

## **DOES A CITIZENS' BUDGET PRODUCE BETTER CITIZENS?**

### **Quasi-Experimental Research on Social Learning in Deliberative Democracy**

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#### **Abstract**

The theoretical assumptions of deliberative democracy are increasingly embraced by policy makers investing in democratic deliberative practices, often without adequate empirical verification. One such assertion concerns the stimulus of social learning among participants of civic democratic deliberation. Through the innovative use of a quasi-experimental design, it is tested if – and among whom – participation in mini-publics stimulates social learning. In terms of whom, this analysis demonstrates higher social learning according to education level. The results inform a richer theory on the impacts of deliberation, as well as better use of limited resources for deliberative practice.

**Keywords:** deliberative democracy; citizens' budget; social learning; public reason

#### **Introduction**

The central question this research wants to explore is if – and if so, among whom – participation in civic democratic deliberation stimulates social learning.

This research objective is based on the assumption that democratic deliberation strengthens public reason (Chappell, 2012; Christiano, 1997; Fishkin, 1997; Habermas, 1996; Mill, 1948; Pateman, 1975; Valadez, 2001) and particularly stimulates social learning (Barracough, 2013; Dryzek, 2006; Park, 2000; Welton, 2001). Deliberators would learn from each other other's insights and experiences, which would result in a greater understanding and appreciation of opposing views (Barracough, 2013). However, we still lack accurate empirical data on the phenomenon of democratic deliberation for this – theoretically assumed – claim to be – empirically – valid. Empirical research on democratic deliberation rarely explores social learning thoroughly. And where this has been the case, researchers have been dependent on the indirect measurement of participants' self-assessment of social learning (Grönlund, Herne, & Setälä, 2017; Hansen, 2004; Luskin, O'Flynn, Fishkin, & Russell, 2014; Michels & De Graaf,

2010; Price & Cappella, 2002) or informal deliberation (Park, 2000), or on the measurement of social learning in digressive behavior (Grönlund et al., 2017). Moreover, there is barely something known on the impact of the self-selection effect on the deliberative effect (cf. who takes part in a citizens' budget?).

Through the innovative use of a quasi-experimental design, in which the investigation of social learning is directly approached and crucial citizens' features are taken into account, this project will adequately be able to go beyond the rather broad existing causal questions in the field. Hence, the overall relevance of this work lies in the objective to significantly improve existing democratic theory with in-depth empirical data. Hence, despite the theoretical trend in scaling up deliberative democracy, we still lack accurate empirical data on the phenomenon of democratic deliberation. Furthermore, since ordinary citizens and governments are extensively investing in the practical implementation of deliberative practices, it is as well of much practical relevance to contribute to insights on the efficiency of those investments, from a public-spirited perspective of citizenship – assumed in this research.

The essence of this research concerns a definite empirical investigation of the effect of deliberative practices. Practices which cannot be detached from the normative arguments on which they are based, but which can never fully reach the requirements political theorists aim for. One should note that there is no consensus in the literature on the normative – procedural nor outcome – requirements to which deliberative democracy has to answer. However, that is beside the point in this work. A research that (merely) aims at gathering empirical knowledge on the effect of democratic deliberative practices (not at the falsification of deliberative democracy as a theoretical model), does not require normative consensus, nor an ideal type of deliberation. It does need a core normative basis, but it has to leave open the different empirical, institutional conditions through which this normative basis of democratic deliberation can be fulfilled (Chappell, 2012).

The notion of 'deliberative mini-publics' is broadly used in the literature to outline a general framework for civic deliberation<sup>1</sup> and will therefore be used as conceptualization of deliberative democracy in this work. This notion defines the forums organized by policy-makers in which citizens who represent different viewpoints are gathered together

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<sup>1</sup> In what follows we will often refer to 'deliberation' whereas systematically 'democratic deliberation' is meant.

to moderately deliberate on a particular issue in small groups (Brown, 2006; Fung, 2003; Goodin & Dryzek, 2006; Setälä & Herne, 2014).

In the first part of this article, we will synthesize the literature in the field out of which three hypotheses follow, we will test in this study. In this first part we will also explain how we approach social learning – the central dependent variable in this work. In the second part we will point out the methods used to test our hypotheses. In the penultimate part, we will present the results as answers on the hypotheses. In the concluding part, we will come back to the most important empirical insights of our analysis and we will reflect on their implications for the academic and societal field; two terrains wherein democratic deliberation emerges ever more empathically .

## **1. Literature Review & Hypotheses**

### *1.1. Social Learning & Citizenship*

Three incentives for policy-makers to engage citizens in their decision-making, in between elections (participation in the invited space), can be extracted out of the literature: ‘because they have to’ (juridical argument), ‘because it ought to be’ (moral argument) and ‘because it is worth it’ (Fung, 2003). The latest refers to the quality of decisions (‘better decisions’), the legitimacy of the decisions (‘better support’) and social learning (‘better citizens’). It is that final benefit that civic deliberation in particular assumes to stimulate (Barraclough, 2013; Dryzek, 2006; Park, 2000; Welton, 2001). In this work we endorse Barraclough’s (2013) definition of social learning as civic deliberators who learn from each other’s insights and experiences, which results in a greater understanding and appreciation of opposing views<sup>2</sup>.

This interpretation of social learning has to be framed within the implicit assumption of the importance of public reason, on which this research is based<sup>3</sup>. If democracy is about the debate on the decisions which mostly benefit society, then it is our duty being citizens (of whom the interests are assumed to be served by our representatives) to think about what we think is good for the society as a whole and to act upon it (read: to cast our vote accordingly). If policy has to serve society in the end, then the representation of the simple

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<sup>2</sup> The interpretation of ‘empathy’ in Grönlund, Herne & Setälä (2017) matches for a great part with the conceptualization of social learning (cf. *infra*).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Rawls’ (1971) ‘duty of civility’ and Arendt’s (1967) ‘representative thinking’ or ‘enlarged mindedness’.

sum of individual interest is not only morally counterintuitive, but also materially inefficient. Seen from this perspective, social learning is of crucial importance. To be able to deliberately choose for a policy whereby the society as a whole is benefitted, it is essential to understand and appreciate the perspectives of those who do not share our background, environment or experiences.

For the concrete conceptualization of this notion, we adapt Park's (2000) classification of what he labels in his deliberative democratic research as 'civility': one's understanding of why others think the way they do. Even though this definition consist of a pure cognitive approach (in contrast with our more broad interpretation of social learning that also refers to the appreciation of opposing views), he conceptualizes his notion along different axes, of which we reconcile the cognitive and attitudinal in this work<sup>4</sup> (cf. diagram 1).

***Dia 1. Conceptualisation of social learning***

Social learning = learning from each other's insights and experiences

→ understanding and appreciating opposing views

Cognitive: learning to understand other's views and to make their own views understandable for others

Attitudinal: learning to transcend the perspective of the personal environment

Understanding other's views as an indicator of social learning (cognitive), does not merely imply that people are conscious of what other people think. The 'understanding' factor indicates reference to learning why other people think the way they do (Siu, 2008). A necessary precondition for deliberators to be able to learn about the reasoned arguments of others, is that deliberators are able to make themselves understandable for others (cognitive). This has also to be seen as a – softer – indicator of social learning. Indeed, being able to explain why you hold a particular position implies an (implicit) understanding that others do not necessarily share your background or world, or are otherwise different. Learning to transcend the perspective of the personal environment

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<sup>4</sup> The complete conceptualization also consists of a 'behaviour'-indicator: learning to show understanding for other opinions, actually making the own opinion understandable for others and appreciating other perspectives. However, this indicator is not studied in this (but in following) publication(s).

(attitudinal), subsequently, is about taking the consciousness of these differences (in meaning, social position, needs) into account (Janssens & Steyaert, 2001).

### *1.2. Empirical Fuzziness about the Deliberative Effect*

Democratic theorists argue that deliberation is good for democracy, as a process (e.g. rendering decision-making more legitimate) and/or an outcome (e.g. producing better decisions or citizens). Concerning the latter, democratic theorists generally make the claim of the transformative power of deliberation (Steiner, Bächtiger, Spörndli, & Steenbergen, 2004). The reflective aspect of deliberation is claimed to be crucial: deliberative reflection would have the potential to transform preferences/interests/beliefs in a normative welcome way (Chappell, 2012; Dryzek, 2000; Stokes, 1999; Valadez, 2001). More specifically, the deliberative process, contrarily to the way citizen participation in representative democracies is organized, would have the potential to go beyond the mere aggregation of individual interest (Leyenaar, 2007). Some make the claim that there would be a reinforcement of the willingness to take the arguments of other people into account (Christiano, 1997; Fishkin, 1997), while others even assume that deliberation would strengthen the commitment to the common good (Chappell, 2012; Habermas, 1996; Mill, 1948; Pateman, 1975; Valadez, 2001).

Some democratic theorists borrow the term of social learning from social psychological theories to formalize the public-spirited transformative effect of deliberation (Dryzek, 2006; Kanra, 2012; Welton, 2001). Barraclough (2013) argues that participation in deliberative processes opens up the opportunity for learning from each other's insights and experiences – as a part or a result of the process – which results in a greater understanding and appreciation of opposing views. What makes an opinion deliberative, is that it has grasped and taken into consideration the opposing view of others (Park, 2000).

However, based on the current state of the art of the empirical research on democratic deliberation, we cannot – empirically – validate the latest-mentioned – theoretically assumed – deliberative effect. Previous empirical research concluded that deliberation creates more single-peaked preferences (Farrar et al., 2010), that it acts as a buffer against more negative feelings towards the out-group (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2014) and that it makes people more thoughtful (Grönlund, Bächtiger, & Setälä, 2014; Smets & Isernia, 2014). Other conclusions have been that

deliberation stimulates mutual understanding of conflicting viewpoints (Andersen & Hansen, 2007; Hansen, 2004; Luskin et al., 2014). It has also been derived from earlier research that deliberation leads to a greater cosmopolitan and collective orientation of preferences (Gastil, Bacci, & Dollinger, 2010), as well as to preferences that are more environmentally friendly (Fishkin, 1997).

All of these conclusions are in line with the transformative character argued for and assumed by deliberative theorists. However, there has been disproportionately less attention given to the more profound relationship between social learning and deliberative democracy in empirical research than this has been the case in democratic theory.

Social learning implies more than merely developing empathy as the understanding of opposing views (Andersen & Hansen, 2007; Hansen, 2004; Luskin et al., 2014). Social learning also presumes that one learns to take other visions into account. This is as well not necessarily implied when deliberation appears to greaten the expression of preferences towards ‘the common good’ (Fishkin, 1997; Gastil et al., 2010), which just as well can be guided by a mere personal consideration. Moreover, from the state of the art it is to be derived that empirical research in which social learning is approached as a key dependent variable, researchers have been largely dependent on participants’ self-assessment of the perception of an evolution in social learning (Michels & De Graaf, 2010; Price & Cappella, 2002), on the evolution of participants’ self-assessment of the willingness to consider other views and the measurement of digressive behavior (Andersen & Hansen, 2007; Grönlund et al., 2017; Hansen, 2004; Luskin et al., 2014), or even on the self-assessment of deliberation as ‘the frequency of political conversations people think they have with those with whom they disagree’ (Park, 2000). This means that up until today, we still lack studies in which the assumed deliberative effect on social learning is directly and formally approached. This makes the empirical validity of the far-reaching claim on social learning still unclear.

In the meantime, the importance of taking the perspectives of others with a different background, environment or experience into account, is mounting in societal debate. More and more, the moral and material desirability of citizens (read: consumers) who vote – in a democracy – for a party because they assume they will lower their taxes or make their recently bought solar panels economically cost-effective, is put into question. In such a political context, the societal importance of social learning is considerably

rising. From this point of view, policy makers are increasingly inspired by the persuasive theoretical assumption that democratic deliberation stimulates social learning.

Given its reasonable theoretical explanation and some meaningful empirical indications in previous research, we could expect that deliberation actually stimulates social learning.

*H1: Participation in mini-publics stimulates social learning among deliberators.*

The objective of this research is, however, not limited to the contribution of empirical knowledge on the mere outcome of deliberative practices. This work is also characterized by the ambition to discover some meaningful insights on the explanation of the measured deliberative outcome. At present day, researchers are therefore still explicitly stressing the need to come to a deeper understanding of the deliberative outcomes (Setälä & Herne, 2014). Generally, empiricists forgot to turn the page and consequently ignored the effect of the individual features of civic deliberators.

The self-selection thesis, which opposes the socialization thesis, assumes that political participation is driven by the intrinsic presence of certain norms of citizenship (Baum, 2015; Uhlener, 2001). This theory presupposes that the engagement in political participation is driven by the calculation of the returns on investment (of time and energy). Citizens who have the experience, network, skills or trust to participate will be more inclined to see the benefits of participation and thus to actually grasp these opportunities.

Specifically, this self-selection thesis supposes that the socio-economic situation is crucial in forecasting political participation (Baum, 2015; Uhlener, 2001). Because of a higher political knowledge, trust and interest, it assumes that higher-educated citizens will be more inclined to participate to deliberative democratic processes in the invited space. Because of the glass ceiling, the opposite would hold for women (in opposition to men). The little empirical research on individual features of civic deliberators, confirms this assumption (McNulty, 2015).

Hence, if we assume that deliberation mainly attracts ‘politically favorable citizens’, the question rises to what extent this interacts with the actual deliberation and its outcomes. If we a) suppose that deliberation stimulates social learning among its participating citizens, but b) also assume that those citizens hold some – politically crucial – distinct features, then the question is if those features are necessary for the deliberative effect on social learning to come about? Even if the opposite could also hold (that the deliberative effect

is precisely greater among those who do not already hold politically crucial features), we can reasonably assume the following:

*H2.1: Men learn more socially than women through participation in mini-publics*

*H2.2: Higher-educated learn more socially than lower-educated through participation in mini-publics*

## **2. Methods**

Because we are dealing with a complex political phenomenon (Eckstein, 1975), of which the empirical aspects are still left uncharted (Ragin, 1987), and in which we want to test a causal assumption (Abelson et al., 2003), we argue that the case study is the most accurate method to address our research objective. This means that – theoretically – we rein in external validity. However, one has to notice that in the current context in which deliberative democratic experiments in practice take on so many distinct forms (topic, decision-making, length, role of moderator/experts) and the impact of those conditions is still unknown, external validity is by definition unachievable. However, this does not mean that one cannot strive to validate the institutional context.

In contrast with many other experiments in the field, we study a real-world deliberative practice. More specifically we selected the case of the participatory budgeting program of Antwerp District, the largest and most central district of the municipality of Antwerp (Belgium's most populous city). Antwerpian districts enjoy a directly-elected sub-local council and dispose over those – constrained – powers that concern the citizens' most direct living environment (streets, public squares, green spaces, culture, sports, communication, targeting youth and seniors). Since 2014 Antwerp District has yearly set up forums in three different phases in which a diverse group of citizens<sup>5</sup> moderately deliberates in small groups on the spending of €1.1m (10% of district council spending).

With the Antwerpian case, we study the prevalent (urban) practice of citizens' budgets as mini-publics. These practices – opposed to other real-world deliberations – are not characterized by specific policy questions, nor distorted by ruling political power

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<sup>5</sup> Participation is open to every district inhabitant, which in the first edition of the program led to a rather traditional participatory public. By focusing on informing and inspiring hard-to-reach citizens (youngsters, people with a migration background), the organization now succeeds in achieving a remarkable diverse group of participants (cf. 92% of the participants agreed that a diversity of opinions was represented at the tables).



relations – dependent on the particular case at hand. Citizens' budgets are characterized by an universal setting in which a mini-public can independently decide on politically allocated money. Furthermore, with the Antwerpian case, we selected a case of which the particular decision-making procedure, role of moderators and length has been copied in foreign cities and municipalities. In that way, we argue that the Antwerpian Citizens' Budget opens up the opportunity to maximize the internal and external validity within our case study research.

Contrary to traditional cross-sectional research, we developed a design that allows us to test causal relations accurately. This research is based on unique panel data of the participants of the Antwerpian Citizens' Budget 2017 before and after their participation in a respective phase of the deliberative process. This one group pretest posttest design allows us to analyze the evolution in social learning for each individual. Hence, we measured the upper-mentioned indicators of social learning (cognitive and attitudinal) through a pre-/post survey, of which the answers were coded qualitatively<sup>6</sup> and the results analyzed quantitatively.

More specifically, we asked the respondents (before and after every phase of the trajectory) to which of the topics<sup>7</sup> they would certainly want to spend money on. The answer on this is not as such of much relevance for this research, but acted as a cue for the sequential questions. Hence, we subsequently asked for (all of) the (specific) reasons for their choice. This survey design has been successfully introduced by Cappela et al. (2002), in research on the impact of informal deliberation on one's argumentation for the choice of this or that presidential candidate.

In contrast with the research of Cappela et al. (2002), the amount of given arguments is of no relevance in this research. Our data-analysis focusses on the content of the given arguments. In that way we can study if respondents are able to think of understandable arguments for their own position (cognitive), if they either or not transcend the personal environment (attitudinal), and the respective pre/post evolution in this. If one offers either few or many arguments, does as such tell us nothing about the comprehensibility or public reason of those arguments.

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<sup>6</sup> To become maximum consistency on the (pre- vs. post-)coding, one coder coded all answer. Afterwards, 30% of the answers were recoded by a second coder. Krippendorff's alpha measured both for the own argumentation and for the argumentation of others .74.

<sup>7</sup> In the second phase we explicitly asked which of the at the first phase selected themes one preferred.

For the coding of these arguments, a coding scheme has been developed based on the Discourse Quality Index (DQI) (Steiner et al., 2004). Since the DQI is not to be seen as a method to measure argumentation, but is used as an index to analyze reported argumentation, we argue that it is a well-founded<sup>8</sup> instrument to apply on either form of deliberative argumentation; whether it has been reported before, during or after deliberation, as an answer subsequently to explicit questions or not. Since the index has been initially developed for parliamentary deliberation, it is common to adapt the index for use for civic deliberation (Steffensmeier & Schenck-Hamlin, 2008). More specifically, it is desirably to focus not only on ‘arguments’, but also on narratives and reasons (e.g. personal stories and anecdotes).

In this way, these elements of the DQI which are relevant according to the dependent variable in question – the level of justification (inferior, qualified, sophisticated) and the content of justifications (neutral, group interests, common good) –, have been updated to the particular context of this research. Specifically, we made the distinction between unqualified (no reasons or only reasons without a clear linkage with the opinion), qualified (at least one reason with a clear linkage with the opinion – cf. cognitive) and qualified public argumentations (at least one reason with a clear linkage with the opinion whereby an individual or particular group context is being transcended – cf. attitude).

Hence, we can explore social learning by studying the pre-post evolution of the coded argumentation (cf. table 1). When an argument becomes ‘public (qualified)’ or ‘qualified’, social learning has taken place. In the first case, the respondent shows having learnt to transcend the personal environment. This can concern both an evolution of a (non-public) qualified, as a unqualified pre-argumentation. In the second case, the respondent shows having learnt to think of understandable arguments for one’s own argumentation, the more soft form of social learning (‘+’ instead of ‘+ +’). The latest can only concern unqualified pre-argumentations that evolve to (non-public) qualified post-argumentations.

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<sup>8</sup> Yet unconventional.

**Table 1. Summary individual evolution own argumentation**

		POST		
		PUBLIC	QUALIFIED	UNQUALIFIED
PRE	PUBLIC	Stays public ( = )	Becomes private ( - )	Becomes unqualified ( - - )
	QUALIFIED	Becomes public ( + + )	Stays qualified ( = )	
	UNQUALIFIED		Becomes qualified ( + )	Stays unqualified ( = )

Next to the argumentation of the own opinion, we also asked for potential opposing opinions, as measurement for the second – stronger – cognitive indicator of social learning. By analogy with the above mentioned survey design of Cappela et al. (2002), participants were asked for specific reasons vis-à-vis their proper reported priority other citizens could have not to spend money on it. These answers were coded in compliance with the own argumentation as described above: qualified vs. unqualified argumentation. An evolution from a pre-unqualified to a post-qualified argumentation shows that respondents learnt to understand other's views (cf. table 2).

In this chapter we focus on the survey results of the first and second phase of the Citizens' Budget of 2017<sup>9</sup>.

Of the 175 civic deliberators of the first phase and the 102 of the second, respectively 77 (phase 1) and 36 (phase 2) have completed both the pre- as the post-survey<sup>10</sup>. Hence, we become reliable response rates of respectively 46% and 35%. Since a lot of the non-response concerns dropout after the pre-surveys, we have considerable proportions of

<sup>9</sup> The third and final phase is not incorporated in our analysis since the response rate at this phase was too low to achieve valid results (9%). The fact that this response rate is much lower than at phase 1 and 2 (whereas the same technique and strategy vis-à-vis similar – and often also the same – respondents was used) is remarkable. We get back to this in the discussion part.

<sup>10</sup> Of whom 32 participants at the first phase and 23 at the second phase completed the pre-survey online. Every other pre-survey was completed physically on site, every post-survey online. The social learners (cf. infra) who completed the pre-survey physically are overrepresented at phase 1 (with regard to the social learners who completed the pre-survey online), whereas they are precisely – similarly strongly – underrepresented at phase 2. Hence, we conclude that there is no net-effect of the way (physically or online) the (pre-)survey was completed. One has to remark that we did not opt to let participants fill in the post-survey on site. Seen the nature of the questions, we argue that answers in such a context would be contaminated by mere memory (instead of knowledge). Seen the quasi-experimental set-up of this study it is, however, important to collect the post-results relatively quick after the end of the deliberation (because of contamination by other post-processes or –events). Hence, by means of clear communication and fast follow-up, we succeeded in receiving 58% of the post-results (phase 1 and 2) within the day after the deliberation. Answers which we received after more than 5 days, were no longer registered.

socio-demographic information of the total population at our disposal (80% of all participants in phase 1, 44% in phase 2). Hence, if we compare the sub-samples response (pre and post) vs. non-response (pre only) on gender, age and education, then we notice no statistical differences<sup>11</sup>. This means that the respondents of which we have the data to analyze their social learning, do not differ from these civic deliberators who do not appear in our analysis. This means that there is no reasons to presume that these other deliberators learnt differently, which preserves the internal validity of our results.

**Table 2.** Summary individual evolution argumentation of others

		POST	
		QUALIFIED	UNQUALIFIED
PRE	QUALIFIED	Stays qualified ( = )	Becomes unqualified ( - - )
	UNQUALIFIED	Becomes qualified ( + + )	Stays unqualified ( = )

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Does it work?

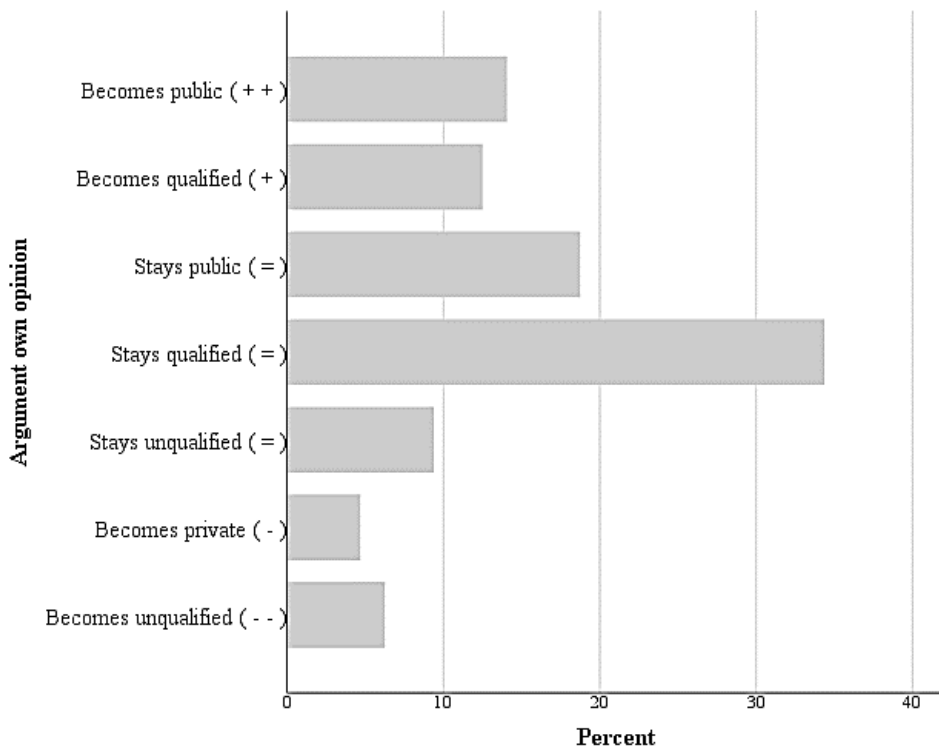
Firstly, we ascertain that regarding the argumentation of the own opinion, the vast majority of participants already had a qualified opinion at the beginning of the deliberation: 67% at the start of phase 1, 78% before phase 2. At the beginning of the first phase, more than one third of these already reported a qualified public argument (25%). At the start of phase 2, this public variant concerned more than half of the qualified arguments (42%).

Figures 1 & 2 show the result of the comparison – for each respondent – between that pre-argumentation and the reported argumentation after the respective first and second phase of the Citizens’ Budget. When an argument becomes ‘public (qualified)’ or ‘qualified’, social learning has taken place (cf. table 1).

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<sup>11</sup> Based on a paired samples test.

**Fig. 1.** Phase 1: individual evolution own argumentation (N = 64)

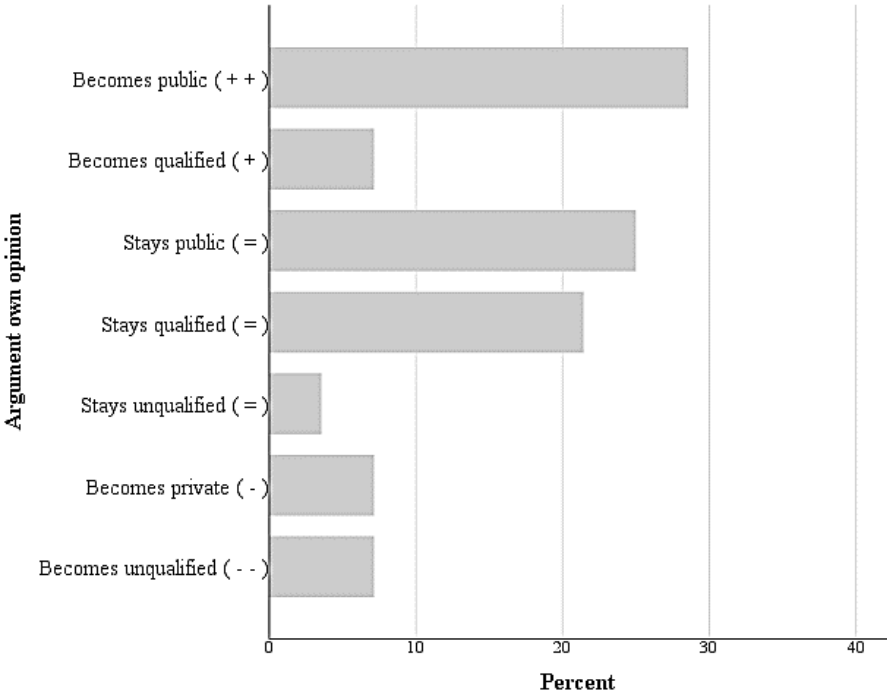


The first and second phase show a similar, positive effect of social learning. After the first phase we see an effect of social learning among 27% of the respondents: 13% shows a qualified argumentation whereas they did not have this at their disposal before the deliberation, among 14%, the post-argumentation shows an evolution to a (qualified) public character. At the end of the second phase we found that 36% of the respondents demonstrates – based on the argumentation for the own opinion – to have learnt socially. Among 7% there is an evolution to a qualified argumentation, among 29%, there is an evolution to a (qualified) public argument – the stronger indicator of social learning.

Moreover one has to notice that the vast majority of the respondents who have not been categorized as having learnt socially, already had a qualified argumentation at the start and were able to maintain this level of argumentation (53% in phase 1, 46% in phase 2). More than one third in phase 1 (19%) and more than half among them in phase 2 (25%) even possessed a qualified public argument at the start. In other words, these respondents were not able to learn socially. However, they succeeded in maintaining this type of argumentation. That they – because they did not evolve – are resorted within the rest group of non-learners, enforces the positive effect of social learning when it comes to the

argument of the own opinion. Furthermore, we ascertain only a – in relation with the upper mentioned positive effect – limited negative effect (11% at phase 1, 14% at phase 2); in casu respondents of whom the public qualified pre-argumentation evolved to a mere qualified post-argumentation (‘becomes private’), or of whom the (mere) qualified pre-argumentation became an unqualified post-argumentation (‘becomes unqualified’).

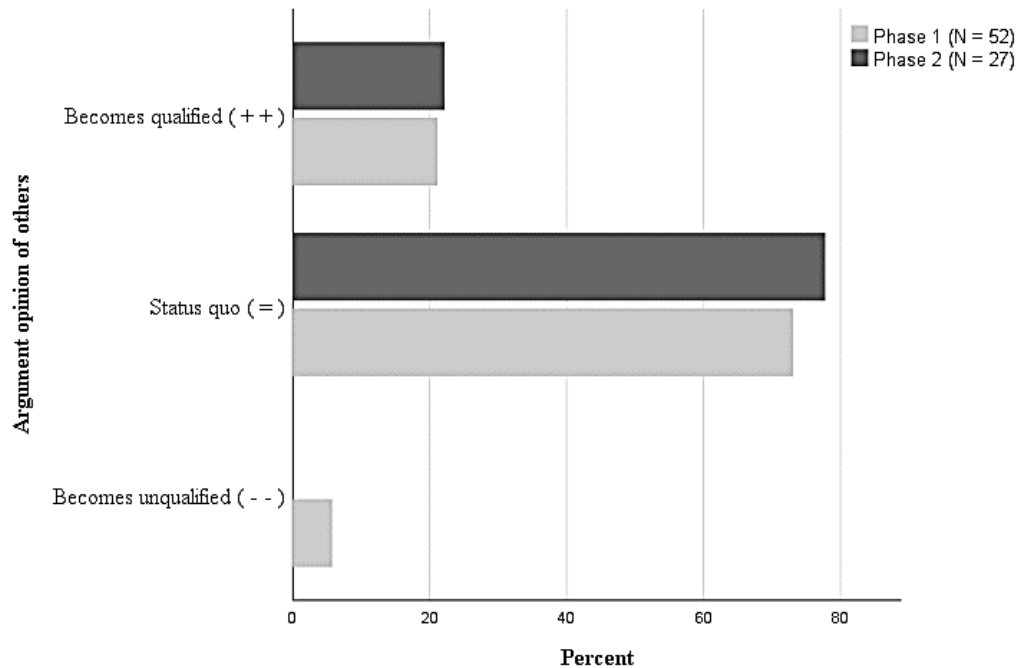
**Fig. 2.** Phase 2: individual evolution own argumentation (N = 28)



Secondly, corresponding the reported argumentation regarding the opinion of others (who would not want to finance the concerned priority), we found out that three quart of those arguments were unqualified at the beginning of the Citizens’ Budget: 74% at phase 1, 77% at phase 2. In other words: contrarily regarding the own opinion, only few respondents were able to give concrete reasons why others would not want to finance their priority before the start of the deliberation.

Figures 3 shows the results of the comparison – for each respondents between this pre-argumentation and the reported argument at the end of the respective first and second phase of the Citizens’ Budget.

**Fig. 3.** Phase 1 & 2: individual evolution argumentation of others



Again we discovered a similar, positive evolution in social learning in the first and second phase. After the first phase, we detected an effect on social learning among 21% of the respondents, after the second phase, this is the case among 22% of the respondents. This means that more than one out of five respondents were not able to give concrete reasons why other citizens would not support the same priority at the outset, but were capable of doing so after the deliberation.

Furthermore, one has to remark that 3 respondents (6%) subsequently to the first phase<sup>12</sup>, and no one succeeding the second phase reported no (concrete) reasons where they have been able to do so at the respective starts of the phases. This implies that a part of the status quo group, concerns respondents who maintained their qualitative pre-argumentation. So, hereby it goes as well that they (since they did not evolve) were not labeled as social learners and thus enforce the positive effect on social learning.

Finally, we discovered that all respondents – but two (in phase 2) – who learnt socially regarding the argumentation for the own opinion (in phase 1 or 2), differed from those who learnt socially on the argumentation of the opinion of others. In that way, we can

<sup>12</sup> A possible explanation is that respondents did less effort for the post-survey (cf. survey fatigue due to identical questions in a short time frame).

conclude that 48%<sup>13</sup> of the respondents learnt socially in phase 1, and 51%<sup>14</sup> in phase 2. These learners were both in phase 1 and 2 proportionally spread out over the distinct meetings in the respective phases<sup>15</sup>.

At first sight, this latest empirical conclusion seems counterintuitive; how can you learn to know the arguments that oppose your own opinion (social learning on the argument of others), without also having learnt arguments that support the own position (social learning on own opinion)? Above, however, we mentioned that there has been a ‘positive status quo group’ regarding the argumentation of the own opinion. Hence, we ascertained that the social learners regarding the argument of the opinion of others, were respondents who already possessed and maintained a qualified (public) argumentation for the own position (except the two respondents who both learnt on the argumentation of others as of their own).

With the conclusion that about half of the participants learnt socially, the results of this case study suggest the confirmation of H1. It is not unimportant to stress hereby that this number is not the result of mainly low social learning (cf. own argumentation becomes qualified). The positive evolution correspondent for 73% in phase 1<sup>16</sup> and for 88% in phase 2<sup>17</sup> with learning to understand the meaning of others (cf. argumentation of the position of others becomes qualified) and to transcend the personal environment (cf. own argumentation becomes public) – the stronger indicators of social learning.

### 3.2. *Among whom?*

Next we wish to find out under which conditions this effect of social learning takes place. Therefore we will focus in what follows on two central individual conditions in political participation: gender and education.

The participants were approximately equally distributed regarding gender and education. In phase 1 participants consisted by 46% out of women and 46% out of low educated<sup>18</sup>. In phase 2 these numbers were respectively 48% and 44%. It has to be remarked that these

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<sup>13</sup> 27% + 21%

<sup>14</sup> 36% + 15% [(4 (new social learners on a total of 6)/N=27) = 15]

<sup>15</sup> All of the 8 encounters within the first phase represented at least 7% of the social learners. At phase 2, 57% of the social learners deliberated at the first encounter on Saturday, 43% deliberated at the second encounter on Sunday.

<sup>16</sup> [21% (qualified evolution regarding the opinion of others) + 14% (public evolution regarding the own opinion)] / [21% + 14% + 13% (qualified evolution regarding the own opinion)].

<sup>17</sup> [22% (qualified evolution regarding the opinion of others) + 29% (public evolution regarding the own opinion)] / [22% + 29% + 7% (qualified evolution regarding the own opinion)].

<sup>18</sup> High educated vs. maximum secondary education.



numbers are quite high in comparison with other deliberative and – more generally – participative trajectories. Often, the vast majority of participants are highly educated and manly. In this way, this case opens up as an opportunity to establish internal valid results on these crucial individual conditions.

When we compare all the participants who learnt socially in phase 1 or 2 with those who did not learn in the respective phases, then we ascertain no statistical differences on gender ( $N = 140$ ,  $\phi = .023$ ,  $p > .05$ ), nor on education<sup>19</sup> ( $N = 137$ ,  $\phi = .052$ ,  $p > .05$ ). However, if we compare the stronger forms of social learning (own argumentation becomes public, argumentation of others become qualified) with the softer form (own argumentation becomes qualified), then we do discover statistical differences on education ( $N = 44$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The significance of this effect disappears when we compare the stronger forms of social learning with all those who did not learn strongly, nor softly socially.

This analysis does not lead in the direction of H2.1, but it does suggest the confirmation of H2.2: we concluded that you do not have a greater chance of higher social learning being highly educated or manly, but that if you learn socially, you do have a greater chance of learning more thoroughly from the insights and experiences of others when being highly educated.

#### **4. Conclusion & Discussion**

In this article we answered the causal question if participation in democratic deliberation stimulates social learning – among whom? Based on a reiteration of the three central empirical conclusions of this quasi-experimental study of the case of the Antwerpian Citizens' Budget, we explain in this concluding part, the scientific and societal relevance of this work.

Through a comparison of pre- and post-survey data, we concluded in the first place that approximately one third of the participants were able to give concrete reasons for their own opinion at the end of the deliberation, where they were not capable of doing so

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<sup>19</sup> Every time a participant learnt or did not learn socially (own argumentation, argumentation others – phase 1, phase 2), his or her gender or education level was taken into account (instead of ending up with a less accurate comparison of heterogeneous groups of respondents that learnt socially on the own or the other's argumentation versus those who did not at all learn socially). We exclude the positive status quo group from the non-social learners, since they could not learn socially due to a priori high social learning indicators (cf. infra).

beforehand (27% at phase 1, 36% at phase 2). Moreover, most of them transcended the personal environment in giving these concrete post-reasons, where they did not so at the start of the deliberation.

Furthermore we ascertained that the most participants already were able to give concrete reasons for their own position at the start and were capable of maintaining this way of reasoning. For a significant part of these participants (19% at phase 1 and 25% at phase 2), these concrete reasons already had a public character (whereby the personal environment was transcended). In other words, these participants could not learn socially, but they succeed in maintaining this type of reasoning. However, because this does not concern an evolution, they were not categorized as social learners. This reinforces the positive effect of social learning on the argumentation of the own opinion.

Secondly, we concluded that participants afterwards were better capable of giving reasons why others would have a different opinion. One out of five respondents were able to report concrete reasons why others would not agree with the concerned respondent's own opinion, where they could not report this beforehand (21% at phase 1, 22% at phase 2). Again, it is the case that a part of the group that was not labeled as social learners are concerning participants who beforehand already reported concrete reasons for another opinion and repeated this afterwards. This conclusion – derived from direct measurements – confirms the formerly assessed evolution of participants' self-assessment of the willingness to consider other views (Andersen & Hansen, 2007; Grönlund et al., 2017; Hansen, 2004; Luskin et al., 2014).

This strongly positive relationship between deliberation and social learning is confirmed by two additional observations. It follows from our analysis that the two upper-mentioned groups of social learners (those who learnt on the own argument, those who learnt on the argument of others) consist exclusively of different participants – let alone two participants at phase 2. Concretely, this means that not less than half of the participants of the Antwerpian Citizens' Budget, learnt socially (48% at phase 1, 51% at phase 2). Furthermore, we ascertained that the strongest ways of social learning took place. Citizens not only learnt to argue for their own opinion (the softer indicator of social learning), but they predominantly transcended their own environment in doing so, as well as were able to reason from another environment out of which they delivered concrete reasons against their own position.

The fact that these evolutions de facto occurred through respective deliberations of an hour and a half, additionally appears to confirm the theoretical assumption of the deliberative effect on social learning. Moreover, these micro-level insights indicates direction to the systemic turn. One has to remark that because of the large-scale size and strength of the effect, the absence of a control group is de facto neutralized. Indeed, nothing indicates that non-participating citizens learnt socially to the same extent between a regular Sunday afternoon and a blue Monday morning<sup>20</sup>. Also, that the mere pre-surveying of argumentation would have as such a strong social learning effect, is difficult to explain. Definitely vis-à-vis a subsequent debate in which the exchange of arguments is central in the decision-making. However, when the sample size is sufficiently great, it can be a suggestion for further research to explore the panel conditioning effect of the research design at hand.

Mini-publics are more topical than ever and are not rarely justified by their presumed effect on social learning. In this way this research suggest that the rising investments in deliberative democratic experiments are desirable – in light of the importance of public reason in citizenship.

Nevertheless one has to handle the conclusion of this research carefully. This study concerns the first empirical data on the deliberative effect on social learning in which the variables are respectively directly and formally measured. Although we obtained an internally valid measuring instrument with the use of an innovated quasi-experimental set-up, the number of participants was relatively limited. In other words, we have to await to what extent further research (to most similar cases) confirms the results of this study.

However, we selected a case which – because of its common participatory budgeting setting, its context of a diverse city, its decision-making model that has been copied and implemented abroad – tells us more than merely something about an evolution among citizens in a Belgian city.

In addition, we wish to stress again that since our response rate at the final phase was too low (9%), the final phase has not been incorporated in our analysis<sup>21</sup>. At the same time, we used the same questioning technique and strategy vis-à-vis similar – and often also the same – participants. At this phase, in which the funding of concrete projects is at stake,

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<sup>20</sup> Indication of the time in which the pre- and post-surveys were completed (cf. footnote 6: 58% of the post-results were received within the day after the deliberation).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. footnote 5.

participants reported on site that they ‘have no time to complete the survey’ since they wanted ‘to use the time before the start of the deliberation to campaign for their own project’ and ‘to search for allies’. This suggests that the context of this third phase is less favourable for evolutions in social learning. A qualitative subsequent analysis of the respective actual deliberations (in which the final phase is incorporated), can clarify this matter.

One has to remark that we approached phase 1 and 2 as if they were separated independent variables. However, in practice there is overlap between the two phases: more than half of the participants of phase 2, participated as well in phase 1. Nevertheless, further analysis demonstrated that previous participation (at a previous edition or in the previous phase), or former social learning (in a previous phase) had no (positive, nor negative) effect on the evolution in social learning. Since this analysis is based on a small N (a sample from a sample from a relative small population), further research is needed to confirm this conclusion. This may learn us more on the temporality and specificity of the effect on social learning. Does the effect of social learning only concerns the deliberative issues? Or those these – and other – effects (also) play on other fields and on the longer term?

The third and last central empirical conclusion raised more specifically from the empirical illiteracy on the impact of the influence of the self-selection effect on the deliberative effect. Our analysis showed that not all citizens are equally susceptible to social learning through participation in democratic deliberation; not men, but high educated demonstrated higher social learning. Whereas high and low educated people have an equal chance of learning socially, our results do indicate that it is being highly educated that makes one more favourable to learn to understand other opinions and to transcend the perspective of the personal environment, instead of merely learning to reason for one’s own opinion. Qualitative research on the respondents’ deliberative experiences should offer an explanation of this phenomenon.

If further research would confirm this result, then the question raises if and how deliberation can lead to more inclusive social learning. How do we make sure that citizens of whom the participation to deliberation is less evident, have equal chances to develop as more fortunate citizens? A concern inherently connected with the public-spirited perspective of citizenship, from where this research started.

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