

How to foster collaborative learning during the deliberations of municipal councils in the Brussels-Capital Region?

Key messages

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In municipal councils, learning is the dynamic through which councilors revise or strengthen their policy beliefs and preferences over time based on the accumulation of evidence and on social interactions.

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The results of this research suggest, on the one hand, that collaborative learning is a positive dynamic and, on the other, that it is possible to foster it.

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To do so, policy recommendations have been formulated about: (1) the involvement of political groups; (2) the organization of committees and working groups; (3) the adaptation of formal and informal rules that govern the debates within the council; and (4) the role of council presidents.

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These recommendations depend on practical and regulatory changes both at the local and regional levels

Introduction

Within the 19 municipal councils in the Brussels-Capital Region, about 700 elected officials (or ‘councilors’) meet almost monthly and deliberate about various important areas of citizens’ lives. In such deliberative context, learning is the dynamic through which decision-makers (here, the councilors) revise or strengthen their policy beliefs and preferences over time based on the accumulation of evidence and on social interactions. Existing research demonstrates that effective learning accelerates the development of shared understandings and mutual agreements, transform relationships among parties and, ultimately, facilitates decision-making. the policy issue and why it is particularly important or current. Put the research into context.

The practical aim of the project was to develop a software in which municipal councillors can make their case for a draft decision. The software would then generate a synthesis of all these arguments in the form of a cognitive map. The theoretical objective of the project was to compare the dynamics of collaborative learning before and after the introduction of the software and, in doing so, to identify drivers that can facilitate them.

Methods, approaches and results/body

A systematic review of the existing literature was first conducted. Following the PRISMA approach, we systematically screened 44 studies. Public deliberation depends on individual conditions such as gender, age, education, values, and various psychological characteristics. The role of facilitators, who have expertise in public deliberation (rather than the topic being debated), is crucial. Learning is also the result of a subtle mix of stable rules and changing deliberative methods. Moreover, deliberation calls for deliberation, that is, the more people are trained in deliberation, participate in actual deliberations, and learn to deliberate from their experiences, the more likely they are to participate in future deliberative processes more effectively.

Based on this, the eD&LIB software was developed. In order to promote collaborative learning between municipal councillors, this software is based on the articulation between a conceptual system for analysing public problems and a method (Delphi) involving the carrying out of two rounds of survey among the participants.

The concrete functioning of municipal councils in the Brussels-Capital Region was then analysed, with a focus on the drivers and obstacles to collaborative learning. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 17 Municipal Secretaries and Presidents of Municipal Councils in the Brussels-Capital Region. Data from these interviews were analysed. Eighteen factors at three levels – macro, meso and micro – have been identified as determinants of collaborative learning within municipal councils. In order to confirm these results, four focus groups were organised with the leaders of the political groups of the majority and the opposition of our two partner municipalities: Jette and Koekelberg. Data analysis is ongoing.

Conclusions

In municipal councils, learning is the dynamic through which councilors revise or strengthen their policy beliefs and preferences over time based on the accumulation of evidence and on social interactions. The results of this research suggest, on the one hand, that collaborative learning is a positive dynamic and, on the other, that municipal councillors and officials are not without recourse to model social learning in the Brussels-Capital Region.

Policy recommendations

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.

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 promoting 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.

Committees or working groups that gather councillors from diverse political groups from the majority and opposition to work on specific issues should be multiplied. Social activities, such as field trips, could also be organized; to the best of our knowledge, with the exception of some political groups, there are few municipalities in which social activities, especially intergroup ones, are organized for councilors. Of course, there are constraints related to the limited amount of time that councilors can dedicate to local politics.

Furthermore, municipal councilors admittedly meet on some occasions outside of council meetings, e.g., when they are invited by local actors to discuss an issue or to participate in a drink or meal. However, these activities are not necessarily sufficient to build actual relations, whereas the research results suggest that such activities could benefit social learning.

Formal rules related to the organization of the committee and council meetings could also be adapted. New rules could encourage longer conversations between the college and the councilors, as well as more councilors from both majority groups and opposition groups to take the floor, especially regarding the more complex issues on the agenda. Furthermore, the conditions of social learning in the context of deliberations among councilors and in the context of public deliberations including citizens are not similar; in the second case, access to the public is part of the definition, whereas in the first case, the research results suggest that access to the general public makes idea exchanges more challenging. Thus, more occasions to discuss without access to the general public could be considered, as far as transparency about the process and outcomes of these discussions is preserved. Last but not least, longer timeframes for receiving the preparatory documents before the council meetings could be prescribed for some categories of issues that require and/or deserve more time for thinking, consultation, and discussion.

Policy recommendations

Beyond formal rules, **debates** could be redesigned to improve their spontaneity, at least in committee meetings. For example, collective intelligence approaches have been all the rage during the last few years, especially as far as citizen participation is concerned (e.g., Brulocalis, 2023); these approaches have been much less prominent in parliaments and councils, despite the fact that they could be useful therein too (see, e.g., Boucher et al., 2023). For example, collective intelligence techniques could make councilors more aware of the political values that bias deliberators' perceptions (Kaebnick, 2021) and more able to overcome those biases. Last but not least, there is much room for improvement in the ICT domain. Admittedly, the BOS software has considerably improved document management, but features facilitating the dialog between councilors in relation to these documents could be considered.

Council presidents can play a decisive role as deliberative facilitators. They can foster internal inclusion and pluralism, encourage passive members to participate, and curtail dominant members when necessary, without interfering too much in the discussion (Lindell & Ehrström, 2020). However, our findings showed that elected council presidents may not be able to play this role for several reasons; on the one hand, they are members of the majority (if not mayors); on the other hand, their actual roles tend to be mostly organizational. The introduction of apolitical presidents trained in deliberation could be a promising avenue for future research and practice.

List of publications

Alomar, MA., Al Saleh, M., Aubin, D., Moyson, S. (2023). *The Conditions of Social Learning in Formal Deliberative Settings: A Study of Municipal Councils in Brussels*. In: Rouet, G., Côme, T. (eds) *Participatory and Digital Democracy at the Local Level*. Contributions to Political Science. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-20943-7_11

Alomar, MA., Al Saleh, M., Moyson, S. (2023). *Towards a more collaborative deliberations within Municipal Councils The case of eD&LIB software in Brussels-Capital Region in Belgium*, Paper presented at the IIAS-SEAPP Conference 2023: Developmental States and Professionalization of Public Administration and Public Policy 6-9 February 2023 | Doha, Qatar.

Alomar M. A. AL Saleh M. & Moyson S., (2022), *A study of learning in Brussels municipal councils and a software to foster it*, Paper presented at the *International Colloquium: Digital technology and participatory democracy at the local level: European discourse and practices*, Paris, 27-28 January 2022.

Alomar, M.A ; Aubin, D, Carlier N. & Moyson, S. (2022), *Social learning for effective governance principles: a quali-quali approach to deliberation within the municipal councils in Brussels*, paper presenter to the *IASIA 2022 Conference : Implementing and promoting effective governance principles - leave no one, no place behind*, Rabat, Morocco, 25-29/07/2022.

Alomar M. A. AL Saleh M. & Moyson S., (2022), *Towards a more collaborative elites' deliberations at the local level: A study of learning in Brussels municipal councils and a software to foster it*, Paper presented at the *IPSA Seminar 2022: Smart Cities and Open Government* held in Madrid – Spain, 23th September 2022.

Alomar MA. & Moyson S. (2021), *Conditions and outcomes of policy learning during deliberations among political elites: An analysis of the municipal councils and councilors in the Brussels-Capital Region - Thematic analysis*, Paper presented (online) at the *European Consortium of Political Research General Conference - 30 Aug-3 Sept 2021*.

The autor & project

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