The Conditions of Social Learning in Formal Deliberative Settings: A Study of Municipal Councils in Brussels

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1 Introduction

Democracy is backsliding in large parts of the world, even in stable democracies. A growing disillusionment with democratic institutions, lower levels of support and trust in politicians and political institutions, a rise of authoritarianism and populism, and a growing gap between citizens and decision-makers are some important signs of democratic erosion (Lindell & Ehrström, 2020, p. 2; Landemore, 2017, p. 52). Deliberative democracy has grown in theory and practice in order to tackle these challenges. It is supposed to increase the legitimacy of democratic decision-making by empowering citizens and letting their voices be actually listened by decision-makers.

Two main deliberative "tracks" can be distinguished, according to Habermas (1996): "the first kind of deliberation [is] meant to be formal and decision-oriented, taking place within the walls of Parliament. The other, taking place among the public, [is] decentralized, distributed, informal, and diffuse, with the assumed function of setting the agenda for Parliament" (Landemore, 2017, pp. 52–53). Not only are these two extremes of the same continuum – debates with citizens within the walls of parliament becoming increasingly common (e.g., Vrydagh et al., 2021) – but other forms of "institutional deliberation" (e.g., in governments, courts, policy processes) have also been recognized (Quirk et al., 2018). In addition, they reinforce each other: while informal public deliberation plays a crucial role for empowering citizens and formulating policy recommendations, formal public deliberation remains fundamental to transform the outputs of informal deliberation into concrete decisions.

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Deliberation, in its Habermasian ideal-typical form, involves people with various understandings and interests openly expressing the "reasons" (1984) for their views toward a public problem and their preferences regarding the solutions to the problem. Likewise, they should listen to the reasons expressed by other participants (Mansbridge et al., 2012). This should at least lead – if not to a higher level of agreement among participants – to better knowledge of the problem and a greater awareness of the diversity of views. Parties standing too far apart and unwilling to compromise may bring democratic work to a standstill (Skoog & D. K., 2021). This can prove to be harmful insofar as it substitutes particular interests for the general interest, favors the balance of power often to the detriment of the weaker ones, and ultimately limits the collective intelligence of municipal deliberations. In other words, deliberating involves learning, the latter having a crucial role in the conditions and outcomes of the former. That said, social learning is not necessarily desirable per se and may be a lever for some deliberators to impose their views over the others' opinions.

Learning, in turn, may be defined as an individual and collective process involving the enduring acquisition or modification of cognitive constructs such as beliefs and preferences (Riche et al., 2021; Gregorcic & Krašovec, 2016). Learning has been popularized in public administration and public policy research starting in the 1970s (Heclo, 1974), in order to understand how public decision-makers deal with societal problems characterized by uncertainty and improve governmental capacity to address them. Moreover, existing research demonstrates that effective learning accelerates the development of shared understandings and mutual agreements, transforms relationships among parties, and, ultimately, facilitates decision-making (Riche et al., 2021). Public deliberation can be considered a context of "social learning" (Dryzeck, 2007; Gregorcic & Krašovec, 2016). Social learning approaches focus on the cognitive and social mechanisms through which actors in a given institutional setting manage uncertainty and complex ideas to make policies (Heclo, 1974; Moyson & Scholten, 2018).

Who learns what, in public deliberation settings? Consistent with social learning in policy processes, social learning in deliberative settings may concern two dimensions (Moyson, 2017). On the one hand, learning refers to the acquisition of information: the collection and treatment of this information, subject to various heuristics and biases, questions or reinforces the existing beliefs of individuals, or generates new ones. On the other hand, information acquisition can lead adjustments in individuals' attitudes and behaviors. In addition, learning in deliberative settings is social because it concerns at least two individuals: the educator, who shares information, and the learner, who collects and treats information – and, potentially, the facilitator, who can model deliberation through (Prosser et al., 2018). However, in contrast with the classical learning setting of a classroom, the roles of educator and learner should not be stable over time, in a Habemarsian deliberative setting: each participant plays (or at least can play) these two roles.

In this chapter, we are interested in the conditions of social learning in formal deliberative settings. On the one hand, while the role of learning in deliberative processes is crucial, it is not self-evident. Fundamental differences in interests,

goals, and values, or even in ways of interpreting situations, almost invariably make such learning processes very challenging in formal deliberative settings (e.g., Eriksson et al., 2019). On the other hand, so far, few research on social learning in deliberative settings has been conducted in general and, especially, in formal deliberative settings.

What are the conditions of social learning among participants in formal deliberative settings? To address this research question, we present the results of the thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with municipal council presidents and general directors from 13 municipalities in the Brussels-Capital Region in Belgium. The next section provides details about the research context and methods before the presentation of the results. We conclude with a discussion of these results, with a particular focus on the potential role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).

2 Research Context and Methods

There are 19 municipal councils in the Brussels-Capital Region in Belgium. Within these councils, about 700 elected officials (or "councillors") meet and deliberate together about various important issues of citizens' lives, such as teaching, sport, mobility, social services, etc. The municipal councils are the parliaments of the municipalities in which the councillors are supposed to protect the public interest through several main roles such as making decisions on municipal issues; giving the executive (the "college" of Mayor and Deputy-Mayors or aldermen) the means to work by voting the budget; and controlling the action of the executive. In other words, councils are crucial arenas of politics and policies at the municipal level. The municipal councils meet almost monthly. The agenda and supporting documents are sent by the municipal administration to the municipal councillors 7 full days before each council meeting.

In this context, municipal councillors are involved in social interactions with each other, as well as with various stakeholders such as civil servants, companies, associations, or citizens. These interactions about policy issues (e.g., sport) can help them to accumulate evidence (e.g., about sport needs in the municipality), which can lead to revise or strengthen their policy beliefs and preferences (e.g., to build or not to build a new sport hall). Given this, in theory, municipal councils could be the place for social learning per excellence.

In practice, however, during municipal councils' deliberations, the political groups and their members would play frozen roles. The majority group would most often support the college, value its action, and explain how well their vision of the world has been implemented. The minority group, in contrast, would express another vision of the world, propose alternative proposals to the projects of the college, and control the college of the mayor and aldermen (De Beer de Laer, 2012; van Haute et al., 2018). In other words, elected officials would attend council meetings with the main objective of defending their positions, like in company boards

(Dinsart, 2019). This suggests that municipal council deliberations, as such, do not foster social learning.

That said, there are steps preceding monthly council meetings and providing councillors with other opportunities to interact, in addition to informal talks among councillors:

- *Committee meetings* involve some members of all political groups and principally aim at discussing the technicalities of the issues on the agenda of the next council meeting. Experts internal or external to the municipal administration may be invited to answer councillors' questions.
- *Group meetings* are commonly organized before council meetings for the members of each political group to define positions and to assign missions regarding the next council meeting (who speaks about what). Most often, majority groups meet together, whereas opposition groups meet per group.

To address the research question, semi-structured interviews were conducted with municipal council presidents (MCP, i.e., elected officials) and general directors (GD, i.e., civil servants) in 13 municipalities (see Table 1) between May 2020 and October 2020. This is, at the same time, a strength and a limitation of the research design. On the one hand, municipal council presidents and general directors are among the most experienced and committed members of municipal councils, with a detailed knowledge of the council procedures and dynamics. On the other hand, the other councillors were not directly interviewed, which means that some reports on learning dynamics are only indirect. The duration of each interview, conducted on site or online, varies between 45 and 70 minutes: 212 pages of qualitative data resulted from the transcription of the recordings.

Table 1 List of interviews (MCP, municipal council president; GD, general director)

Municipality	Date of the interview	Interviewee(s)
Brussels City	October 2020	GD
Schaerbeek	October 2020	MCP
Ixelles	October 2020	GD and MCP
Uccle	October 2020	GD
Woluwe-Saint-Lambert	October 2020	GD and MCP
Jette	June 2020	GD
Saint-Gilles	October 2020	GD
Etterbeek	October 2020	GD
Woluwe-Saint-Pierre	October 2020	GD
Auderghem	October 2020	GD
Watermael-Boitsfort	October 2020	GD and MCP
Ganshoren	October 2020	GD
Koekelberg	May 2020	GD and 1st Alderman

Source: Authors

As far as social learning is concerned, questions about information acquisition and sharing as well as attitudinal and behavioral adaptations were asked. The questions concerned the meetings of the committees, the groups, and the council itself.

As far as the conditions of social learning are concerned, we conducted a thematic analysis of qualitative data (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2016), using the NVivo software version 11. We aimed to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent to the raw data (Thomas, 2006). We decomposed the received data in "themes" and sometimes in "sub-themes." To do so, we read the full text of each interview at least two times. Each quote related to social learning and its conditions – i.e., conditions that lead councillors to play the role of educator or learner through interactions among them – and a new theme was created on NVivo.

3 Conditions of Social Learning in Municipal Council Deliberations in Brussels: Results of the Thematic Analytics

Various conditions of social learning in the context of municipal council deliberations have been identified. They have been organized by level of analysis – micro, meso, and macro – and consistently presented in this section.

3.1 Micro-level Conditions of Social Learning

The micro-level conditions of social learning in council meetings refer to the motivation of the individual councillors, their personal and professional background, as well as their political and legal experience. All councillors are not equal to address the multiple and complex issues on the agenda of municipal councils. First of all, they are not equally motivated.

> You might think that people are easily putted on electoral lists…. That is not true. It is not interesting for people to be in the municipal council for 4, 5 or even 6 hours sometimes if they do not have the possibility to have an active role…. Then, once the people are elected, they must keep them motivated

The personal interest and motivation of councillors to engage in discussions about municipal issues have been mentioned multiple times by our interviewees as a reason for which the discussions will be constructive. For example, discussions within the preparatory committees would be more constructive than the public sessions of the council because, generally, the councillors who attend these committees participate, either at the request of their political group because they are competent in the topics being discussed or because they are personally interested in them. In addition, the (gross) fees are limited: between 75€ and 200€ per committee and council

meeting, according to the regional law – a fee that does clearly not compensate for the preparatory work and meetings. In most municipalities, it is closer to 75€ than to 200€. This means that, unlike for the regional and federal representatives and senators, politics may not be – and is not – a full-time job, for the "simple" municipal councillors who do not cumulate that mandate with one or more other ones. In this context, engaging in long-term public deliberation and demanding social learning processes on municipal issues requires a lot of motivation.

Second, the councillors have different personal characteristics as well as various social, economic, and cultural profiles. As a result, their tendency to speak and, perhaps, their ability to understand each aspect of the issues, at the preparatory meetings and at the council meetings, are different.

> There are people who are not easy with public speaking. […] There can also be shyness.
>
> It is the socio-economic level, I mean by that, the level of education…. We have some of our councillors who have difficulty reading or speaking in French or Dutch. And it is not them who we will hear most often of course.

Third, the political and legal experience of councillors can influence their participation to social learning dynamics within council meetings.

> I think those who have a good political experience, whatever in local, regional or national level, are much more at ease to speak in public and will intervene more rapidly and effectively

For example, municipal affairs are complicated and interconnected with competences at regional or federal levels. A lack of political and legal experience can limit the ability of the municipal councillor to understand what falls within municipal competence or not, what he or she can or cannot do.

> You may have been elected because you are popular and active in the field of sport, and find yourself in a town council not knowing the limits of what you can do or not.
>
> A municipal councillor, individually, is someone who works most of the time in the private sector and is rarely confronted with the logic of public service and municipal authority as we know it.
>
> We are often in a situation where it is necessary to explain municipal councillors that it is not because a given street is on the municipal territory that is the municipality is responsible for its maintenance and cleaning. There are streets through which the tram passes, those ones are maintained and cleaned by the Brussels-Capital region…not by the municipality.

Some interviewees even suggested that the new councillors, in order to be able to participate effectively in municipal affairs, should undergo specialized training on the functioning and skills of municipal councils. These training courses are usually organized by non-profit organizations such as Brulocalis, the Association of the Cities and Municipalities of the Brussels-Capital Region.

> … A new councillor really needs training to understand properly […] there is specific training that is organized, for example, by Brulocalis for all new municipal councillors to understand the framework, the overall functioning of a municipal council…. I think such trainings can provide new elected representatives with a minimal baggage.

That said, interestingly, some interviewees underlined that the municipal councillors with legal background, like lawyers, often focus on formal issues and on procedures rather than on the content of the discussion.

> [The councillors who have a legal background] participate more but, from my experience, they focus on questions of form rather than on questions of substance, of content. …. Where a councillor who does not have this legal background, will rather talk about the substance of a problem.

3.2 Meso-level Conditions of Social Learning

The meso-level conditions refer to the relationships among them. Prior relationships among municipal councillors allow them to meet together informally and to discuss municipal issues, which creates more trust and cordiality among them and thus facilitates interactions that can lead to social learning, especially in small-sized municipalities:

> If we look at thirty items on the council's agenda, we usually have twenty to twenty-five items which are adopted unanimously. Here, we have a reality: everyone is talking to each other. I mean, we're all at the market on Sundays, we talk to each other, we know each other.

Beyond relationships, cordiality in the discussion between councillors has been pointed out by multiple interviewees as condition for social learning to occur, especially in municipalities in which such cordiality seems to be missing. In a democratic system, it is usual to disagree with the ideas of others. However, lack of respect freezes communication among participants. The way in which the person expresses his or her disagreement is essential in creating a positive environment for communication based on mutual understanding and respect.

> Cordiality is a fundamental element. We may not agree, but there are ways to say it when we do not agree…We may not share the same opinion but, at the least, we owe the respect.

Cordiality opens the doors for social learning as it enhances the receptiveness of the councillors to new information produced by the other parties during the council meetings or the preparatory meetings, which can lead to correcting minor errors, to redrafting some parts of decision projects, or even to more radically changing the original decision projects.

> One might think that it is inevitably majority against opposition. However, we can be surprised because sometimes we can see a radical change during the session, where the opposition raises a point, and at the end, that changed completely.
>
> During the discussions within municipal councils, there is an exchange of ideas, of counter-proposals, and that the alderman may say: "Ok, it's a good idea to take this into account". […] Yes, that could happen.
>
> The municipal administration prepares a draft of deliberation. If the councillors decide in session to modify it, they have the right. But they should have a majority to do that. If the minority achieves to convince the majority to add something, we can add it. So, it's not automatically that the points pass like that, not at all… we could be wrong, we may have forgotten something, we can improve the project.

However, municipal politics is as it is, and other interviewees argue that the impact of relationships and cordiality, though real, remains rather marginal:

> Change happens… but it's rare ... the majority / opposition divide stays quite respected.

3.3 Macro-level Conditions of Social Learning

The macro-level conditions of social learning in council meetings are mainly political and procedural. We also discuss the role of ICT in council meetings. Municipal politics is generally understood by municipal councillors as a game closer to rivalry and conflict than to collaboration. Each political family has its vision of the public interest and its political convictions and beliefs which are generally based on sound theories in political, economic, social science, etc. Disagreement with others does not necessarily mean that his point of view is not legitimate, but, quite simply, it is not "mine."

> Right-wing economic policy, for example, is a supply-side policy. Left-wing, socialist economic policy is a demand-side policy. As a socialist, even if supply-side politics has its legitimacy and is reflected in some states, I will not lead a politics of supply overnight as a socialist. It would be contrary to my commitment, it would be contrary to my convictions and, although I hear that there are other beliefs and other ways of doing things, but they are not mine.

The nature of the political game implies that the political parties that are in power and were elected on the basis of a municipal program will carry it out despite disagreement of the others.

> … If what the other defend represents their vision of the general interest that I do not share with him…. I make sure that my vision prevails, because it is me who was elected, it is me who is in the majority and thus, it is me who decide… therefore it is my vision of society that I'll implement.

Practically speaking, following each election, the political groups forming together the majority negotiate and publish a document, called "the majority agreement," presenting the overall program and roadmap which will guide the action of the college until the next election. The opposition, which does not participate to these negotiations, is not prompted to share its good ideas with the majority during the legislature.

> It will not be a natural reflex if, systematically, someone from the opposition share his/her good idea with the majority or the mayor and ask them to put it themselves on the agenda.

Such a majority-minority politics of domination confirms the idea that councillors play frozen roles, in the context of council deliberations. On one side, the opposition groups are not tempted to share counterarguments or good ideas with majority groups during committee meetings, in order to improve decision projects of the majority. They keep their best ideas for council meetings.

On the other side, the majority groups often rely on their political power to impose their projects without looking for the support of the opposition groups: they are not encouraged to produce information in order to convince the opposition groups. Within the majority groups, the councillors are always most often involved in a dynamic of "political" support, even if they do not, individually, quite agree.

> I think the councillor of the majority, he's in a situation where it's very difficult to stay motivated. Because, even if he does not agree with what is done, he is always in a dynamic of majority. On the other side, on the opposition side, most councillors have a role or take a role... Actually, we often say that the worst role in a municipal council is to be a councillor of the majority. Because they really have nothing to do.

At the end of the day, information exchange and acquisition are limited during council meetings, especially on issues that are politically divisive. In addition, political parties at the local level tend to remain consistent with the position of their political family, even if the political group at the local level does not quite agree That said, the interviews reveal that opportunities for social learning are more numerous than suggested by classical depictions of formal council meetings: discussions between majority and minority councillors generate actual learning dynamics on most municipal issues in informal talks, in group meetings, and, mostly, in committee meetings. In the latter ones, experts internal or external to the municipal administration are commonly invited to share their knowledge which is considered to be more "neutral" and, anyway, fosters learning too.

Certain procedures of the municipal councils can influence the possibilities of social learning among councillors. At the informal level, the tasks are distributed among councillors, within political groups. Indeed, given the considerable number and complexity of items that are on the agenda of the municipal councils, as well as the short amount of time available to do that, it is not possible for each councillor to prepare and speak about each of them. In this context, the political groups, more particularly the group leaders, try to distribute the work among its members, taking into account the specialty and skills of each member before each municipal council.

> Upon receipt of the agenda, the group leader says: Well here you are, we'll share the work. Do you want to take a look at the public construction contracts? Do you want to examine the budget etc. […] In this way, it becomes usual to see the same persons intervening on the same points all the time?

In terms of social learning, those routines have several implications. On the one hand, they suggest that the items on the council agenda are addressed by councillors who hold some sort of expertise, capable of producing and understanding relevant ideas about it. On the other hand, they mean that each municipal issue is actually prepared by a small number of similar councillors, which limits the variety of positions discussed in the meetings as well as the chances to be questioned or reinforced in the light of new information.

At the formal level, first, public access (or not) to the discussion of councillors plays a decisive role in social learning among them. While council meetings are public, committee meetings and group meetings or informal talks are not. Discussions between municipal councillors which are not accessible to the general

public are much more conducive to social learning. Committee meetings, in particular, were underlined by the interviewees as important moments for fairly constructive discussions between political groups. They allow the majority groups, in particular, to listen to the suggestions of the minority groups and to actually integrate them in the decision projects. Similarly, they have more room to ask annoying questions to the members of the college or to criticize their action.

> I would say, as long as you are not in public mode, as long as there is no public audience watching or who is likely to watch, collaboration is much easier.
>
> In discussions, at all levels of power, in the shelter of a castle without journalists, you forge better deals than when the press is there.
>
> It is the theatrical aspect, the aspect "the public looks at me…I will put the college in difficulty".
>
> I think that in committee discussions, it is much easier to achieve consensus, to have constructive discussions than in public sessions.

Second, two types of voting procedures may be distinguished, within council meetings. Both of them discourage social learning. On the one hand, collective votes or by group involve that the group leader acts as spokesperson and votes on behalf of all group members, which hampers social learning, certainly during council meetings themselves but also during preparatory meetings depending on the social dynamics within and between groups, for example, if the group leader does not tend to listen to new information provided group members form group positions. Similarly, the latter are not tempted to provide information to the former anymore. On the other hand, in nominal or individual votes, each councillor votes personally, which can foster social learning.

> In fact, there was a voting system by which voting was done by group. So, it was the group leader who said: "Green, okay." PS, okay… it was usually the group leaders who voted on behalf of their group. After few years, it was M. xxx, who said: "listen, we have agreed this mode of operation, but ... I no longer want this system of vote because, even though I am the chef of the group, I don't have to impose my vision on my own group to the point where they vote like me". On this basis, the municipal council changed the voting system. Now, everyone votes personally, there is no spokesperson who says: "Ecolo Group, we are seven, ok"…Which is, in my opinion, very democratic. It's democracy in the group…

That said, individual votes cannot guarantee a full freedom to share or to acquire information nor to adapt and express his or he own policy preferences accordingly. As mentioned above, there is an actual group pressure, especially in the majority supporting the college, on individual councillors as far as individual votes are not anonymous but nominal.

> [The individual vote] does not mean that the group leader after the public session can say: "Well my friend, you voted against whereas I had suggested".

Overall, both informal and formal procedures in municipal councils have been pointed out as obstacles to social learning, with the exception of the political specialization of some councillors in some municipal issues resulting from the repartition of tasks within their respective groups.

The main software used to support the work of the Municipal Councils is "BO Secretariat" (BOS). BOS has been developed by the Brussels Regional Informatics

Centre: a regional public agency offering ICT services related to the competences of the Brussels-Capital region, including municipal issues. BOS facilitates the electronic management of the secretarial work of assemblies, such as municipal councils. With the exceptions of Brussels-City and Schaerbeek, BOS is used by all municipalities of the Brussels-Capital Region and seems to be positively perceived.

> I experienced both before and after BOS…. BOS has changed my life positively for several reasons, first I have a system that is secure, starting from the moment when an agent puts the point in BOS I get tracing of the process, the complete history of modifications etc. And then, when we make a modification during the session, whether during the College or Council meetings, I can immediately check whether it is in order and I know that this is the version that will go to the tutelage.

BOS has not been developed to foster discussions and social learning among councillors as such. Yet, BOS facilitates the access of municipal councillors to the files related to the Council agenda, which gives them more time to examine them.

> Elected officials have passive access ... But it is not between them, they do not have the possibility to communicate with each other via BOS.
>
> Within the period of seven full days, not only do [the councillors] receive the agenda but all the proposals for deliberation which will be submitted for their approval and all the appendices as well. They have access to all the annexes, all the documents that will enable them to clarify their knowledge of the case.

Beyond BOS, ICT are barely present, and their contribution to social learning is limited. Still, the interviewees mentioned email correspondence and, sometimes, WhatsApp groups which mainly bring together the municipal councillors of one given political group, but never all the municipal councillors of the majority and the opposition.

4 Conclusion

Public deliberation involves people with various understandings and interests openly expressing the "reasons" (Habermas, 1984) for their views toward a public problem and their preferences regarding the solutions to the problem. Public deliberations, in this Habermasian (1996) form, suppose social learning, defined as an individual and collective process involving the enduring acquisition or modification of cognitive constructs such as beliefs and preferences (Dryzeck, 2007; Gregorcic & Krašovec, 2016). In this chapter, we have looked at the conditions of social learning in formal deliberative settings based on the thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with municipal council presidents and general directors of 13 out of the 19 municipalities of the Brussels-Capital Region in Belgium.

Overall, our findings confirm but strongly qualify the classical view on municipal councillors as playing "frozen" roles at council meetings (De Beer de Laer, 2012; van Haute et al., 2018). Admittedly, all councillors are not equally equipped to engage in discussions leading to social learning about municipal issues, depending on their personal and professional background as well as their legal and political

experience. Despite relationships that can be characterized by cordiality, municipal politics in general, as well as the elaboration and implementation of the majority agreement against and without the minority groups in particular, do not drive councillors to learn from each other. Similarly, formal voting procedures and public access to the council meetings can cultivate democracy but also the pressure from municipal and regional/federal parties on individual councillors and can discourage them to express themselves as well as to adjust their attitudes and behaviors according to the new information shared by the other councillors or by experts and citizens. Last but not least, a limited number of councillors remain actually motivated to engage in cognitively and socially demanding processes of discussion about municipal issues over time. This is especially true in the majority groups, in which the councillors are strongly expected to support the action of the college. Furthermore, the issues on the agenda of the municipal councils tend to be divided among the same councillors over time, according to their knowledge and motivation. As a result, the council meetings are often closer to discussions between insiders defending constant positions, than to Habermasian deliberations eliciting social learning.

Yet, the group meetings and the committee meetings have been highlighted on multiple occasions as venues where, beyond council meetings as such, learning actually occurs among councillors. Most often restricted to a limited number of interested councillors, they allow actual dynamics of social learning on decision projects within and between minority and majority groups. In the same vein, our interviewees have tended to pinpoint the obstacles to social learning in municipal councils. They are real, of course, but we hypothesize that they are, most often, the photographic negative of what can happen in other municipalities. For example, cordiality may be lacking here, but not there. Similarly, group pressure may be higher in some municipalities and lower in other ones. In other words, the qualitative data point to a diversity of conditions to social learning, but they do not quantify their presence or absence nor their actual effect on learning dynamics. Finally, the conditions of social learning in municipal councils are strongly related to each other. For example, some group leaders are well aware that the motivation of the individual councillors needs to be cultivated: according to our interviewees, they can take this into account to share the work within the group.

These findings suggest several implications. First, future research on formal deliberative settings should embrace a processual approach (see, e.g., Rick & Liu, 2018) that includes not only the formal steps of the process but also the informal ones. In municipal policymaking in Brussels, what happens at some points of the process, e.g., at the council meetings, is not what happens at the other ones, e.g., at the preparatory meetings. Social learning is probably stronger in informal meetings than in formal ones.

Second, with some exceptions (e.g., Delwit, 2005; de Maesschalk, 2009), empirical research about municipal councillors in Brussels remains scarce. Future research on social learning in municipal councils should be conducted on larger sets of councillors and municipalities. How much motivated, experienced, or cordial are municipal councillors in Brussels? Is municipal politics an obstacle to social

learning in all municipalities? How is the work actually organized within and between political groups? Ultimately, what is the actual effect of these conditions on social learning? The results presented in this chapter are based on interviews only with municipal council presidents and general directors from only 13 out of the 19 municipalities in Brussels. Quantitative research would certainly be adequate to address these questions more precisely. Generally speaking, given their number and their importance in politics and policy, more research about municipal councillors is needed.

Third, this chapter focused on the conditions of social learning, perhaps at the cost of a finer operationalization of learning itself. What kind of information is actually shared, during council meetings? To what extent do the councillors adjust their beliefs and preferences to this information? Following the exploratory study presented in this chapter, addressing these questions requires new research methodologies. For example, direct observations or the analysis of meetings' transcripts would certainly facilitate the analysis of information exchanges (e.g., Schatz, 2013; Dooley, 2020). Longitudinal analyses of councillors' positions could be helpful to assess learning more precisely (e.g., Neale, 2020; Moyson et al., 2022).

Fourth, future research could address some contextual conditions of learning in municipal councils which have been overlooked in this chapter. For example, some interviewees suggested that social learning is easier in smaller municipalities – where most councillors know each other – than in bigger ones – where it is not always the case. Similarly, the role of municipal council presidents and general directors as facilitators (Prosser et al., 2018) of council discussions has not been clearly addressed in this research, whereas existing research suggests that their impact on social learning could be important (Riche et al., 2021). Last but not least, we did not engage in wider, ethical questions such as whether or not political red lines against parties considered as too extreme are desirable. But, strictly speaking, social learning in municipal councils can suffer from decisions not to debate with the councillors from these parties.

Practically speaking, these findings suggest that municipal councillors and officials are not without recourse to model social learning in councils. For example, majority agreements could be designed in such a way to involve minority groups. This way, the political project implemented by the college would be the result of a deliberation eliciting more social learning among members of the majority groups as well as the minority groups. To do so, solutions to recognize the contributions of the minority groups to the municipal projects should be found. Similarly, the study has pinpointed that the participation of the councillors from the majority groups to the decisional processes is, sometimes, limited. In other words, their potential for contributing to the dynamic of social learning can be underexploited. To address this issue, informal procedures promote actual discussion between the members of the college and the councillors from the majority groups. At the formal level, some rules could be designed to compel the latter to express their opinions, either during the preparatory meetings or during the council meeting themselves. Elections could be complicated for those who do not apply those rules, e.g., with reports on how

much they took the floor during the policymaking process, inspired by the statistics about parliamentary activities already existing at the regional and federal levels.

At the end of the day, what could be the role of ICTs in social learning within municipal councils in Brussels? Several studies have confirmed that the use of ICT can help to improve interactions and knowledge acquisition by participants in deliberative settings (e.g., Velasquez & González, 2010; Wyss & Beste, 2017). As far as municipal councils in Brussels are concerned, we suggest that a two-step software could be designed according to the Delphi technique (Fink-Hafner et al., 2019). In a first step, a councillor, e.g., a group leader, would submit a given municipal issue to other councillors, e.g., to the other group members, to the other members of the minority/majority group, or to all other councillors. Several open questions would be asked to each councillor. These questions could be structured around a conceptual framework for policy analysis, e.g., the multiple streams framework (Zahiariadis, 2019): What is the public problem? What should be the policy solutions? Are they feasible? Etc. The anonymous answers to these questions would be examined by a policy analyst, and, in a second step, several closed questions would be asked again to the participants to assess the degree of consensus on some perceptions of the problem and of its solutions. The result of this survey would be the basis for discussions in preparatory meetings and council meetings, especially when the decisional process is long term enough. In other words, this software would not be intended to replace classical council meetings but just to support them.

Of course, such a solution would have some drawbacks. First, the solution is digital, whereas the interviews revealed that municipal councillors' experience with computers is highly variable. Second, as far as the solution does not replace the face-to-face meetings, engaging with the software involves more work, especially for the most committed councillors, whereas the research has pinpointed that cultivating councillor motivation is already difficult.

Yet, we believe that the software would effectively address the obstacles to social learning. Most importantly, the anonymity of the participation would remove some group pressure on individual councillors, allowing the emergence of opinions that would not be expressed in face-to-face settings. Similarly, some councillors are, perhaps, more comfortable with expressing their opinions online than aloud. As a result of the Delphi approach, some solutions could reveal more (or less) consensual than they seem to be in classical meetings, revealing the actual level of agreement or disagreement among councillors, which would suggest more extensive discussions about them. Overall, we believe that ICT could push deliberators to express their "reasons" more openly, not only in the municipal councils of Brussels but also in other formal deliberative settings.

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