Deliberating foreign policy: perceptions and effects of citizen participation in Germany

Pfeifer, Hanna; Opitz, Christian; Geis, Anna

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Deliberating Foreign Policy: Perceptions and Effects of Citizen Participation in German Foreign Policy

Hanna Pfeifer, Christian Opitz, and Anna Geis

Citizen participation has been a popular format in policy fields like environmental and climate policies for many years. More recently, however, it has extended to issues of foreign policy, which has long been considered as a prerogative of the executive in democratic systems. This paper analyses citizen participation in German foreign policy by comparing deliberative-participatory processes implemented by the German Federal Foreign Office (AA) and the Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, and Nuclear Safety (BMU). We draw on recent scholarship in the field of deliberative democracy in order to gain a better understanding how the two ministries understand citizen participation, how they implement these processes, and what effects they have on formal decision-making. Using interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, we investigate two processes of citizen participation in depth. We argue that ministerial understandings of citizen participation determine how they design formats in their respective field. This leads to quite divergent implementations and results of deliberative-participatory formats in the field of foreign policy, depending on whether the AA or the BMU initiates them.

Keywords: citizen participation; deliberative democracy; foreign policy; environmental policy

INTRODUCTION

Citizens' dissatisfaction with representative democracy is quite widespread in mature democracies of the Western world. Arguably, one of the main reasons for this is a growing disillusionment amongst ordinary citizens about their say in politics. On average almost 4 out of 10 people in the European Union do not see their voice count in their country (European Parliament 2018, 16). If a central pillar of democratic legitimacy is governing public affairs by the people, representative democracy in its traditional form is seen as less and less capable of fulfilling this ideal. Against this

background, political practitioners and theorists alike have called for exploring novel forms of legitimising democratic politics. One possibility is citizen participation (CP) which has become more prominent since the 1990s. Such participation convenes citizens to deliberate on a specific political issue by exchanging ideas and arguments. The results may subsequently influence the activities of the executive.

CP in a broad sense has been conducted in environmental and climate policies as well as controversial local infrastructure projects for many years, in part due to legal stipulations. Despite the lack of such formal requirements, it also has extended to issues of foreign policy (FP) more recently.[1] FP has long been considered as a prerogative of the executive in democratic systems. While there has been some evidence for the inclusion of stakeholders and civil society actors into FP, observers contended that 'the wider idea of democratic participation [was still] lacking' (Headley and Burton 2012, 248). According to conventional wisdom, the field of FP does not lend itself to the involvement of citizens. How, then, should we make sense of this new phenomenon, and how is CP implemented in foreign policy?

Given that the phenomenon of citizen participation is quite recent in FP, academic literature on the topic is still scarce. Pertinent data bases on so-called democratic innovations do include some processes which belong to FP,[2] but lack the

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[1] In this regard, our term "citizen participation" differs from processes that are required by law in certain policy areas in Germany, e.g. regional planning procedures or environmental impact assessments. In contrast to those, the executive in foreign policy may conduct participation processes out of some motivation other than legal requirements.

[2] The most comprehensive, world-wide data base on democratic innovations and public participation is participedia.net (retrieved 12th June 2019). The data base covers almost 2.000 processes, but hardly any of them (15) cover FP.

German participation processes entirely. Since Germany has started to engage in a number of CP processes in foreign policy (Adebahr, Brockmeier, and Li 2018), our article seeks to provide a more precise understanding of such processes by studying the German case in depth.[3] More specifically, we compare flagship participation processes by the German Federal Foreign Office (*Auswärtiges Amt*, AA) with those by the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, and Nuclear Safety (*Bundesministerium für Umwelt, Naturschutz und nukleare Sicherheit*, BMU).

By comparing the AA and BMU, the article advances our understanding of CP in two ways. First, we empirically trace similarities and differences how participation processes are implemented in two sub-fields of FP. The AA can be considered as a 'least likely case' for resorting to CP, given that existing research characterises core FP as less suitable for involving citizens. Second, we contribute to the scant literature on how political elites perceive and make sense of CP (Hendriks 2005; Hendriks and Lees-Marshment 2019; Niessen 2019). In particular, we take up the argument put forward by Carolyn Hendriks (2005), i.e., that the executive's storyline, or understanding, of CP processes conditions their influence on formal decision-making.

Our article examines whether this theoretical assumption holds for CP in German foreign policy. Our article proceeds as follows. First, we introduce our key concept of CP, present ideal types of how executives understand political processes, and take a closer look at how CP may influence formal decision-making. Next, we account for our methodological choices in terms of case selection, data collection and analysis. In the third part, we investigate important participation processes by the AA and BMU

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[3] We have found evidence for several similar processes in other Western democracies, which makes the study relevant beyond the German context. A comparative analysis is beyond the scope of this article.

in order to compare the respective implementation and understanding of CP. In the conclusion, we sum up our findings and formulate some preliminary hypotheses about why CP is different in the two sub-fields of FP.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Types of Citizen Participation

We focus on forms of citizen participation that are initiated and conducted by the executives, as represented by national ministries. Such processes can be seen as a form of 'participatory engineering' by the executive, which stands in stark contrast to the waves of bottom-up participatory movements in the 1960s and 1970s (Ritzi and Schaal 2014). The more recent top-down CP involves ordinary citizens, i.e., persons who are selected as private individuals and do not participate in their representative function of an interest group or NGO. Although the inclusion of (scientific) experts can be a part of, and coupled with, processes of CP, the majority of participants are 'laywomen' and 'laymen'. Moreover, CP is different from stakeholder participation, which is often a formal part of political decision-making. We exclude forms of formal participation as legally stipulated in a democratic system. Finally, we analyse such forms of CPs that are somehow connected to the policy-making process, thereby leaving aside 'soft' forms of participation such as 'open days' or public tours through federal ministries.

Two types of CPs formats are relevant for our analysis: collaborative governance and deliberative mini-publics. Collaborative governance is an umbrella term for such 'participatory arrangements that seek to enable cooperation and coproduction between citizens, public authorities and stakeholders' (Elstub and Escobar 2019, 27). Usually, results of such processes are based on consensus and taken through bargaining or deliberation. The latter also forms the central basis for mini-publics. Following

Bächtiger et al., deliberation can be understood as '*mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern*' (2018, 2; emphasis in original). It rests on certain ideals like mutual respect, absence of coercive power, inclusivity, publicity, and accountability. In the debate on deliberative democracy, so-called 'mini-publics' have attracted significant academic attention (e.g. Grönlund, Bächtiger, and Setälä 2014). Although specific designs vary, a mini-public can be understood as a participation process with a pre-determined agenda, by which a small and diverse group of citizens deliberates about a given political issue (Smith and Setälä 2018, 300). Another crucial feature is that some form of sortition be part of the participants' selection process (Elstub and Escobar 2019). Both collaborative governance and deliberative mini-publics may inform various stages of policy-making, but their actual impact varies considerably.

The Executive's Understanding of Participation

Much of the existing literature investigates the relationship between the design of CP processes and their results on the decision-making process (e.g. Fung 2015; Pogrebinschi and Ryan 2018; Kuyper and Wolkenstein 2019). For instance, Robert Goodin and John Dryzek (2006, 225) showed in which ways mini-publics can influence policy-making, ranging from the very rare cases in which 'a forum is formally empowered as part of a decision-making process', to direct and indirect uptake of recommendations at some stage of the policy process to changing the terms in which the public debates a certain issue. Others have emphasised the importance of (restraining) contextual factors which determine the influence of CP on policy-making as much as the design (Bua and Escobar 2018).

Besides considering design and context, we subscribe to the argument of

Carolyn Hendriks (2005) that policy actors, e.g. government officials, may follow a constructed 'participatory storyline'. This narrative shapes their views on whom to include in CP and what role to ascribe to citizens in the policy-making process, thereby conditioning what political influence the pertaining deliberative process may have. Hendriks limits her discussion empirically to deliberative processes in Australian domestic politics. In order to examine, and potentially broaden, the empirical scope of her argument, we seek to reconstruct the understandings of citizen participation as held by ministerial representatives in foreign policy. For the present article, we build on insights from Christoph Niessen's innovative study (2019). Adapting his categorisation for our purposes, we distinguish between four ideal types of understanding: epistemic, elitist, integrative, and evolutionary.

Executives with an *epistemic* view primarily want to improve the knowledge basis upon which they base decision-making. To this end, they consult and involve ordinary citizens, particularly those that either have a special expertise or are directly affected by the decision at hand. While still retaining its formal decision-making authority, the executive does acknowledge its capacity limits and is therefore interested in increasing the epistemic quality of its decisions by means of CP (Estlund and Landemore 2018). According to the *elitist* understanding, executives offer CP mainly because of strategic interests. On the one hand, executives firmly stress that only 'conventional' political actors of representative democracy should decide political issues because they are formally legitimised to do so. Yet, these actors nowadays face an increased demand by the public to justify their actions, thereby engaging in a 'politics of legitimacy' (Geis, Nullmeier, and Daase 2012). Offering formats of CP without attaching substantial importance to them helps the executive to dampen public claims, signal its innovativeness, and secure material and ideational support. In other

words, the executive ascribes only a symbolic function to such processes (Geis and Pfeifer 2017).

Executives holding an *integrative* view perceive of CP as an instrument by which they can bridge the gap between politics and an increasingly alienated public, and (re-)new public trust in the political system at large (Åström, Jonsson, and Karlsson 2017). Based on this understanding, the executive is open to give ordinary citizens more opportunities to express their preferences and have a say in solving political issues. In addition, by means of adequate recruitment, CP can involve those social groups who do not usually show an interest in politics. In this perspective, CP has mainly the function of reconnecting politics and society, and thus executives can be expected to pursue a re-politicising of certain issues. Finally, executives adopting an *evolutionary* understanding subscribe to the diagnosis that the current democratic system is fundamentally deficient and, as a consequence, in need of reinvention. The executive attributes an empowering function to CP through which ordinary citizens may build up the capacities to deliberate political issues and, in the long run, even (co-)decide them (Warren and Pearse 2008).

Coupling and Effects of Citizen Participation

In order to assess the effects that CP has on foreign policy, we draw on the concept of coupling which has recently gained popularity among deliberative democratic theorists (e.g. Hendriks 2016; Setälä 2017; Kuyper and Wolkenstein 2019). It is rooted in a systemic approach to deliberative democracy as 'a set of distinguishable, differentiated, but to some degree interdependent parts, often with distributed functions and a division of labour, connected in such a way as to form a complex whole' (Mansbridge et al. 2012, 4). Coupling draws our attention to the quantity and quality of these relationships of (inter-)dependencies. It refers to the extent to which one deliberative site receives,

interprets, and translates inputs from another site into its internal functioning (Neblo and White 2018, 448). Put differently, coupling describes the degree of openness which different sites have for each other's influence in a deliberative system. In this contribution, we focus on how executives take up results and recommendations from the respective processes of CP.

Based on the work by Mansbridge et al. (2012, 22–23), we distinguish between three main types of relationships: loose coupling, decoupling, and tight coupling. The first type sees deliberative CP and ministerial decision-making as *loosely coupled*. This connection exists when, 'through processes of convergence, mutual influence, and mutual adjustment, each of these parts would consider reasons and proposals generated in the other parts' (Mansbridge et al. 2012, 23). Loose coupling means that results from the participatory-deliberative site do not translate into direct impact. The second type refers to a relationship of basic independence, in which the executive and CP are *decoupled*. In this relationship, 'good reasons arising from one part fail to penetrate the others' (Mansbridge et al. 2012, 23). The deliberative results have thus no observable impact on autonomous ministerial decision-making. In contrast, the third type of *tight coupling* describes a relationship of strong interdependence between the executive and CP. The deliberative process and results have a more or less immediate impact on formal decision-making. To be sure, tight coupling seems very unlikely in traditional representative democracy. After all, a direct transfer of decision-making authority from the executive to the public is legally not possible. However, at least theoretically, it is conceivable that the locus of decision-making *de facto* shifts. Mansbridge et al. 2012, 23 discuss coupling mainly in normative terms, with loose coupling being the most preferable among the three types. In contrast, we are first and foremost interested in

assessing *empirically* how individual processes of CP are coupled with formal decision-making in the field of foreign policy.

METHODOLOGY

Our study is guided by the question of how CP is conducted in FP, what effects it may have, how the executive's understanding of CP's role in political processes shapes its implementation and impact. The paper investigates FP processes in Germany whose decisions often have far-reaching significance for Europe and beyond. More specifically, we will compare CP as conducted by ministerial actors in the BMU and the AA. The BMU has a long track-record of interacting with civil society actors and including them into their policy-making process. It also engages in a relatively broad range of CP. Although not all of these processes focus on FP *per se*, many of them deal with issues of global relevance, e.g. energy and resource policy or climate foreign policy, and can therefore be subsumed under a broad understanding of FP. In contrast, the AA initiated CP in the field of more 'classical' FP matters only since 2014. Our comparison of the BMU and AA is motivated, first, by identifying similarities and differences in how CP is conducted and what impacts it has on decision-making in the *same policy field*, i.e., foreign policy, by *different ministries*. As we assume that understandings held by elites shape how CP is implemented, it can be expected that a ministry's history and culture have a socialising impact on its personnel in terms of convictions and perceptions of the public's role in policy-making. Thus, even though dealing with issue areas that belong to the same policy field, the implementation of CP may look very different depending on *who* initiates it. The same is true for the question of coupling, i.e., the effects which CP may have on political processes in this policy area. While the scope and character of BMU's CP is likely to be a favourable case, we expect the AA to be a 'tougher' context given that existing research suggests that this

'core' of FP is not well suited for involving citizens. Thus, according to divergent understandings held by representatives of different ministries, the impact of CP on policies may vary in the same policy field, too.

The data we collected stem from various sources. First, through extensive desk-based research, we gathered official documentation by the BMU and AA on relevant processes of citizen participation. Second, we conducted semi-structured interviews with ministerial officials, representatives of implementing organisations, and other experts involved in pertaining processes. Finally, we used the method of participatory observation of different CP formats in 2018. In the data analysis, we followed an actor-centred approach (Range and Faas 2016) that aimed at the reconstruction of understandings as held by ministerial elites from the empirical material. Instead of projecting our presuppositions, we gave priority to the perceptions and assessments as expressed by the ministerial actors involved. In particular, our analysis was guided by their interpretations of, and expectations for, the substance and results of citizen participation. More specifically, we qualitatively coded and analysed our primary and secondary data according to the types of an epistemic, elitist, integrative, and evolutionary understanding of CP adapted from Niessen (2019). We readily acknowledge that ascribing *one* understanding to an organisation of several hundreds of members can be disputed. However, we do believe that our qualitative analysis provides us with a 'dominant storyline' (Hendriks 2005, 4) – or, as we would call it, an ideal type of how ministerial actors perceive CP and its role in political processes.

As for operationalising the concept of coupling, we rely on Michael Neblo's and Avery White's (2018) distinction among three main dimensions of coupling: awareness, translatability, and receptivity. *Awareness* refers to the degree to which one site is cognisant of, and informed about, the activities by the other, which also includes a

critical level of documentation. The more detailed a ministry has reported on, covered, and evaluated a participation process, the tighter the coupling between the deliberative site and the executive we expect to see. *Translatability* describes the degree to which one site understands the products of the other. This is important when we assume diverging perceptions, in which political actors are mainly oriented towards the formal decision-making, while ordinary citizens are primarily interested in the issue's relevance to their everyday life. Provided that the data indicates that the results of CP are rather specific and tailored to political needs, we can speak of a higher translatability and thus also a higher degree of coupling.

Receptivity means that one site in a deliberative system is open to, and engages with, the products of the other. Receptivity may be identified in many ways. Our data analysis focused on four factors on which receptive coupling is based. First, the ministry is committed to the participation process if material resources are spent, time is invested, and high-level members of the ministry are present. Next, the ministry may have institutionalised CP in its own organisational structure such as specific units. Third, we examined receptivity in our data according to the degree to which the ministry gives detailed feedback on whether or not, and why, it takes on some or all of the deliberative findings, as this kind of accountability indicates a certain degree of engagement with them. Finally, receptivity can also be demonstrated by a direct political uptake of deliberative results. Clearly, this is the most plausible form of political impact. If there was evidence that the results of the CP found their way into the final product of formal decision-making, we took this as a clue for coupling based on receptivity.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN GERMAN FOREIGN POLICY

In what follows, we will empirically analyse and compare two processes of CP as

implemented by the AA and the BMU. (1) We will start each section by giving an overview of the general activity of each ministry in the field of CP and explain why we selected the respective 'signature' format of CP. (2) We then reconstruct the ministerial understandings of CP by drawing on documentation of several processes, expert interviews and participant observations.[4] (3) Finally, we analyse the type of CP format by identifying its characteristics and connecting them to the respective understanding held by representatives of the ministry. The most important step of analysis in this section is the question if, and how, the participatory-deliberative site is coupled to formal decision-making.

The German Federal Foreign Office (AA)

Overview. The German Federal Foreign Office (AA) started its CP activities with the so-called 'Review 2014', a year-long process that began in February 2014 and included several public dialogues about defining the means and purposes of German foreign policy. The 'Review 2014' resulted in a (moderate) restructuring of the AA, including the creation of a new division called 'Strategic Communication' and, therein, the unit 'Civic dialogue and public relations on a domestic level: Foreign policy in Germany'. This unit is in charge of organising and conducting three processes of CP the ministry now offers on a recurrent basis: the 'Citizen Workshop on Foreign Policy' ('*Bürgerwerkstatt Außenpolitik*'), 'Diplomats in Dialogue' ('*Diplomaten im Dialog*'), and the 'Open Situation Room'.

We chose the *Citizen Workshop* (CW) as a case study for this article. It has taken place annually since 2016 and is the AA's flagship participation process. It is a

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[4] In this part, all English translations of German terms and sources are our own.

day-long event in Berlin involving 120 citizens. Although each CW has a slightly different focus, the general theme often revolves around Europe. In terms of scope, resources invested, and prestige, it is certainly the most important among the three formats.

The AA's understanding of citizen participation. The AA's understanding of CP can be classified as *integrative*. For the AA, the starting point of its CP efforts was the identification of a gap between the public and political actors (IAA2). While the majority of Germans is sceptical towards a more active German foreign policy, national policy elites and international partners, push for adopting more responsibility abroad. In order to close this gap, the ministry aims at a 'communicative opening' (IAA1; IAA3). Foreign policy 'must be negotiated at the heart of society' (AA 2015), thus strengthening the feedback loop between FP decisions and the public. Accordingly, AA representatives use a certain framing to describe and advertise CP as 'a dialogue with the public' (AA and Mercator 2017). CP is not seen as an instrument of actually involving citizens into the ministerial decision-making (IAA2). Rather, it aims at vitalising and informing the public debate. Notably, the responsible unit in the AA is situated within the department of Strategic Communication (IE3). CP has thus a communicative purpose and is not (necessarily) of programmatic, content-based value.

From its integrative perspective, the AA first wants to convey the message that it listens to the opinions and concerns articulated by citizens (IE1). It aims at presenting itself as an actor who is genuinely interested in an open dialogue. Consequently, the involvement of high-level AA representatives, sometimes the minister himself, is seen as crucial (IAA3). Through this, the AA hopes to confront a feeling of unease and dissatisfaction which prevails in large segments of society (IAA3). Second, the ministry wants to demonstrate to citizens 'how complex the process of appraisal and decision-

making in FP is' (AA 2019). It aims at facilitating an understanding amongst the public

that the ministry often has to weigh different factors, rather than giving in to popular but

simplistic sentiments (IAA1). The AA thus uses CP to facilitate public trust in its

decision-making competence.

However, while the integrative perspective of the AA focuses on the relationship

between the executive and the public, it also tries to facilitate deliberation about FP

among citizens themselves. CP is thus also seen as providing a platform where citizens

with different opinions can meet and find commonalities (IAA3). In this vein, the AA

finds it important that the citizens conceive of CP as an enjoyable exercise with positive

dynamics – where deliberating FP can be 'fun' (AA and BE|YOND 2019). This

suggests that the AA also seeks to promote deliberative values and inter-societal trust.

Type of participation format and coupling. The CW is best described as belonging to

the family of *collaborative governance* formats. It is branded as an 'exchange on equal

footing' (AA and BE|YOND 2019) in an interactive setting. After advertising the event,

mainly through social media campaigns, the *selection of participants* is guided by three

criteria: gender, age and place of residence. Thus, the AA combines self-selection with

purposive selection. Indeed, with around 60 per cent of academics and a more or less

homogenous, EU-friendly set of attitudes, participants of the CW 2018 were not

representative of the German population. In the morning, participants were seated at

various round tables of about a dozen people, including representatives of the AA. They

deliberate four different topics, but usually remain on a rather general level, e.g. what

the core values of Europe are. In the afternoon, participants were supposed to condense

their deliberation results into some kind of policy proposal. In 2018, they had to

formulate a tweet containing the key message from their discussion. In sum, four tweet

proposals for each of the four topics were developed by the smaller groups. These

proposals were then discussed with a high-ranking official of the AA – in 2016 and 2017 the foreign minister himself, in 2018 another high-ranking official. Finally, through voting and negotiating with AA representatives, participants had to agree on which tweet to send (POAA1). The *mode of participation* is clearly discursive expression. As for the *mode of decision-making*, in this case: which tweet to send via the AA channel, the AA combines deliberation with negotiation and bargaining, and aggregation. The personal benefit of individual participants is clearly the most visible influence this format has, and thus it has an overall weak *extent of power and authority*. This seems to be in line with the ministry's understanding that CP is mainly about enhancing debates on FP and demonstrating how complex these matters are.

The concept of *coupling* allows us to analyse the question of influence in more detail. Regarding *documentation*, the interconnectedness is rather weak, as participation processes are not captured and evaluated thoroughly. Documentation of the CW is rather scant. While the first two versions had been described in brief notices, the last in 2018 saw an expanded multi-media page flow (AA and BE|YOND 2019). Yet, the make-up of this documenting material makes it seem like an attempt geared towards publicity rather than substance. Although evaluation forms were distributed, a detailed analysis is hardly possible, given the pro-forma character of the exercise. In this sense, it is telling that the AA questions the added value of such methodological efforts (IAA3). However, the AA did invite experts and stakeholders to an internal workshop on 'Strengthening public dialogue on foreign policy' in March 2018. On this occasion, a commissioned report was presented which maps and analyses dialogue processes in Germany and refers to international best practices (Adebahr, Brockmeier, and Li 2018).

Concerning *translatability*, more often than not the deliberative results of CP are hardly compatible with the ministerial decision-making. Condensing the deliberation

into a form which could be relevant for the AA's internal considerations seems rather hard (IAA3). For example, producing good Twitter messages does not have too much in common with formulating policy proposals. Moreover, the topics of the CW are usually vague. The AA chose to address participants with abstract questions, e.g. 'What are core European values?'. Unsurprisingly, citizens found it hard to come up with concrete proposals (POAA1). Finally, AA officials often enjoy superior knowledge in FP topics and therefore dismiss many proposals due to a perceived lack of political practicality. This 'complexity problem' is also cited by AA officials as a reason for the lacking political relevance of many deliberative results (IAA1). They generally do not reach the level of specificity and quality needed to inform complicated, and often fast-paced, decision-making. Pressure on the ministry to coordinate action with partner countries complicates matters further.

In terms of *receptivity*, the financial resources the AA dedicates to CP are very restricted (POAA1). Although the expenditures for the CW are high compared to other formats, including covering the costs of transportation and accommodation for all participants, they remain limited since the event takes place once a year for one day. Moreover, the AA mainly uses social media to advertise its events (IAA3). By contrast, the immaterial and symbolic commitment seems high. Senior officials participate, and even the minister himself attended some of the CWs. But even for this flagship process, the responsible unit found it difficult to recruit willing AA officials for a full day more than once a year. At the same time, the unit is a manifestation of how CP is institutionalised within the AA. Yet, not more than four people make up the whole unit, and the three participations processes are just one among many other tasks they have to cope with (POAA1). According to internal and external views, the unit does have a

decisive standing within the ministry (IAA3; IE1), and thus it remains questionable to what extent it can actually access, or feed into, the thematic sections of the AA.

Finally, the AA also does not provide elaborate *feedback* in response to the deliberative results of CP. This deficit is also seen by the officials themselves. They express a desire to communicate how deliberative results (do not) feed into policies. Yet, their limited capacities prevent them from pursuing this further (IAA1). Participants in the CW also criticise the lack of transparency in what AA representatives do with the deliberative findings (POAA1). In light of all this, it is not surprising that we could so far not find any evidence that the results of CP found their way into *formal decision-making*. The political impact is frequently questioned, by citizens and cooperation partners alike (POAA1; IE1). Overall, our analysis shows that CP and decision-making by the AA are almost ideal-typically de-coupled. The deliberative results generally do not influence or penetrate formal decisions. Rather, they are part of a non-binding dialogue with the public, which is largely in accordance with the AA's mainly integrative understanding of CP.

The German Federal Ministry for the Environment (BMU)

Overview. The Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, and Nuclear Safety (BMU) has been offering CP for a number of years. This was evidently inspired and pushed by similar processes which had been going on at the local and regional levels for decades. The ministry has also established a special unit called 'Sustainable Development and CP' within the 'General Issues of Environmental Policy' department. A recent milestone in the CP activities of the BMU was the adoption of the 'Guidelines for Good Citizen participation' in January 2019 (BMU, IFOK, and FÖV 2019) compiled with citizens in a participation process. It involved 25 randomly selected citizens who developed more than 60 recommendations in a one-day workshop

(POBMU1). The final document contains 19 guidelines in four chapters, ranging from preparing and conducting to evaluating participation processes. They serve a dual function: introducing quality standards for CP by the BMU and providing a framework for its officials when conducting pertaining activities (BMU, IFOK, and FÖV 2019, 4). Being far more than an orientation guide, the Guidelines became part of the ministry's rules of procedures and are internally binding (POBMU1).

A particularly intriguing CP process was the *Climate Action Plan* (CAP) 2050 which started in summer 2015. As part of the Paris Agreement, CAP 2050 was the German national plan on measures of climate protection to be taken in various fields, such as energy, industry, and agriculture. The BMU organised two different, parallel participation processes: in addition to involving representatives of the *Bundesländer*, municipalities, and economic associations, there was a second track with ordinary citizens (BMU 2017, 6). In terms of scope, complexity, and documentation, this is certainly the most pertinent process for the BMU's overall activities, which is why we chose it as a case study.

The BMU's understanding of citizen participation. The BMU holds a largely *epistemic* understanding of CP. In its eyes, adapting to environmental and climate changes is nowadays not possible without involving relevant groups and taking into account their standpoint. CP 'represents an important instrument of modern governance which employs complex processes of deliberation and participation to complex issues' (BMU 2017, 5). Unlike the AA, political complexity is thus not seen as a reason for exclusion. Rather, it makes the inclusion of ordinary citizens an even more pressing necessity. The BMU acknowledges that many of its decisions can only be effective if they are grounded in, as well as accepted and implemented at, the grassroots level. The ministry is convinced that it can derive suggestions 'to improve the basis for its decisions'

(BMU, IFOK, and FÖV 2019, 4) from everyday experiences of citizens. It therefore

believes that 'good citizen participation leads to better environmental policy'

(POBMU1).

At times, connotations of an *integrative* understanding of CP surface, and some

of the statements even suggest an *evolutionary* understanding. But the BMU's primary

goal remains what the Guidelines phrases as 'the thematic utilisation of results of citizen

participation for political decision-making' (BMU, IFOK, and FÖV 2019, 7). From this

perspective, only an improved epistemic quality of political decisions will help to

achieve those broader societal objectives. However, the BMU still makes it clear that

the results of CP can only inform, but not determine its formal decisions. The

Guidelines, too, explicitly highlight that participation processes have an advisory

function only. The 'authority to take responsibility for decisions remains with the

representative political bodies' (BMU, IFOK, and FÖV 2019, 4).

Type of citizen participation format and coupling.   The CAP process is best described

as a *deliberative mini-public*. *Participant selection* was based on sortition, which is in

line with the ministry's official goal to involve a wide cross-section of society to tap

into a diversity of opinions, experiences, and expertise (BMU, IFOK, and FÖV 2019,

11). As a first step, more than 75.000 people were phone-called after a randomised

selection. In a second step, however, the citizens contacted had to decide whether they

wanted to participate or not, which introduces an element of self-selection. After being

given information material, 555 of them eventually participated in a 'Day of Citizen

Dialogue' which took place in five big cities. In each city, participants deliberated at

different thematic tables, which resulted in 77 proposed measures (BMU and

Bertelsmann 2017, 34). These measures were subjected to an online dialogue, open for

everyone to comment and evaluate. After this, a citizen report was formulated. In

addition, two citizen delegates from each city plus two online delegates were selected and met with the same number of delegates from the stakeholder process. The committees merged the results of both processes into a joint catalogue of 97 proposed measures. It was presented to the federal minister in March 2016. Based on that, the BMU wrote a draft and coordinated it with the other ministries. All of this resulted in the adoption of CAP 2050 in November 2016 (BMU 2016). The BMU then held a final conference with all participants, looking back to and reflecting the participation process and its results. Thus, the *modes of communication* and *decision-making* were complex interactions of discursive expression and exchange, as well as deliberation. The *extent of power and influence* is a combination of advising and consulting, as stipulated by the Guidelines, and co-governance, given that some of their proposals were adopted in the CAP.

Again, we should examine this closer by using the concept of coupling. Regarding the first dimension of *awareness*, the BMU is very meticulous in presenting, and accounting for, its participation process. It runs an extensive web dossier which provides a wealth of publicly accessible documents, including brief statements by the ministry and very comprehensive reports by other agencies. The ministry frequently evaluates its processes, at times also by independent external agencies. Although it is the BMU's goal to inform the public about key results, it can still be hard to generate the desired public attention and media coverage of CAP 2050 was low (BMU and Bertelsmann 2017, 33).

In terms of *translatability*, CP results can easily be integrated into the BMU's decision-making. The ministry has a clear framework in place which gears the deliberative findings towards specific measures (BMU 2017, 6). In addition, the Guidelines stipulate that, in order to enhance their applicability, results should be

'presented clearly and structured in a final report' (BMU, IFOK, and FÖV 2019, 20). At times, however, the provisions made to ensure political translatability may affect the deliberative quality of CP. In the case of CAP 2050, in order to meet a tight political timeline, some participants criticised that there was not enough time to fully engage in deliberation (BMU 2017, 9).

Looking at the BMU's *receptivity*, the ministry dedicates a considerable amount of money to CP. The overall CAP 2050 process cost 2,5 million Euro, including more than 500.000 Euro for the citizen track alone (BMU and Bertelsmann 2017, 40). CP appears to be a central concern for the highest-level officials, too. The minister herself (Barbara Hendricks) and state secretaries partook in the CAP process. External actors confirm the high commitment of the top-level management which also pushed for making the Guidelines an internally binding document (IE2). It is therefore not surprising that, in terms of institutionalisation, the BMU boasts its 'great experience with citizen participation in comparison to other federal ministries' (BMU, IFOK, and FÖV 2019, 5). Indeed, external experts attest the ministry high competence. The establishment of a special unit for CP and the facilitation of professional training for all of its officials are seen as an indicator of the ministry's professionalism (IE2). However, cooperation between the special unit and the thematic units is not without challenges. Some colleagues are (still) not convinced by the added value of CP (POBMU2). Comprising only a few people, the unit is indeed rather small in light of the expressed commitment and portfolio of tasks.

Regarding *feedback*, the Guidelines stipulate that participating citizens receive a written response which should 'thoroughly explain why and in which form the results have been used in the subsequent decision-making, and if not why' (BMU, IFOK, and FÖV 2019, 21). Yet, these high ambitions can run into political difficulties. In the case

of CAP 2050, once the joint catalogue was presented and the decision-making within the ministry and the cabinet followed, the BMU could not uphold the same level of transparency it had provided earlier (BMU and Bertelsmann 2017, 36). In terms of *direct uptake*, the CAP 2050 document showed impressive results: 18 of the 97 measures of the joint catalogue originated from the citizen report. The BMU itself estimated that more than half of the 53 measures of the final CAP 2050 were derived from the participation process with stakeholders and citizens (BMU and Bertelsmann 2017, 38). It seems that, when making formal decisions, the ministry takes the results of CP into account 'as much as possible' (BMU, IFOK, and FÖV 2019, 4). However, as the phase of the inter-ministerial coordination of CAP 2050 demonstrates, decision-making by, and negotiations among, formal political actors imposes limits on this (BMU and Bertelsmann 2017, 39). Formal decision-making does retain a critical level of autonomy in order to safeguard the preferences and needs of the BMU and other political actors. Thus, in sum, we find a relationship of loose coupling between the BMU and CP.

CONCLUSION

The German cases of the AA and the BMU illustrate that a multitude of CP formats is nowadays offered by executive even in the field of FP. Our empirical analysis shows that the extent of coupling between participation processes and formal decision-making, and thus the political impact of the former on the latter, depends crucially on how the respective ministry understands the purpose of involving ordinary citizens. On the one side, the AA perceives CP mainly from an integrative perspective and accordingly chooses formats of collaborative governance. The Citizen Workshops are largely decoupled from decision-making and the symbolic rapprochement of politics and society trumps substantial implications of CP for policy. On the other side, an epistemic

understanding is predominant in the BMU. While not delegating any formal authority, it takes substantially into account a diverse input of local expertise, indicating a loose coupling between CP and political decisions. The Climate Action Plan 2050 represents a sophisticated form of a mini-public, with citizens' recommendations making their way into political programmes.

Overall, our findings confirm those theoretical approaches which maintain that we need to trace how political elites understand CP in order understand better how such processes may influence formal decision-making (Hendriks 2005). Even in the context of FP, generally conceived of as a rather challenging terrain for CP, we show that this proposition is valid. However, this does not suggest that the executive's perception of CP is influential for how participation processes are conducted, nor how significant their political effect is, in *any* given context. For example, the question whether the argument holds for 'hard' security issues warrants further research.

We refrain from a normative evaluation of these CP processes and their coupling to formal decision-making at this point of research. While most scholars judge a loose coupling to be theoretically ideal (Mansbridge et al. 2012), we suggest that, in practice, the desirable grade of coupling depends not least on which sites are connected in which policy area (Hendriks 2016, 57). In foreign policy, where the executive is incomparably dominating, it may in fact not be preferable to tighten the coupling between formal decision-making and CP too much in order to safeguard the latter's potential as an important counter-balance in the system as a whole. We generally hold that a normative evaluation needs to be fine-tuned to the specific context rather than making sweeping

statements. In the case of the AA, it seems too early to judge what type of coupling is normatively desirable, and it remains to be seen how its formats further evolve.[5]

Despite these recent developments, our article shows that even within the area of foreign policy, two ministries of the same national executive hold so very divergent views on CP and, as a consequence, implement processes in very different ways. One explanation would be that foreign policy matters are simply too complex for citizens to actually influence, let alone co-govern them, which is the view representatives from the AA subscribe to. However, it seems an implausible assumption that foreign policy in the narrow sense is more complex than external environmental policy and climate governance. A second hypothesis is that the degree of information asymmetry between the ministry and the people differs between the two policy sub-fields. In environmental and climate policy, ordinary citizens possess local expertise and experiences, and these are both unavailable and important for the executive to make adequate decisions. By contrast, in the case of 'hard' foreign policy issues, the executive has superior knowledge in comparison to the general population. They can draw on a broad system of knowledge production, including intelligence services, foreign embassies, and diplomatic interactions. As it is hard to imagine where citizens might have a comparative advantage in these issue areas, it is also unlikely for executives to think that local information can improve their decisions (Fung 2003, 354). Moreover, many security-related FP decisions rely on a critical degree of discretion and secrecy, which imposes limits to the transparency of information the executive can share with its population. This explanation would be in line with the findings of authors who hold that

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[5] The most recent CW of 2019 seems to indicate that the responsible department has made some changes in terms of improved documentation and feedback, possibly aided by an internal learning process. We plan to analyse such changes over time in a future article.

the context of deliberative and participatory formats is important, in particular the specificities of a policy field (Elstub and Escobar, 2019).

This is where a third explanation fits in: the political culture of a policy field and in particular ministerial cultures into which officials are socialised. The BMU has a long tradition of engaging stakeholders, civil society, and citizens in their decision-making processes. While the origins of this tradition are at the local level, the experience gained in these processes have apparently in part been transferable to the national and even transnational level. As both NGOs and individuals are very active in environmental and climate-related questions in Germany, the BMU's efforts resonate well in society. Finally, as we know from our interviews, some members of the ministerial staff involved in CP have previously worked in civil society organisations and political consultancies which implement CP processes. In contrast, the AA does not have a tradition of opening up to the public, let alone ordinary citizens, whatsoever. Indeed, it is among the more elitist of German ministries. Thus, it is not surprising that the AA is a latecomer in CP and embraces more modest formats at first. In this context, the importance of top-level and internal champions, such as former foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, is not to be underestimated, as it was him who made the opening process of the AA a political priority (IAA2). If this opening will entail a change in the overall ministerial culture and thus in the AA's understanding of CP remains to be seen. Once a participation process is started, it may create path dependencies and gradually expand beyond its original scope. In order to address this and other preliminary hypotheses, further (comparative) studies of CP in foreign policy in Germany and beyond seem warranted.

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