



Agora Party: The role of political parties in institutionalization

By Susan Lee, Global Assembly

The origin story

Agora is a political party founded in 2018 that holds one seat in the Brussels Regional Parliament (2019-2024).¹ Though taking the form of a political party, Agora identifies as a “social movement.” Distinct from traditional parties, its single programmatic aim is to institutionalize a permanent citizens’ assembly with binding power. The Agora MP’s two mandates—conveying recommendations of a citizens’ assembly and advocating for citizen participation within Parliament—service this goal. As Pepijn Kennis, Agora’s first elected MP puts it, the original motivating logic was, “Let’s go and get that seat because it gives us the human and financial resources to organize these assemblies,” as well as a formal voice to insert citizens’ recommendations into Parliament.² Despite having a small initial following the group leveraged a loophole in Brussels’ linguistically-divided Parliament to win their seat in the Dutch-speaking segment with 3,629 votes ([Damman & Adzersen 2023](#)).

The model

Agora’s strategy has been described as “hacking the representative system” ([Junius et al. 2023](#)) or a “political Trojan’s

horse” ([Damman & Adzersen 2023](#)). Typically, political leg-work for deliberative processes is undertaken by deliberative practitioners or civil servants. Agora instead seeks to *leverage* the political capital and resources established in representative bodies (regional parliament) and elected officials (MPs) to institutionalize a mini-public. Like other movement parties, Agora considers the party form as the means, rather than the end, to achieve its deliberative agenda.


The party’s two formal streams of work include:

1. Operation of the [Brussels Citizens’ Assembly \(BCA\)](#)

The BCA convenes around 89 Brusseleirs, selected via a civic lottery and stratified by gender, age, and level of education.³ The Assembly is designed and organized by a working group composed of Agora staff and volunteers and funded by a portion of their elected MP’s salary. Thus far, four BCA’s have been organized, each convening a new set of deliberators. The agenda of BCA’s is either “reactive” or “proactive”: in the former, participants consider ordinances or resolutions that are being debated in Parliament, and in the latter, participants produce their own resolution on a predefined theme ([Agora 2021](#)). Thus far,



1. Elections for all regional parliaments in Belgium are held simultaneously every five years, in tandem with federal and European elections. The next election is scheduled for June of 2024.
2. Original interview conducted by the New Frontiers project.
3. The original number of deliberators (89) mirrors the number of elected MPs who sit in the Brussels Regional Parliament. However, subsequent assemblies had less participants due to COVID and learnings from the literature on mini-public design.



one BCA was “reactive” and the other three “proactive.” While the four assemblies have varying process designs, they all involve learning from experts, break-out deliberations, co-writing and -drafting, and a decisive vote on final recommendations.⁴

Once deliberations conclude, the proposals are presented, signed, and delivered to Pepijn Kennis, the current Agora MP, who conveys them into Parliament “as faithfully as possible” ([Agora 2023](#)). The MP and his team continue to work to actualize BCA resolutions in committee and plenary sessions of Parliament. These parliamentary activities include question submissions and interpellations, drafting of bills (“ordonnances”), amendments, or resolutions, and work on the regional budget.

Rather than an end goal, Agora’s BCAs can be considered a kind of *interim assembly* that builds toward the establishment of a legally mandated and institutionally (rather than party) organized permanent assembly. Kennis describes this as getting “people involved in this sort of practice so that people can get to know it, and also to showcase that it can work.”


2. Promoting citizen participation

Apart from serving as a spokesperson and advocate for the BCA, the only other mandate of the Agora MP is to promote deliberative democracy and citizen participation in Parliament. Notably, Agora’s MP cast the decisive vote on the operationalization of the Brussels Mixed Committees ([Agora 2023](#)).

Insights from this case for practitioners

What role can political parties play in institutionalizing deliberation?

While support for consultative usage of mini-publics has grown among Belgian politicians, there is a tendency to withdraw support once the criteria of “bindingness” is introduced ([Rangoni et al. 2021](#)). Movement parties like Agora respond to this problem by saddling the “formal power” of electoral politics to inject mini-public deliberations into the empowered Parliament. Movement parties, such as green parties or pirate parties, often navigate a challenging middle ground, blending elements of radical activism within the demands of bureaucracy ([della Porta et al. 2017](#)). In *deliberative* movement parties, this tension is particularly pronounced as the party engages in existing political processes (e.g. elected Parliament) to propose wholly new processes (e.g. citizen Parliament by lot). On one hand, the movement party model has shown success in expediting the institutionalization of deliberative instruments. Consider, for example, the case of Ahora Madrid or Podemos, which likewise emerged from grassroots movements and leveraged unlikely electoral victories to establish alternative forms of governance. On the other hand, these cases also demonstrate the transience and conflict that can accompany movement parties.



4. Detailed and transparent information, including recorded expert interventions and criteria for selection of texts, is published by Agora for each assembly ([Agora 2021](#)).



How influential have the outcomes of the Agora assembly been?

Agora's four BCAs have covered housing, employment, the environment, and five additional resolutions or ordinances discussed in parliamentary commissions. However, the adoption of BCA resolutions in Parliament has remained limited thus far. Notable instances include the approval of an amendment on cyberviolence proposed by other MPs, which the BCA approved during a reactive cycle ([Agora 2024](#)). This example illustrates the political influence that a citizens' assembly's appraisal can lend to proposed policies. Yet, it also suggests enhanced challenges of integrating new, citizen-formed policies into the parliamentary process.

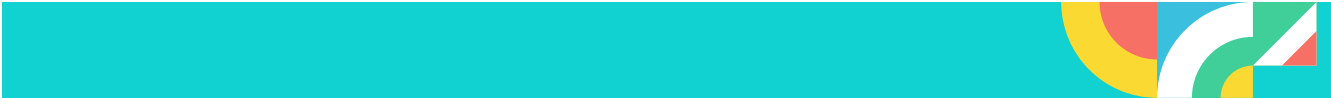
In addition to policy uptake, we ought also to consider the embedding of democratic innovation as an influential outcome of Agora's activities. Due to the presence of an elected MP, the BCA has maintained a persistent and routine presence in Parliament, unique for most citizens' assemblies. These activities include handover (relaying recommendations verbatim into Parliamentary sessions), submitting parliamentary questions to relevant ministers based on recommendations, and translating proposals into concrete legal texts. Since 2020, Kennis has submitted nearly 200 questions to Parliament ([Parlament.Brussels 2024](#)) and engaged in over 50 recorded legislative activities related to outcomes of the BCA ([Parlament.Brussels 2024](#)).

Limited policy uptake reflects the nascent character of the BCA and the limited policy influence of mini-publics in general. The strategic model of the party suggests a way in which democratic innovations can be more rigorously embedded into existing institutions. Beyond formal "voicing in," additional informal outcomes such as building favorable relationships with other MPs or internal culture change should be noted as an outcome.

How useful has Agora been in advocating for more citizen engagement beyond the interim assembly?

While BCAs are currently an important component of Agora's activities, it is important to emphasize that they are not the end goal; they serve a demonstrative function to foreshadow an institutionalized body that is not attached to one political party.

During Agora's time in Parliament, two formal deliberative bodies have been institutionalized in Brussels. One role that Agora plays in this landscape is in lending *symbolic legitimacy* to deliberation. Kennis explains that their seat shows other parliamentarians, "there's enough people that actually want to give away their vote" to this program. More tangibly, Kennis cast the swing vote during a parliamentary plenary session approving the vade-mecum or rule of procedure of Deliberative Committees (OECD 2021).



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