



The Decade-Long Journey to the Institutionalization of Mixed Committees in Belgium

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***Note:** We have included two perspectives on the Brussels Mixed Legislative Committees: one from the civil servant side, and the other from the operational. Here, Jonathan Moskovic speaks to his experience as a member of the civil servant team that designed the Committees.*

In 2019, the Brussels Francophone Parliament became the first legislative chamber in the world to create “mixed” legislative committees that included elected politicians and randomly selected citizens. This piece tells the story of how this came to be, where it stands now, and what’s next.

The origin: G1000 in 2011

The G1000 was the first Belgian national deliberative democracy initiative. It emerged in a context of deep political crisis. G1000 aimed, through a bottom-up grassroots approach, to revitalize Belgium’s representative democratic system by complementing it with deliberative democracy. It was a response to the increasing ineffectiveness of the representative democracy system, as evidenced in part by the 2010-11 Belgian parliamentary crisis.

The purpose of the project was to engage a wider audience in political discourse and generate popular and useful policy suggestions. The large size of the deliberative project was aimed at raising awareness around the issues in Belgian politics and policy making. The G1000 took place in three distinct phases; each used a different method of deliberative democracy but worked towards results that informed and served as a starting point for the next.

An influential think tank


After this first initiative, which put deliberative democracy on the political-media radar in Belgium, the role of the G1000 initiators evolved. In the years following the launch of the G1000, the idea was no longer to organize other citizens’ assemblies but to capitalize on the lessons learned from the initiative by sharing them with political decision-makers in Belgium. Thus, numerous (private) meetings were organized with various political players (ministers, parliamentarians, party study centers) as well as public conferences to disseminate the experience more widely.

In addition to political contacts, the publication of G1000 initiator David van Reybrouck’s book *“Against Elections”* in 2013, contributed significantly to the recognition of the importance of citizens’ assemblies in Belgium.

An analysis of the political platforms for the 2014 federal elections revealed the success of the G1000 ideas. All the country’s French- and Dutch-speaking parties mentioned the importance of citizen participation, and some even specified the creation of citizens’ assemblies.

When the Green Party experiments

The party that has always been at the forefront of democratic innovation in Belgium is the French-speaking Green Party. At the very heart of its DNA is the question of the evolution of democratic relations and the place of the citizen in the system.



In March 2017, the party decided to call on methodological advice from the G1000, including the author of this text, to launch a citizen panel “Ecolab” dedicated to democracy.

The aim? To formulate recommendations to feed into the party’s program for the May 2019 elections. At the end of the day, the most popular recommendation was to create mixed assemblies made out of randomly selected citizens and parliamentary in the country’s various parliaments.

This recommendation was subsequently included in the Green Party’s democracy chapter for the 2019 elections.

Parliamentary proposals turned down but...

Following the work of the citizens’ panel for the Green party, various ecologist MPs introduced a parliamentary proposal in the Federal Parliament, the Walloon Parliament, the Brussels region Parliament and the French-speaking Brussels Parliament to create these “Joint commissions between citizens and MPs”. At the time, as the Green Party was still in parliamentary opposition at the various levels of power, the text was rejected.

In Brussels, Magali Plovie, a Green Party Member of Parliament who introduced the proposal, was able to request a legal opinion from the Council of State on the various principles of the process. The results of this request subsequently fed into the design process.

A pilot project in Brussels

In October-November 2017, in parallel with the ecologists’ proposals, the Brussels parliament initiated a pilot citizens’ panel “make your Brussels mobility”. 40 Brussels citizens were randomly selected to deliberate over 4 days

and make recommendations for the future mobility plan in Brussels.

This experience enabled the parliamentary administration to familiarise itself with deliberative practices, which proved to be a great asset later on.


On the other hand, the reaction to this initiative among parliamentarians who believed in effective citizens’ participation, was fairly negative. In particular, the lack of a guaranteed follow-up in the original design was criticised. For others more reticent about real citizen participation, this lack of systematic follow-up was precisely a favorable argument.

In the final design of the institutionalised process, the maximalist version of a real and detailed follow-up has prevailed, which some MPs deplore because of the political pressure it generates.

Electoral victory and a new horizon

The May 2019 elections saw the French-speaking Greens achieve an excellent electoral result, making them the second-largest political force in Brussels. This result put them in a powerful position for government negotiations. One of the party’s demands, which would later be enshrined in the government agreement, was to institutionalize deliberative committees—that is, mixed committees of randomly selected citizens and MPs—in the various Brussels parliaments throughout the legislature.

Simultaneously, Magali Plovie, who had become one of the key figures in democratic innovation within the Green Party, was appointed President of the French-speaking Parliament of Brussels. From this position, she played a central role in setting up the deliberative committees. She



also appointed the author of this text, and former G1000 coordinator, as a democratic innovation advisor to help her implement this major, institutional change.

The change gathered additional momentum through the electoral success of a citizens' movement, Agora, which was able to gain a seat in parliament with Pepijn Kennis. The movement was elected with the sole proposal of organizing citizens' assemblies within parliament.

The German-speaking community as an inspiration

Parallely, on 25th February 2019, all parties in the parliament of Ostbelgien voted to establish a permanent Citizens' Council. Its main objectives are to provide citizens not only a permanent voice in the process of decision-making through the organisation of citizens' assemblies but also a systematic monitoring system to ensure accountability.

The model consists of a permanent institution (the Citizens' Council or Bürgerrat, in German) and a temporary institution (Citizens' Assemblies). The Citizens' Council is composed of 24 citizens (previous members of the Assemblies), who serve for 18 months. This has two aims: avoid parliament-like long terms and allow every Ostbelgian to take part in the institution.

This process made the small German-speaking community (population under 80,000) the first parliament in the world to institutionalize citizen participation permanently. Here too, the G1000 played a key role in its creation and design. The German-speaking model continues to be a source of inspiration for Brussels and proves that parliamentarians from different parties can implement a major innovation at the very heart of the "citizens' house", the Parliament.

In the months following the creation of the German-speaking model, a parliamentary exchange was organized between German-speaking and Brussels parliamentarians to inspire the creation of a permanent model in Brussels too.

Co-constructing the design

Unlike the above-mentioned process in the German-speaking community, where a committee of experts is directly in charge of design, the choice made in Brussels was radically different.


Indeed, it was decided to create a common working group for the Brussels Region and the French-speaking Parliament comprising all the political groups (from the majority as well as the opposition) and to decide together on the design and major strategic orientations of the deliberative committees.

In practice, for almost a year, parliamentarians would meet at a rate of almost one meeting per week to propose a modification of the Parliament's regulations and the drafting of a "vade mecum" which operationalizes the major orientations of the deliberative commissions.

To guide the thinking of parliamentarians, hearings with international and national experts were organized regularly to enable them to draw on the best international experiences to arbitrate the different options.

Raising the awareness of stakeholders and general public

One of the major challenges of such a new democratic tool is its appropriation by civil society and citizens. In addition to the creation of a common platform to both parliaments



for the dissemination of information democratie.brussels, a great deal of attention has been paid to communication.

A cycle of four conferences was organized at the Parliament to address a series of key issues in deliberative democracy (e.g. the role of the media), to which associations and citizens were invited.

In addition, meetings were organized in the various districts of Brussels with associations to inform them of the future process and the role they could play in it, and the various communal magazines also mentioned the novelty.

In all, the office of the President of the French-speaking Brussels Parliament organized almost 200 meetings with over 4,000 people over the course of the legislature.

A world first

In December 2019, parliamentary regulations were adapted to allow the creation of deliberative committees. “*A world première*” headlines the newspaper *Le Soir*—one of the country’s leading media outlets—on the day of the vote.

In July 2020, the two parliaments adopted the *Vade-mecum*, a 27-page document detailing the practical operation of deliberative committees.

In the wake of these adoptions, the Brussels government also became involved in the process. Indeed, the government decided to adopt a note in which it undertakes to support the process and to ensure follow-up by the relevant ministers within 6 months of the report’s adoption. This commitment to follow-up on the part of both Parliament and the government is a real asset for the follow-up of recommendations and the success of the process.

Inspiring others

The uniqueness of the deliberative committees has since become the inspiration for other parliamentary assemblies in Belgium. Thus, following the creation of deliberative commissions in 2019-2020 in the Brussels Regional Parliament and the Brussels French-speaking Parliament, the Walloon Parliament, in October 2023, and the Federal Parliament, in January 2024, changed their internal rules to enable them to associate randomly selected citizens and elected parliamentarians in mixed committees.

At the time of writing, the Walloon Parliament has begun its first deliberative committee, bringing together 30 randomly selected citizens and 10 Members of Parliament.


Other parliaments that take up the initiative must do so in a way that incorporates all the key principles (notably in terms of inclusion and follow-up) to maintain a genuinely high standard of citizen participation.

A constantly evolving initiative

Since the initiative was launched, a total of 6 deliberative committees have already been set up. These committees have covered topics as wide-ranging as urban noise, biodiversity, and citizen participation in times of crisis.

The initiative is designed to evolve, with each committee followed by an evaluation by citizens via questionnaires, and by parliamentarians via ad hoc committees.

Various elements relating to the methodology of the process have been added or clarified to bring the texts into line with the practical organization that has developed over time, thanks to the expertise acquired by the administration of the Parliament.



The main changes have been:

1. **Greater transparency:**
 - a. Mandatory motivation of the various bodies - the scientific committee, the Bureau of the Parliament and the administration of the Parliament.
 - b. Broadening the discussion for the assembly's remit to include the standing committee, in the presence of the scientific committee and the petitioners.
2. **Improving information:**
 - a. A focus on the institutional framework (competencies) and the political and budgetary context.
 - b. The continuous presence of thematic experts and certain resource persons (administration).
3. **The right for unrepresented political groups to take part in a deliberative committee.**
4. **Modification of the composition of the scientific committee, opening it up to former citizen participants.**
5. **A more detailed and comprehensive approach to the follow-up as a key element of the process.**

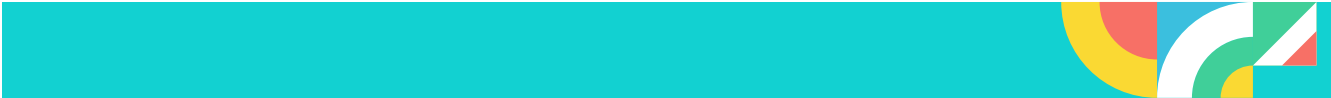
What's next?

In 2024, there will be no deliberative committees organized, as it is specified in the parliament's regulations that it is not permitted to organize one during an election year to guarantee real follow-up and the absence of instrumentalization.

A real challenge for the future lies in enhancing the value of citizen investment, which should no longer take place during evenings and weekends as is currently the case. A bill has been introduced at the national level to create a real "citizen's leave", modelled on the status of citizens during a jury trial.

At the same time, a reflection has been initiated with the different stakeholders to see how it would be possible to open the initiative to the people who have been "forgotten by democracy" and today are still absent from the committees: the homeless, the undocumented, and prisoners.

Finally, we must continue to ensure that the fundamental principles of deliberative committees are respected by future coalitions and Parliaments which would like to launch the same initiative, to guarantee real and effective citizens' participation.



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