRATIVES OF CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES AS DRIVERS FOR A BETTER-INFORMED EU CITIZENRY

¿BLINDANDO LA DELIBERACIÓN EN GRUPOS DE 150 CIUDADANOS? NARRATIVAS ENFRENTADAS DE LAS ASAMBLEAS CIUDADANAS COMO IMPULSORAS DE UNA CIUDADANÍA EUROPEA MEJOR INFORMADA

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ABSTRACT

This paper reveals a discursive struggle in the EU “deliberative wave” to define under which leadership and methodologies Citizens’ Assemblies (CAs) are institutionalised in the EU. Despite the lack of academic consensus, disinformation is an articulating element of the different competing narratives. The research question guiding this paper is: How do the EU “deliberative wave” actors frame CAs as drivers of a better-informed citizenry? Through theory-building methods, semi-structured interviews, and drawing on how CAs are framed as tools against disinformation, four prevailing narratives are identified: anti-political deliberation, self-legitimising deliberation, scientific deliberation, and radical deliberation. CAs do not necessarily foster a better-informed citizenry or a more inclusive democracy: each narrative implies a different normative conception of the public sphere and democracy. Depending on the type of actor and their objectives, they will gravitate towards the narrative that best allows them to position their particular interests.

Keywords: Citizens’ Assemblies, Deliberative democracy, Disinformation, European Union, Transnational democracy.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la lucha discursiva en la «ola deliberativa» en la Unión Europea para definir bajo qué liderazgo y metodologías se institucionalizan las asambleas ciudadanas en el sistema político de la UE. A pesar de la falta de consenso académico, la desinformación es un elemento articulador de las diferentes narrativas en liza. La pregunta de investigación que guía este artículo es: ¿cómo enmarcan los actores de la «ola deliberativa» de la Unión Europea a las asambleas ciudadanas como promotoras de una ciudadanía mejor informada? A través de métodos de construcción teórica, entrevistas semiestructuradas, y basándose en cómo se enmarcan las asambleas ciudadanas como herramientas contra la desinformación, se identifican cuatro narrativas predominantes: la deliberación antipolítica, la deliberación autolegitimadora, la deliberación científica y la deliberación radical. Las asambleas ciudadanas no fomentan necesariamente una ciudadanía mejor informada o una democracia más inclusiva: cada narrativa implica una concepción normativa diferente de la esfera pública y la democracia. Dependiendo del tipo de actor y de sus objetivos, gravitarán hacia la narrativa que mejor les permita posicionar sus intereses particulares.

Palabras clave: asambleas ciudadanas, democracia deliberativa, desinformación, Unión Europea, democracia transnacional.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Following the 2008 Great Recession, there has been growing interest in and debate on introducing innovative reforms to strengthen democracy, notably from progressive social movements (della Porta, 2020). Authors such as Landemore (2020), Sintomer (2023), and Fishkin (2003), among others, have proposed renewing representative democracy through the reintroduction or reformulation of sortition and deliberation through randomly-selected Citizens' Assemblies (CAs), also known as Deliberative Mini-Publics (DMPs).

The OECD (2020) has recently coined the term “deliberative wave” to refer to the current momentum in the use, interest, and support for “*Citizens' Assemblies, Juries, Panels, and other representative deliberative processes*”. These deliberative innovations are not limited to the national level but have also been experimentally introduced into the European Union (EU) political system, such as the European Citizens' Panels (ECPs), first organised during the Conference on the Future of Europe (COFOE) and later transposed by the European Commission into its internal work.

However, all the already-existing experiments are ad-hoc events with a narrowly defined thematic focus and purpose and do not constitute a real effort to institutionalise randomly-selected CAs in the EU's political system permanently. As a result, in a sort of EU “deliberative wave”, a wide range of diverse political actors (international political institutions, transnational social movements, civil society organisations, political parties, NGOs, scholars, activists, organising companies, philanthropists, etc.) are urging the EU institutions to integrate deliberative CAs in their decision-making processes or even advocate for the creation of a new EU institution in the form of a permanent, randomly-selected, and transnational European CA.

The EU “deliberative wave” coincides with the emergence of fact-checkers and robust regulatory entrepreneurship by the EU to combat disinformation through legislation such as the Digital Services Act (DSA) (Bouza & Oleart, 2023). While the connection between these two dimensions is not straightforward, one of the pledges of the proponents of CAs is that these innovations will contribute to combating the latent climate of disinformation and generating a better-informed EU citizenry. However, there is no academic consensus

that supports this. “Disinformation” is a contested signifier whose definition implies varying normative conceptions of the public sphere and democracy (Bouza & Oleart, 2023). Therefore, the research question guiding this article is: *How do the EU “deliberative wave” actors frame CAs as drivers of a better-informed citizenry?*

The main objective of this paper is to contribute to the normative discussion on the institutionalisation of CAs at the transnational level in the EU. This will be explored through secondary literature and semi-structured interviews with actors involved in the EU “deliberative wave”. Taking an in-depth exploratory approach (Swedberg, 2020), this paper aims to highlight actors’ framing techniques and narrative devices used to defend CAs as tools against disinformation and drivers for a better-informed EU citizenry. Four prevailing narratives are identified: anti-political deliberation, self-legitimising deliberation, scientific deliberation, and radical deliberation. The competing narratives are explained and developed through inductive grounded theory-building methods (List & Valentini, 2016). The question of disinformation and informed citizenry appear as articulating elements of the different competing narratives. Each narrative implicitly carries a different normative conception of the public sphere and democracy, and therefore, diverse ways of acting against disinformation and fostering a better-informed citizenry. This paper argues that CAs do not necessarily or automatically contribute to the fight against disinformation, the promotion of a better-informed EU citizenry, or fostering a more inclusive democracy. The objectives pursued by each narrative reproduced by the actors are not always necessarily democratic but may have anti-political, authoritarian, technocratic or populist aims. This paper also argues that there is an ongoing discursive struggle to define the concept of CAs and the methods and processes for institutionalising them in the EU’s political system. Depending on the type of actor and their objectives, they will tend towards the narrative that best allows them to position their interests.

This research approach is novel and relevant to the institutionalisation of CAs and other democratic innovations as 1) an actor-based narrative approach has rarely been used in this context, and 2) this institutionalisation at the transnational EU level is relatively under-explored (as such research has typically focused on the national,

regional, or local levels). It is, therefore, essential to study what actors are promoting a democratic reform of such magnitude in the EU, what objectives they are pursuing, and the normative implications of their discourses.

The article is structured as follows: section 2 reviews the literature on the use and institutionalisation of CAs and their potential benefits for a better-informed EU citizenry; section 3 critically analyses the transcripts of the interviews and identifies the common themes and narratives present in them; section 4 develops the four prevailing narratives in the EU “deliberative wave”; finally, section 5 presents the article’s concluding remarks.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW: THE EU “DELIBERATIVE WAVE” AND A BETTER-INFORMED CITIZENRY

Two historical myths are exploited to support the mainstream narrative of CAs as adequate tools to tackle disinformation and generate a better-informed citizenry: a constructive and a reactive argument.

The constructive argument relies on Athenian democracy as a conceptual “commonplace” for deliberative democracy (Fishkin, 2018; Abbas & Sintomer, 2022). In this respect, there would be more interest in politics - and thus more incentives for citizens to keep themselves adequately informed to participate in deliberation - because anybody could be chosen at any time under sortition to participate in the assembly.

The reactive argument is directly related to Manin’s (1997) exploration of the consolidation of representative democracy and the demise of sortition in the Italian City-Republics. Drawing on the case of the Florentine Republic, Manin (1997) explores how political elites contributed to the fall of sortition, transforming the concept of modern political representation and tying it to elections. In this respect, Florentine political elites expected that their connections, influence, and prestige would make them prevail in the electoral competition by controlling the flow of political information, among others (Manin, 1997).

Thus, following these two arguments, proponents of CAs argue that 1) CAs are more effective in preventing the capture of

power by elites and fostering a better-informed citizenry and a more effective system of defences against disinformation and manipulation, and 2) there are more incentives for manipulation and control of the information flow by the elites in representative democracies (Abbas & Sintomer, 2022).

1. A better-informed citizenry?

Several authors link the proper functioning of democracy to the existence of an informed public opinion free of information manipulation. For Schiffrin (2017), an uninformed citizenry cannot act in its own interest when electing its representatives: democracy relies on the idea of an educated population, a necessary prerequisite for active participation in politics. However, Sartori (1999) argues that representative democracy can operate even if the electorate is uninformed. Similarly, Bennett & Livingston (2021) explain that informed citizenry is a myth that makes democracy work better. Thus, the problem is not that the citizenry is less informed but that political elites perceive this as the case and are more likely to manipulate public opinion, knowing they will not be held accountable (Dias et al., 2022).

According to Chambers (2009), elites are aware of the rhetorical tricks and strategies needed to activate informational biases in the wider public. Fishkin (2018) argues that electoral democracy produces an uninformed public because 1) it provides no incentive for citizens to stay informed because the possibility of their vote influencing the outcome of the election is minimal (alluding to Downs' theory of "rational ignorance") and 2) it provides incentives for political elites to spread fake news and manipulate public opinion for the sole purpose of achieving electoral majorities.

In this sense, CAs are considered as a potential means of combating disinformation and generating a better-informed EU citizenry. For Fishkin (2018), CAs show the conclusions that the general population or public would reach if they could discuss the topic under good informational conditions. Abbas & Sintomer (2022, p. 250) argue that CAs aim to deliver an informed public opinion "*by allowing diverse points of view to debate under circumstances approaching the ideal*" and that the quality of deliberation within a CA "*is often better than those of elected assemblies*". Chambers (2023) states that there

is no fake news or any other pathology related to post-truth within the CA. Moreover, the OECD (2020, p. 84) underlined that helping “*counteract polarisation and disinformation on the issue addressed in the process*” is one of the primary outcomes of these democratic innovations. Niemeyer (2011) and Curato & Böker (2016) conceive CAs as “brokers of knowledge” or reliable intermediaries between citizens and complex information (Talpin, 2019, p. 197). Similarly, Gastil et al. (2023, p. 2) understand CAs as a “trusted information proxy”.

The main argument linking CAs to the concept of an informed citizenry is that individuals are better-informed after participating in them. Indeed, this is the aim of the revival of sortition and CAs: to incentivise the political participation of “ordinary citizens” and the popular classes beyond the more politicised, more informed, and more likely to participate (Talpin, 2019, p. 187). According to Ganuza & Mendiharat (2020), CAs are a means to qualify participants’ opinions and empower them to make autonomous political decisions.

There is empirical evidence that individuals participating in CAs acquire more and better information and reduce their polarisation on the issue they are deliberating on (Dryzek et al., 2019; Grönlund et al., 2015). However, participation is voluntary, so there is a significant self-selection bias. People who decide to participate are usually highly informed, very interested in politics and have higher economic resources (Ganuza & Mendiharat, 2020, p. 149). Thus, the average CA participant profile is that of an individual less likely to be affected by misinformation or disinformation campaigns. Therefore, the impact of CAs on a better-informed wider public and citizenry must be put into perspective.

It is generally argued that, in Athenian democracy, the converging “commonplace” of advocates of deliberative innovations (Fishkin, 1991; Talpin, 2019), citizens had significant incentives to keep themselves adequately informed about political issues, as anybody could be chosen at any time under sortition to participate in the assembly. However, the same participatory biases related to the self-selection of the most interested and informed citizens were reproduced in Athens. Sortition only occurred among those who volunteered and wished to participate in power-sharing, not among all

citizens (Manin, 1997, p. 25). Thus, it would be inaccurate to claim that sortition encouraged general interest in politics, as only the ones who were already informed and interested in politics volunteered. Moreover, there is also a need to focus on whether the effects will be transferred to the non-participants (i.e. the wider public or general citizenry): disinformation and deliberation require a systemic perspective (Dias et al., 2022; McKay & Tenove, 2021; Lafont, 2022).

Several authors claim that the only way to generate a better-informed citizenry is through civic education and involving citizens in democratic decision-making (Mansbridge, 1999; Pateman, 1970). According to Fishkin (2018), such deliberative experiences encourage citizens to stay informed because “*they think their voice will matter*” (p. 210) and because they will want to “*be prepared and appear prepared*” (p. 180) for group discussions with fellow citizens. However, only in exceptional cases have deliberative experiments empowered citizens in decision-making (Talpin, 2019). This might further increase participants’ distrust in political institutions, making them feel deceived or instrumentalised (Funes et al., 2014). Although deliberative instruments allow (some) citizens to be involved in the decision-making process, important decisions are still made by political and economic elites (Talpin, 2019). The unlikelihood of CAs having a decision-making role has even been stressed by Fishkin (2009), who recalls the centrality of consent and “legitimate domination” in the modern understandings of democracy (Villacañas, 2002). As Lafont (2022) explains, the outcome of the CA does not ensure its representativeness or majoritarian acceptance or support from the general population.

2. *The public sphere and mass democracy*

The democratic legitimacy of deliberative innovations cannot be justified only in terms of the epistemic quality of the process and outputs or the formation of an informed opinion by individual participants (Lafont, 2015). Abandoning the mass public in favour of CAs would mean conferring greater legitimacy on the group of participants than on the rest of the general citizenry in a sort of “participatory elitism” (Chambers, 2009, p. 344).

Thus, according to Olsen & Trenz (2015), Chambers (2009) or Lafont (2015), the democratic legitimacy of CAs can only be justified by their link to the wider public and broader society. Theories on CAs generally assume that uncoerced discussion between individuals impacts the institutional level and mass politics (Fishkin, 2009). However, despite the demonstrated effects on individual participants, this does not necessarily or automatically translate outside the CA to the wider public. For example, referring to the case of Europolis, the first transnational deliberative experiment in the EU, Olsen & Trenz (2015, p. 14-15) explain that this experience “*was not less ‘secretive’ than, say, deliberation in the comitology system of the EU.*” Lafont (2020) has criticised “lottocratic” conceptions of deliberative democracy, referring to them as a “shortcut” which fails to address the quality of deliberation in the public sphere at the macro level. Similarly, Olsen & Trenz (2015) state a disconnection between the CA’s mini-public and the “macro” of democratic politics, as the deliberation is rarely linked to the broader political debates and the rest of the public sphere. Chambers (2009) argues that while initiatives that focus on discrete deliberations (i.e. theories of democratic deliberation) are on the rise, deliberative initiatives that focus on systemic effects (i.e. theories of deliberative democracy) are in decline. It is essential to ensure the publicity of CAs and their link to the full breadth of democratic audiences and significant policy debates if deliberative democracy is not to be abandoned from mass politics (Chambers, 2009).

Authors such as Fung (2007) and Ganuza & Mendiharat (2020) argue that the replication or multiplication of CAs would produce effects for the wider public, particularly those not participating in the CA. Lafont (2015), on the contrary, argues that simply replicating would not contribute to democratising the public space since non-participating citizens would remain poorly informed and unaware of what happens inside the CA.

The main element that explains the disconnection of CAs from the rest of the public sphere is that they sideline intermediary actors (Oleart, 2023). Ganuza & Mendiharat (2020) argue that CAs offer an effective alternative to the distrust of political parties as intermediaries between citizens, power, and political institutions. For Oleart (2023), this shows an anti-political dimension of CAs, which conceives in-

termediary actors as obstacles to achieving social consensus. These intermediary actors or mediators would be, among others, “*the media, social movements, trade unions, civil society or political parties at national and transnational levels*” (Oleart, 2023, p. 3). The demise of these mediators or gatekeepers results from the rise of networked communication (Chambers, 2023), but randomly-selected CAs would make this demise even deeper.

Despite often being responsible for the dissemination of disinformation and misinformation, McKay & Tenove (2021) explain that intermediary actors, including political parties, can take measures to limit its amplification, such as codes of conduct. Intermediary actors are essential for the distribution of information and contribution to public debate in mass democracies. As Chambers (2023) argues, these actors ensure minimum standards of epistemic quality and political accountability despite their imperfection. Oleart (2023) argues that democratic pluralism requires strong collective actors capable of competing in the public sphere. Moreover, their intermediation is essential to empower vulnerable social groups, especially at the transnational level. Similarly, Olsen & Trenz (2015, p. 15) argue that “*publicity through mediation from strong publics to the general public is a general condition for the generation of democratic legitimacy.*”

3. Conflict neutralisation as a means of informational protection

While in the CA, communication is symmetrical, face-to-face, and unmediated, in the general public, it is asymmetrical, highly mediated and distorted by the structural inequalities of society (Chambers, 2009). This has led authors such as Fishkin (2018, p. 201) to define CAs as “protected spheres” against distortions outside them, such as attempts at manipulation, citizen disinterest, or political ignorance. Fung (2003, p. 338), for his part, refers to CAs as “more perfect public spheres” capable of neutralising the communicative distortions caused by social and cultural inequalities in mass democracies (Chambers, 2009).

CAs aim to contribute to an informed and more truthful public opinion, where lies and manipulation are less likely to occur. Abbas & Sintomer (2022) point out that this contrasts the broader public opinion, which is seen as emotionally driven, easily manipulated and

uninformed. On the contrary, according to its advocates, deliberation and plural scrutiny would facilitate the detection of errors and fallacies and make it more difficult to manipulate information or use it for strategic and self-interested purposes (Ganuza & Mendiharat, 2020, p. 78).

Therefore, CAs would sometimes aim to generate “neutral and fact-based deliberation”, “protecting” participants from the partisan biases of intermediary actors (Oleart, 2023, p. 11). Oleart (2023, p. 3) critically defines this as “*a bubble-like setting with a tightly controlled ‘external’ input*” that lacks a systemic view of the public sphere. Among others, selecting the experts who participate or determining which information is provided to participants can never be a neutral decision but a decision controlled by the promoters or organisers. In this respect, despite arguing for CA’s effectiveness against disinformation, the mainstream narrative does not prioritise strengthening the public sphere, creating a plural and independent media system, or including diverse civil society groups (Oleart, 2023).

While deliberative democracy has consensus-seeking objectives (della Porta, 2005), agonism holds the impossibility of a “rational consensus” without exclusion and moves away from the consensual view of democracy. Mouffe (1999) describes these deliberative forums as an ideal simulation of an unrestricted debate to reach a consensus through rational argumentation among participants. For Mouffe (1999), conflict is inherent to politics, and its appropriate channelling promotes inclusion and strengthens democracy. The anti-political vision of deliberative democracy implies a belief in the possibility of eliminating any power relations or conducting a debate based on pure rationality (Mouffe, 1999). However, assuming “impartiality”, “neutrality”, or “common-sense”, denies the centrality of emotions and identities as constitutive of the political. Mouffe (1999, p. 756) states, “*To deny that there ever could be a free and unconstrained public deliberation of all matters of common concern is therefore crucial for democratic politics.*”

Similarly, Olsen & Trenz (2015) argue that the dominant deliberative democracy framework overlooks democracy as a game of shifting and divergent loyalties and identities. This is in line with an idea put forward by the organisers of the “new generation” ECPs,

where participants were encouraged to be aware that they were not participating on behalf of any particular group (e.g. state, party, ideology, etc.) but instead that they were only “representing themselves” (Gjaldbæk-Sverdrup et al., 2023; Oleart, 2023b). This conceptualisation of participants as “average” or “ordinary” citizens is criticised by Talpin (2019) as being a normative construction and an instrumental decision aimed at building a docile public without associative or partisan affiliation to avoid possible obstacles or opposition to the institutions’ agenda.

While advocates for deliberative innovations argue that the dynamics of competition between political actors fuel disinformation in public debate, agonistic pluralism argues that such dynamics are constitutive of the political (Mouffe, 1999, 2002). The former neglects how channelling conflict through a vibrant agonistic public sphere can contribute to combating the systemic effects of disinformation and generating incentives for a better-informed citizenry. As Mouffe (2002) argues, aversion to political confrontation leads to disaffection with political participation, disincentivising citizens to stay well-informed about political issues.

According to Lafont (2022), the implicit “lottocracy” in the predominant view of CAs justifies the exclusion of the majority of the citizenry on “technopopulist” reasons. As populism, it distrusts political elites and believes that “ordinary citizens” should take power, assuming the CA is a descriptive representation or “embodiment” of the people (Lafont, 2022). As technocracy, it believes that only the well-informed should make political decisions because policies would be better, more effective and more accepted, which justifies the learning process and the deliberative “filter” within the CA (Lafont, 2022). However, as Lafont (2022) explains, both visions are incompatible, and inevitably, there is a tendency towards one of the two. Both share the anti-democratic vision of “blind deference” (Lafont, 2022). That is, they promote the division between the majority of citizens who are subject to the laws and a minority who are in charge of making them, either under the justification of “more adequately representing the people” (as in populism) or of “being more informed” (as in technocracy) (Lafont, 2022). Neither assumption, therefore, guarantees or promotes a more inclusive democracy or a better-informed citizenry.

According to Lafont (2022), CAs sometimes pretend to speak as the people or on their behalf but should only aim to “speak to the people”.

Consequently, Pateman (2012) or Lafont (2022) argue that CAs do not necessarily or automatically translate into a democratisation of democracy, the enhancement of democratic inclusion or the promotion of a better-informed citizenry or public sphere. Talpin (2019) argues that randomly-selected CAs have become an easily exportable process at the price of losing their political radicalism or transformative potential. Fishkin (2018) himself explains how these processes can be used evily or even how they have been used as tools for citizen co-optation in authoritarian regimes. Among others, He & Warren (2011, p. 270) explore how China takes advantage of the “persuasion-based influence” of deliberative practices in a kind of “authoritarian deliberation”.

4. The scope for Citizens' Assemblies in the EU's political system

CAs base their legitimacy on the representative coherence between the mini-public, or group of selected participants, and the constituency from which it is drawn (Olsen & Trenz, 2015). Thus, Guéniffey (1993) argues that sortition should only take place in contexts of equal circumstances and culture among the members of the political body (Manin, 1997, p. 106). Manin (1997, p. 228) affirms that, according to Madison or Sieyès, direct democracy was possible in ancient republics because of the homogeneity and small size of the political body, something unthinkable in today's societies. Therefore, unlike their application in very local and homogeneous contexts, it is more complicated to apply these tools in the EU's political system as it is complex, multilevel, transnational, multilingual, with multiple sources of legitimacy, fragmented and still under construction (Crum & Fossum, 2009). Moreover, European public spheres are mostly nationally oriented, and mass media is established at the state level (Olsen & Trenz, 2015). The European public sphere is highly segmented, with minimal cross-national discussions (Fishkin, 2018). In any case, as Nicolaidis & Liebert (2023, p. 50) argue, sortition and deliberation can contribute to forging closer links between European citizens and to the “*Europeanisation of national public spheres.*”

Several CAs have been organised within the EU institutions. The first transnational deliberative experiment in the EU was *Europolis*, organised before the 2009 European Parliament elections (Olsen & Trenz, 2015). Subsequently, during COFOE the ECPs were introduced: panels composed of randomly-selected European citizens to discuss and offer recommendations on specific topics (jointly organised by the Commission, the Parliament, and the Council). Some authors have already studied how such deliberative experiments have reproduced the dynamics explained above: self-selection of the most informed, depoliticisation, disintermediation and disconnection with the public sphere (Olsen & Trenz, 2015; Oleart, 2023; Ballangé, 2022; Bailly, 2023). Following COFOE, the European Commission has included ECPs in its internal work. However, Gjaldbæk-Sverdrup et al. (2023) understand the panels organised by the European Commission as an exercise in self-legitimisation and “technocratic democratisation.”

Although CA’s primary goal is decision-making through citizen deliberation, its sociological effects or use as civic education exercises are crucial by-products or side-effects. This is especially important in the case of the EU, where the ECPs are for many participants the first time they go to Brussels, visit the EU’s political institutions, or make transnational connections with people from another Member State (Gjaldbæk-Sverdrup et al., 2023). Talpin (2019) argues that participation in a deliberative forum is a transformative experience. In this respect, CAs would be an essential civic education exercise (Chambers, 2009). Based on this, Niemeyer (2011) and Curato & Böker (2016) conceive CAs as “schools of democracy” where participants can learn civic knowledge and skills (Talpin, 2019, p. 197).

In any case, the already-existing experiments are ad-hoc events with a narrowly defined thematic focus and purpose. This has stimulated the growing push for institutionalising CAs at the transnational level in the EU’s political system, in a sort of EU “deliberative wave”: a wide range of diverse political actors (international political institutions, transnational social movements, civil society organisations, political parties, NGOs, scholars, activists, organising companies, philanthropists, etc.) have joined forces to coordinate their demands and condition the political agenda to institutionalise CAs in the EU’s

political system permanently. More recently, 41 European democracy-related organisations released an advocacy statement urging EU institutions to integrate deliberative CAs into their decision-making processes (Bürgerrat, 2024). At the same time, other actors have the long-term *meso* objective of creating a new EU institution in the form of a permanent, randomly-selected, and transnational European CA. This is defended, among others, by civil society organisations such as Citizens Take Over Europe, networked consortia such as the Democratic Odyssey or even transnational EU political parties such as Volt or DiEM25.

III. ANALYSING THE INTERVIEWS: SURFING THE EU “DELIBERATIVE WAVE”

The main method used in this article are semi-structured interviews. In this respect, the interviewees were selected to represent the diversity of the different types of political actors involved in the EU “deliberative wave”. Between 14th March 2024 and 29th April 2024, 15 interviews were conducted with activists, participants, civil society organisations, EU political institutions, organising companies, practitioners, and scholars, among others. All the interviews were carried out online, lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed with the permission of the interviewees. All references to the interviews, as well as textual quotations, have been consulted and agreed with the interviewees. Table 1 contains the full list of interviewees, according to their preferences for anonymity in terms of their names and positions.

Table 1: List of interviewees

	Interviewee	Position	Date
1	C.R.	Activist/advocator for CAs	14/3/24
2	Thorsten Sterk	Campaigner at Mehr Demokratie	14/3/24
3	A.R.	Facilitator in the new generation ECPs	18/3/24
4	J.A.C.P.	Participant in the new generation ECPs	19/3/24
5	Guillaume McLaughlin	Co-head of the Joint Secretariat of the Conference on the Future of Europe, European Parliament; Head of the Interinstitutional Reflection Unit in the European Parliament.	21/3/24
6	Paul Gölz	Postdoctoral fellow at UC Berkeley; Panelot <i>(Computer scientist working on algorithms for the selection of participants in CAs)</i>	21/3/24
7	Gaëtane Ricard-Nihoul	Deputy head of unit at Citizens' Dialogues Unit, DG COMM, European Commission.	22/3/24
8	Niccolò Milanese	Founding Director at European Alternatives; Citizens Take Over Europe	26/3/24
9	Constantin Schäfer	Managing consultant at Ifok; Facilitator	29/3/24
10	Camille Dobler	Head of research at Missions Publiques; Facilitator	29/3/24
11	Rolf Nijmeijer	Research Associate at the European Media and Information Fund (EMIF); Disinformation scholar	4/4/24
12	Daniela Vancic	European Program Manager at Democracy International	5/4/24
13	Brett Henning	Director and Co-founder at Sortition Foundation	22/4/24
14	Nabbila Abbas	Research Officer at Federation for Innovation in Democracy - Europe (FIDE)	29/4/24
15	Yago Bermejo	Co-founder and Co-director at Deliberativa	29/4/24

Source: Own elaboration (2024).

This section presents the analysis of the transcripts of the interviews, using thematic content analysis and critical discourse analysis. The transcribed material is divided into several interconnected themes, which broadly coincide with the literature review:

1. *Truth*

The organising company Deliberativa, which works in the organisation of these CAs (more specifically, the ECPs), openly claims on its webpage that its methods contribute to: “*Combat disinformation in public opinion through informed discussion*” (Deliberativa, 2024). Its Co-founder and Co-director, Yago Bermejo, reproduces the idea of the CA as a “protected” space against disinformation: “*A deliberative assembly is a safe space where independent experts verify the information provided. Thus, citizens participating in the assembly are, in a way, better protected from disinformation.*”

For Rolf Nijmeijer, deliberation requires an “epistemological common ground”, which is being undermined by disinformation. In other words, disinformation contaminates the public debate and challenges the consensus on what truth is and how to access it. There is a consensus among interviewees, referring to scientific research, that participants get more and better information about the topic they deliberate on in the CA. The concept of “truth” appears recurrently, especially among activists and facilitators. The deliberative group in a CA is understood as a space of self-regulating truth, where discussion among participants brings disinformation and misinformation to light. Facilitators agree that their role is not to intervene to point out lies or impose the truth but to ensure a peaceful space of collective self-regulation among participants. Furthermore, it is assumed that as participants know that what they say will be verified, they have less incentives to pass on false or uncertain information.

A dominant narrative is that the facilitator’s task is, in a way, to apply the Socratic method in the deliberative group. Participants are invited to express their reflections through questions to generate a “collective truth” or, as J.A.C.P. states, “*to get closer to the underlying truth of the citizenry.*” For Camille Dobler, this collective intelligence is “almost mathematical”: she argues that “*when you bring together people from different lives and different backgrounds, biases cancel*

each other out; it's like negative times negative equal positive". Hence, a quasi-scientific perspective emerges, assuming that debate between individuals with diverse profiles, provided specific procedures are followed, favours informed deliberation and the production of more efficient and widely accepted public policies.

2. Learning

There is not a clear relationship between deliberation and disinformation, and this lack of academic consensus is further translated among the interviewed actors. Camille Dobler says, "*There is no guarantee that deliberative democracy, by its essence, is a shield to disinformation*". As Rolf Nijmeijer points out, the same factors contaminating the debate (i.e. disinformation and misinformation campaigns) affect citizens equally outside and inside the CA. This perspective understands disinformation and misinformation as human tendencies that cannot be eliminated from political discourse but require structural changes and addressing root causes such as economic inequality.

The interviewed organisers agree that the ECPs lack a learning session to bring all participants to the same level of knowledge, which can sometimes lead to the reproduction of misinformation (or even disinformation) dynamics within the CA. The case of ECPs is exceptional since, besides providing information on the subject under discussion, the organisers must teach the functioning of the EU. However, one of the interviewees, namely Guillaume McLaughlin, argues the usefulness of a certain lack of information or knowledge among the participants. McLaughlin states that the "raw naivety" of many participants meant that "*they could not see through all the complexities and came up with straightforward and helpful answers.*"

In the case of the ECPs, this learning dimension is not confined to the thematic or institutional levels. The facilitators and practitioners underline intercultural learning between different countries, languages, or forms of deliberation as a unique learning characteristic of the ECPs. Moreover, the constructive argument explored above is reproduced at the systemic level, stressing the type of civic education that should be promoted to train citizens prepared for deliberation. According to Niccolò Milanese, "*the sense that it could be you who*

gets called up to participate would incentivise educating citizens so that they could be capable of participating in these deliberations.”

The interviewed civil society organisations argue that participation in the CA does not necessarily imply more significant incentives for long-term political participation, either in organised civil society or elections. Moreover, most of the interviewees say that the capacity of CAs to foster citizen interest and learning lies in their practical or effective political impact. Niccolò Milanese refers to the experience of COFOE’s ECPs to explain how the CA itself can contribute to disinform, misinform or generate false expectations among participants and the wider public: *“These ‘big slogans’ saying, ‘the future is in your hands’, are a form of disinformation already”*.

3. Information control

Furthermore, the question arises as to whether the CAs themselves can serve as chambers for controlling the flow of information or imposing certain narratives. In this respect, organising institutions (specifically the European Commission) and practitioners appear to be the main culprits. The former due to the political intentionality behind its actions, and the latter due to carrying out a very constrained and procedural deliberative process. The objectivity and neutrality promised by a discussion based on data and expert knowledge are very limited: not only do experts reproduce their own biases and interests, but the selection of experts is often dominated by the organisation itself. As Yago Bermejo explains, *“In the CAs, there are powerful authority biases: if you put experts leaning towards one side or the other of the political spectrum, the CA is more likely to go that way.”* Selecting experts, far from being a neutral decision, is inevitably a political decision. Whereas in the case of COFOE, the selection of experts reflected a balance between the inter-institutional organisation of the Commission, Parliament, and Council, in the case of the “new generation” ECPs, it remains a process dominated solely by staff from the Commission.

Different proposals emerge to counteract this situation, such as incorporating participants into selecting expert knowledge. Others, such as Yago Bermejo, defend the balanced incorporation of the different European Parliament political groups in selecting experts

and providing information within the panel. Otherwise, it would mean further side-lining alternative narratives, such as the left, the Greens, or the far-right and anti-European parties. As Niccolò Milnanesi explains: *“This involves broader questions such as how we should deal with the far right.”* The issue here is not whether these narratives should be included or not but that intentionally not doing it, despite attempts to portray it as neutral or objective, constitutes a political decision.

Gaëtane Ricard-Nihoul, Deputy head of unit at Citizens’ Dialogues Unit at the European Commission’s Directorate-General Communication (the unit responsible for the organisation of the “new generation” ECPs), admits that in the ECPs, *“the framing will be a bit more top-down”* to ensure *“the contribution of the citizens to be meaningful for policymaking.”* In this case, the framing power is even more potent than outside the CA because of 1) the non-inclusion of intermediary actors to challenge the dominant framing and 2) the difficulty for participants to generate the necessary collective effort within the CA to generate a counter-frame.

4. Media impact

All interviewees argue that the ECPs, whether those of CO-FOE or the “new generation”, have a minimal impact beyond the 150 individual participants or the EU Bubble and cannot grab the attention of the media or the wider European public. A.R. exclaims, *“It’s not normal that we don’t hear about it in the news.”*

Similarly, many journalists consider COFOE a “non-journalistic event” (Oleart, 2023). Consequently, organisers design “soft outreach efforts” such as inviting journalists to cover the ECPs or other public communication strategies such as filming a documentary that narrates the journey of a participant from the moment they are selected until the last day of the panel. These unidirectional, top-down communication strategies do not contribute to the participation of citizens outside the CA. Furthermore, promoters and practitioners rely on the mouth-to-mouth of “veteran participants” as a multiplier for translating the debate from the mini-public to the rest of the public sphere. However, as is acknowledged in the interviews, participants

spend much more time talking about their experience than the topic under discussion.

A prevailing narrative is that the ECPs' lack of salience is only tied to the mismatch between the EU and the national political agendas or the lack of a genuine European public sphere. In this respect, Camille Dobler exclaims: *“Even the EU itself is not covered by the media, so how can you expect the ECPs to be covered? There’s no EU public sphere; that’s the issue!”* In contrast, actors such as Claudia Chwalisz (2022), founder and CEO of DemocracyNext, refers to CAs as *“a movement that’s quietly reshaping democracy for the better.”* However, the fact that it is taking place quietly indicates the low salience of the issues at stake, its eminently top-down character (especially at the EU level), and the lack of mass popular mobilisation to support these innovations' institutionalisation. Practitioners acknowledge that the connection between CAs and the wider public is an issue to which little time and resources have been devoted so far. In any case, Yago Bermejo considers CAs as *“a first step towards public policy in a space vaccinated against misinformation.”*

5. *Connecting with the public sphere*

Three main proposals emerge to connect ECPs (or CAs in general) with the European public sphere:

- 1) Replicating or multiplying such processes: Generating a deliberative ecosystem with multiple CAs to ensure that a large part of the citizenry can be selected to participate. Beyond multiplying the number of CAs that are organised, the civil society perspective aims to promote deliberation in already-existing common spaces, such as neighbourhoods or municipalities, businesses, factories, schools, or the media. Nabila Abbas states that it is not only about favouring the *“multiplication of occasions of deliberation within the society but to make deliberative norms hegemonic”*.
- 2) Connecting CAs to online citizen participation spaces: The European Commission, has recently launched the Citizens' Engagement Platform, through which it is possible to contribute to the ECPs' discussions. However, these

tools reproduce the already-mentioned biases: voluntary participation, involvement of those most interested (or stakeholders and interest groups) and high socio-economic and educational profiles. Furthermore, participation in these spaces remains unidirectional and non-interactive, which fails to ensure its impact.

- 3) Increasing the practical impact of the CA: Other interviewees argue that ECPs' low media salience is only due to their limited practical effect on the EU decision-making process. However, there is no majoritarian support for increasing the power given to these CAs either. Brett Henning argues, "*It's very controversial to imply that they should be more than advisory at the moment.*"

6. *Conflict and consensus*

In any case, the lack of a political dimension goes beyond the practical impact of each individual CA but begins when selecting the topics to be discussed. This is the case of the ECPs, where Niccolò Milanese exclaims, "*They've chosen topics that are as unpolitical and uncontroversial as possible, then you can't be surprised that the media is not interested.*" On the one hand, ECPs do not address an agenda of real political dilemmas at the European level but minor issues with minimal political impact or issues where there is already a broad consensus (disregarding areas of controversy where the political impact would be higher). On the other hand, the top-down framing and control of the information flow presents such debates as problems where there is only a mere technical disagreement.

The organisers and advocates generally conceive the CA as a depoliticised space where political conflict is neutralised through the protection and encapsulation of debate. Neutralisation has two meanings here: 1) as cancelling or hiding the conflict or 2) as bringing the conflict to a neutral ground, free of political biases or positions considered to be extreme. Most promoters and practitioners understand CA as a space free of polarisation and partisanship, less reliant on political biases and cleavages, and where rational argumentation is prioritised. This view of the CA as a "sealed bubble" (as Niccolò Milanese puts it) from toxic informational interference hides an an-

ti-political view, promoting the isolation of the debate from the wider public. Milanese questions whether this perspective is genuinely politically useful or even political at all: “*You’re not doing anything about the political debate, the political dialectics, power, etc, and that’s what disinformation is about!*”

Following the reactive argument, a common perspective among CAs’ advocates is to point directly to electoral democracy and party-based democracy as responsible for the growing disinformation. In this respect, power struggles would incentivise political parties to lie to capture more votes. As Brett Henning argues, “*The confrontational aspect of electoral politics is directly at odds with the idea of informed deliberation.*” More bluntly, C.R. argues: “*The logic during an election isn’t to tell the truth or neither to be right or wrong but to take on board as many people as possible, as many voters as possible.*” This creates a contrasting idea between a) the supposedly harmonious and consensus-driven debate within the CA and b) the conflictive and divisive discussion of the wider public. Guillaume McLaughlin states: “*In deliberative processes, you build by bringing together little areas of consensus to come to some final product, which is exactly the opposite of what we do in the Parliament: oppose each other.*”

7. Disintermediation

Thus, CAs are conceived as a tool for disintermediation, as a space for direct connection between citizens and institutions. In the words of Gaëtane Ricard-Nihoul, the ECPs (and CAs, in general) “*contribute to decrease the distance between citizens and institutions and increase trust in institutions.*” Several interviewees argue that citizens trust their peers more than politicians. Brett Henning cites Gastil et al. (2023) to say that CAs are a “*trusted information proxy*”, a “*trusted neutral source*”. However, as Niccolò Milanese puts it, “*the claim of a direct relationship between the citizens and the institutions is a political strategy*”. The direct communicative or informational link between institutions and citizens side-lines intermediary actors (e.g. trade unions, political parties, civil society organisations, etc.) by conceiving them as potential contaminators of public debate and obstacles to impartiality, neutrality, and consensus.

The political subject behind this disintermediation-based political participation within the CA is that of an “unmediated”, neutral, impartial, unbiased individual. An “ordinary citizen” or, as Brett Henning puts it, an “average citizen” or an “average everyday person”. As explained above, participants were informed by the organisers of the ECPs that they were only “representing themselves” (Gjaldbæk-Sverdrup et al., 2023; Oleart, 2023b). C.R. even states that “*the facilitators, one day, hopefully, will replace politicians in a way that citizens could really represent themselves without an intermediary*”. This narrative hides an anti-political vision of deliberation and the idea that it is possible to reach a rational consensus far removed from emotions, political identities, and biases. According to Nabila Abbas, “*The idea of having void citizens that are completely neutral and that will come to a considered judgment only through deliberation in an empty room is a construction that doesn't happen.*” The idea of “self-representation”, in short, stands in contrast to the central concept of representation in our modern mass democracies. For Niccolò Milanese, the idea that it is possible to have deliberation between citizens by suppressing or eliminating intermediary political institutions is the position of a “dangerous idiot”.

Therefore, the primary resistance to institutionalising CAs in the EU comes from 1) political parties or elected representatives and 2) organised civil society. The former because, as Guillaume McLaughlin explains, “*argue that they already legitimately represent citizens*”; the latter because, as Gaëtane Ricard-Nihoul explains, “*feel that this format may threaten the civil dialogue they have been struggling to push for*”.

In contrast to the disintermediated and neutralised perspective, a more radical or militant point of view conceives the CA as a space for open political confrontation and conflict channelling. Niccolò Milanese proposes to incorporate contestation by including intermediary actors into the CA itself: “*The best way to ensure that a real deliberation is taking place inside of the mini-public is to have as much connection and presence of the maxi-public, as many mediators between the mini-public and the maxi-public as possible.*”

In any case, despite favouring the narrative of a direct and unmediated connection between institutions and citizens, CAs inevitably

emerge as new forms of mediation (Oleart, 2023). The Berggruen Institute, a philanthropic organisation behind the funding of many CAs, defines them as “*new mediating institutions [that] can mend the breach between institutions and their people in the form of ‘participation without populism’*” (Berggruen Institute, 2024).

8. Representativeness

The political dimension of the CAs is closely related to their representativeness of the EU’s political body. Most interviewees stressed that CAs have a very micro perspective, especially considering the breadth of the EU electorate. “*150 citizens at a time? Good luck in reaching everyone!*” exclaims Camille Dobler. However, doubts about the ECPs’ representativeness of the whole EU population are not restricted to the limited number of participants.

On the one hand, the ECPs reproduce the traditional dynamics of the CAs, specifically the self-selection bias, whereby those who are more informed, interested in politics, and have more socio-economic resources are more likely to participate. Therefore, “unheard voices” (as Daniela Vancic puts it) are not included despite being the main objective of the CAs. Moreover, in the ECPs, there is another participation bias: most participants have pro-EU attitudes, so there is an apparent lack of representation of Eurosceptic profiles. Side-lining or neglecting Eurosceptic perspectives in the ECPs only contributes to their depoliticisation. According to Niccolò Milanese, “*excluded voices should be, if not heard, at least recognised as excluded from the deliberation happening inside the CA.*”

On the other hand, there is no clear consensus on the appropriateness of channelling the debate through a representative sample of EU citizens. Using a representative sample is not a neutral decision with no political meaning or impact but a political decision itself. Niccolò Milanese argues, “*A representative sample isn’t a natural fact which is unpolitical about the wider constituency. It is an abstraction, a political choice. It is subject to the broader political and power dynamics in our society. If you have a representative sample as if it were a natural fact, you’re just reinforcing the majoritarian position.*” To prevent this, Daniela Vancic argues for overrepresenting particular political or social groups within the CA. This would aim at including

marginalised and excluded groups that do not usually volunteer to participate in CAs.

9. Empowering or “participatory-washing”?

Except for European Commission staff, all interviewees agree that the impact of the ECPs is minimal. Guillaume McLaughlin argues, “*ECPs are just another way for the Commission to broaden their stakeholder consultation when developing ideas or even when they have virtually finished the proposals.*” During the interviews, the term “participatory-washing” appears recurrently, which Yago Bermejo defines as: “*Taking pictures with citizens while involving them in a process without any political impact.*” Thus, practitioners and activists claim that the ECPs are being used strategically and self-interestedly by the European Commission as a self-legitimation tool to alleviate its acute lack of democratic legitimacy. This explains why the Directorate-General for Communication (DG COMM) is in charge of the organisation and the amount of financial and organisational resources invested in unidirectional visibility tools to promote the event and attract media attention.

The promoters from the institutions and the organising companies also emphasise the potential of the ECPs as tools for digital alphabetisation, civic education or political socialisation in the EU. However, on the one hand, it is stressed that this is not the primary objective of these CAs but rather a “by-product” or a “side-effect”. On the other hand, it is again underlined that ECPs have a very micro perspective, and it would be very costly to organise the required number of ECPs for a substantial percentage of the EU population to participate. As Guillaume McLaughlin puts it, “*ECPs are a very expensive tool to make ‘ideal citizens’ out of them.*” Niccolò Milanese suggests that there are many other effective civic education tools that, besides, “*don’t rely on creating the false impression that you are taking part in a political process.*”

In any case, many actors have proposed pushing for the institutionalisation of CAs at the EU level. However, some interviewees are more critical of this proposal or openly oppose it. Brett Henning exclaims, “*That would be very political; I don’t think people have much of an appetite for an even bigger EU at the moment.*” Henning

proposes connecting the ECI with the ECPs as “*a less threatening way of institutionalisation.*” Niccolò Milanese exclaims: “*The last thing I want to do is to create another EU institution which is as bureaucratic and as sort of top-down as the current ones.*” Milanese argues that European civil society organisations themselves must take responsibility for promoting real deliberation in the public sphere, as many “*still conceive themselves as pro-EU propaganda organisations.*” In this respect, both inside and outside the CA, intermediary actors and organised civil society can serve as an essential politicising element of the European public sphere and as a generator of a broader, systemic deliberation in European society.

IV. PREVAILING NARRATIVES ON CITIZENS’ ASSEMBLIES IN THE EU “DELIBERATIVE WAVE”

Drawing on the literature and on how the interviewed actors frame CAs as tools against disinformation and drivers of a better-informed citizenry, as Table 2 shows, four prevailing competing narratives are identified: anti-political deliberation, self-legitimising deliberation, scientific deliberation, and radical deliberation. Each narrative is organised according to: 1) the objective it pursues, 2) its conception of conflict, 3) its conception of political participation, 4) the power structures of the CA, and 5) the impact given to its outcomes. Likewise, each narrative implicitly leads to a different normative conception of democracy and the public sphere and diverse ways of acting against disinformation and fostering a better-informed citizenry. The objectives pursued by each narrative are not always necessarily democratic but may have anti-political, authoritarian, technocratic or populist aims. Depending on the type of actor and their objectives, they will tend towards the narrative that best allows them to position their interests.

Table 2: Prevailing narratives on CAs in the EU “deliberative wave”

Narrative	Objective	Conflict	Political participation	Organisation	Impact	Public sphere
Anti-political deliberation	Control	Elimination	Anti-representation	Top-down	High	<i>Bunker-like</i>
Self-legitimising deliberation	Persuasion	Neutralisation	Disintermediation	Top-down	Low	<i>Stage-like</i>
Scientific deliberation	Effectiveness	Resolution	Diversification	Horizontal	Replication-based	<i>Consensus-seeking</i>
Radical deliberation	Inclusion	Channelling	Empowerment	Bottom-up	Embedded	<i>Agonistic</i>

Source: Own elaboration (2024).

In any case, none of the four narratives is exactly empirically reproduced among the interviewed actors: they are all interlinked and often overlap. The four narratives are ideal categories that allow us to make sense of the current debate on the institutionalisation of CAs in the EU political system. Moreover, they are intended to serve as a warning signal on the need to explore the normative implications for democracy and the public sphere implicit in the methodologies, objectives and discourses of the actors advocating for using CAs in the EU. Each narrative is further developed below:

1. Anti-political deliberation

This narrative understands the CA as a space protected from interference and a tool to control the flow of information. The encapsulation of deliberation allows for top-down control of what happens within the CA and prevents dissent from spilling over into the rest of society, which results in the abolition of political conflict on a broader scale. The normative conception of the public sphere behind this narrative is a bunker-like mini-public sphere. Actors who defend this narrative understand CAs as providing neutral, impartial, and efficient decision-making, far removed from political biases that prevent consensus. This supposedly depoliticised or anti-political vision openly rejects the role of intermediary actors and even the concept of representation in mass society by prioritising the creation of a representative sample of the political body (which, inevitably, remains subject to society's existing political and power dynamics). The denial of politics through the elimination of conflict would allow the organisers to present the processes and outcomes of CA as neutral, even though they are intended to satisfy their interests and preferences. Despite being the least widespread narrative, it prevails among large corporations, techno-optimists, and philanthropists. This relates to the notion of “corporate populism” developed by Nyberg & Murray (2023, p. 6-7), a totalitarian fantasy “*with business elites influencing politics for their own interests while simultaneously relying on a sense of mistrust to legitimately speak for unrepresented people*”. Moreover, as He & Warren (2011) explore, this is consistent with the “authoritarian deliberation” under non-democratic regimes such as China.

2. *Self-legitimising deliberation*

This narrative aims at the strategic and self-interested self-legitimation of the organising institution. Although the selection of participants is usually aimed at creating a random representative sample of the political body, the self-legitimation strategy is sometimes based on the over-representation of certain excluded or minority political groups with the alleged objective of empowering them in the political debate on the issue under discussion (as is done in ECPs with 16–25-year-olds). Conflict neutralisation is achieved through a) control of the deliberative process, the information flow, and the selection of experts, b) selection of issues that are relatively inconsequential or removed from the political agenda, or c) non-inclusion of intermediary actors (e.g. political parties, trade unions, civil society organisations, etc.) within the CA. Behind this desired disintermediation lies the organiser's interest in connecting institutions and citizens directly. As explored above, the most blatant case in this respect is that of the European Commission's "new generation" ECPs, with a totally top-down organisation, topics far removed from the public agenda and insignificant practical impact. The normative conception of the public sphere behind this narrative is of a stage-like public sphere. Despite the media irrelevance of the topic under discussion or the limited political effects of the CA, the organisers invest financial and organisational resources in unidirectional visibility tools to promote the event and attract media attention (as a paradigmatic example, during the "new generation" ECPs, a documentary was filmed to publicise the experience of the participants). This is consistent with the "technocratic democratisation" concept coined by Gjaldbæk-Sverdrup et al. (2023) or the "participatory-washing" perspective underlined by some interviewees. "Participatory-washing" could be defined as a form of public relations aimed at persuading the public that the work of an organisation is the result of a democratic process of citizen participation. Yet, citizens' transformative potential is minimal or relies on a co-optation strategy.

3. *Scientific deliberation*

The scientific perspective assumes that debate between individuals with diverse profiles, provided specific procedures are

followed, favours informed deliberation and the production of more efficient and widely accepted public policies. Regarding conflict, it is understood that it can be “resolved” by reaching a “rational consensus” by a) ensuring a diverse pool of participants, b) selecting experts with divergent positions, and c) following rational and impartial argumentation. The normative conception of the public sphere implicit in this narrative is a space where consensus is sought and assumed as possible. The possibility of reaching a “rational consensus” based on argumentation is asserted through prioritising the procedural and methodological aspects, disregarding politics as a struggle of emotions and identities (often reproducing anti-political positions). According to this perspective, the very organisation of the CA is conceived as the result of a process of horizontal agreements, which reflect the consensus between the diversity of the parties involved. The CA participants are intended to descriptively represent the general population through the random sample’s microcosm, which would allow us to know what the outcome of public deliberation would be in the general society if the necessary conditions were met. As Lafont’s (2022) criticism of “lottocratic technopopulism” emphasises, this narrative simultaneously holds that the deliberative group will a) “better represent the people” and b) “ensure that decisions will be taken by the best-informed”. The impact of the CA and the link between the mini-public and the rest of the public sphere are conceived as the result of the replication or multiplication of such deliberative spaces. This narrative is especially present among practitioners, organising companies, companies selecting participants, organisations defending sortition in politics, or even among activists and academics who defend these processes.

4. Radical deliberation

The radical narrative does not deny the adversarial conception of politics, nor does it prioritise the achievement of a “rational consensus.” On the contrary, this narrative is radically political and channels conflict within the CA. Rather than as a protected sphere, the CA is conceived as another space of political confrontation, from selecting the topic (which should be relevant and politically and practically impactful) to selecting participants, expert knowledge and supporting

information. The CA is openly conceived as a political tool with concrete political objectives and is intended to include and empower subaltern, minority or traditionally excluded groups in elaborating public policies. This narrative conceives random representative sampling not as natural and depoliticised but as a tool that remains subject to society's existing political and power dynamics whose use would legitimise majority positions and reproduce the biases and results of the debate outside the CA. As such, it often prioritises the over-representation of certain political groups over establishing a random representative sample. The normative conception of the public sphere in this narrative is, following Mouffe (1999, 2002), an agonistic public sphere: every element to be decided in the organisation of the CA is recognised as the result of a vibrant agonistic struggle between adversaries (not enemies) to make their position hegemonic without delegitimising the position of the rest. The perspective aims to embed the CA into already-existing political communities and channels of representation. Thus, rather than diminishing the role of mediators, this narrative argues for incorporating as many mediators as possible within the CA as indispensable actors in mass democracy and as a link between the mini-public and the wider public. The organisational preferences of this narrative move away from the top-down perspective and instead prioritise bottom-up organisations through grassroots movements or civil society organisations. This perspective is mainly present in civil society organisations or social movements. While in the case of the EU, the number of political actors able to navigate these terms is limited, organisations such as Citizens Take Over Europe or European Alternatives have a radical conception of deliberation in the EU.

V. CONCLUSION

The research question posed at the beginning of the article was: *How do the EU “deliberative wave” actors frame CAs as drivers of a better-informed citizenry?* This paper has tried to answer this question through an actor-based perspective. It is argued that there is an ongoing discursive struggle among different actors to define under which leadership, methods and processes CAs and deliberative democracy are institutionalised in the EU. In this sense, and despite

the lack of academic consensus, the question of disinformation and informed citizenry appear as articulating elements of the different competing narratives.

The article has explored this question through exploratory and theory-building methods, using secondary literature and semi-structured interviews with actors involved in the EU “deliberative wave”. Drawing on how the interviewed actors frame CAs as tools against disinformation and drivers of a better-informed citizenry, four prevailing narratives are identified in this struggle: anti-political deliberation, self-legitimising deliberation, scientific deliberation, and radical deliberation.

Thus, this paper argues that CAs do not necessarily or automatically contribute to the fight against disinformation, the promotion of a better-informed EU citizenry, or fostering a more inclusive democracy. There is currently a discursive struggle between the different political actors involved in the EU “deliberative wave” to define and condition the process of institutionalisation of CAs in the EU political system. There is no consensus or concrete agreement on the methods and methodologies to be implemented, but somewhat divergent, competing, or conflicting narratives. The objectives pursued by each narrative reproduced by the actors are not always necessarily democratic but may have anti-political, authoritarian, technocratic or populist aims. Depending on the type of actor and their objectives, they will tend towards the narrative that best allows them to position their interests. Likewise, each narrative implicitly leads to a different normative conception of the public sphere. While some perspectives conceive the CA as a space for open political contestation, others see it as a tool to control and protect the flow of information or to empower technocratic perspectives under the pretext of seeking to produce more effective and informed policies.

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