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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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Introduction

- 1 Individual citizen participation in the policy-making process gives lay citizens opportunities to influence policy-making between elections (Elstub & Escobar, 2019b; Hendriks, 2023). Citizens are, for instance, involved in the policymaking process via citizen panels or polls (Elstub & Escobar, 2019a). This trend is accounted for by a perceived lack of trust in, and waning support for, political institutions and by a declining voter turnout. Allowing the participation of individual citizens is expected to intercept this downfall (Landemore, 2020a). This *utopian* thinking, supporting efforts to

create individual citizen participation (Baiocchi, 2001), is at odds with the empirical reality where civil society organisations (CSOs) have been representing the interests and needs of their constituencies in the policy-making process (Warren, 2001). CSOs are privately established organisations, working for the common interest of society, not state organised, nor part of the market (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004; Evers & Laville, 2004). Examples are labour unions, youth organisations, organisations providing services to people in poverty etc. Changes in how citizens participate imply a reform of the privileged relation between CSOs and government, since CSOs are no longer seen as having a leading or privileged role in influencing policy-making and representing society (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2017, p. 40).

- 2 CSOs are central to democratic life because they bring people together, cultivate public opinion, and keep check on the use of government power (Warren, 2001), but in theory are excluded from individual citizen participation modes, or at least given a different position (Hendriks, 2006b; Jacquet et al., 2023). In many societies, CSOs contribute to the public debate and opinion, and raise awareness about their expertise domain (Young, 2000). Attempting to change or improve democracy and policy-making is not a new role for CSOs (Fung, 2003). Many CSOs, especially in neo-corporatist societies, have cultivated an interdependent relation with the government as they provide government-subsidised services, and the government relies on them to obtain information about certain target groups and societal interests (Bloodgood et al., 2014; Salamon, 1987). In these contexts, CSOs have obtained a privileged position in a so-called third-party government and are partners in service delivery or are asked to share information on societal developments (Fung, 2003; Salamon, 1995; Salamon & Toepler, 2015). Individual citizen participation, on the other hand, is based on creating unmediated participation from lay citizens in policy-making (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2017; Jacquet et al., 2023).
- 3 Juxtaposing CSOs' ways of working and their position in the policy-making process, and the increase in participation by *lay* citizens, directs attention to CSOs' attitudes towards this evolution. Previous empirical research departed from the idea that individual citizen participation in policy-making conflicts with the practices of CSOs. It shows that CSOs' *behave* differently in individual citizen participation modes. They use the participation mode to their own advantage, or resist when they do not agree with the information being spread etc. (Ganuza et al., 2014; Hendriks, 2006b; Wampler, 2007). However, studies have highlighted CSOs' behaviour predominantly in top-down, deliberative modes, such as citizen panels and participatory budgets (e.g. Ganuza et al., 2014; Hendriks, 2006b; Wampler, 2007), leaving a blind spot in understanding CSOs' perceptions towards other individual citizen participation modes. Hence our research question: Under which circumstances do CSOs perceive individual citizen participation in the policy-making process as legitimate?
- 4 We conduct a maximum variation comparative case study of four different individual citizen participation initiatives at the local government level. We introduce a framework of different individual citizen participation modes and, for each of these modes, we select a fitting real-life initiative in which we study CSOs' perceptions of legitimacy. The framework is based on two variables: initiative-taker, initiated top-down (from the (local) government) or bottom-up (from society) (Elstub & Escobar, 2019a; Fung, 2015), and method, aggregative, or deliberative (among others Jäske, 2019; Michels & De Graaf, 2017; Schneider & Busse, 2019). Our analysis and results are

structured around CSOs' input, throughput, and output legitimacy perceptions (Schmidt, 2013) in each case. In the discussion we compare CSOs' perceptions of the initiatives' legitimacy by contrasting (1) top-down and bottom-up, and (2) aggregation and deliberation. We find that CSOs' perceptions of the legitimacy of individual citizen participation are, in the first place, influenced by the specific participation mode. Additionally, the analysis demonstrates that these perceptions are nuanced by CSOs' level of involvement in the initiative and by their trust in the local government.

- 5 Studying a variety of participation modes allows understanding of the different circumstances influencing CSOs' legitimacy perceptions and supports the external validity of the study (Findley et al., 2021). The conclusions of this study are relevant for practice, as CSOs are in the position to enhance or obstruct efforts to create individual citizen participation (e.g. Dodge, 2010; Ganuza et al., 2014). In terms of theory, it helps in understanding CSOs' behaviour while widening the scope by studying CSOs' perceptions towards a maximum variation of individual citizen participation modes.

Civil society organisations and individual citizen participation modes

- 6 CSOs' perceptions of individual citizen participation are likely to depend on the individual citizen participation mode, CSOs' traditional way of working, and possible changes to their position in the policy-making process. Different individual citizen participation modes may entail different opportunities and challenges for CSOs.

Top-down or bottom-up

- 7 In top-down citizen participation, the (local) government decides which issue will be the centre of the participation and who is allowed to participate and under which conditions. In theoretical accounts it mostly excludes CSOs, following the ideal typical outline of creating participation between citizens and government, without other stakeholders (Jacquet et al., 2023; Wampler, 2007). Previous empirical research shows that, when CSOs are left out, they pursue other opportunities to influence the participation mode (e.g. Hendriks, 2006b; Wampler, 2007). Many CSOs and similar groups find it difficult to navigate top-down initiated individual citizen participation and either protest against the initiative or ignore it (e.g. Dodge, 2010; Ganuza et al., 2014; Wampler, 2007). CSOs frame initiatives as 'new forms of political domination' and find that individual citizen participation restricts their bargaining power towards the government (Font & Galais, 2011; Ganuza et al., 2014, p. 2288). Individual citizen participation decreases CSOs' opportunities to 'speak about the things that matter to citizens' as citizens' perspectives and input are considered to fall short and to be merely individual concerns (Ganuza et al., 2014). CSOs want to uphold the status quo or fear losing control over the discourse around their subject of expertise (Fung, 2003; Hendriks, 2006b).
- 8 Bottom-up initiated participation is closely connected to the social origins of CSOs as they are, by definition, established in society (Edwards, 2004; Evers & Laville, 2004). Bottom-up initiated participation has no formal restrictions on CSOs' participation and many CSOs use this strategy, or tag on to citizen-initiated participation (Kriesi & Wisler, 1996). Bottom-up organised citizen participation starts from society, but is

often an endeavour of social movements or CSOs (Della Porta & Felicetti, 2022; Fleuß, 2023). The goals for these groups range from influencing a specific policy issue to a radical change in democratic institutions (Fleuß, 2023; Pateman, 2012). Considering the previous, we assume that CSOs affected by bottom-up participation will have milder perceptions of participation than those affected by top-down initiated participation.

Aggregation or deliberation

- 9 In aggregative modes, a majority of votes usually settles the decision (Fung & Wright, 2003). Aggregative democracy is less concerned with the needs of a group, but leaves room for the individual to make up their mind (Hendriks, 2023). Aggregative methods do not fully match with the original way of working of CSOs, which stresses practices such as conversation, deliberation, and trust building (Evers & Laville, 2004). Aggregation is critiqued for resulting in a 'winning' and 'losing' side, for its lack of flexibility, nuance, and deliberation, for its irreversibility, and for the risk of being used as a populist tool. Additionally, aggregation is linked to attempts to undermine the classic policy-making process (Chambers, 2001, 2018; Jäske & Setälä, 2019). Majority rule and basing policy-making hereupon is said to be incompatible with deliberation. Public opinion is expected to become adversarial, rather than consensus-seeking (Chambers, 2001). Considering CSOs' emphasis on countervailing state authority by raising public awareness, stirring public opinion, enhancing the quality of representation etc. (Fung, 2003), we assume that this method is perceived as inadequate by CSOs for individual citizen participation.
- 10 Deliberation is a form of decision-making, based on reasoning among equal citizens, and often aims for consensus (Cohen, 2005; Parkinson, 2004; Smith, 2009). The quality of the debate is central in deliberative modes (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2015). In practice, usually a certain number of citizens are selected (drawn or signed up) to deliberate and to discuss the matter that the initiative deals with (Harris, 2019). This method is more similar to CSOs' practices and their function as a school of democracy (Fung, 2003; Rossteutscher, 2000). Many CSOs work with deliberation and attempt to create deliberation in society (Fung, 2003; Rossteutscher, 2000). They cultivate political and social skills in their members, civic virtues, and the ability to deliberate with people with opposing ideas (Warren, 2001). The assumption is that deliberation would allow more chances than representative democracy for certain constituencies to take part in democratic life. Deliberation is supposed to be conducted in an equal setting where distribution of power and resources play no role (Cohen, 1997, 2005). A deliberative mode may serve as a space in which people use these acquired skills, or where CSOs can enhance the deliberation by their involvement. Not all CSOs are able to solve the issues that they raise (Habermas, 1996), but a deliberative participation opportunity may allow them or their constituents to link their concerns to government actions (Fung, 2003). Deliberative democracy has also been linked to the creation of CSOs. In coming together as individual citizens for citizen budgets, people grouped up, eventually creating new associations in the neighbourhood and fostering the civil society sphere (Baiocchi, 2001). (Cohen & Rogers, 1993). We assume that CSOs affected by deliberative individual citizen participation will express fairly positive perceptions.

Perceptions of legitimacy of individual citizen participation modes

- 11 We examine CSOs' perceptions of legitimacy of individual citizen participation modes. Perceived legitimacy is distinct from normative legitimacy in the sense that the aim is to understand the perceptions of democratic actors about different types of individual citizen participation (Werner, 2020). In literature, practices are often compared with an ideal-type of democratic legitimacy, for instance in Landemore (2020b) or Caluwaerts and Reuchamps (2015). Instead of this, we analyse CSOs' perceptions of the input, throughput, and output legitimacy of individual citizen participation modes (Hendriks, 2021; Schmidt, 2013). The following introduces the different elements that make up our analytical framework.
- 12 First, input legitimacy is the perception of the level of responsiveness from government, as well as inclusiveness and participation-orientation (Hendriks, 2021; Schmidt, 2013). It indicates a balance in the representation of different groups and the possibility of citizen control over the policy decision-making process (Hendriks, 2021; Michels, 2011; Schmidt & Wood, 2019). Input legitimacy concerns access to the participation mode (Haesevoets et al., 2023), or the ability of the constituency to which the decision applies to express its preferences (Scharpf, 1998).
- 13 Second, throughput legitimacy concerns the perceived quality of the policy decision-making procedure (Schmidt & Wood, 2019). It covers whether the process is appropriately conducted, transparent, open, fair, and accountable (Hendriks, 2021; Schmidt, 2013). The procedure should be open to the public eye, decisions should be explained and justified, and participants should receive information (de Fine Licht, 2011; Schmidt & Wood, 2019).
- 14 Third, output legitimacy indicates whether the outputs (the solution) and the outcomes (value of the solution) of a citizen participation mode are considered adequate in terms of effectivity, cost-efficiency, and productivity (Hendriks, 2021; Schmidt, 2013; Schmidt & Wood, 2019).

Research design

Local government context: Flanders

- 15 We conduct our research at the local governmental level in Flanders (the northern region of Belgium), an apt context in which to study CSOs' perceptions of individual citizen participation modes. Traditionally, many Flemish local CSOs have a privileged position in the policy-making process and uphold a close relationship to local government (Pauly et al., 2018). Flanders is a typical example of a neo-corporatist context in which there is concertation between government and CSOs (as well as other stakeholders) in the policy-making process, based on reciprocal trust (Bloodgood et al., 2014; Pauly et al., 2021). Additionally, as in many Western countries, local governments in Flanders are experimenting with individual citizen participation (Caluwaerts et al. 2020). The Governmental Decree on Local Policy instructs local governments on how to organise citizen participation and broadens the formal possibilities for citizen participation ("Decree on Local Policy," 2017). We select four local governments, in

each of which there is an initiative fitting one of the defined individual citizen participation modes.

Data collection

- 16 In each of the municipalities, we conducted interviews with key informants in CSOs having a stake in the individual citizen participation initiative. This sample strategy ensures that the studied perceptions are about CSOs' lived reality, and not a reaction to the researcher's account of the situation. Not all CSOs in a municipality are affected by citizen participation, or are aware of it happening; hence, we addressed those CSOs that were informed, or which participated, resisted etc. For most CSOs, a *stake* in the initiative meant that the policy domain in which they work was the subject of the participation initiative, or that they had a project in the initiative. We also included CSOs working with vulnerable groups, such as people in poverty. CSOs range from old, relying on long cooperations (with the city), to new, issue-based CSOs whose existence is still fragile. The sampling strategy resulted in a variety of CSOs.
- 17 To map the relevant CSOs, we consulted the local governments for an overview of CSOs in the municipality and conducted additional desk research. At the end of each interview, we asked for details of other CSOs that could be considered as having a stake in the participation. CSOs in Flemish local governments fulfil a range of functions (van Gyes et al., 2018) and this variety is represented in the respondents, supporting the external validity of this research (Findley et al., 2021) (see also Table 1 in the appendix). Information on the background of each CSO (see Table 1 in the appendix) is gathered from internet searches and checked during the interviews.
- 18 For each relevant CSO, we interviewed a key informant, i.e. the coordinator, or a staff or board member, depending on who was best informed about, or involved in, the citizen participation initiative, while also having a good understanding of their CSO. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing the interviewer to probe deeper into the perceptions of their respondents (Hermanowicz, 2002). In total we conducted 38 interviews, lasting around one hour each. In each local government a document and media analysis were conducted to gain insight into the background of each initiative and the discourse around it.

Maximum-variation initiatives

- 19 We take citizen participation initiatives as a unit of analysis and have selected four initiatives, based on our earlier developed framework of modes. The following table displays a compressed version of the four cases.

Table 1 Overview cases

	Top-down	Bottom-up
Aggregative	1: referendum	3: citizen-initiated plebiscite

Deliberative	2: participatory budget	4: citizen-initiated panel
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Source: the Authors

Top-down and aggregative: binding referenda

- 20 Binding digital referenda, organised by the local government, are selected as an initiative to study a mode that is organised top-down and aggregative. The referenda took place in an average-sized city with 80.000 inhabitants. Referenda are considered as citizen participation as they allow a direct say in agenda-setting and decision-making (Jäske & Setälä, 2019). A referendum is supposed to allow every citizen to participate equally and to deliver a result efficiently (Michels, 2011). The local government took the initiative to organise a digital referendum on a regular basis. In these referenda, people can only vote online and CSOs are not deliberately mobilised to reach specific groups in society, nor asked to share expertise.
- 21 Referenda are among the lesser common participation modes in Flemish municipalities. However, the data collection occurred after a couple of referenda, and respondents were familiar with the procedure. In a first digital referendum (2019), citizens could vote for or against car-free Sundays in the city centre. Nearly 10.000 people participated (16% of the population) and the no-vote won by a small majority. In another referendum (2022), about city cleanliness and increased fines for littering and illicit dumping, 3.804 inhabitants participated (4,8% of the population). The majority of participants favoured a stricter cleanliness policy (Demeulemeester, 2022). But, unlike the first digital referendum on car-free Sundays, there was only a minimum of public debate and media attention.

Top-down and deliberative: participatory budget

- 22 A second initiative is also top-down, but deliberative: a participatory budget in 2023 in an average-sized city (72.000 inhabitants) that had organised a couple of participatory budgets at the time of data collection. Both CSOs and individual citizens were allowed to propose projects that would better connect their neighbourhood, breaking with the ideal-typical goal of including lay citizens. Most CSOs in the study took part in the initiative.
- 23 Participatory budgets are among the frequently used participation modes in Flemish municipalities. Examples of proposed projects are installing benches, planting flowers, embellishing squares etc. A total budget of 120.000 euros was distributed proportionately over the different neighbourhoods of the municipality. The projects were screened by a jury (experts, key actors from the different neighbourhoods, and municipal staff). Citizens aged 14 and older could vote on the projects and eventually a sum of money was allocated to the projects based on their popularity.

Bottom-up and aggregative: plebiscite

- 24 A plebiscite is not commonly used in Flemish municipalities, but is a fitting example of an aggregative, bottom-up mode. This plebiscite was organised in a large city (270 000 inhabitants) and demanded by a group of citizens through a collection of signatures.

Flemish decree allows citizens to collect signatures from a proportion of the inhabitants of a municipality which the municipality should organise a plebiscite ("Decree on Local Policy," 2017). Citizens aged 16 and up could be signatories and could vote, with 12.4% of the population participating (Schouppe, 2023). Media coverage was minimal, indicating sparse public debate. The city council did not discuss the matter extensively, apart from giving the necessary approval. The local government was involved in rephrasing the original questions to fit into local policy and handed out information brochures about the current policies and the changes presented in the plebiscite. The first statement was: "Municipal public property should not be privatised. Do you agree?" (79.4% yes-votes). The second was: "Should the city establish a land bank of public land to realise 40% of social housing?" (77.4% yes-votes).

- 25 CSOs in this municipality established a 'housing coalition,' a tight-knitted group of CSOs (Wooncoalitie, 2024) well-versed in advocacy work through official channels. Many of them participated in collecting signatures to organise a plebiscite, spread information, and mobilised citizens to vote. Consequently, a share of interviewed CSOs are members of this coalition.

Bottom-up and deliberative participation: citizen panel

- 26 The fourth case is a bottom-up citizen panel in an averaged-sized city (89.000 inhabitants). The organisers of this citizen panel were people from the local arts-scene; the city allowed them to create participation, but did not formally facilitate their efforts. The organisers spread a call to inhabitants and CSOs via social media and word of mouth to propose projects imagining a (new) purpose to (empty) public spaces in the municipality. In negotiation with the local government, 20.000 m² were allocated, on which the projects could be realised. Participants deliberated on several occasions to select and discuss which projects to implement. This participation mode is not very common but is a good example of deliberative bottom-up participation. It also structurally brings together small participation efforts of individual citizens and CSOs that would find their way separately to the local government. A couple of new, issue-based CSOs took the opportunity to participate and to network. Most CSOs sampled in this initiative took part by handing in a project or by aiding in facilitation.
- 27 Because of the lockdowns in the COVID-19 period, the project came to a halt shortly after its kick-off and has since been mostly a collection of lectures about democracy and society (*De Grond Der Dingen*). Some projects are in their execution phase, but many have not been implemented, mostly because of lockdowns and a lack of follow-up.

Operationalisation of perceived legitimacy

- 28 For each CSO, we study the input, throughput, and output legitimacy perceptions (Hendriks, 2021; Schmidt, 2013) of the participation initiatives. Studying perceptions of legitimacy from different angles provides insight into which elements CSOs find better or worse and what might explain this. We operationalise each of the three legitimacy components with two indicators of Haesevoets et al. (2023), ensuring construct validity (Adcock & Collier, 2001). The exact questions can be found in the appendix.
- 29 Input legitimacy entails whether the initiative is seen as inclusive and considers various points of view. Throughput legitimacy concerns whether the initiative is

transparent and fair, according to the CSO. Output legitimacy is conceptualised as whether the CSO considers the initiative as ensuring an efficient and effective solution, or in advisory initiatives, as a *contribution hereto*.

- 30 Additionally, to obtain as complete a view as possible of legitimacy perceptions, we asked CSOs whether they thought that the participation initiative overall was a *good* way of shaping local policy-making (Garry et al., 2022). We also questioned which elements CSOs think could be adjusted, to gain insight into where legitimacy is lacking.

Data analysis

- 31 The data we collected through interviews are analysed using thematic analysis, and coded both deductively and inductively (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Deductive coding started from the previously defined factors for each legitimacy type. Inductive coding broadens the conception of CSOs' understanding of the three types of legitimacy. For instance, apart from 'inclusion' for input legitimacy, interviewees indicated e.g. the capacities of individual citizens to make considered judgments. For throughput legitimacy, the lack of debate, for instance, was added to the code-family 'negative throughput legitimacy.' Each of the legitimacy perceptions were split into positive and negative. Conducting the coding in different rounds made codes coherent and mutually exclusive (Terry et al., 2017).

Results

- 32 For each initiative we discuss and explain CSOs' perceptions of input, throughput, and output legitimacy. The summarised results of the CSOs' perceptions in the different individual citizen participation initiatives are displayed in Table 2. Perceptions of legitimacy are, in the first place, explained by the mode of individual citizen participation; this is further nuanced by CSOs' involvement in the initiative and by their trust in the local government. Moreover, within the two top-down initiated initiatives (digital referenda and participatory budgets), perceptions of the legitimacy of CSOs within the initiative are similar. In the two bottom-up initiated initiatives (plebiscite and citizen panel), the analysis shows differences between CSOs concerning their perception of legitimacy, which we can link to CSOs' level of involvement. This is the extent to which the CSO adopts a role in the initiative and becomes part of it because it houses one of their projects. The detailed results for each CSO in each initiative can be found in Table 1 in the appendix.

Table 2: CSOs' perceptions of legitimacy per initiative

		Input	Throughput	Output
1	Referenda Top-down/Aggregative			
	All CSOs	Low	Low	Low
2	Participatory budgeting			

	Top-down/Deliberative			
	All CSOs	Average	Average	Average
3	Plebiscite			
	Bottom-up/Aggregative			
	CSOs with little involvement	Average	Low	Average
	CSOs with much involvement	High	Average	High
4	Citizen panel			
	Bottom-up/Deliberative			
	CSOs with little involvement	High	High	High
	CSOs with much involvement	High	Average	Low

Source: the Authors

Top-down and aggregative: why can't CSOs play a role?

- 33 In terms of input legitimacy, CSOs acknowledge the accessibility and potentially wide reach of the referenda, but this is overshadowed by the low salience of the topics and the fact that CSOs were not involved in mobilising citizens. CSOs found the predominantly digital execution of the referenda as not being inclusive, as it limits the participation opportunities of elderly people and others with limited access to digital tools. In their opinion, the municipality forsook the provision of information about the consequences and alternatives, limiting the information on which people could base their decision. In one of the referenda, a debate was organised, which resulted in a polarised discussion and did not allow for multiple perspectives on the matter.
- 34 CSOs find themselves better positioned to facilitate participation and to initiate public debate than the government, yet because of a decline in trust in the government, the majority of CSOs is reluctant to provide spontaneous support. CSOs disagree with the government's policies and find that they are involved less over recent years in sharing their expertise in the policy-making process. Certain CSOs explicitly state that they do not trust the government to act in the interests of citizens. They also question the capacity of citizens to make informed decisions.
- The last one was waste and weeds [cleanliness of the city], but also then, if you read it, you know the answers already. As (an) association we have not raised the issue, 'Suit yourself, government'. (1.1 TD, Aggregative)
- 35 All CSOs perceive throughput legitimacy poorly. They find transparency, debate, and nuance in the initiative lacking and assign this to the approach of the municipality. Even though they are confident that the voting process has been conducted fairly, they stress that aggregation does not permit nuanced debate. Most CSOs find that they have been structurally sidelined by the government: they were not included for their expertise, nor for mobilising and informing citizens. CSOs also stress that the choice of

the specific topics was not transparent, as these were decided without any input from either CSOs or citizens.

Yeah, our vision was more nuanced and complex than just 'yes or no.' And it was also our fear that materialised in that referendum. We feared it would turn into a black-and-white discussion, leading to polarisation, and in the end, that's somewhat what happened. So, therefore we were no proponents of the referendum. (1.4 TD, Aggregative)

- 36 Finally, for output legitimacy, CSOs found digital referenda not to be efficient because of their low salience and high costs. Although some CSOs acknowledged their effectiveness as the government implemented the results, most found the referenda ineffective because the subjects were perceived as irrelevant and did not contribute to more pressing issues.

Our people [people in poverty] have even less confidence in the city because they feel that their problems are not addressed, which is not always right, but all of the sudden they pose a 'yes or no' question. That doesn't make sense, that is not engaging people. (1.2 TD Aggregative)

Top-down and deliberative: nice, but narrow scope

- 37 For input legitimacy, most CSOs acknowledge the municipality's efforts to be inclusive, and the opportunity for all citizens to be heard. However, the initiative does not reach a diversity of citizens and this is ascribed to the deliberative method demanding citizens' time, knowledge, and resources.

Maybe certain other activities have been organised, but mostly it's by people who already have access, who know how and where to participate. (2.5 TD, Deliberative)

- 38 For throughput, transparency is gauged well when it comes to clarifying the process but is found lacking in terms of the selection of projects. No CSO was aware of how decisions were made by the jury in coming up with a shortlist. Certain CSOs found the municipality unfair in terms of rigidity in its time management, in the assistance offered, and in the scheme for allocating funds. A couple of CSOs took it upon themselves to help citizens in the initiative, while others were convinced that more facilitation from the city would lead to better participation. Since money is involved, participants do not know what a 'fair' budget proposal would be, nor how budgets are considered, resulting in funds being allocated 'unfairly' to projects that have a budget of more than is deemed necessary. CSOs' trust in the municipality, and the fact that they were asked to assist, ameliorate their perceptions of legitimacy, resulting in CSOs giving the municipality the benefit of the doubt over whether the whole process was conducted fairly. Because CSOs were allowed to participate and asked to mobilise people, they have the perception that the initiative had more chance of succeeding.

It isn't easy to involve young people directly, there's a small chance you succeed, unless you have intermediaries [like us]. (2.6 TD, Deliberative)

- 39 Since the citizen budget does not stir much change, and nor does it have detrimental effects, CSOs are neutral in terms of output legitimacy. The initiative is not considered efficient as it is a deliberative process, and a lot of effort was invested in keeping people motivated, including the efforts of CSOs. Nor is the initiative considered effective, with CSOs questioning whether a citizen budget is the right means of enhancing participation; the initiative is perceived as being unable to engage citizens in effective

participation. Some stress the lack of follow-up and citizens being left to their own devices.

So, is it efficient? I think you're soothing the population by giving them the idea they can change small things in their neighbourhood. (2.3 TD Deliberative)

Bottom-up and aggregative: democratic opportunity, but may not align with CSOs' strategies

40 In the two bottom-up organised initiatives, perceptions of legitimacy differ based on CSOs' level of involvement. For the plebiscite, the majority of CSOs perceived the citizens' approach at times as being both rigid and unconventional. CSOs more involved acknowledge the flaws but have average-level perceptions of legitimacy. They are opportunistic and frame the plebiscite as 'a contribution to their aim to better the housing situation.' Other CSOs have lower legitimacy perceptions and withhold cooperation because they see the initiative as being redundant to the work of the housing-coalition (see case description) and hence they do not engage. They fear the discrepancy between the inexperienced citizens' approach and the structured, successful method of CSOs and the housing-coalition.

41 Input legitimacy is evaluated as average to high, overall, but depends on CSOs' involvement. CSOs find the topic salient and voting (aggregation) allows for all citizens to be heard in a matter that concerns them. Nevertheless, this is downplayed by the plebiscite questions which are hard to comprehend, according to all the CSOs, because the questions were formulated by citizens with *a lack of essential understanding and information about the housing situation*. CSOs with less involvement find that the organising citizens do not identify the most salient element and leave too little space to include their or other CSOs' expertise, reinforcing their low input legitimacy perceptions and rendering the plebiscite ineffective. Those with greater involvement emphasise the plebiscite's 'democratic opportunity' for citizens, and its potential contribution to their own work in changing the housing situation. Involved CSOs tried to cut through the complexity for citizens, sharing information and mobilising them. They said that the initiative became more inclusive and sparked public debate, due to their involvement, in turn improving input and throughput legitimacy.

Could it have been more inclusive? Yes, perhaps, but I think that's a strange question, you can always make remarks, but it's an accomplishment within the legal framework, something's started that hasn't been there before, the discussion lives now. (3.10 BU, Aggregative)

42 Throughput legitimacy is overall considered as low to average. Voting is deemed fair because it gives all citizens the opportunity to participate on a salient issue. Both the CSOs with a larger role in the initiative and the organising citizens expected more political debate and practical assistance from the city. Transparency is seen as a weaker point: the process of formulating the questions and choosing specific topics was not clear. Certain CSOs limited their involvement because they were critical about the process. They feared that activist ways of working, such as protests, would reflect badly on them and perhaps hamper their relationship with the local government. They also put most of the responsibility for the potential outcomes of the plebiscite on the citizens and found that the process should have been more accessible and open.

A huge weakness in the whole organisation was the friction among the organisers. If eventually you're invited with the mayor and it turns out you're diametrically

opposed on how to reach a goal, that has given us the feeling that we should dissociate ourselves from it. (3.11 BU Aggregative)

- 43 Finally, the goal of this initiative is seen as agenda-setting, as a plebiscite can only be advisory. Most CSOs perceive this goal to be met. CSOs with limited involvement emphasise cost-inefficiency in their perceptions, whereas those more involved stress the effectiveness. The side-effects of the plebiscite – networking, public opinion formation etc. – are also framed as positive for output legitimacy. However, as in the first case (aggregative, top-down digital referendum), the method is considered as cost-inefficient by all CSOs, lowering perceptions of output legitimacy.

The issue is dear to us. We thought it'd be an excellent opportunity to put some issues on the agenda, so we cooperated. [...] It could have gone wrong, I mean those questions, what do they mean, they're still fighting over it. But of course, it's not a good way to take decisions, no, no, no, not to take decisions, good it's not binding, but it works to put stuff on the agenda. (3.5 BU Aggregative)

Bottom-up and deliberative: familiar, but in need of professionalism

- 44 The bottom-up approach, and the involvement of CSOs in the process, reflects positively on input legitimacy. According to all CSOs, initiative-takers put a lot of effort into making the initiative inclusive, part of which was involving the CSOs. CSOs acknowledge that, regardless of the efforts of the initiative-takers, the deliberation did not attract certain hard-to-reach groups.

They've worked very hard on inclusivity and to reach people from other origins, so I think in that they succeeded, but I also think that there'll always be work on that part. (4.1 BU, Deliberative)

- 45 Throughput legitimacy in this initiative is overall considered as good; the method of deliberation used in the initiative is seen as transparent, fair, and open to debate. The bottom-up initiation provided a sense of ownership and freedom and the idea of creating participation together. Certain respondents remarked that the method of deliberation and the additional explanations and theories provided for participants were at times 'high-brow' hampering throughput legitimacy. Those CSOs with more involvement pointed out that the frequency at which the initiative deliberated became too time-intensive and tedious and this discredited throughput legitimacy for them.

They [the organisers] held meetings in which small groups could discuss about the content and to bundle certain initiatives into themes. I am convinced that it's been a good process for the city, a healing process. (4.5 BU Deliberative)

- 46 The initiative is critiqued for its output legitimacy. It is perceived as ineffective and inefficient, with the bottom-up approach seen as unprofessional at times, and the deliberation as too slow to create results. No CSO expected efficiency, however, so this is not seen as a major issue. CSOs that were more involved expected concrete results after putting in time and effort. Because of the lockdowns and the city's lack of responsiveness, very few results have yet been implemented. These CSOs mention that they had no perspective on their project, lowering their perceptions of output legitimacy. For some, the lack of response from local government also dented their trust in the government. As in the previous bottom-up initiative, positive perceptions of the outcome also rely on the side-effects of the initiative. Those CSOs with less involvement mostly praise the opportunities for networking and community building

in the municipality, as well as the fact that the initiative stirred public debate about public space.

Sometimes you just have to get going. If I receive another e-mail about my project, I'll think "are we finally doing this, or not?" (4.8 BU Deliberative)

Discussion and conclusion

- 47 In times of changing participatory democracy, where citizens demand more opportunities to provide input in the policy-making process, and local governments experiment with allowing citizens to voice their queries, it is paramount to understand how these practices are perceived by CSOs. CSOs have been taking up the role of informing the policy-making process, advocating for change, and cultivating political skills in society (e.g. Fung, 2003; Warren, 2001; Young, 2000). Individual citizen participation has the potential to disrupt this role, but CSOs can also enhance individual citizen participation initiatives (Dodge, 2014; Font & Galais, 2011; Hendriks, 2006a). However, research on CSOs and similar organisations has been limited to their behaviour and to deliberative, top-down-initiated individual citizen participation (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2017; Ganuza & Baiocchi, 2019; Hendriks, 2006b; Wampler, 2007). Other modes of individual citizen participation have not yet been considered thoroughly.
- 48 This study questioned under which circumstances CSOs perceived citizen participation modes as being legitimate. Overall, CSOs are neutral to fairly positive about individual citizen participation, while perceptions of legitimacy differ depending on the mode of participation (initiative-taker and method). CSOs' perceptions are also moderated by their role in the initiative and by their trust in the local government.

Top-down vs bottom-up

- 49 First, CSOs see opportunities in different types of citizen participation initiatives but those that are bottom-up initiated are perceived as being better, even though they are said to need greater professionalism. The positive view on bottom-up initiatives may be because CSOs and similar organisations are familiar with bottom-up methods (Della Porta & Felicetti, 2022; Fung, 2003). Overall, they are seen as more inclusive, with the process being gauged better, partly because CSOs have more leeway to affect it, and even though they are seen as largely ineffective, they have positive side-effects, such as networking, agenda-setting and community building, which contribute to CSOs' deliberative approach. The lack of (effective) outcomes diminishes the output legitimacy of bottom-up initiatives mostly for those CSOs that are involved and which expect beneficial results for their organisation. This nuances the findings of Caluwaerts and Reuchamps (2015), who stress responsiveness and implementation for a bottom-up mode to be legitimate.
- 50 Top-down modes often do not include CSOs and directly address individual citizens (De Graaf et al., 2015; Font & Galais, 2011; Fung, 2015). A risk is that CSOs feel by-passed, or restricted, in top-down citizen participation (Font & Galais, 2011; Fung & Wright, 2001), which we can confirm for the referenda. Overall, CSOs struggle to see democratic value in top-down initiatives. This can be corroborated by the conclusion of Kübler et al. (2020) that citizen participation is used to "strengthen governability" rather than

“deepen democracy.” The initiatives are seen as effective, but this is trumped by perceptions of inefficiency and low inclusiveness. Top-down initiatives are more structured, and set up for a specific goal, not leaving much room for CSOs to assist, resulting in their having to facilitate the participation when they are allowed a role. Most CSOs interpret top-down initiated participation as a forced attempt to allow citizens to participate, lacking a fundamental impact on citizens’ trust or community building.

Aggregation vs deliberation

- 51 Second, aggregation or deliberation also affect CSOs’ perceptions. Aggregation is seen as difficult in terms of including or mobilising hard-to-reach groups but is considered good in terms of attempting to allow many people to participate (Michels, 2011). Our results show that CSOs also perceive aggregative processes as lacking nuance and debate (Chambers, 2018). Finally, aggregation is considered as effective, whereas deliberation is perceived as slow and as lacking cost-efficiency.
- 52 CSOs are aware of the exclusionary effect of deliberation (Glimmerveen et al., 2022; Sanders, 1997), but they nevertheless have a positive perception of input and throughput legitimacy, mostly because of the effects of their involvement. CSOs are well-versed in the deliberative method and find that a deliberative process allows for debate and nuance. Nonetheless, they perceive it as fairly inefficient and slow. The deliberative initiatives are seen as ineffective and inefficient (Callahan, 2007), but they allow for networking and public opinion formation, side-effects that CSOs consider positive for output legitimacy. CSOs function as platforms for deliberation and public opinion formation and try to impact democracy with deliberative methods (Bua & Bussu, 2023; Fung, 2003; Hendriks, 2006a; Warren, 2001) and this could inform the more positive perceptions of CSOs towards these methods.

Moderating effects

- 53 Third, CSOs’ perceptions are influenced by their involvement in the initiative and by their trust in the local government. CSOs with much involvement in an initiative expect beneficial results for their organisation and find that their involvement improves the initiative and its inclusiveness. Those CSOs not allowed to be involved have lower input legitimacy perceptions. CSOs see themselves as competent to mobilise a diverse range of citizens, and to provide the necessary expertise, corroborating the insights of Wampler (2007) and Hendriks (2006b).
- 54 CSOs’ perceptions are also influenced by their trust in the local government. CSOs affected by a top-down initiative, and with more trust in the government, gauge the legitimacy of the individual citizen participation mode higher. CSOs’ perceptions of participation are lower when they are left out and thus have a different role in facilitating participation from the one they are used to (Salamon & Toepler, 2015). CSOs take their relationship with the local government into consideration to decide the extent to which they will take part in a bottom-up initiative with some fearing the loss of a privileged position. Indeed, those CSOs that have more contact with local government prefer representative democracy over individual citizen participation (Berkvens et al., 2023).

Recommendations for practice

- 55 Individual citizen participation may benefit from assistance from CSOs. CSOs find that the legitimacy of individual citizen participation initiatives can be strengthened by including CSOs, especially in getting through to hard-to-reach groups, and in including their expertise in the policy domain. Involving CSOs also improves citizen participation and citizens' perceptions (Dodge, 2014; Font & Galais, 2011; Fung & Wright, 2001). Second, providing information and the space for nuance and debate is recommended for both deliberative and aggregative modes. Third, maintaining a good working relationship between local government and local CSOs may help in setting up citizen participation. Fourth, the impact of citizen participation can be improved by heightening the salience of the topic or policy domain, while balancing its potential divisiveness. Finally, responsiveness to bottom-up developments in the municipality may lead to more vibrant and successful initiatives, extending right through to the execution of the results (Moynihan, 2003).
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APPENDIXES

Interview questions on perceptions of legitimacy

- Does your CSO find the participation initiative inclusive and allowing for sufficient points of view to be considered?
- Does your CSO find the participation initiative a fair and transparent way to give advice/take decisions in local policy?
- Does your CSO find the outcome of the participation initiative efficient and effective, or contributing to an efficient and effective outcome?
- Does your CSO find the participation initiative a good way to take decisions in local policy?
- How could the participation initiative be improved, according to your CSO?

Background and legitimacy perceptions of CSOs per initiative

The table below categorises the responding CSOs on a couple of variables. The policy domain and target group give insight into who the organisation works for, or which interests it has in mind (in the case of advocacy organisations). A previous study of CSOs in Flanders found that three types were most prevalent: advocacy, service delivery, and community building (Pauly et al., 2018). In every interview we provided

respondents with a short definition of each type and asked them which one their CSO identified with.

CSOs' involvement is expressed on a scale showing 'no involvement,' 'low involvement,' 'average involvement,' and 'high involvement.' Each degree of involvement is clarified by a brief description of the role that the CSO adopted in the initiative, by questioning in the interviews, and by information from documents. For instance, CSOs having a project and actively engaging in the initiative, or actively mobilising for the initiative, are categorised as having 'high involvement.' For others, involvement is limited or non-existent.

Trust in the local government is represented by 'low trust,' 'average trust,' and 'high trust.' Often high trust is connected to regular contact, but this is not the case for all CSOs; some have necessary ad hoc contacts but have low trust in the government. We ask about CSOs' trust in the local government in the interviews. Similarly, we express the amount of contact that a CSO has with the local government as 'rare' when they occasionally address the government, happening usually on their own initiative and for a specific issue. When CSOs have a structural meeting with the local government where they address matters and/or the government asks for their input, we label this as 'regular.' None of the responding CSOs reported never having any contact with the local government.

Legitimacy perceptions are labelled 'low,' 'average,' or 'high.' In the coding process, we coded perceptions as negative or positive. The labels depend on the balance between positive and negative perceptions and the issues that CSOs stressed as important. As described in the method section, we coded both inductively and deductively (Boyatzis, 1998). Deductive coding is based on the theoretical basis for our interview questions (Haesevoets et al., 2023). Inductive codes are, for example, an initiative contributing to CSOs' goals, a lack or sufficiency of assistance from the city, or side-effects such as damaging or building trust in the government and agenda-setting. Inductive coding shows that CSOs find other issues more or equally important, in perceiving a participation initiative as legitimate, than those theoretically put forward.

Table 1 Background and legitimacy perceptions of CSOs per initiative

Reference	Description	Policy domain/ target group	Type of organisation	Involvement in initiative	Role in initiative	Contact with local government	Trust in local government	Input perceptions	Through- put perceptions	Output perceptions
CSOs 1.1	CSO working in municipalities for conservation of nature and native animals' habitats.	Environment and nature	Advocacy	None	None	Regular	Low	Low	Low	Low
CSOs 1.2	CSO delivering services to people in	People living in poverty	Service delivery	None	None	Rare	Average	Low	Low	Low

	poverty and homeless people, and community house where people can access facilities such as computers.									
CSOs 1.3	CSO working with young people (in vulnerable situations) through popular culture.	Young people	Community building	None	None	Rare	Low	Low	Low	Low
CSOs 1.4	CSO advocating for the interests of local cyclists, keeping checks on infrastructure and road safety.	Cyclists	Advocacy	None	Refused role in mobilising citizens in first referendum	Regular	High	Average	Low	Low
CSOs 1.5	Neighbour-led CSO in organising events for the neighbourhood.	Diverse citizens	Community building	None	None	Regular	High	Average	Low	Low
CSOs 1.6	CSO advocating for local commerce, specifically the self-employed.	Local merchants	Advocacy	None	None	Rare	Low	Low	Low	Low
CSOs 1.7	Small CSO organising a variety of events, mostly focused on cyclists and public space.	Diverse citizens	Community building	None	None	Rare	Low	Low	Low	Low
Top-down participatory budget	Description	Policy domain/target group	Type of organisation	Involvement in initiative	Role in initiative	Contact with local government	Trust in local government	Input perceptions	Throughput perceptions	Output perceptions
CSO 2.1	CSO working with young people (in vulnerable	Young people	Community building	Average	Members handed project, in CSO	Regular	High	High	Average	Average

	situations). Needed to support their members who handed in project (administratively and financially).				supports implementation					
CSO 2.2	Umbrella CSO for organisations working with newcomers	Newcomers	Advocacy/ community building	Low	Spreading information	Regular	High	Average	Average	Average
CSO 2.3	Community building CSO	Diverse citizens	Advocacy/ community building	High	Selected project	Regular	High	Average	Average	Low
CSO 2.4	Community building CSO	Children and youth	Community building	High	Facilitation, spreading information	Regular	High	Average	Average	Average
CSO 2.5	Small CSO providing leisure and language courses for newcomers.	Newcomers (mainly women)	Community building/ service delivery	High	Selected project	Rare	High	Low	Average	Average
CSO 2.6	CSO assisting in employment of young people (usually school drop-outs).	Young people	Service delivery	High	Selected project	Regular	High	Average	Average	High
CSO 2.7	CSO providing leisure for elderly in the municipality.	Elderly	Community building	None	None	Rare	Low	Low	Low	Low
CSO 2.8	CSO delivering services to young people.	Young people	Service delivery	None	None	Regular	High	Average	Average	Average
Bottom-up plebiscitary	Description	Policy domain/ target group	Type of organisation	Involvement in initiative	Role in initiative	Contact with local government	Trust in local government	Input perceptions	Throughput perceptions	Output perceptions
CSO 3.1	Labour union		Advocacy/ service delivery	Average	Mobilisation	Regular	High	Average	Average	High

CSO 3.2	Labour union		Advocacy/ service delivery	Low	Mobilisation	Rare	High	Average	Low	High
CSO 3.3	CSO for people in poverty	People in poverty	Community building/ advocacy	Low	Mobilisation	Rare	High	Low	Low	Average
CSO 3.4	CSO for people with migration background	Newcomers and people with migration background	Community building	None	None	Rare	Average	Low	Low	Low
CSO 3.5	Social care CSO	People in poverty, people in difficult situations etc.	Service delivery	Average	Mobilisation	Regular	High	Average	High	Average
CSO 3.6	CSO for people in poverty	People in poverty	Service delivery	High	Mobilisation, spreading information, collecting signatures	Regular	High	High	Low	High
CSO 3.7	Umbrella for smaller (voluntary or a few FTEs) organisations working on poverty, inclusion etc.	Newcomers, people in poverty	Advocacy (support small CSOs)	Low	Spreading information	Regular	High	High	Low	Average
CSO 3.8	Tenants' association	Tenants	Service delivery	Low	Spreading information	Rare	High	Average	Low	High
CSO 3.9	Umbrella CSO for organisations working with people in poverty	People in poverty		Low	Spreading information	Regular	High	Average	Average	Average
CSO 3.10	Community building CSO	Diverse citizens	Service delivery/ community building	High	Mobilisation, spreading information, collecting signatures	Regular	Average	High	High	High
				None	None	Regular	High	Low	Low	Average

CSO 3.11	CSO for people in poverty	People in poverty	Service delivery/ advocacy							
CSO 3.12	CSO aiding refugees with housing	Refugees	Service delivery	Low	Mobilisation	Rare	High	Low	Average	Average
CSO 3.13	Initiative takers		Advocacy	Initiative takers	Initiative takers	Rare	Low	High	Average	High
CSO 3.14	Initiative takers		Advocacy	Initiative takers	Initiative takers	Regular	High	Average	Average	High
Bottom-up citizen panel	Description	Policy domain/ target group	Type of organisation	Involvement in initiative	Role in initiative	Contact with local government	Trust in local government	Input perceptions	Throughput perceptions	Output perceptions
CSOs 4.1	CSO investing in local initiatives concerning climate.	Climate	Advocacy	Average	Support, non-executed project	Regular	High	Average	High	High
CSOs 4.2	Small CSO focusing on diversifying culture and literature.	Newcomers	Community building	High	Project, but was picked up by the provincial government to be executed.	Rare	Average	Average	Average	Low
CSOs 4.3	Side project of a local CSO that works with integration of newcomers.	Newcomers	Community building/ service delivery	High	Non-executed project, involved in process	Rare	High	High	Average	Average
CSOs 4.4	Ex-board member of two CSOs who handed in project(s) from vision of both CSOs.	Climate/ cyclists	Advocacy	Average	Non-executed project	Regular	High	Average	High	High
CSOs 4.5	Local CSO bringing a couple of initiatives together that work with empowering farmers and	Climate and food policy	Community building	Average	Non-executed project	Rare	Average	High	High	High

	educating citizens about local food consumption. Organisers were looking for a collaboration between their project and the initiative.									
CSOs 4.6	Youth CSO working with (vulnerable) youth in different neighbourhoods in the city.	Young people	Community building	Average	Non-executed project	Rare	Average	High	High	Average
CSOs 4.7	CSO advocating for the interests of local cyclists, keeping checks on infrastructure and road safety.	Cyclists	Advocacy	Average	Non-executed project	Regular	High	High	Average	High
CSOs 4.8	CSO providing leisure for a specific group of newcomers.	Minority group	Community building	High	Non-executed project	Rare	Low	High	Average	Low

ABSTRACTS

Governments increasingly engage individual citizens in the policy-making process and also in contexts where civil society organisations (CSOs) traditionally play a substantial role in this process by advocating for the interests and needs of their constituencies. Moreover, CSOs are in the position to enhance or obstruct different modes of individual citizen participation. The question of under which circumstances do CSOs find citizen participation modes legitimate is therefore important. We performed a multiple case study fitting a theoretical framework consisting of four different modes of individual citizen participation in local governments that affect CSOs. Our analyses are based on a framework of perceived legitimacy, including input, throughput and output legitimacy. Our results show that CSOs' perceptions of legitimacy vary depending on the individual citizen participation mode and are nuanced by CSOs' role in the initiative and by their trust in the local government.

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