The Democracy–Decarbonization Dilemma: Can Climate Assemblies Provide an Escape Route?

Fergus Green and Michele Zadra

Meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement on climate change demands rapid and systemic economic transformation. Yet, contemporary democracies seem tragically ill-suited to this task. Proposals to insulate climate policy making from democratic control—for instance, through delegation to expert bodies—seem likely to fuel the rise of authoritarian populists, which is already eroding democratic norms and institutions. Deepening democratic engagement with the process of decarbonization may provide an escape route from this apparent "democracy–decarbonization dilemma." In this vein, there has recently been much enthusiasm for climate assemblies. Such processes can have profound effects on their participants. But can they influence attitudes to democracy and support for ambitious climate policy among the wider public? We conduct a narrative review of the theoretical and empirical literature on democratic mini-publics (DMPs) to answer this question and critically reflect on our findings. We find that DMPs can influence the wider public's attitudes toward democratic institutions and public policy to some extent. Yet, DMPs alone—even if well publicized—seem unlikely to be sufficient to stimulate the widespread shifts in knowledge, capacities, attitudes and behavior necessary to escape the democracy–decarbonization dilemma. We propose expanding the use, institutionalization, and orientation of DMPs—so that they become a widely recognized and routinized feature of deliberative systems, interacting with both governments and the wider citizenry—while advancing complementary democratic reform initiatives.

According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), limiting climate change to achieve the goals of the Paris Agreement now requires "wide-ranging, large-scale, rapid and systemic transformation" of the global economy (UNEP 2022, xxii); that is, *deep decarbonization* (cf. Geels et al. 2017). The changes required to address energy-related emissions alone include dramatic improvements in the energy efficiency of buildings, vehicles, appliances, and industrial processes; the replacement of fossil fuels with zero-carbon electricity sources; and the electrification of much of the world's transport fleet and heating systems (European Commission 2019). Deep decarbonization is also required across agri-food systems, land use, waste, and energy-intensive industrial production (Geels et al. 2017). It is widely acknowledged that governments have a critical role to play in setting policies, laws, and regulations to incentivize the necessary changes in firms' strategies and operations and in people's behavior (Hausknost and Hammond 2020; IPCC 2023; van der Ploeg and Venables 2022). Many scholars argue that the state's essential role extends further to providing much of the financing and facilitating much of the innovation required (Aronoff et al. 2019; Green and Healy 2022; Mazzucato 2013; 2022; Pettifor 2019) and to reconfiguring the welfare state so as to manage the disruption and displacement that deep decarbonization will cause—to say nothing of that caused by the impacts of climate change itself (Gough 2017; Markkanen and Anger-Kraavi 2019; Stiglitz 2020). Deep decarbonization is thus "very likely to provoke issues and choices that are of an even more political nature than the first thirty years of climate

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policy making," which was largely modest and incremental (Jordan et al. 2022, 9).

Contemporary democracies seem tragically ill-suited to achieving deep decarbonization of their economies at the speed and scale now demanded. Proponents of "ecological democracy" have long observed the misalignment between democracy's "conventional coordinates and boundaries of time, space, agency and community" and those according to which many ecological problems unfold (Eckersley 2020, 219). Worrisome trends toward populism, misinformation, and polarization in many contemporary democracies make the task of decarbonization even harder. In response to this predicament, some have proposed making climate policy less democratic; for instance, by delegating climate policy-making authority to expert bodies. But these options seem to leave us with a tragic dilemma that we call the *democracy–decarbonization dilemma* (DDD): either shirk decarbonization or shrink democracy.

The main purpose of this article is to explore one plausible escape route from this dilemma: deepening democracy. To date, scholarly and practitioner attention to the climate–democracy intersection has focused on climate assemblies (CAs). These processes have increased their participants' democratic engagement and support for climate policies. Yet, to escape the DDD, it is the attitudes and behavior of the wider public that matter. This raises a crucial but underexplored question: How can deliberative processes be leveraged to build widespread public support for both ambitious climate policies and democratic institutions?

In this reflection article, we critically explore this question, informed by a narrative review of the existing literature. Although there are a growing number of review-style articles addressing CAs or deliberative mini-publics (DMPs) more broadly (e.g., Boswell, Dean, and Smith 2023; Escobar and Elstub 2025; Goldberg 2023; Lorenzoni et al. 2025; Potts et al. 2024; van der Does and Jacquet 2023; Wells 2022), our article differs in these ways: by situating our review within the context of a larger political dilemma (the DDD), focusing on those aspects of deliberative processes that are most relevant to escaping this dilemma, and critically reflecting on such processes in light of the dilemma. Given this "critical" ambition, a narrative review—"a scholarly summary along with interpretation and critique" (Greenhalgh, Thorne, and Malterud 2018, 3)—is more appropriate than a narrower systematic review (Collins and Fauser 2005).[1]

In this article, we make three contributions. First, we diagnose dominant characterizations of the relationship between democracy and climate change in terms of the DDD, which provides a useful theoretical vantage point from which to evaluate response strategies. Second, focusing on CAs as a possible response, we synthesize a wide body of theory and evidence to distill three causal pathways by which CAs could generate increased public support for climate policy, more favorable attitudes toward democratic institutions, or both. Our analysis suggests that CAs hold potential for facilitating incremental improvements on the status quo. However, when viewed in light of the imperative to escape the DDD, they seem gravely insufficient. This imperative informs our third contribution: we suggest three directions for the future of DMPs that, when coupled with complementary democratic reform initiatives, hold out hope of triggering nonlinear changes that could be sufficient to escape the DDD.

We proceed in three stages. In the next section, we elaborate on the DDD to set the context for our ensuing critical analysis. In the third section, we review the literature on CAs and DMPs to distill the mechanisms by which they may influence the wider public. We critically reflect on these findings in the following section. To provide a robust escape route from the DDD, we propose expanding the *use*, *institutionalization*, and *orientation* of DMPs so that they become widely recognized and routinized features of deliberative systems, interacting with both governments and the wider citizenry while advancing complementary democratic reform initiatives; for instance, those relating to the media.

The Democracy-Decarbonization Dilemma

Democratic countries bear a large share of the blame for the woefully inadequate pace of decarbonization relative to agreed climate goals. A 2022 study found that although 24 democracies had achieved sustained emissions reductions, these declines were mostly due to factors unrelated to climate policy (such as the collapse of communist central planning in former Soviet states), and that most of these countries are not achieving sustained decarbonization at rates consistent with meeting the goals of the Paris Agreement (Lamb et al. 2022).[2] Even these democracies —let alone the many more with emissions that are still rising or have plateaued—will therefore need to enact and implement stringent climate policies to achieve deep decarbonization (Sharpe 2023; Vogel and Hickel 2023).

Yet democracies struggle to enact and implement stringent climate policies. Short-term electoral cycles are grossly mismatched with the time horizon in which "investments" in climate policy may yield payoffs (Di Paola and Jamieson 2018; Jacobs 2016). Responsive politicians and parties are thus only likely to enact and implement such policies when incentivized to do so by electoral considerations, including voter and interest-group mobilization (Jordan et al. 2022). But stringent climate policies impose upfront local costs, including on key production inputs and salient consumption items like petrol and electricity in return for the promise of uncertain and seemingly remote global, long-term benefits (Rabe 2018; van der Linden, Maibach, and Leiserowitz 2015). It is therefore unsurprising that such policies tend to be unpopular among majorities of voters, especially when the costs are salient (Ansolabehere and Konisky 2014; Stadelmann-Steffen and Dermont 2018).[3]

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Moreover, stringent climate policies entail concentrated costs on powerful incumbent industries, which can use their power to block or weaken proposed policies directly and/or mobilize opposition from the voting public, leveraging institutional veto points in democratic processes (Di Paola and Jamieson 2018; Mildenberger 2020; Tsebelis 2002). These challenges potentially reflect structural constraints on the modern state's capacity to undertake the deep transformations necessitated by planetary-scale sustainability crises: Hausknost (2020, 18) calls this phenomenon the "glass ceiling of transformation."

Various worrisome trends amplify these challenges. Rising inequality combined with weakened protections against private political influence has exacerbated the political-power asymmetries benefiting corporations and economic elites over citizens, strengthening the capacity for fossil fuel interests to obstruct climate policies (Darian-Smith 2023; Welton 2020, 75–78). The ongoing rise of populism, polarization, and "post-truth" politics in many democracies (Naím 2022), amid widespread voter disengagement and mistrust of political institutions (Hay 2007; Stoker 2017), has made the task of decarbonization even harder—principally by fueling group divisions and unleashing torrents of misinformation (Blühdorn 2020; Falkenberg et al. 2022; Fiorino 2022a). These trends have been supercharged by changes in the media landscape, including the decline of local news media (Hayes and Lawless 2018; Pickard 2019), the corporate capture of legacy media (McChesney 2015; Schiffrin 2021), and the rise of social media platforms (Zuboff 2018), which have been weaponized by tech billionaires and authoritarian governments toward antidemocratic ends and with environmentally destructive consequences (Aronczyk et al. 2025; Beacham, Hafner-Burton, and Schneider 2024; Lahsen 2024). When even moderately stringent climate policies have been imposed, in many instances they provoked a backlash among politically significant groups of citizens—from suburban commuters in France protesting an increased carbon tax on fuel (the *gilets jaunes*) to more recent mobilizations against mandates concerning vehicles, driving, and heat pumps (Colantone et al. 2023; Paterson, Wilshire, and Tobin 2023; Royall 2020). In the face of these democratic constraints and headwinds, it is all too tempting for elected politicians to abjure decarbonization altogether or adopt weak, tokenistic policies that fail to decarbonize at the scale and speed required (Geden 2016; Howlett 2014). We call this pattern *democracy without decarbonization.*[4]

In response to the challenges democracy poses to stringent climate policy, some have proposed insulating climate policy from democracy. The environmentalist James Lovelock has argued that decarbonization necessitates suspending democracy in favor of authoritarianism (see Hickman 2010). Some invoke China's world-leading investments in clean energy as evidence of what can be achieved without the veto points and accountability structures of democracy (Beeson 2010; Gilley 2012). A less radical suspension of democracy has attracted more mainstream support. Under this proposal, government would delegate authority over climate policy making to an independent statutory body to insulate it from electoral pressures—much as countries have done with monetary policy by delegating it to independent central banks (Brunner, Flachsland, and Marschinski 2012; Helm, Hepburn, and Mash 2003; Nemet et al. 2017).[5] But this approach, to be successful on its own terms, would need to be de facto authoritarian. Whereas central banks have proximate control of the money supply, no governmental authority has proximate control over more than a fraction of society's carbon supply.[6] Because point-sources of greenhouse gas emissions are widely dispersed across society, governments seeking to decarbonize must incentivize millions of nonstate actors to change their practices. This means that any technocratic authority with a mandate to achieve jurisdiction-wide decarbonization would need extraordinarily wide-ranging powers to direct changes across virtually the entire economy. Via one route or another, then, the main alternative to democracy without decarbonization seems to be *decarbonization without democracy.*

We refer to this apparent trade-off between democracy and (deep) decarbonization as the democracy–decarbonization dilemma.[7] The dilemma is tragic: in the long run, whichever horn of the dilemma a society grasps, by sacrificing one value it will amplify mechanisms that will undermine the favored value, threatening the latter's long-run viability too. If we continue the path of democracy without decarbonization, the varied earth-system impacts of global heating will tend to exacerbate economic inequality, economic instability, migration, violence, and crime—phenomena that often provoke repressive responses and are associated with and believed to contribute to the rise of authoritarian populist politicians who undermine democratic institutions and processes (Beacham, Hafner-Burton, and Schneider 2026; Burnell 2012; Hafner-Burton et al. 2025; Lindvall 2021; Millward-Hopkins 2022; Mittiga 2024).

Conversely, pursuing decarbonization without democracy—by instituting a powerful, independent climate authority—might yield emissions reductions for a time, but we doubt that it would succeed in achieving deep decarbonization in the long run. This is because deep decarbonization entails major distributive trade-offs that raise important questions of fairness and justice, necessitating *political* choices (Landemore 2023). Handing such extensive power to make such decisions to technocrats would likely fuel the rise of authoritarian populists, who thrive when people perceive technocratic elites to be making important decisions that affect their lives without their democratic input (Landemore 2023; White 2023).[8] Authoritarian populists already frame climate change as

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the project of an out-of-touch, cosmopolitan elite hell-bent on imposing sacrifices on ordinary people (Brown 2014; Lockwood 2018; White 2023), and they tend to be outspoken opponents of climate policy (Dickson and Hobolt 2024; Fiorino 2022b, 2022a; Schaller and Carius 2019; Vihma, Reischl, and Nonbo Andersen 2021). Empowered authoritarian populists would inevitably pressure mainstream political parties to reverse the hypothesized climate authority's mandate and weaken commitments to decarbonization (or win power themselves and do these things directly).

If the DDD is correctly diagnosed, then finding an escape route should be an urgent priority for humanity and especially for political science.

Deepening Democracy: An Escape Route?

Increasingly, scholars argue that tackling climate change will require a deepening of democracy through an increasing reliance on democratic innovations, among which CAs have attracted the bulk of the attention (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2019; Ellis 2025; Fiorino 2022b; Fischer 2017; Landemore 2023; Pickering et al. 2022; Smith 2024; Willis 2020). Could the increasing use of these processes provide an escape route from the DDD? After introducing these processes, this section reviews the theory and evidence for their influence on the attitudes and behavior of the wider public toward both decarbonization and democracy. The review is based on peer-reviewed, English-language publications identified using a keyword search of the ProQuest database,[9] snowballing from these publications, and accessing the Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies' (KNOCA) climate assemblies database.[10] The literature considered in this review includes some studies on CAs, although most of the studies reviewed are of DMPs about other topics.[11]

Background: DMPs and Climate Assemblies

Democratic innovations are processes and institutions that "reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence" (Elstub and Escobar 2019). Among such innovations, DMPs have emerged as the main deliberative-democratic practice in all policy areas and at all levels of government (Harris 2019; Jacquet and van der Does 2021; Paulis et al. 2021).[12] DMPs are processes in which broadly representative groups of lay citizens are convened to deliberate about a matter of public importance, such as a policy issue (Elstub and Escobar 2019; Goodin and Dryzek 2006). Many scholars identify two other core features of DMPs: the involvement of experts as providers of balanced information and the use of independent facilitators to moderate deliberations fairly (Brown 2006; Himmelroos and Christensen 2014; Michels and Binnema 2018; Ryan and Smith 2014; Smith 2009). According to Dahl (1989), the descriptive representativeness and informed deliberation inherent to DMPs confer legitimacy on their outputs. DMPs can also have desirable consequences, including influencing policy decisions, increasing public support for and acceptance of divisive policies, and empowering participants (Goodin and Dryzek 2006).

Citizens' assemblies are DMPs that range from 40 to 150 participants and tend to have an advisory role (Smith and Setälä 2018). They have become the most widely used DMP type for recommending climate policies to policy makers at subnational, national, and even supranational levels (Elstub et al. 2021; Stormonth-Darling et al. 2022; Wells 2022).

A climate assembly (CA) is a citizens' assembly, the remit of which is to deliberate on climate-change policies. CAs are relatively new processes that have attracted growing interest among scholars, policy makers, and segments of the climate movement (Sandover, Moseley, and Devine-Wright 2021; Wells, Howarth, and Brand-Correa 2021). The first national CA was the Ireland Citizens' Assembly held from 2016 to 2018. Since then, more than 17 national CAs have been held in Europe,[13] and many more have been organized at regional and local levels,[14] especially in the United Kingdom (Bryant and Stone 2020; Coleman et al. 2019; Wells 2022). CAs share the basic design features of DMPs: they select their participants through sortition (aiming to represent the population "descriptively"), incorporate experts to provide balanced information about climate change, and use facilitated deliberation aimed at achieving reasoned judgment about outputs (Lorenzoni et al. 2025). They are typically commissioned by governments, parliaments, or local councils, and their outputs are usually policy recommendations for the commissioning body.[15] In addition to these basic features, CAs can vary considerably in terms of size and composition of the assembly, sampling techniques, length of the assembly, remit, budget, moderation techniques, governance, communication strategies, and the specific commitment made by the commissioning body regarding whether and how the CA's outputs will be integrated into the policy process (Agger and Egmose 2025; Boswell, Dean, and Smith 2023).

CAs have been hailed as "an unprecedented and exciting development in climate governance" (Smith 2023). Scholars and practitioners have highlighted their potential to improve climate policy outcomes because they embody features that facilitate sound decision making—expert input, the cognitive diversity of participants, and consensus-oriented deliberation—and lack pressures that undermine sound decision making, such as short-term electoral pressures and corporate influence (Pfeffer 2024; Verret-Hamelin and Vandamme 2022). A considerable body of literature has demonstrated the effects of CAs on

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climate policy (e.g., Boswell, Dean, and Smith 2023; Smith 2023; Thorman and Capstick 2022; Willis, Curato, and Smith 2022).

Critics argue that CAs merely serve the status quo and are not fit for purpose because an existential threat like climate change demands much more radical solutions (Hammond 2020; Machin 2023). Ultimately, however, the more radical solutions that deep decarbonization seems to demand will need to be legitimated by wider publics (Hausknost 2020). This leads us to focus on a key limitation of CAs: they only directly involve a small number of people. Unless CAs can be scaled and leveraged to influence the attitudes and behaviors of the wider citizenry, they will do little to arrest the forces of instability and authoritarian populism that work against both democracy and decarbonization. In fact, there is a risk that they may exacerbate these forces. If CAs lead directly to more ambitious climate policies in contexts in which most citizens do not know about or understand the role of CAs in influencing and legitimizing that ambition, then we can expect heightened backlash. Even if citizens have some awareness of the role of CAs, these processes will not necessarily increase public perceptions of democratic legitimacy, because skeptical citizens "may suppose the real aim is to 'sell' a policy rather than genuinely to listen to public views on the matter" (Goodin and Dryzek 2006, 233).

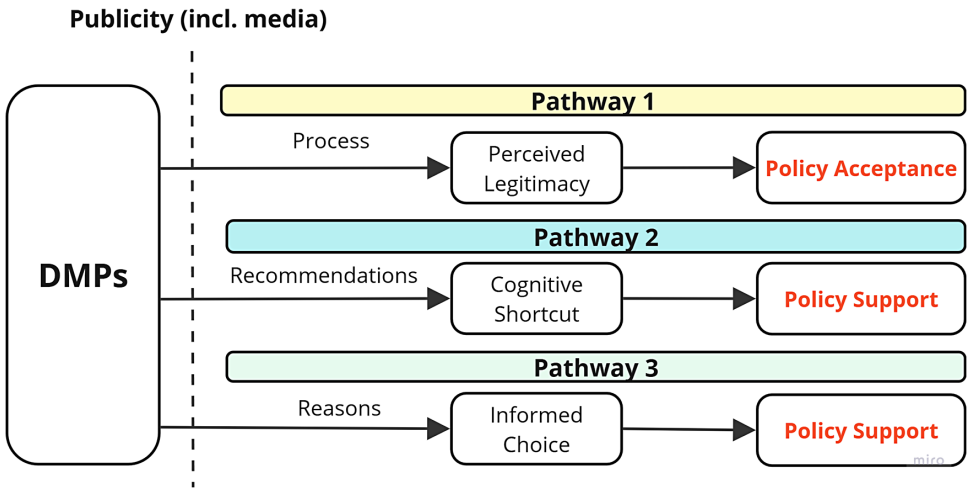
Yet some scholars have recognized the potential for CAs to generate desirable effects on wider publics. For instance, Smith (2023) touts their potential to shift public acceptance of climate policy, and Drews and van den Bergh (2016, 868), reviewing the literature on public attitudes toward climate policies, concluded that "forms of public participation and deliberation … may strengthen policy support." However, the mechanisms have not always been clearly articulated, nor has evidence concerning these potential effects been well documented (Goldberg 2023; Itten and Mouter 2022; Smith 2023; Stasiak et al. 2021; van der Does and Jacquet 2023). CAs in Luxembourg (Paulis et al. 2025), Zurich (Kübler et al. 2025), the United Kingdom and Scotland (Elstub et al. 2025) and, partially, France (discussed later) provide welcome exceptions to this trend. Given the overall limited theory and evidence for CAs' influence on wider public attitudes and behavior, we turn next to the more mature literature on DMPs more generally.

The Impacts of DMPs on the Wider Public: Theory

The literature discloses three main, broad pathways by which DMPs could influence the attitudes and behaviors of the nonparticipating public, visualized in figure 1.

First, nonparticipants could become aware of the DMP's procedures, thereby increasing their perceptions of the legitimacy of or their trust in policy-making institutions (Boulianne 2018) and potentially resulting in their greater acceptance of the policy outcome, regardless of whether it aligns with their preferred outcome (Gangl 2003; Pow, van Dijk, and Marien 2020; Sorial 2021; Tyler 1994).[16] There are two posited causal steps in this pathway: from awareness of DMPs' procedures to perceived legitimacy and from perceived legitimacy to acceptance of policy outcomes. Thus, via this pathway, DMPs could yield benefits for both democracy and decarbonization: political trust and public perceptions of the legitimacy of policy making processes are

Figure 1
Visual representation of the three main causal pathways linking DMPs with policy acceptance and policy support among the wider public



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important social conditions for democracy, whereas increased acceptance of climate policy could reduce the pool of citizens willing to actively mobilize against climate policies they disagree with (Nakatani 2023; Porumbescu and Grimmelikhuijsen 2018).

Second, nonparticipants could become aware of the DMP's recommendations and treat them as a heuristic for desirable policy when formulating or revising their own policy preferences, resulting in wider support for (or increased intensity of support for and greater prioritization of) the recommended policies. As one group of scholars puts it, "knowledge that a group of randomly selected ordinary citizens came up with the proposal after extensive work independently of government and political parties could be enough [for non-participants] to support the recommendation" (Fournier et al. 2011, 132–32).

Third, the provision of reasons by a DMP could inform nonparticipants' knowledge about a policy issue such that they are more likely to vote in accordance with their values (Suiter and Reidy 2020). Given the amount of misinformation that typically hampers climate policy debates, we should expect that any such effect would tend to promote support for climate policies.

All pathways depend on the public becoming aware of the DMP and its procedures, recommendations, or reasons (where provided). Certain mediating actors and processes, such as the news media, influence the extent of such publicity and its content and framing (Fleuss and Suiter 2025; McGovern and Thorne 2021).

We turn now to consider the empirical evidence for the three pathways and then discuss the evidence concerning publicity.

The Impacts of DMPs on the Wider Public: Empirical Evidence

Pathway 1: Impacts of the DMP Process on Perceived Legitimacy and Outcome Acceptance As noted, there are two causal steps in the first theoretical pathway. Some empirical studies are concerned with the first link only (from awareness of DMP processes to perceived legitimacy) and some with the second link only (from perceived legitimacy to outcome acceptance). We discuss each in turn.

Before doing so, we note that some scholars have found a link between DMPs and outcome acceptance that is mediated by a feeling of similarity between the general public and members of the mini-public: the "like me" effect (Pow, van Dijk, and Marien 2020). The effect has been documented even in the case of divisive and salient issues (Arnesen and Peters 2018; Pow, van Dijk, and Marien 2020). For instance, Pow, van Dijk and Marien's (2020) survey on a citizens' assembly on the constitutional future of Northern Ireland revealed that respondents were willing to accept the outcome of the assembly, even if it went against their beliefs, because they identified with the ordinary citizens who constituted the DMP.

As for the link between awareness of DMP processes and perceived legitimacy, several experiments have shown a positive effect of DMPs' procedures on nonparticipants' perceptions of the legitimacy of the specific policy-making process or of democratic institutions more generally (Esaiasson, Gilljam, and Persson 2012; Germann 2025; Herian et al. 2012; Jacobs and Kaufmann 2021; Jäske 2019; Webb 2013; Werner and Marien 2022). These findings also apply in non-Western democracies (Grillos 2022; Kramon 2025). Similarly, a survey-experiment conducted in Canada by Boulianne (2018) found that trust in the municipal government to make good decisions about climate change was higher among those made aware of the municipal government-sponsored DMP on that issue.[17]

Other studies identify the following factors that mediate the link between nonparticipants' awareness of a DMP and their perceptions of the legitimacy of the associated policy-making process (see also table 1):

- descriptive representativeness of the DMP (Germann 2025)
- political genesis of and context (e.g., partisan conflict) surrounding the DMP (Kevins and Robison 2025)[18]
- whether and how a DMP's recommendations are incorporated into the formal policy-making process (Bryant and Stone 2020; Germann, Marien, and Muradova 2024; Giraudet et al. 2022; Goovaerts, De Fine Licht, and Marien 2025; Iusmen and Boswell 2017; Kuntze and Fesenfeld 2021; van Dijk and Lefevre 2023)
- group identities/divisions: experimental results suggest that, in divided societies, minorities tend to assign higher legitimacy to DMPs than majorities (Pow 2023), and ideological and affective forms of polarization reduce people's perceptions of DMPs' legitimacy (van Dijk, Turkenburg, and Pow 2023)
- regional and national structural economic inequalities and national democratic cultures (Kramon 2025; Paulis, Sipma, and Talukder 2025)

A range of subjective beliefs, attitudes, experiences and resources of respondents also seem to matter. Multiple studies used standard or conjoint surveys to determine that the following factors are associated with higher support among citizens for DMPs in general: their familiarity/experience with DMPs (Goldberg, Lindell, and Bächtiger 2025); their political engagement or perceived political self-efficacy (Bedock and Pilet 2023; Paulis, Sipma, and Talukder 2025; Walsh and Elkink 2021; Webb 2013; cf. Kübler et al. 2025; Pilet et al. 2023); their trust in or perceived competence of fellow citizens (Bedock and Pilet

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2021; Goldberg, Lindell, and Bächtiger 2025; Kübler et al. 2025); and their mistrust of or dissatisfaction with status quo political institutions/politicians/parties (Bedock and Pilet 2021, 2023; Goldberg, Lindell, and Bächtiger 2025; Pilet et al. 2024; Pilet et al. 2023; Walsh and Elkink 2021; cf. Kübler et al. 2025; van Dijk, Werner, and Marien 2024). Although these studies are not specifically concerned with respondents' perceptions of the legitimacy of political processes that include DMPs, it seems plausible that these factors might also be associated with legitimacy perceptions.

While not directly contradicting these findings, other studies suggest that DMPs—or at least DMPs alone—may not be the most effective means of enhancing public perceptions of the legitimacy of policy-making institutions. In an influential study, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) found that ordinary US citizens neither seek involvement in politics nor believe their fellow citizens are prepared to do so; they simply want a competent and public-serving government and generally are only willing to personally engage as a last resort to stop greedy and/or incompetent politicians from making bad decisions (and in that scenario, direct voting is preferred to deliberative democracy). Experimental studies in other countries have found that direct citizen engagement of one form or another is seen as more legitimate than deliberative processes (Esaiasson, Gilljam, and Persson 2012; Persson, Esaiasson, and Gilljam 2013) and that mini-publics are perceived as more legitimate by nonparticipants when coupled with forms of wider public decision making, such as referendums (Gastil et al. 2016; Germann, Marien, and Muradova 2024) or citizen forums (Itten and Mouter 2022). Survey studies reveal mixed results in different countries, with majority support for citizens' assemblies in certain contexts in Northern Ireland (Garry et al. 2022) yet a strong rejection of DMPs as a legitimating tool in Germany, even when combined with referendums (Kersting 2016; 2021). In Switzerland, where there is already substantial direct-democratic decision making, a population survey featuring a conjoint experiment following three CAs found that citizens generally have positive views of DMPs but do not want them to replace existing direct-democratic institutions (Kübler et al. 2025).

Other surveys and experimental studies point to specific concerns among wider publics about the competence of randomly selected citizens as compared with other potential decision makers. Scholars have found that self-selection (Jacobs and Kaufmann 2021; Kersting 2021; Kramon 2025; Kübler et al. 2025), appointment (Arnesen and Peters 2018), or a combination of random selection and experts' appointment (Kuntze and Fesenfeld 2021) are seen as either more or equally legitimate when compared with random selection of participants alone (Pow 2023). Consistent with these findings, Rojon, Rijken, and Klandermans (2019) found that a majority of US citizens are concerned that the lack of domain expertise of randomly selected people might hinder their capacity to make good decisions. Furthermore, a large body of evidence gathered through experiments (Goldberg 2021; Goldberg and Bächtiger 2023), qualitative interviews (Jacquet 2019), and public surveys (Bedock and Pilet 2023; Christensen 2020; Renwick, Lauderdale, and Russell 2023; Rojon, Rijken, and Klandermans 2019) reveals that public concerns about ordinary citizens' competence, legitimacy, or both also explain why advisory DMPs are largely preferred to DMPs whose recommendations are authoritative/binding.

Turning to the posited link between perceived legitimacy and policy acceptance, there is again considerable evidence supporting this theory. An experiment by Liu et al. (2020) found that, because of perceived procedural fairness, people are more inclined to accept an energy project in their area if they are allowed to define key aspects of it, such as its exact location. A survey study of Norwegian citizens confirmed that procedural fairness is a key factor in maintaining or increasing policy acceptance (de Blok and Kumlin 2022). A large comparative survey ($N = 5{,}000$) run in eight metropolitan areas across four European countries (France, Germany, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom) demonstrated that participatory decision-making processes that are perceived to be inclusive and fair increase policy acceptance independently of the policy outcome. This effect remains significant even for decisions affecting policy areas in which citizens are usually most concerned about policy outcomes and less concerned about policy-making processes, such as public transport (Strebel, Kübler, and Marcinkowski 2019). A survey experiment in Kenya determined that deliberative processes are more effective than majority rule in increasing perceived procedural fairness and policy acceptance (Grillos 2022). This study, one of the very few conducted in Africa, is particularly important because it confirmed this effect of DMPs outside Western liberal democracies.

Despite the growing body of evidence, we are far from reaching a conclusive understanding of the causal link between perceived legitimacy and policy acceptance. For example, a vignette experiment on COVID-19 restrictions conducted by Muradova and Suiter (2022) found that DMPs only slightly outperform politicians' debates and public consultation in stimulating compliance and even decrease the likelihood of compliance among individuals with low political trust in randomly selected citizens.

Moreover, whether a person perceives a policy-making process to be legitimate appears to have a lesser impact on their acceptance of the policy than whether the outcome of the process aligns with the person's preexisting views (known as "outcome favorability"). Scholars have long debated the respective weights of perceived procedural

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fairness and outcome favorability in determining the acceptance of policy-making outcomes (Tyler 1994). Building on previous work (Esaiasson, Gilljam, and Persson 2017), Esaiasson et al. (2019) conducted a vignette field experiment that pointed even more strongly than the first paper to the overwhelming importance of outcome favorability in determining people's acceptance of policies. Arnesen's (2017) vignette survey experiments yielded a similar result: outcome favorability mattered more for decision acceptance than whether the respondent had a say in the decision. In recent years, other studies have supported outcome favorability as the stronger determinant of policy acceptance (Goldberg and Bächtiger 2023; Marien and Kern 2018; Pilet et al. 2023). Importantly for our purposes, this was also confirmed in a study of the public's acceptance of a CA's recommendations in Luxembourg, with the nuance that respondents' perceptions of its procedural fairness increased acceptance among the policy's "losers" (Paulis et al. 2025).

Still, even if outcome favorability is more important than the perceived legitimacy of the policy process, that does not mean the latter is irrelevant to policy attitudes. Werner and Marien (2022) argue that what matters is that democratic innovations like DMPs stimulate legitimacy perceptions in both "winners" and "losers" of the policy decision, as shown by their survey experiment in the Netherlands and in Sweden: increasing legitimacy perceptions thus facilitates losers' consent more than the status quo of policy making (i.e., representative democracy).

To summarize, the core procedural features of DMPs do seem to increase nonparticipants' perceptions of the legitimacy of policy-making processes (even if other means increase perceived legitimacy to a greater extent), and perceived legitimacy does seem to increase policy acceptance (even if outcome favorability increases acceptance to a greater extent).

Pathway 2: Impacts of DMP Recommendations on Policy Support There is some empirical evidence supporting the theory behind the second pathway (albeit considerably less than for the first), according to which citizens alter or reinforce their policy preferences based on awareness of the outcomes of a DMP, at least under certain conditions. Boulianne (2018), in one of two survey experiments, finds that respondents who were made aware of a DMP and its recommendations were more likely to support those recommendations, although the findings were only statistically significant for three of the six recommendations (of these, the effect sizes ranged between five to seven percentage points). The effects in the second experiment were not statistically significant. The different results of the two experiments, she speculates, are likely explained by the much greater length of time the DMPs spent deliberating in the first study (six Saturdays) compared with the second (2 hours). Plausibly, the longer time that DMP participants spend learning about the policy issue and deliberating about it, the more the public sees them as experts worthy of deferring to. Ingham and Levin's two US survey experiments—one at a national level (2018a) and the other at a state level (2018b) find additional evidence for this second pathway linking knowledge of a DMP's outcome to increased support for that outcome. However, this result holds among only a subset of the samples: those who were either uninformed or not aligned with a party.

To the extent that at least some groups of nonparticipating citizens formulate or shift their policy preferences in line with DMP recommendations, can doing so lead nonparticipants to change their behavior, so that they actively support policies based on the recommendation? The only evidence we uncovered on this point concerned the potential for Citizens Initiative Reviews (CIRs) to alter voting intentions on ballot initiatives (see the later discussion). The effect of DMPs on *participants'* political behavior varies, with not all those who come to support a policy then becoming active supporters (Boulianne, Loptson, and Kahane 2018; Gangl 2003). The effect of a DMP-induced policy preference shift in nonparticipants seems likely to be even more attenuated, given they would have far less exposure to the relevant information and are not involved in the deliberative process. We take up this issue in the discussion section.

Pathway 3: Impacts of DMP reasons (Where Provided) on Policy Support Evidence for this pathway is largely limited to CIRs or similar processes, which aim to inform voters about the case for or against a specific referendum or ballot initiative, rather than to provide recommendations on a broad topic. Experimental studies relating to such processes have shown that exposing nonparticipants to reasons increases their policy knowledge (Ársælsson and Gastil 2025; Christensen et al. 2022; Gastil et al. 2018; 2023; Már and Gastil 2020; 2023; Suiter et al. 2020)[19] and influences policy/voting preferences (Christensen et al. 2022; Gastil et al. 2018; Már and Gastil 2023). Christensen et al. (2022) find that improved knowledge was the mechanism by which exposure to reasons led nonparticipants to update their policy/voting preferences. Various studies have found that exposure to such reasons affects other democratic attitudes and capabilities (Christensen et al. 2022; Knobloch, Barthel, and Gastil 2020; Suiter et al. 2020).

By contrast, other kinds of DMPs, including CAs, deliberate on broad topics that produce a range of positions on which participants vote, rather than a mutually exclusive "yes or no" choice; therefore, they tend not to publish the underlying reasons for their policy recommendations. However, we see potential for reason-giving to play a greater role in future CAs—a point to which we return in the discussion section.

Findings from the studies discussed so far are summarized in table 1 and mapped to the three stylized pathways.

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Table 1
Summary of Empirical Findings, by Pathway

Finding	Relevant Papers
Pathway 1: *Impacts of DMP process on perceived legitimacy and policy acceptance*	
"Like me" effect: the identification of nonparticipants with DMP participants increases their inclination to accept policies.	Arnesen and Peters 2018; Pow, van Dijk, and Marien 2020
When nonparticipants are aware of policy-making processes that include DMPs, their perception of the democratic legitimacy of policy-making processes and democratic institutions increases.	Boulianne 2018; Esaiasson, Gilljam, and Persson 2012; Germann 2025; Herian et al. 2012; Jacobs and Kaufmann 2021; Jäske 2019; Kramon 2025; Webb 2013; Werner and Marien 2022
The perception of DMPs' legitimacy among nonparticipants tends to correlate with ideological, identitarian, and religious cleavages.	van Dijk, Turkenburg, and Pow 2023; Kevins and Robison 2025; Pow 2023
When a government adopts a DMP's policy recommendations or publishes the reasons behind policy decisions that alter or exclude the DMP's recommendations, this increases the perceived legitimacy of policymaking processes among non-participants.	Bryant and Stone 2020; van Dijk and Lefevre 2023; Giraudet et al. 2022; Germann, Marien, and Muradova 2024; Goovaerts, De Fine Licht, and Marien 2025; Iusmen and Boswell 2017; Kuntze and Fesenfeld 2021
Having prior familiarity with DMPs increases nonparticipants' perceived legitimacy of policy-making processes that include DMPs.	Bedock and Pilet 2023; Christensen 2020; Goldberg, Lindell, and Bächtiger 2025; Kübler et al. 2025; Pilet et al. 2023; Walsh and Elkink 2021; Webb 2013
Coupling DMPs with referenda or participatory processes, or using them as advisory bodies to elect representatives, increases their perceived legitimacy among non-participants.	Bedock and Pilet 2023; Gastil et al. 2016; Garry et al. 2022; Germann, Marien, and Muradova 2024; Goldberg 2021; Goldberg and Bächtiger 2023; Itten and Mouter 2022; Jacquet 2019; Kübler et al. 2025; Persson, Esaiasson, and Gilljam 2013; Renwick, Lauderdale, and Russell 2023; Rojon, Rijken, and Klandermans 2019
Perceiving policy-making processes as legitimate increases policy acceptance among nonparticipants.	De Blok and Kumlin 2022; Grillos 2022; Liu et al. 2020; Strebel, Kübler, and Marcinkowski 2019; Paulis et al. 2025; Werner and Marien 2022
Pathway 2: *Impacts of DMP recommendations on policy support*	
Nonparticipants use DMP outcomes as a cognitive shortcut for formulating or shifting policy preferences.	Boulianne 2018; Fournier 2011; Ingham and Levin 2018a, 2018b; Warren and Gastil 2015
Pathway 3: *Impacts of DMP reasons (where provided) on policy support*	
Awareness of DMPs' reasons increases nonparticipants' policy knowledge or reasoning.	Ársælsson and Gastil 2025; Christensen et al. 2022; Gastil et al. 2018; 2023; Már and Gastil 2020, 2023; Suiter and Reidy 2020; Suiter et al. 2020
Awareness of DMPs' reasons influences nonparticipants' policy/voting preferences.	Christensen et al. 2022; Gastil et al. 2018; Már and Gastil 2020

The Importance of Publicity All pathways linking DMPs to effects on nonparticipants depend on them becoming aware of the DMP's procedural features, recommendations, or reasons (Boulianne 2018; Fournier et al. 2011; Jäske 2019; Pow 2023). The publicity the DMP receives is therefore a crucial variable mediating the DMP and its effects on nonparticipants.

Empirically, the essential role of publicity has been observed in multiple studies. Fournier et al. (2011, 134), who studied citizens' assemblies in British Columbia (2004) and Ontario (2006–07)—which led to unsuccessful referendums to change the electoral system—observed that the public's low awareness of the mini-publics "severely hampered the referendums' prospects." They concluded that "awareness of the citizen assembly led to votes for change: those who recognized that common people were behind this project tended to endorse it" (153). Corroborating these findings experimentally, Goldberg (2021, 178), analyzing public perceptions of mini-publics in Germany, found that "citizens who are aware of [Deliberative Citizens Forums] tend to have more positive attitudes toward them."[20]

The media play an important role in determining whether and how information about a DMP is publicized. A survey experiment in Finland showed that learning about a DMP and its recommendations had varied effects depending on whether respondents read its original statement or a newspaper article about it; this finding highlights that the media can distort DMP information in ways that undermine the operation of the identified pathways for public influence (Leino, Jäske, and Setälä 2025).

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Other studies illuminate the important role that media and political messaging can play in promoting acceptance of a policy among those who do not support it (our pathway 1). After conducting three survey experiments with Norwegian and Swedish citizens, Esaiasson et al. (2023) discovered that if elite opinion leaders in politics or media publicly accept an unfavorable policy outcome (regardless of the policy-making process), their followers will be more inclined to take the same view. Tilley and Hobolt (2024, 1180) reached a similar conclusion after conducting an experiment on the emotional reactions of losers of the Brexit referendum and of the 2019 General Election, finding that "politicians may be able to influence voters' faith in democracy by mobilising emotional responses."

The two largest climate assemblies held to date provide valuable contrasting cases that reinforce the importance of publicity in mediating DMPs' public influence. The French government paid considerable attention to communication and outreach for the French Citizens Convention on the Climate (CCC). The 150 participants were encouraged by the organizers to interact with the media, which stimulated extensive public debate (Cherry et al. 2021; Mellier and Wilson 2020; Rozencwajg, Gaborit, and Jeanpierre 2025; Smith 2023; 2024; Wells 2022). The CCC's capacity to generate public debate and the overall positive reaction of the public to the policy recommendations gave a clear political mandate to the parliament to act decisively on climate change (Geib 2021; Wells 2022).

Additionally, the CCC was publicly commissioned by President Macron himself in the aftermath of public unrest (Smith 2024). Because of Macron's commitment, the CCC had more policy impact and generated more public debate than most CAs. One week after the start of the assembly, 70% of the population was aware of its existence. A survey conducted after the Convention showed that public opinion was broadly aligned with its recommended policies (Cherry et al. 2021; Mellier and Wilson 2020).[21] The association between the heightened public debate and the survey results provides suggestive evidence of the potential for well-publicized CAs to influence public support for climate policies, although causation cannot be inferred (survey respondents' attitudes may have pre-dated the CCC), nor can the precise causal pathway.[22]

In comparison, the UK Climate Assembly (UKCA) failed to engage most of the public, despite the involvement of celebrity naturalist Sir David Attenborough and favorable media coverage at the beginning of the assembly and around the launch of the resulting report (Carrick and Elstub 2023). At the start of, during, and after the UKCA, up to 40% of the population knew nothing about it, and the rest knew very little (Carrick and Elstub 2023; Elstub et al. 2025). This was thought to be due to the limited budget for publicity, the lack of an effective communication strategy, and the failure to engage younger generations via social media (Elstub et al. 2025). Moreover, DMPs are not seen as "debate-starters" in the United Kingdom, and a genuine participatory and deliberative culture is not widespread among its political institutions and citizenry (Davidson and Elstub 2014). Furthermore, competition for media attention with other major events such as Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic (Stasiak et al. 2021) and the absence of a strong endorsement from a popular political leader likely limited the UKCA's perceived political relevance, as reflected in its low coverage on TV and radio (Carrick and Elstub 2023).

Another means by which information about a CA can be publicized is via its participants who, with newfound motivation and capabilities resulting from the deliberative process, seek direct involvement in the public sphere. A longitudinal study found that CA participants become more likely to take an active role in politics (Knobloch, Barthel, and Gastil 2020). For example, some of the participants in the French CCC subsequently ran for political office or became high-profile climate activists (Vernaillen 2020), and the French and Austrian national CAs evolved into permanent climate-change advocacy organizations after the ad hoc initial mandate expired: "Les 150" in France and the "Association of the First Austrian Citizens' Climate Assembly" (Buzogány et al. 2022; Rozencwajg, Gaborit, and Jeanpierre 2025; Wells 2022). However, there have not yet been any studies of the impact of these fledgling organizations on wider public attitudes toward climate policy and democracy.

Participants can also influence others within their own social networks. A deliberative field experiment in the United States found that "attending the deliberative session dramatically increased interpersonal political discussion on topics relating to the event" among participants' social networks (Lazer et al. 2015, 552). Similarly, in the climate domain, interviews with participants of a local CA in Devon in the United Kingdom found that participants "had spoken about the topics, or the assembly itself, to family, friends, or others outside of the assembly" (Moseley, Sandover, and Devine-Wright 2025, 9).

Discussion: How Can DMPs Be Leveraged to Escape the DDD?

The recent wave of CAs has provided an invaluable laboratory for real-world experimentation with climate-specific deliberative processes, both testing and adding to the much larger body of theory and evidence concerning DMPs that has emerged over recent decades. This experimentation has yielded useful lessons about how to optimize CAs' design. Common recommendations are that CAs should be government commissioned[23]; advisory in function but with a transparent, upfront commitment from the commissioning government to take account of

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the recommendations and provide reasons in case they are not adopted; and well publicized, so that the wider public is made aware of the CA's existence, purpose, structure/process, and outcomes (Bryant and Stone 2020; King and Wilson 2023; Kuntze and Fesenfeld 2021; Pfeffer and Newig 2025; Sandover, Moseley, and Devine-Wright 2021; Stack and Griessler 2022).

Our review has focused on the extent to which CAs could be expected to increase the wider public's acceptance of and support for climate policies, as well as their perceptions of the legitimacy of democratic processes. On this score, the measures usually proposed for optimizing CAs are all sensible, as far as they go. Our evidence review suggests that such measures together could achieve appreciable, albeit incremental, increases in climate policy acceptance and support (somewhat increasing the likelihood of decarbonization) and in public perceptions of policy-making institutions' legitimacy (somewhat reducing authoritarian populists' appeal). In particular, the frequent recommendation for a well-resourced and systematic communication strategy (Elstub et al. 2025; Moseley, Sandover, and Devine-Wright 2025; Stasiak et al. 2021; Thorman and Capstick 2022) seems essential if the identified public effects are to be realized. However, our review also suggests that these recommended measures alone are unlikely to be sufficient to stimulate the widespread shifts in knowledge, capacities, attitudes and behavior necessary to achieve mass public support for deep decarbonization and to defend democratic institutions against the gathering forces of authoritarian populism, polarization, and disinformation.

In light of these limitations, we suggest that, to escape the DDD, DMPs need to be expanded in three ways—their use, their institutionalization, and their orientation—and complemented by a range of other measures designed to deepen democracy (although we focus on the DMP-related recommendations here). Our proposals are informed by and consistent with a strand of deliberative democratic theory focused on "deliberative systems" (Curato and Böker 2016; Elstub and Escobar 2025; Mansbridge et al. 2012; Niemeyer 2014; Ravazzi 2023). Only by attending to the interactions between DMPs and elements of the wider sociopolitical systems in which political expression occurs will it be possible to trigger reinforcing feedback effects needed to escape the DDD.

First, the use of deliberative democratic mechanisms—including but not limited to DMPs—for policy making should be expanded. The expanded adoption of deliberative processes will help routinize their use within government and increase citizens' direct and indirect exposure to a means of doing democracy that, for most people, will be foreign. The evidence we reviewed suggests that as citizens become more familiar with DMPs and accustomed to seeing their fellow citizens participating in policy-making processes, they will be more inclined to perceive deliberative-democratic processes as legitimate. But there is also a need for governments to clarify exactly what the functions of DMPs are and how their outputs will be considered and used (Fernandez-Martínez, Font, and Smith 2024). In the climate domain, citizens are arguably better equipped to deliberate over how to decarbonize than the more abstract and complex questions of whether and how much to do so (Welton 2020). Consequently, while there is still value in broad-based, national-level CAs focused on national policies and measures, there is also merit in proposals for more localized and sector-specific CAs that address narrower topics, such as the terms on which renewable energy infrastructure is sited in a particular community, or the appropriate technologies and policies for decarbonizing household heating (Ainscough and Willis 2024). Given that populist opponents of climate policy often target tangible, local changes, such as wind farms, electric vehicles, heat pumps, and low-traffic neighborhoods (Paterson, Wilshire, and Tobin 2023), building consensus among local citizens on these kinds of changes should build support for decarbonization while undercutting populists' appeal (see also Jacobs 2024).

Second, the expanded use of DMPs could also help prepare the ground for their institutionalization, whether they are climate-specific or general in focus. This would boost DMPs' autonomy and status and hence their potential impact (Elstub and Escobar 2025). Already, at least two subnational governments (Brussels and Milan) have adopted permanent CAs as part of their policy processes (Abbas and Smith 2024), and at least two others (Paris and the Ostbelgien region of Belgium) have adopted citizens' bodies with a more general mandate (Bedock and Pilet 2023; Elstub et al. 2021; Rovers and Dejaeghere 2022). Another permanent assembly was launched in 2022 in Rouen (Smith 2024), and in 2026 the Catalan government approved legislation establishing a "universal right to participate" in public policy making and creating a comprehensive legal framework for citizen participation in the region.[24]

There are political obstacles to the greater institutionalization of DMPs, insofar as it would require elected politicians to relinquish power and would diminish the capacity of powerful interest groups to influence political outcomes (Ejsing, Veng, and Papazu 2023; Koskimaa and Rapeli 2020; Niessen 2019).[25] However, design choices can help diminish opposition and build popular support for this process. In particular, we suggest that institutionalization efforts should aim to establish advisory DMPs that play an "epistemic" role within the wider deliberative system. In effect, they would become similar to select committees, which aim to inculcate norms and processes of "iterated deliberation" and involve "rounds of revisions of policy proposals based on deliberative exchanges" (Setälä 2017, 857). Such proposals are more likely to garner popular support (given the clear findings about citizens' concerns with random selection and clear

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preferences for advisory DMPs) and to be less opposed by existing politicians and powerful interest groups (because less power is being relinquished).[26] As more and more citizens become familiar with DMPs, they are likely to become more supportive of their expanded use (Goldberg 2023). They may even come to prefer DMPs with legislative authority (at least of a shared kind, alongside an elected chamber)—and may do so in numbers sufficient to overcome the earlier mentioned political obstacles—which would significantly strengthen the prospects for decarbonization (Verret-Hamelin and Vandamme 2022).[27]

As well as informing policy making, more frequently used and institutionalized assemblies will provide more opportunities for citizens to participate in and become familiar with deliberative institutions generally and climate-related deliberation specifically (Abbas and Smith 2024, 4). Still, the limited scalability of DMPs constrains the number of people who can participate in them. Moreover, there is a risk that more frequently used and institutionalized DMPs become less likely to attract media attention and more vulnerable to co-optation by powerful interests (Elstub and Escobar 2025). Ultimately, building civic and climate capacities among the public and improving the quality of government require expanding the orientation of DMPs to engaging the wider public (Elstub and Escobar 2025; Rozencwajg, Gaborit, and Jeanpierre 2025).

Proponents of deliberative democracy have debated the most appropriate function for DMPs: Should they be aimed primarily at directly influencing the policy-making process or at influencing their fellow citizens and thus indirectly influencing the policy-making process (Curato and Böker 2016; Lafont 2019; Ravazzi 2023)? Certainly, much of the literature on CAs has focused on their potential to improve climate policy making directly. In our view, escaping the DDD necessitates that DMPs have a dual function: not only informing policy making but also improving the epistemic quality of and facilitating wider participation in public debates over complex policy issues such as climate change before, during, and after the DMP (Ejsing, Veng, and Papazu 2023; Elstub and Escobar 2025; Smith 2024). Regardless of whether DMPs' policy-facing role is advisory/"epistemic" or not, we do not see any necessary conflict with DMPs having a public-facing "epistemic" function too. However, we argue that this expanded, public-oriented function would necessitate three types of changes to the way DMPs, especially CAs, usually operate.

First, it requires a greater focus on reason-giving. As noted, DMPs (other than CIRs) currently tend to publish only their recommendations and not the reasons for them. Consensus on both recommendations and the underlying reasons for them would be improbable in a DMP (List 2011), but it is plausible that assembly members could come to a meta-consensus on the strongest reasons for (and, potentially also, against) their recommendations (cf. Dryzek and Niemeyer 2006), summaries of which could be published alongside them. This process could facilitate nonparticipants' deliberation about climate policy—"internally" and with others (Goodin and Niemeyer 2003)—and hence develop their underlying democratic capabilities in line with the third pathway (van der Does and Jacquet 2023). This would also help mitigate a risk associated with the second pathway: that citizens blindly follow the policy recommendations of the DMP (Lafont 2019). Providing summaries of reasons raises challenges, including requiring more time for deliberation; making outputs more complex, which could attenuate other DMP effects (Suiter et al. 2020); or complicating publicity efforts, so a balance needs to be struck. If more localized and sector-specific CAs become more common—as we recommended earlier—the narrower range of topics requiring recommendation could create more space for reason summaries. This topic merits further experimentation and research.

Second, DMPs' public-oriented function requires means of empowering participants to transmit DMPs' outputs to the public and mobilize public engagement in both democracy and decarbonization, potentially reinforcing all three pathways. Empowering participants requires both recognizing participants' unique position, motivations and capacities and making concerted efforts to facilitate their impact beyond the assembly (Ejsing, Veng, and Papazu 2023). For instance, DMP participants can be provided with professional media training (as occurred in France) and supported to engage with legacy and social media, which has been observed to increase public awareness and understanding of CAs (Rovers and Dejaeghere 2022). However, a more public-facing role does not come without challenges, as it compromises participants' anonymity and independence and, consequently, may reduce their willingness to participate or alter their opinions (Boswell, Dean, and Smith 2023; Rozencwajg, Gaborit, and Jeanpierre 2025). In polarized environments, media exposure can leave participants open to public abuse and even raise safety concerns (Smith 2024). But this public-facing role need not be taken up by all participants to be effective. As we noted earlier, many CA participants have been transformed by their experience and have become active in the media and politics after their CA concluded.[28] Moreover, participants could also be trained in how to facilitate small-group "conversations" about climate change in their social circles (Klein Salamon 2023)—a realistic means of "reaching out to broader publics and setting deliberative rather than confrontational terms of public discourse" (Curato and Böker 2016, 178). Public discourse relating to this outreach is also likely to be less polarized in more localized DMPs, which may escape the national media spotlight.

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Third, there should be channels by which the wider public can engage with DMPs/CAs, which could strengthen the mechanisms in the first pathway. Digital tools have a crucial role to play in creating such channels, because they enable large numbers of citizens to participate meaningfully at various stages of deliberative and policy-making processes (Fischli and Muldoon 2024; Fishkin et al. 2024; Gastil 2023). The wider public could help frame the CA's agenda (Elstub and Escobar 2025; Mellier and Wilson 2020); for instance, via digital tools that allow people to propose and upvote topics. The public could also contribute proposals and comments (Elstub and Escobar 2025; Muradova and Suiter 2022; Suiter, Saude, and McNally 2025), as occurred in the Irish Citizens' Assembly and in the French CCC. In Ireland, the public reacted well to this opportunity and sent thousands of written contributions to the assembly.[29] Another option is to allow the public to vote and comment on the DMP's final recommendations/proposals (Elstub and Escobar 2025), as was done successfully to build support for climate policies in the Dutch Municipality of Súdwest-Fryslân (Itten and Mouter 2022).

Using digital tools, however, creates risks and challenges of its own. It is crucial that citizens feel as though their inputs are listened to, meaning that careful thought must be given to how digital tools are designed and integrated into the relevant process (Fischli and Muldoon 2024). This aspect was not well thought through in the French CCC, for instance: even though approximately 3,400 public contributions were received, "this material was left largely untapped" (Giraudet et al. 2022). Such failures create their own risks of causing disillusionment among citizens (Suiter et al. 2020; van Dijk and Lefevre 2023). There are, moreover, limitations to the scope and quality of engagement that can be expected from the use of digital tools as means of scaling engagement with deliberative processes (Mikhaylovskaya 2024). For instance, digital engagement may not be conducive to having transformative experiences of the kind that have been found to occur in face-to-face DMPs (Fishkin et al. 2024), and because of the "digital divide," such tools risk excluding certain groups from engagement opportunities (Mikhaylovskaya 2024). Still, experiments with digital engagement are growing and yielding valuable lessons about how these issues can be addressed (Fischli and Muldoon 2024). Many scholars also see promise in artificial intelligence to improve online group deliberation at scale (Gastil 2023; Gastil and Broghammer 2021; Mikhaylovskaya 2024; Tessler et al. 2024).

The expanded orientation of DMPs that we propose could be expected to expose DMPs' proposals and arguments to scrutiny by civil society groups and social movements. When addressing climate change, this would mitigate another risk that some scholars have identified with (government-established) CAs, namely, that they promote incremental solutions, rather than the more radical socioeconomic transformations that an effective response to climate change demands (Ainscough and Willis 2024; Blühdorn 2013; Elstub and Escobar 2025; Hammond 2020; Knops and Vrydagh 2023; Rozencwajg, Gaborit, and Jeanpierre 2025; Willis, Curato, and Smith 2022).

Overall, the expansion, institutionalization, and reorientation of DMPs and CAs that we propose seem likely to significantly increase the prospects for escaping the DDD. Still, DMPs, even when configured as we recommend, are unlikely to be sufficient for that purpose. Consistent with our commitment to deliberative systems, a wider set of reforms must be pursued in parallel (Curato and Böker 2016; Niemeyer 2014)—not only to enhance the impact of DMPs/CAs but also to address other features of contemporary democracies that undermine both democracy and decarbonization, which we cataloged earlier. Specifying the additional reforms needed would take us beyond the scope of this article, but we highlight one area of democratic life that is likely to be closely coupled with the success or failure of DMPs in catalyzing democratization and decarbonization: the media (including social media). As discussed, whether and how information about DMPs is covered in the media in large part determine their effects on the public, yet media and information systems themselves are in structural crisis, posing discrete challenges for democracy. An important strand of reform advocated by media scholars concerned with the democracy-undermining effects of commercial media is to foster greater public ownership and governance of media organizations and digital platforms (Fenton et al. 2020; Pickard 2019). The more public-spirited media that such reforms would foster would be more likely to engage the public in the processes and outcomes of CAs and other DMPs. Meanwhile, DMPs focusing on media reform could help build support for such reforms in the first place (Matasick 2020). This is but one illustration of a wider imperative for scholars and practitioners to explore how future DMPs can be creatively coupled with the wider democratic reform efforts needed to escape the DDD.

Conclusion

The future of democracy and of the Earth's climate system are profoundly intertwined. The current state of democracy in the high-emitting, industrialized nations appears ill-suited to the "wide-ranging, large-scale, rapid and systemic transformation" of the global economy now necessary to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement (UNEP 2022, xxii). Yet, taking climate action out of the hands of elected representatives, as some have proposed, seems likely to fuel authoritarian populism. In this article, we probe the plausibility of escaping this democracy–decarbonization dilemma by deepening democracy, an approach that is increasingly being advocated in theory and experimented with in practice, especially through

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CAs. CAs, and DMPs more generally, can be transformative for their participants' attitudes and behavior toward both democracy and decarbonization. But we know less about the potential for such processes to have similar impacts on the wider public and the mechanisms by which they might do so.

To take stock of this knowledge, we undertook a narrative review of the scholarly literature on the effects of DMPs on the wider public. We identified theoretical expectations for impacts via three causal pathways by which nonparticipating citizens, when informed about the processes, recommendations, or reasons of a DMP, might develop attitudes that are more favorable toward democratic policy-making institutions and/or toward the policies recommended by the DMP. We uncovered some evidence for each pathway, suggesting that DMPs—provided they receive sufficient publicity—might be able to increase citizens' perceived legitimacy of policy-making institutions, support for climate policies, and acceptance of climate policies where they do not support them.

Because of the relative novelty of these fields, significant knowledge gaps remain. In particular, the mechanisms by which DMPs influence the policy preferences of wider publics remain only partially understood. To date, many of the articles that have investigated these mechanisms have used field or vignette experiments. These experiments have yielded valuable insights into the mechanisms linking DMPs to effects on the wider public. However, by their nature, these experiments propose hypothetical situations and must control for important exogenous variables, such as cultural, social, and economic contexts, raising concerns about external validity (Guy Peters 2013). Notably, because such experiments inform respondents about the DMP, they circumvent the need for publicity, effectively assuming away an important mediating factor. More observational surveys following real-world CAs would be valuable because they present a more realistic picture of specific CA's effects (though they have the inverse drawbacks of experiments: it is impossible to disentangle respondents' views from their preexisting opinions and other mediating factors). A promising avenue for further research is to undertake panel surveys of nonparticipants before, during and after CA processes to discern respondents' preexisting views and capture longitudinal effects. Further research would also be valuable in cases outside western democracies (Goldberg 2023) and on the global dimensions of climate change (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2019).

Although future research will be beneficial, we think that both the potential and limits of DMPs are fairly clear. DMPs can give policy makers greater confidence to implement climate measures, and they can influence public attitudes toward democratic institutions and toward climate policies to some extent. Yet, DMPs alone—even if well publicized—seem unlikely to be sufficient to stimulate the widespread shifts in knowledge, capacities, attitudes, and behavior necessary to achieve mass public support for deep decarbonization or to defend democratic institutions against authoritarian populism, polarization and disinformation.

Consequently, we concluded that escaping the DDD will require much more than optimizing the design and publicity of CAs: it will require efforts to engage much larger swathes of the public in deliberative-democratic processes. We propose significantly expanding the use, institutionalization, and orientation of DMPs, so that they become a widely recognized and routinized feature of deliberative systems, recursively interacting with both governments (to inform policy makers) and the wider citizenry (to learn from and inform their views, and to help build widespread civic and climate capacities). But we also recognize that DMPs, even when configured in this way, will be insufficient to escape the DDD: complementary democratic reforms are needed too.

This imperative may appear to make the challenge of decarbonizing even more daunting than it already is. The way forward, we suggest, is not to think of the required transformations as needing to be implemented in one legislative package. Rather it is to think about how DMPs and other deliberative and participatory democratic processes can be leveraged to generate reinforcing feedback effects that iteratively deepen both decarbonization and democracy. A systemic approach to decarbonizing while deepening democracy appears to us the surest escape route from the twin perils of authoritarian populism and runaway climate change.

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Notes

1 Details of the method used in our review are provided in the opening paragraph of the section entitled 'Deepening Democracy: An Escape Route?'.

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2 In the United States, even the limited progress toward decarbonization that has been made in recent years is now being rolled back by the second Trump presidency.
3 Remember, we are referring to *stringent* climate policies needed for *deep* decarbonization. Although surveys and opinion polls show that large majorities in many countries are concerned about climate change in general and think their government should strengthen commitments to address it (Carman et al. 2024; Flynn et al. 2024), it remains a low-salience / low-priority issue for majorities in most high-emitting countries (Carman et al. 2024; Crawley 2024; Crawley, Coffé, and Chapman 2020).
4 We mean *deep* decarbonization consistent with achieving the Paris goals, as explained earlier.
5 A milder version of this exists in many countries, in which climate bodies *advise* governments but do not have delegated authority to enact and implement policies. Generally, climate bureaucracies do not have such authority. One exception is California, where the legislature set long-term climate goals but delegated the authority to design and implement policies to achieve those goals to an independent agency, the California Air Resources Board (CARB; Meckling and Nahm 2018).
6 States do have direct control over a nontrivial *fraction* of emissions, those from government operations, such as military assets, hospitals, and state-owned utilities.
7 For a different formulation of a similar dilemma, see Di Paola and Jamieson (2018).
8 California's approach (see note 5) succeeded in reducing GHG emissions to 1990 levels largely through measures to increase renewables in the power sector (Meckling and Nahm 2018; D. Vogel 2024). But the future steps needed to deeply decarbonize California—not least its huge transport emissions—will require more far-reaching interventions in Californians' lives (Vogel 2024). The resilience of CARB's delegated authority in the face of the political forces discussed here will be a useful test case of the political limits of "decarbonization without democracy" (cf. Meckling et al. 2022).
9 Our search strategy consisted of two stages. First, we conducted the following search on the ProQuest database: abstract(mini-public*) OR abstract(minipublic*) OR abstract("citizen* assembl*") OR abstract(climate NEAR/3 assembl*). This search query was designed to be maximally inclusive of articles on DMPs or CAs. Because there are no standard terms to capture effects on wider publics, we did not include terms related to such effects in our initial search so as to avoid type-2 errors. In the second stage, we manually reviewed the abstracts (and, where necessary, the full text) from the initial search to isolate articles that empirically studied wider-public effects.
10 See Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies, https://www.knoca.eu.
11 Because CAs are a subset of DMPs dedicated to climate change, we assume the causal mechanisms linking DMPs to effects on the wider public will hold for CAs too. Nonetheless, where cited papers focus on CAs, we highlight this fact. The reviewed papers use a variety of methods. Where relevant, we highlight the method used.
12 The other four "families" of democratic innovations identified by Elstub and Escobar (2019) are: participatory budgeting; referenda and citizen initiatives; collaborative governance; and digital participation.
13 See KNOCA's "Map of Climate Assemblies," https://www.knoca.eu/climate-assemblies#Map-of-climate-assemblies, accessed June 19, 2026.
14 See Participedia.net and Appropredia.org, both accessed July 15, 2023.
15 Occasionally, civil society organizations have also organized independent assemblies; for example, in Germany and Poland, and the "Global Assembly." We focus on government-commissioned CAs.
16 Theoretically, it is possible for procedural legitimacy to induce policy *support*, rather than mere acceptance, in nonparticipants; for example, through nonparticipants' deference to the descriptively representative assembly (the "like me" effect; Pow, van Dijk, and Marien 2020). However, this effect seems likely to be weaker than the mechanism's effect on mere acceptance and has not (to our knowledge) been corroborated by empirical evidence.
17 A second survey experiment, reported in the same study, found no effect on trust for a DMP discussing the provincial government's policies on energy efficiency. But the non-effect was likely because, in that study only, the DMP was not commissioned by the government, but by a community group and academics—and this was made clear to survey respondents (Boulianne 2018).
18 In contrast to these first two groups of studies, a vignette experiment in the United States by Már and Gastil (2023) found that specific information about DMP design features did not boost perceived legitimacy.
19 Suiter and Reidy (2020) make a similar argument based on post-referendum surveys.
20 Goldberg's (2021, 178) survey also revealed that outcome favorability is a strong predictor of support for participatory mechanisms.
21 However, the poll also revealed that 73% of respondents had little faith in the government taking the CA's recommendations seriously. In line with other studies (Doyle and Walsh 2020; Parkinson 2020),

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referenda were seen as the most effective means of popular legitimization of the CCC's recommendations (81%), more so than elected politicians. A separate social media analysis revealed many French citizens believed that President Macron used the assembly as a device, rather than having a genuine interest in including the public in the policy-making process (Vernaillen 2020).

22 The Irish citizens' assembly, which included discussions of climate change, also received wide publicity, but the assembly also discussed the (highly salient) abortion issue, which was the subject of a referendum soon after.

23 Pfeffer and Newig (2025) argue that multiple state organs should commission CAs in contexts where there is disagreement among them (e.g., different ministries).

24 See Government of Catalonia, "El Govern aprova la llei que regula el dret de la ciutadania a participar en les polítiques públiques", https://govern.cat/salapremsa/notes-premsa/809976/govern-aprova-llei-que-regula-dret-ciutadania-participar-politiques-publiques, accessed 22 June 2026.

25 The reasons why powerful interests prefer electoral representation over sortition-based representation are articulated by Guerrero (2014).

26 There may be other reasons to prefer advisory DMPs, including constitutional constraints.

27 Experimentation with binding DMPs at the local level (of which there are contemporary examples in Poland; Sobol 2024) would provide valuable insights into wider-public attitudes toward such processes.

28 It was suggested to us that these spokespersons may pursue their own views rather than those of the CA collectively. However, we have not seen any evidence of spokespersons misrepresenting the CA's views. The publication of the CA's conclusions and the potential for other members to correct the record seem like credible deterrents to any such misrepresentations. Insofar as CA members may advocate their own views, we see no problem with this so long as they clearly distinguish them from those of the CA. Overall, the benefits of facilitating public engagement by members who wish to take up that role seems to us to outweigh the risks.

29 Albeit with substantial variations across the topics (Stasiak et al. 2021): the debate on climate change stimulated 1,185 public contributions, far fewer than the referendum on abortion (12,200 comments; Farrell, Suiter, and Harris 2019).

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