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To cite this article: Albert Meijer, Reinout van der Veer, Albert Faber & Julia Penning de Vries (2017) Political innovation as ideal and strategy: the case of aleatoric democracy in the City of Utrecht, Public Management Review, 19:1, 20-36, DOI: [10.1080/14719037.2016.1200666](https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2016.1200666)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2016.1200666>



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Published online: 11 Jul 2016.



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## Political innovation as ideal and strategy: the case of aleatoric democracy in the City of Utrecht

Albert Meijer<sup>a</sup>, Reinout van der Veer<sup>a</sup>, Albert Faber<sup>b</sup> and Julia Penning de Vries<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Utrecht School of Governance, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands; <sup>b</sup>Scientific Council for Government Policy, The Hague, The Netherlands

### ABSTRACT

Political innovations aim to strengthen democracy but few connect well to the institutionalized democratic context. This paper explores how political innovations can be successfully embedded in existing democratic systems. It builds upon both the literature on political innovation and on new democratic arrangements and studies a practice of aleatoric democracy – using the lottery instead of elections to select representatives – in the Dutch City of Utrecht. The case study shows how the idealist logic of improving democracy and the realist logic of realizing specific political goals intertwine to get the political innovation accepted by the institutionalized democratic system.

**KEYWORDS** Political innovation; democratic arrangement; citizen engagement

### Introduction

Models of representative democracy have proved to be remarkably stable in European and North American countries. Alternatives such as direct democracy have been propagated but they have never been able to overthrow the dominant model of choosing parliamentary and executive representatives to act for the people. This does not mean that these alternatives had no effect. Pleas for more direct citizen engagement have resulted in various amendments in the forms of hearings, referendums, public debates etc. These amendments can be regarded as processes of political innovation: new ideas are used to strengthen democracy (Smith 2009; Michels 2011). Not only lack of faith in existing representation but also the disintegration of civil society (Putnam 2000) explains the search for new forms of citizen engagement, and therefore, political innovation is high on the agenda of local governments around the world.

Many new democratic arrangements have been proposed but only few of them obtain a serious position in the institutionalized democratic context (Michels 2011). Innovations are often regarded as competitors rather than allies. Under what conditions are certain political innovations successfully connected to democratic systems that have existed for a long time? This paper aims to enhance our understanding of these processes of political innovation by analysing a specific amendment to western democratic models: the aleatoric democracy (Dowlen 2008). Aleatoric democracy

**CONTACT** Albert Meijer  [a.j.meijer@uu.nl](mailto:a.j.meijer@uu.nl)

means that representatives of the people are randomly selected through a lottery, they engage in collaborative decision-making and they are generally remunerated for their engagement. This form of democracy was the foundation of the ancient Greek polis of Athens and recently this idea is receiving new attention. It is presented as an important addition to existing democratic system and is also often referred to as ‘mini-publics’ (Goodin and Dryzek 2006; Smith 2009; Hendriks and Michels 2011). Our research enhances our understanding of the political innovation of local democracy by analysing this specific democratic arrangement.

This paper builds upon both theories of democracy (Pateman 1970; Barber 1984; Dahl 1998; Dryzek 2000; Fishkin 2009), theories of public innovation (Osborne and Brown 2005; Sørensen and Torfing 2011; Bekkers, Edelenbos, and Steijn 2011) and specific literature on democratic innovation (Smith 2009; Michels 2011). It develops a conceptual understanding of aleatoric democracy and analyses it as a political innovation and our analysis focuses on the different phases of the process of political innovation. Our theoretical framing of the connection between innovation and institutional context focuses on two classic political logics: an idealistic one in line with political philosophers such as Montesquieu, Rousseau, Mill and many others and a realist one that originates from Machiavelli, Von Clausewitz and, again, many others. Our analysis highlights how these two different logics of political innovation – an idealist logic and a strategic logic – are intertwined and generate the motivation and support for this political innovation.

The empirical material presented in this paper is a rich and detailed case of aleatoric democracy in the City of Utrecht in the Netherlands. The key feature of this process of political innovation is that citizens were randomly selected to participate, they received remuneration for their participation and they could be regarded as an alternative form of citizen representation. In contrast with many other forms of participation such as citizen panels, the advice was not ‘free’: local government had committed beforehand to follow this advice and to translate it to an energy policy plan. Our empirical analysis of this case shows that an interplay between idealist and realist logics explains why they are ‘accepted’ by the institutionalized democratic system.

## Aleatoric democracy

The current system of representative democracy with a key role for the electoral process is both firmly established in Western democracies and heavily criticized. Critics highlight that the system suffers from a lack of legitimacy and effectiveness and may result in an electoral aristocracy rather than popular rule (van Reybrouck 2013, 84). Corruption and a focus on limited and short-term interests are presented as the inevitable by-products of this arrangement and therefore radical changes are needed. This is an extensive debate that cannot be summarized in a few sentences but we will sketch the broad outlines of this debate to position aleatoric democracy as a political innovation.

The right to elect our rulers is seen as a cornerstone of democracy but representatives are often criticized for focusing on their own interests and failing to connect to the populace. The call for democratic innovation often relates to concerns on how to deal with so-called wicked problems (Rittel and Webber 1973). These are problems such as sustainability and urban safety that are not only complicated in terms of the knowledge needed to comprehend the problem and possible solutions but that are also challenging for the different value orientations. For this reason, new forms of politics may be needed to find collective solutions to these problems. Building upon a Habermasian notion of a

public debate, interactive policymaking and other forms of citizen engagement have been propagated and implemented to strengthen democracy. Goodin and Dryzek (2006) identify citizen juries, consensus conferences and deliberative polls as new forms of engaging a ‘mini-public’ in the democratic process. A latest – but also an old – contribution to this debate is the idea of an aleatoric democracy. The key idea of an aleatoric democracy is that, similar to court juries in many countries, all citizens can be randomly selected to engage in collective decision-making processes. In ancient Athens, this meant that every year citizens were selected by drawing lots to rule the polis. This classic idea has been translated to our modern times and it is presented as a solution for the problems of democracy (Carson and Martin 1999). The selected citizens often receive a pay, are informed by experts and do not only deliberate options but actually develop laws and plans for the community (Smith 2009).

The idea of an aleatoric democracy combines some of the elements of other democratic systems. It engages a *representative group of citizens* in debates and decision-making. The difference with the electoral system is that the participants – representatives – are not elected but selected by drawing lots. In addition, it is a system for organizing the *political debate*. The fact that this debate takes place among a selected group of citizens not only limits the contributions but also facilitates consensus-seeking behaviour and mutual learning. While monitorial citizens (Schudson 1999) are motivated by private interests or a specific public interest and focus on critiquing government initiatives and actions, citizens in aleatoric democracy are expected to have a broader perspective on the public good and to be willing to co-produce decisions with government.

The contribution of aleatoric democracy can be assessed in terms of fairness and competence (Renn and Webler 1995). Fairness is a normative–ethical criterion which highlights that a process is fair if all participants have equal opportunities to influence the agenda and rules, equal opportunities to name the moderator and equal opportunities to participate in the debate (Webler 1995). Competence is a functional–analytical criterion that highlights that the process should offer the participants optimal opportunities to use available knowledge for the decision. Specifically, this means that the process should acknowledge and tap into the available knowledge and it should contain procedures for dealing with conflicts in knowledge claims.

Aleatoric democracy is heavily debated and there are both proponents and opponents of this system. Proponents highlight its capacity to advance public decision-making about wicked issues and to enhance citizen engagement (van Reybrouck 2013). We will not engage in the normative debate on aleatoric democracy but conduct an empirical analysis. In this paper, we conceptualize aleatoric democracy as a political innovation and analyse why this idea in a certain context is presented as a solution to democratic problems and how the political innovation is implemented and connects to the existing democratic institutions.

## Political innovation

### *Political innovation as ideal and strategy*

Change to political systems has been one of the key domains of research in the political sciences. Many interesting studies of political innovation have been published recently ranging from the stages of political innovation in rural China’s local

democratization (Zhang 2012) to the birth of a unique democracy in Karnataka (Raghavan and Manor 2012) and renewable energy in Australia (Effendi and Courvisanos 2012). Although some of these studies refer to the role of politics in developing innovative solutions to societal problems, most studies conceptualize political innovation as substantial changes to the political system motivated by new ideas about politics. Although theoretically the concept of political innovation could refer to new forms of authoritarian government, most research focuses on changes in democratic systems. For this reason, the words that are used to describe these political innovations range from democratic innovation (Smith 2009), innovation in democratic governance (Michels 2011) to deliberative innovations (Goodin and Dryzek 2006) and innovative democratic techniques (Goodin and Dryzek 2006).

Following Walker's (1969) classic discussion of the diffusion of innovation among American states, we define political innovation as a political mechanism, structure or process that is new to the specific polity. Similarly, Sørensen and Torfing (2011, 849) define innovation as the 'intentional and proactive process that involves the generation and practical adoption and spread of new and creative ideas, which aim to produce a qualitative change in a specific context'. This clearly underlines that it does not matter whether the approach has already been introduced elsewhere: it should be new in this context. The definition also stipulates that it is not a quantitative change – for example: more frequent elections – but a qualitative change: doing things differently. These two elements – 'newness' and 'qualitative change' – are (inter) subjective and therefore whether a change is seen as an innovation differs. Whether aleatoric democracy is perceived as a political innovation therefore needs to be investigated empirically.

Political innovation is defined 'intentional efforts to transform political institutions designed to make authoritative political decisions (polity), the political processes that lead to such decisions (politics) and the content of the resulting policies (policy)' (Sørensen, 2016). They can be seen as a specific sort of institutional innovation in the sense that the rules which apply to the political process are changed – innovated – to produce more desirable outcomes (Bekkers, Edelenbos, and Steijn 2011). Political innovations can be analysed both as ideals in the sense that they aim to strengthen democratic quality and as strategies for realizing certain interests (cf. Stone 1997). Important changes in our electoral system such as right to vote for poor people, women and blacks not only have an idealist logic in the sense that they embody the empowerment of these groups but also a strategic component in these sense that certain political parties benefited from these changes in the electorate.

The *idealist logic* positions political innovation in the long tradition of the development of arrangements for dealing with disputes and value plurality in democratic society. This logic builds on a long intellectual tradition in political philosophy that started in ancient Greece with Plato's *The Republic* and that continued in the Age of Enlightenment with philosophers such as Montesquieu, Rousseau and Locke. The idealist logic stipulates how new ideas can strengthen our democratic systems (Dahl 1998). Ideas are formulated on the basis of different conceptions of what a democratic community entails and what should be seen as proper arrangements for dealing with conflict and allocation of scarce resources.

At the same time, however, this political innovation emerges at a specific place and a specific moment in time. This raises the question who finds the political innovation desirable and who manages to actually transform the idea into a practice. This means

that the term ‘political’ in the term ‘political innovation’ does not only refer to the rules of the political game but also to the political – or strategic – motives for changing the rules of the game (Hix and Høyland 2011). In a *realist logic*, changing politics is political: new mechanisms are used to realize the outcomes that a specific actor or group finds desirable. This logic is rather different from the idealist logic that focuses on the nature of ideas and shifts the emphasis to the actual realization.

### ***Phases in the process of political innovation***

The analyses of political innovation generally build upon the seminal work of Rogers (1995). His work is used to study how and when innovation is adopted and how they disseminate over a larger population of nation states, states, provinces or local government. The process of innovation can be studied in terms of the different phases. Although these phase models have been criticized for being too sterile and not describing the messiness of actual innovation processes, their analytical value is broadly acknowledged. At the same time, the phase models need to be adapted to work for institutional changes such as political innovation. For this reason, we propose the following phase model for political innovation (cf. Osborne and Brown 2005, 129; Meijer 2014): (1) selecting the political innovation, (2) implementing the political innovation and (3) connecting the political innovation to the institutional context. These different phases can be used to analyse the adoption of the innovation, the implementation and its nexus to existing institutional structures. We will develop these phases further on the basis of the academic literature.

#### ***Ad 1. Selecting the political innovation***

An idea to innovate politics has to compete with other promising ideas for support and (financial) resources (Morabito 2008). The classic approach to the adoption of innovation highlights that the uptake depends on two factors: perceived usefulness and barriers to adoption such as cost (Rogers 1995). The basic idea is that individuals will be more likely to adopt the innovation if they are aware of its value, see how it could be helpful to them in their specific context and consider the barriers to be limited. For political systems, this means that key actors have to be able to frame the political innovation as useful and the barriers as surmountable to obtain support for the process of political innovation. This phase can be qualified as successful when the idea is actually selected and obtains support for its subsequent implementation.

#### ***Ad 2. Implementing the political innovation***

Implementing the political innovation is about taking the required actions to ‘make it work’. This involves making budgets available, organizing citizen participation etc. This phase is successful when the political innovation delivers on its political promise. Assessing whether the innovation delivers on its promise is complicated since they embody specific normative choices. At the same time, as we discussed in the previous section, they all aim to result in fair and competent decision-making and therefore these criteria can be used to assess political innovations (Renn and Webler 1995). This means that the performance of political innovations can be assessed in terms of competence and fairness.

### ***Ad 3. Connecting the political innovation to the institutional context***

The political innovation needs to be connected to formal and informal arenas of political decision-making and action to have an impact on democratic practice within formal institutions such as parliaments and councils (Goodin and Dryzek 2006). Goodin and Dryzek (2006) actually identify eight forms of impact: actual making policy, taking up in the policy process, informing public debates, shaping policy by market testing, legitimating policy, confidence/constituency building, popular oversight and resisting co-option. We will simplify this distinction in our analysis and we will focus on, on the one hand, actual impact on policies and, on the other, on the legitimation of these policies.

This framework for studying political innovation formed the basis for our empirical research into aleatoric democracy as a political innovation. We conducted empirical research in the City of Utrecht to enhance our understanding of processes of political innovation and, more specifically, the connection of these innovations to political institutions.

### **Research methods**

This study should be regarded as a most advanced case study in terms of the institutional positioning of aleatoric democracy. There have been some experiments with aleatoric democracy but a direct connection with political decision-making by the Municipal Board and the City Council is often not established (Michels 2011, 284). The case we analysed, puts aleatoric democracy right in the heart of political innovation of local democracy and it was nominated for the EURO CITIES Award 2015 in the category ‘citizen participation’.

Our empirical study aimed to reconstruct the adoption of a political innovation, the performance of the political innovation and the connection to existing democratic structures. The case was studied intensively from January to November 2015 with a combination of methods:

- Extensive *interviewing* with the responsible Municipal Board Member, interviews with Council Members of each political party responsible for sustainability ( $N = 9$ ), interviews with the experts that informed the citizens about energy ( $N = 2$ ) and interviews with the civil servants that organized the process ( $N = 3$ ).
- A *survey* among the participating citizens during the first and the last meeting ( $N = 160$  and  $150$ , response rate = 93 per cent and 90 per cent).
- *Participatory observations* during 4 months of all the meetings of the organizing committee, the three City conversation meetings, a meeting of the Council Committee on public space and a staff meeting between high-ranking civil servants and the Municipal Board Member.
- A wide variety of *documents* was analysed such as memos, draft documents and internal communication at the City of Utrecht, official documents, agendas and minutes of the Council, official communications between Municipal Board Member and Council, and public communications about the energy conversation.

These methods were used to study the phases of the process of political innovation. We studied the *selection of the political innovation* through interviews and by



analysing arguments for the aleatoric democracy in documents and meetings. We also interviewed the responsible Municipal Board Member and asked her for the motivations to engage in this process of political innovation. In addition, we asked the Council Members of both coalition and opposition parties for their motivations to engage in or resist to this process of political innovation.

We used the observations of the meeting, the interviews with citizens and the various interviews to analyse the *implementation of the political innovation*. We used a survey among participants to assess the participants' satisfaction with the meetings and the resulting Energy Plan, their reasons for attending and their opinion on the political innovation itself. However, we were not allowed to survey certain background characteristics (such as the level of education) because this could potentially influence the dynamics of the process. Age, gender and area of residence were cross-checked with the municipal registry to assess the representativeness of the group of participants. The political innovation's fairness was assessed by evaluating the extent to which (1) the selection process yielded a representative group of participants, (2) (subsets of) participants could freely take part in the deliberations (and restrictions placed on participation by other participants or members of the organization), (3) participants were allowed to resolve disputes among themselves (i.e. reach a decision) without external arbiters, (4) participants were allowed to influence to the agenda of the meetings (including the predetermined goal of climate neutrality), outcomes of individual meetings and the final Energy Plan. Competence of the political innovation was assessed by evaluating the extent to which (1) participants had access to the required substantive knowledge and expertise to reach an informed decision, (2) this knowledge and expertise was presented in a comprehensive manner, (3) uncertainties surrounding this knowledge and expertise were explicitly relayed to the participants and (4) the process allowed participants to utilize their own knowledge and expertise where possible.

To study the *connection of the political innovation to the institutional context*, we used interviews with the responsible Municipal Board Member and Council Members from both coalition and opposition parties. We focused on the following issues: their overall support for the political innovation, their expectations regarding the capacity of the innovation to legitimize policy, their ideas about the relationship between the democratic positions and mandates of the participants vis-a-vis the Council and their ideas about the motivations of other political actors involved. Process tracing (George and Bennett 2005; Blatter and Haverland 2012) provided theoretical insights in the mechanisms that play a role in the introduction of political innovations in local democracy.

## Aleatoric democracy in the City of Utrecht

### *Political innovation?*

In 2014, the newly formed coalition of the Liberal-Democrats, the Greens, the Liberals and the Socialists agreed on an ambitious new target: Utrecht aims to be climate neutral by 2030. In order to craft a realist and well-supported plan, the municipality decided to organize a 'City Conversation on Energy'. The goal of this series of meetings was to allow a 'cross section of the population' to draft a new Energy Plan 2016–2030 (Municipal Board of Utrecht, 10 October 2014). The cross section of the population was to be involved through a random draw selection



process, through extensive and informed deliberation and with a financial remuneration.

The process was explicitly aligned with existing political decision-making processes: the Council was to receive its outcomes and the Municipal Board announced its willingness to commit to the adoption of the Energy Plan, provided a fit with the coalition's ambitions. The Municipal Board informed the Council of the conditions for the process, attributing the participants with the task to find out how Utrecht can employ 'all possibilities to save as much energy as possible and generate as much sustainable energy as possible', while confining solutions to the city's own borders (Letter Municipal Board to Council, 28 January 2015).

To understand whether this is a political innovation in the sense of a qualitative change on the basis of a new idea, the new approach can be contrasted with the pre-existing form of political decision-making about urban sustainability. Earlier, wind power development plans for a business park in Utrecht met with fierce local resistance. Invited by the Municipal Board, a local energy cooperative developed an ambitious plan for (eventually) six wind turbines, but after heavy local protest, the Liberal-Democrats and the Social-Democrats in Utrecht withdrew their support in 2013 and the plan lost its majority in the Council (Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency 2014). In this process, citizens were engaged both as proponents and opponents of the plan. The 'normal' political process engages all citizens through elections but only active citizens, either fighting for sustainable urban living or resisting the location chosen for the windmills, are directly engaged in specific decision-making process.

The new process arguably differs substantially from the traditional process since citizens are engaged through a lottery, rather than through self-selection. Participation came at an early stage in the process, allowing for involvement in the development of plans rather than a mere reaction to already elaborated plans. A participatory, deliberative decision-making model allows for a closer dialogue between stakeholders, not necessarily to arbitrate conflict or to build consensus, but rather to improve understanding of and engagement with each other's positions. This allows to find outcomes that transcend a choice between opposites or a watery consensus, aiming rather to find a model that acknowledges a balance between collective and individual interests. In addition, the remuneration of citizens has the potential of moving beyond 'mere' participation towards governance by the people. A final reason why this is a political innovation is that it changes the interaction between Municipal Board and Council. The Municipal Board Member stipulated beforehand that she would follow the plan developed by the City Conversation on Energy as long as the plan stayed within the framework she had laid out for it (Interview Municipal Board Member, 12 March 2015). This is a highly interesting move since this indicates that she transferred part of her mandate to this group of citizens.

Empirically, the innovativeness of the City Conversation on Energy was contested. The Municipal Board Member and coalition Council Members for the Greens, Liberal-Democrats and Liberals were keen to frame the project as innovative. The City Conversation was referred to as an 'interesting experiment [...] to see how citizens make decisions if they are well-informed' (Interview Municipal Board Member, 12 March 2015). Both Council Members for the Liberal-Democrats and Liberals subscribed to this notion and framed the project as 'an experiment' with the

potential to innovate local democracy (Interview D66, 2 April 2015; Interview VVD, 19 March 2015). Other Council Members, including from the fourth coalition party (Socialists), did not emphasize the political or democratic novelty of the City Conversation but regarded it as a normal practice of engaging citizens in conversations on different subjects (Interview CDA, 20 February 2015; Interview CU, 26 March 2015). The Council Member for the Labour Party even called the City Conversations ‘make-believe participation’ and ‘symbolic politics’ (Interview PvdA, 12 March 2015).

What is evident from these reactions is that party affiliation appears to be an influential factor in the political assessment of the City Conversation as a political innovation or not. While all parties strongly support the ambition to increase citizen participation in local politics, they disagree about the means to do so. Opposition parties avoid linkages with the project, as they claim the project is bound to fail to produce an Energy Plan that enjoys broad public support. On the other hand, coalition parties tend to support the responsible Municipal Board Member in her claims that a new energy policy for Utrecht requires an innovative experiment to succeed – and that this City Conversation is an important step in that direction. The Socialist Party is the exception to this rule, voicing not only scepticism about the City Conversation as a political innovation but also maintaining political support for the Municipal Board on this project (Interview SP, 5 March 2015).

### ***Selecting the political innovation***

A key strategic motivation for the Municipal Board Member to start this process of political innovation was to find a response to citizen resistance to windmills for energy production. The plan to build windmills had received broad support in the City Council but a small group of citizens started a strong protest against these plans and managed to stop the plan. The Municipal Board Member for Sustainability felt that the ‘silent majority’ had not been heard and that a small group of activist citizens had managed to hijack the debate. For this reason, she wanted to find a way to bring the ‘silent majority’ into the debate about local energy (Interview Municipal Board Member, 12 March 2015).

The desire to experiment with the idea of aleatoric democracy is another, more idealist, motivation for this political innovation. Aleatoric democracy had received new attention in Flandres in the form of a so-called G1000 and several experiments with this type of democratic arrangement had been organized in the Netherlands. The idea was propagated by the Flemish author David van Reybrouck at a meeting in Utrecht and was received with much appreciation by citizens, public servants, Council Members and the Municipal Board. The idea was seen as a highly interesting political innovation and there was a great willingness to experiment with this idea in Utrecht among public servants, the Municipal Board Member and a limited number of Council Members (Interview Municipal Board Member, 12 March 2015; Interview D66, 2 April 2015; Interview VVD, 19 March 2015). In that sense, the debate about the local energy policy presented an opportunity to experiment with this type of democratic arrangement that was broadly supported by the City Council.

For the Municipal Board Member, the Energy Conversation was an early investment in public and political support for the policy (Interview D66, 2 April 2015). The Municipal Board Member’s main concern – stemming from the previous experiences

with the windmills – was that everyone supports sustainability measures until they are made visible (Interview Municipal Board Member, 12 March 2015). While the aleatoric element was a novelty, the City Conversation on Energy was the latest addition to a series of City Conversations already taking place in Utrecht. This deliberative method is the showpiece of D66 (Liberal–Democrats), Utrecht’s largest party, the Municipal Board Member’s strongest coalition partner in environmental affairs and one of two parties that ultimately cancelled the earlier plans for the windmills (Interview GL, 2 March 2015; Interview SP, 5 March 2015). Should the plan draw heavy political fire in the Council, the Municipal Board Member’s choice of method would put D66 in a difficult position: withdrawing support for the Energy Plan would mean D66 to discard its own preferred method and the input by citizens it values so strongly.

This analysis shows that an interesting idea popped up and received broad support and was then connected to the strategic interests of the Municipal Board. By involving citizens early in the process and legitimizing the selection of these citizens by using a lottery, the Municipal Board Member hoped to shield herself against opposing citizen initiatives later on in the process by claiming that this was only a ‘loud minority’ opposing the plan. Similarly, the expectation was also that this would buy her political support and strengthen her position vis-à-vis the Council. The realist positioning of aleatoric democracy as a way to develop a policy plan can be qualified as strategic use of an idealistic perspective on citizen engagement.

### **Implementing the political innovation**

A project team of city civil servants set out to design and organize the City Conversation on Energy. 10,000 citizens received a letter of invitation and 863 sent a positive reply. 200 citizens were then randomly selected in a second stage of the selection process and of these 200 a total of 165 participants attended all three meetings.

The first meeting took place on 14 March 2015 and participants were not yet presented with much technical information but instead were asked to freely imagine what their ‘Climate neutral Utrecht’ would look like in 2030 (Observations, 14 March 2015). The second meeting was a ‘reality check’, where the participants’ initial ideas were combined with existing policy solutions (Observations, 28 March 2015). In between the second and third meetings the project team and experts created a draft Energy Plan that would serve as input for the final meeting. The aggregation of participants’ preferences was predominately done by tallying the preferences. The third and final meeting focused on the evaluation of the draft Energy Plan. Participants were mostly positive about the draft plan: they recognized their input and valued the coherence of the plan. The meeting was concluded with a ceremonial presentation of the Energy Plan to the Municipal Board Member (Observations, 18 April 2015).

The City Conversation on Energy was implemented as means for the Municipal Board Member to gather valuable *political expertise*: insight into the way individual measures are valued by citizens and into the criteria they use to value these measures. In turn, the quality of the obtained political expertise is dependent on two factors: the fairness of the process that allows the entire spectrum of opinions to be taken into

account and the competence of the process that ensures the political expertise is informed by a necessary amount technical expertise.

The random selection offered all citizens an equal chance at participation but still only a minority of citizens responded to the invitation. This means that this innovation did not fully comply with the idea of aleatoric democracy but still resulted in a self-selected sample. At the same time, a more diverse group of citizens who were specifically invited participated in the process. For the Municipal Board Member this was of vital importance: the issue of urban energy involves everyone as 'everyone has an outlet' (Interview D66, 2 April 2015). In addition, one of the reasons for offering a remuneration was the argument that all citizens, regardless of economic status, should have an equal chance to participate and, if necessary, the ability to take 3 days off to participate in the City Conversation. The group of participants indeed appeared representative in terms of their age, gender and area of residence, with a slight over-representation of people aged 27–44 (40 per cent of participants, 32 per cent of city population) and 45–64 (29 per cent of participants, 20 per cent of city population). All other percentages fell within a 4-per cent margin of their citywide value (Utrecht Municipal Research Department, 25 February 2015).

The competence of the process was secured by the presence of a number of experts on urban energy (Interview public servant, 12 May 2015; Interview Ecofys, 19 May 2015). Even though there was some doubt about the extent to which the expertise that was brought is was biased by the Municipal Board (Interview VVD, 9 October 2015), these experts provided the participants with the technical expertise necessary to make an informed decision. Emphasis was also placed on the importance of the knowledge and expertise already present among the participants as the chairman notes that everyone is an expert on their own lives and energy use. While early in the process several stakeholders voice concerns over differences in the base levels of knowledge among participants (Interview ChristenUnie, 26 March 2015), the process seems to have created increasingly competent participants (Interview Ecofys, 19 May 2015; Interview public servant, 11 May 2015).

The final verdict on the success of the process lies with the citizens themselves. Our survey shows that 75 per cent believe their ideas have become part of the plan (15.3 per cent is unsure as the plan is not yet adopted by the City Council) and 86 per cent is satisfied with the way the plan has come about. While certain measures were observably more popular than others (e.g. windmills), all participants strongly supported the target of climate neutrality that the plan was supposed to achieve: a majority of participants wanted to remain informal 'energy ambassadors' after the City Conversation on Energy was concluded.

The analysis of this implementation highlights that the idealist logic of realizing a fair and competent form of democracy played a key role in the organization of the aleatoric democracy. Put differently, a fair process was of great strategic importance to the Municipal Board since they could use this as an argument for following the plan drafted by the group of citizens. This shows that the framing of the City Conversation in the earlier phase presents more opportunities for strategic behaviour whereas a process that conforms with certain ideal standards is called for in the implementation of the political innovation.

### ***Connecting the political innovation to the institutional context***

From the start, the Municipal Board Member responsible for Sustainability discussed the relation between this form of aleatoric democracy and the existing democratic structures extensively with the City Council. The relation with the City Council was sensitive since the issue here was who spoke on behalf of ‘the citizen’ and hence there is a certain competition between two democratic mandates – a aleatoric and an electoral – here. The bargaining process between the Municipal Board Member and the Council resulted in specific limits to the mandate for this form of political innovation. The City Conversation on Energy was only to discuss the *means* for realizing climate neutrality in Utrecht by the year 2030. The *ends* for the energy policy were not to be discussed and taken as a given (Interview VVD, 9 November 2015).

The City Conversation on Energy eventually resulted in the Municipal Board’s interpretation of the Energy Plan presented to the City Council. The original Energy Plan, as drafted by the citizens, was not forwarded to the Council, but is considered to be the product and property of the 165 participants. The project team also created an additional process report which explains its decisions and the organizational rationale behind the project. The final vote on the plan took place on 14 January 2016 and the plan was unanimously supported by the Council.

The nexus between the City Conversation on Energy as a political innovation and the institutional context can be understood from both an idealist and a realist logic. The two dominant idealist elements are the emphasis on involving the ‘silent majority’ and offering everyone a chance to participate because the issue of urban energy concerned everyone (Interview Municipal Board Member, 12 March 2015). Such arguments carry much normative weight and are reiterated in the official Municipal Board’s interpretation of the Energy Plan (Municipal Board, 2015). The Council has displayed a susceptibility to the normative arguments advanced by the Municipal Board Member. The enhancement of citizen participation was supported by all interviewed Council Members. Moreover, the ambitious target of climate neutrality by 2030 was univocally ratified by the Council prior to the organization of the City Conversation on Energy (Council meeting Commission City & Environment, 12 March 2015). Part of the Council’s resistance to the blind adoption of the Energy plan, however, can be ascribed to a normative argument advanced by individual Council Members themselves: the Council still represents the 330,000 citizens that were not invited to the City Conversation (e.g. Interview PvdA, 12 March 2015; Interview SP, 5 March 2015). The absence of clear data on the representativeness of the group of participants kept the conflict between these two idealist arguments (aleatoric vis-a-vis electoral) a central part of the debate between the Council and the Municipal Board Member.

The realist logic in the Council’s behaviour highlights a different side of this conflict. The institutionalization of new mechanisms for more direct forms of democracy (such as aleatoric democracy) threaten the relative decrease in power of any elected parliamentary body such as a City Council: if citizens are given a chance to speak directly, they no longer require representation by professional political representatives. The Municipal Board Member explicitly referred to the participants as representatives of the people in the city. Such developments also incentivized

Utrecht's City Council to strategically use its formal powers to block innovation in an attempt to preserve the status quo. The existence of such a strategy is evidenced by the Council's decision not to blindly adopt the Energy Plan as it results from the City Conversation. Of decisive importance for the legitimacy of this decision was the Council's ability to convince other stakeholders of the inability of the participants to come up with the Energy Plan in a fair and competent way. Participants were claimed not to be representative because of their high average level of education (Interview PvdA, 12 March 2015) or their inherent interest in the issue of sustainability: 'You invite 10,000 people for a reason. You only expect 1.5% to show up, and those are the usual suspects' (Interview CDA, 20 February 2015). Moreover, the participants' competence was claimed to be insufficient because energy policy requires an understanding of the technical complexities involved, and this is something 165 participants cannot learn within 3 days (Interview CU, 26 March 2015).

Thus, the executive and legislative powers take opposing sides in the debate on the City Conversation's position in the broader institutional context. However, as the executive power comprised a coalition of Council parties, there is a noticeable difference between the strategies employed by coalition and opposition parties. Coalition parties openly support the Municipal Board Member's decision to organize the City Conversation, but are unwilling to surrender their final say on the resulting Energy Plan. Council Members for the Greens, Liberal-democrats and Liberals attend and enthusiastically participate in one or multiple meetings of the City Conversation. Opposition parties are clearly less supportive of (the Municipal Board Member's decision to use) the method. They are more vocal about the criticisms mentioned above and also emphasize the high-cost-to-low-benefit ratio and the strong possibility of disappointing the participants (Interview ChristenUnie, 26 March 2015; Interview CDA, 20 February 2015). In addition, they purposely stay away from the three meetings because this may implicitly have suggested support for the coalition plans (Interview PvdD, 4 March 2015).

Finally, the participants themselves are well aware of the politicization of the City Conversation. During the final meeting, they clearly state that they do not want to be held accountable for the resulting Energy plan. Moreover, they explicitly refute the Municipal Board Member's claim that the plan is 'Utrecht's plan'. Instead, they suggest that the plan is presented as a plan 'by 166 Utrechters'. (Observations, 18 April 2015)

Based on a realist logic, the construction of the Energy Plan and its preliminary uptake in the Council suggest that the Municipal Board Member's strategy to embed the political innovation into the existing institutional structure has largely been successful. However, a strategic interpretation could read that in this way the Municipal Board Member was able to 'outmanoeuvre' the City Council in an attempt to break the institutional deadlock using citizens to further her own agenda. Complementing this realist logic with its idealist counterpart, a different explanation emerges: the Municipal Board Member was able to break the deadlock to further her own agenda, but this agenda was fully supported by all Council parties. Politicization of the *means* had effectively paralysed a municipal policy area which was striving for a widely supported *goal* and the political innovation broke this deadlock. Moreover, throughout this process, the Municipal Board Member had succeeded in drawing 'normal citizens' closer into the political decision-making process.



## Conclusions

The case study shows how the three types of political innovation in Sørensen's (2016) conceptualization – polity, politics and policy – are closely connected in the realization of this form of aleatoric democracy. This innovation is challenging to the existing structure but the analysis clearly shows that aleatoric democracy can indeed find a position in the formal institutionalized democratic system. The old idea was revitalized and resulted in engagement of randomly selected citizens in the development of a plan for a highly sensitive and controversial political issue. Even though there was a self-selection bias since the citizens were not obligated to participate, the case showed new forms of engagement, new roles of citizens and politicians and new outcomes of a political struggle and can therefore be qualified as political innovation. Under what conditions was this political innovations successfully connected to the democratic systems? We have argued that political innovation has two logics: the idealist logic of improving decision-making in the polis and the realist logic of selective use of ideas to realize specific political goals. This case highlights that the intertwining of these two seemingly competing logics was a key condition for the success of this political innovation.

The idealist logic in the case is that aleatoric democracy indeed has the potential to innovate local politics and contribute to the ability to take decisions about wicked problems such as urban sustainability. The citizens emerged as a new actor on the political stage and their voice was influential. The process of selecting citizens through a lottery resulted in a new type of mandate for the city energy policy. The goal of engaging other citizens than the 'usual suspects' has also been realized and resulted in a varied group of voices. The success of political innovation in this case may be attributed to its early focus on institutional embedding. Acceptance of the value of this form of democracy by both the Municipal Board Member and the City Council were key to its success in terms of impact on urban policies. The aleatoric democracy does not replace the electoral one but strengthens it – although there is also a certain friction – by broadening up citizen engagement by the 'silent majority'.

The realist logic of this process, however, lies in the use of certain ideas in political processes. The idea of the aleatoric democracy is successfully used by the Municipal Board Member and the coalition parties in the Council to build support from 'the citizens' for an Energy Plan. The citizens have been transformed from activists protesting against – but sometimes also in favour of – wind turbines, to a rational advisory body that was able to develop a (much broader) Energy Plan for the city. This Energy Plan was developed within the objectives that had been formulated by the Municipal Board Member and hence could be regarded as an operationalization of her policy agenda. The City Conversation on Energy can be qualified as an instrumental form of political innovation since aleatoric democracy served to break a deadlock in the decision-making process over sustainable energy. The choice for aleatoric democracy, in this logic, is a politically astute move to create legitimacy for the coalition's sustainability agenda.

Our analysis provides some specific insights in the process of political innovation.

First, the empirical analysis of adoption of political innovation shows that we may need to understand this particular case as an example of *garbage can political innovation*. Cohen, March and Olsen (1972) argued that decision-making in organization entails a rather unpredictable coupling between a stream of solutions and a



stream of problems. They argue that – metaphorically – problems, solutions, participants and choice opportunities flow in and out of a ‘garbage can’. Innovation theory seems to suffer from a similar rationality bias, suggesting that innovation is newly developed solutions to existing problems or possibilities (Rogers 1995). The case study shows that the innovation was not a new but an ancient idea that was connected to a new problem to serve the needs of various, changing participants for different goals. The perspective of garbage can theory – with its attention for windows of opportunities and policy entrepreneurs – can help to understand the ‘messy’ processes of political innovation.

Second, the analysis highlights the tension between, on the one hand, connecting the innovation to the existing political practices, while on the other hand, also letting it maintain its own democratic profile. The citizens are positioned within a democratic process organized by the Municipal Board Member in contact with the City Council. The ends of collective action were not to be discussed – the goal of reaching climate neutrality in 2030 was a given – and the City Conversation on Energy only focused on the means. Critics argue that this is not in line with the idea of aleatoric democracy where citizens can define their own agenda. At the same time, this embedding of aleatoric democracy in existing democratic institutions may have helped to strengthen the impact of their efforts. The basic tension is that of *compromising political innovation*: more connected political innovations can be expected to be more successful in their embedding but, at the same time, this means that they compromise on their democratic promise.

This research shows how political innovations can be understood from an integrated perspective rather than from a cynical perspective (power always stays in the same hands) or an idealistic perspective (political innovations are free-floating ideas that generate a better world). Our key observation in this case is that the two logics – the idealist and the strategic logic – in political innovation are not rivals but partners. An ideal may only be realized if it is strategically developed and a strategic agenda may only gain legitimacy if it is built on a broadly shared conception of democratic decision-making. Innovative ideas require strategic action and strategic action can benefit from innovative ideas. Our understanding of political innovation needs to take these complementary logics as a starting point for analysis and theory development.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

**Albert Meijer** is a Professor of Public Innovation at the Utrecht School of Governance. His research focuses on social and technological innovations in cities and public organizations.

**Reinout van der Veer** is a student in the research master’s program on public administration and organizational science at the Utrecht School of Governance.

**Albert Faber** is a senior research at the Scientific Council for Government Policy in the Netherlands. His key interests are sustainability and societal transitions.

**Julia Penning de Vries** is a student in the research master’s program on public administration and organizational science at the Utrecht School of Governance.

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