

# Should I Go? Participation Biases in Citizen Deliberation Forums: Evidence from Germany

Lennart Klein <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Tübingen



## Motivation

- Increasing popularity of Citizen's Councils in Germany (Table 1)
- Climate activists group "Letzte Generation" demands a representative Standing Citizen's Council on Climate Change with legislative power
- New Problems, New Institutions? ("Climate Democracy")

> "How attitudinally and psychologically representative and inclusive are Citizen's Councils?"

## Research Background

### Deliberative Democracy

- James S. Fishkin's (1991) classic work on "Deliberative Polling"

### Important Characteristics:

- Random selection
- Voluntary participation
- Political equality
- Representativeness
- Inclusivity

### The Problem:

- Usually very **high non-response rates** (e.g., Dean et al. 2022)
- Potentially **high self-selection bias**

### Participation Biases

- Luskin et al. (2022) have explored the social biases during the deliberation process
- But what about the political and psychological participation biases through self-selection?

## Hypotheses

**H1: Attitudes** – Participants report higher levels of political interest and trust in institutions than the general public.

**H2: Personality** – Participants tend to score higher on Assertiveness and Extraversion than the general public.

## Methods

### Sampling & Data Collection

- Online survey of current and former participants of multiple national and regional citizen's councils
- Survey items matched with constructs in the *German General Social Survey 2021 (ALLBUS)*
- Big-Five Factor Scale (Goldberg 1992) compared to national dataset from *Open Psychometrics*

## A new 'Deliberative Wave'?

- Citizen's Council participants:  $M = 186.88$  ( $SD = 134.19$ )
- Example: Respondents in the monthly representative *DeutschlandTREND* survey:  $N = 1.000 - 1.500$

Table 1. Size of German National Citizen's Councils

Name	Year	N
Citizens' Council on Democracy	2019	160
Citizens' Council "Germany's Role in the World"	2020	160
Citizens' Council on Education and Learning	2021	500
Citizens' Council on Climate Change	2021	160
Citizens' Council on Artificial Intelligence	2022	200/100*
Citizens' Council on Research	2022	55
Citizens' Forum on the Future of Europe	2022	100
Citizens' Council "Change in Nutrition"	2023	160

Notes: Data from Mehr Demokratie e.V., \*with control group

## Implications & Discussion

### Normative Democratic Theory and Practice

- Citizen's Councils might not be able to deliver on their "democratic ideal" of true representativeness
- Could potentially even backfire by alienating less engaged members of the general public, increasing political apathy

### Institutional Design

- Humans only have limited cognitive ability to deal with "wicked" systemic issues like climate change due to psychological distance, hyperbolic discounting, etc. (Schweizer et al. 2022)
- This poses further research questions regarding Citizen's Councils' decision-making ability and effectiveness

## Limitations & Next Steps

- Data collection still ongoing
- Likely smaller sample size than national surveys (limited population size & non-response)
- Past participation could have induced treatment effects, potentially leading to sampling heterogeneity and confounding

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## References

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