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THE POLITICS OF EXPERTISE IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A MULTI-LEVEL MINI-PUBLIC APPROACH

Benjamin Leruth

University of Melbourne

Pier Domenico Tortola

University of Groningen

REGROUP

REBUILDING GOVERNANCE AND RESILIENCE OUT OF THE PANDEMIC

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REGROUP

REBUILDING GOVERNANCE AND
RESILIENCE OUT OF THE PANDEMIC

Culminating more than a decade of crisis in Europe, the Covid-19 pandemic has opened an important window of opportunity for institutional and policy change, not only at the "reactive" level of emergency responses, but also to tackle more broadly the many socio-political challenges caused or exacerbated by Covid-19. Building on this premise, the Horizon Europe project REGROUP (*Rebuilding governance and resilience out of the pandemic*) aims to: 1) provide the European Union with a body of actionable advice on how to rebuild post-pandemic governance and public policies in an effective and democratic way; anchored to 2) a map of the socio-political dynamics and consequences of Covid-19; and 3) an empirically-informed normative evaluation of the pandemic.

www.regroup-horizon.eu

info@regroup-horizon.eu

@regroup-horizon.bsky.social

@regroup-horizon

@regroup_horizon

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Abstract

As a crisis of unprecedented speed, pervasiveness, and multi-dimensionality, COVID-19 generated several questions and tensions at the intersection of scientific knowledge and democratic politics. These were, in turn, yet another manifestation of broader debates on the appropriate role and functions of science and expertise in liberal-democratic policymaking, which have defined a large part of European politics over the past few years. This paper contributes to the research on the politics of expertise by presenting the results of an innovative multi-level mini-public approach, in which citizens from five European countries – France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, and Poland – were asked to discuss and deliberate on questions relating to the place and role of experts in policymaking, scientific information, and communication. The results of these discussions not only yield more fine-grained and nuanced evidence on citizens' attitudes on these topics than currently available via survey research but also allow for the formulation of actionable advice that will be of interest to policymakers at the national as well as EU level.

Keywords: COVID-19, expertise, information, trust, citizens' juries

Introduction

Politics and expertise have always had a problematic relationship in liberal-democratic systems. On the one hand, politics needs the contribution of experts to manage increasingly complex societies. On the other, expertise is by its nature undemocratic and reliant on a principle of public legitimacy – the possession of specialised knowledge – that deviates from the key democratic notion of the 'will of the people'. This puts expertise and democratic politics in a state of permanent tension, which at times erupts into open conflict.

The debate on expertise in democracy is by no means new, witnessed by the now-century-old Lippman-Dewey debate. It has, however, become particularly prominent in recent years, as experts have become the target of increasingly bitter attacks, including from within democratic institutions (Michael Gove's denunciation that 'people in this country have had enough of experts', in reference to Brexit, is perhaps the most infamous such philippic), which are, more often than not, fueled and amplified by social media. All things considered, the role and legitimacy of expertise in policymaking have been a defining theme of recent political struggles in our democracies and seem destined to remain so for the foreseeable future.

Focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper contributes to the academic debate on expertise in liberal democracy by taking a bottom-up perspective, which examines the attitudes and opinions of citizens on this topic. We do so by presenting the results of an innovative multi-level mini-public exercise, in which participants from five countries – France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Poland – were asked to discuss and deliberate on questions related to the politics of (COVID-19) expertise, in citizens' juries at the national and transnational level. Our deliberative method not only yields more fine-grained and nuanced evidence on citizens' preferences than is currently available via surveys but also allows for the formulation of concrete policy solutions and proposals that build on such opinions. As such, our method is particularly well-placed to acknowledge and embrace the real-world complexity of the relationship between expertise and democratic politics and produce societally relevant findings.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows: the next section lays out our conceptual framework by identifying and examining three broad questions delimiting the politics of expertise: (1) the place and role of experts in public policy; (2) public trust in expert-based decision-making; and (3) scientific information and communication. Taking a step forward, the third section zooms in on the COVID-19 pandemic to highlight the main specific issues and complications presented by this case with regard to the politics of expertise. Section four introduces our multi-level jury approach and describes the main methodological and practical steps in its implementation. Section five analyses

the main results of our jury deliberations and related policy prescriptions, focusing on the various components of the politics of expertise identified in the conceptual framework. The sixth section recaps and concludes.

A conceptual framework on the politics of expertise

Policymaking in contemporary democracies relies to a great extent on the development and use of expertise. Even in the most laissez-faire among developed political systems, public authorities preside over a range of policy tasks whose magnitude and complexity make the deployment of expertise – defined here as the possession of specialised and recognised knowledge in a particular scientific or technical field[1] – an inevitable part of the policy process. Whether clearing a new drug for the market, setting an economy's money supply, reforming school curricula, or defining a country's military posture, it would be difficult to imagine policymakers working without the crucial contribution of specialised expertise at various points of the policymaking process. For some observers, the prominence of unelected experts has grown to such an extent over the past few decades as to establish, for good or bad, a new type of separation of powers in democracy (Jasanoff 1990; Vibert 2007).

The importance of experts for democratic political systems is just another manifestation of a more general principle of liberal democracy; for the latter to be viable and deliver effective governance for its citizens, the majoritarian principle – whereby decisions are based on the will of a majority and legitimised as such – cannot be unlimited. While the will of the people remains the main guiding principle for democratic decision-making, this principle must function within certain confines, designed to prevent democracy from turning against its citizens and ultimately itself (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2025). The rule of law, the principle of political freedom, the protection of minorities, and constitutional safeguards thereof are some prominent examples of such confines; they provide alternative sources of political legitimacy, which trump majority rule in liberal democracy and are safeguarded by non-majoritarian rules and institutions. Knowledge and expertise, and the institutions embodying them, may be seen as working in an analogous way (Eriksen 2021).

While the merits of integrating – and balancing – the majority principle with the principle of expertise is widely accepted in the thought on and practice of public decision-making, this general idea still leaves considerable room for discussion on a range of issues, pertaining to how exactly to best embed expertise in democratic political

1. The theoretical debate on the nature and holders of expertise is much larger than meets the eye (e.g. Croce 2019; Farrington-Darby and Wilson 2006; Goldman 2018). For our purposes, however, this simple definition will suffice.

systems and processes. These questions, which delimit much of what we may term the 'politics of expertise', have both analytical and normative ramifications; they are of interest to scholars of politics, who investigate how they are answered in society and why, but they are also part and parcel of ongoing debates on the functions of knowledge and expertise in democracy. In the remainder of this section, we highlight three such questions, which we believe are particularly salient, both in general and with respect to the politics of COVID-19 in Europe.

The first question is about the position of expertise in the policymaking process. As Giovanni Sartori (1987) put it in a simple but effective statement, the proper role of experts in democracy is that of defining the means of policy, while the ends should be left to (party) politics. Elaborating on this general principle, Tortola (2020) locates the appropriate position of experts in democratic policymaking in a space between full dependence on political power and full autonomy from it. On the one hand, experts need some measure of freedom from politics to escape the pressures of majoritarianism and be able to produce knowledge-based suggestions and decisions. On the other hand, to be compatible with democracy, expert autonomy must operate within the confines of overall objectives defined politically via the competition of, and compromise among, different visions of the 'good society' as represented by political parties and ideologies.

The foregoing is a good starting point, which however leaves several open issues as to the exact place and role of expertise in public policymaking. The first is, simply, that the spectrum identified by Tortola still leaves many possible choices as to the autonomy of experts in politics. Experts could, at one end of the spectrum, be given a minimalistic mandate and left free to fulfil the latter as they see fit (the case of the European Central Bank, a technical body guided by a univocal mandate of price stability, might be a good example of this model). Moving towards the opposite end of the spectrum, experts may face increasing constraints on their actions in terms of additional goals to achieve and/or the precision with which these goals are defined.

The above is further complicated by the fact that the boundaries between the means and ends of policymaking are often fuzzy. Combined with the mainly sequential mode of interaction between politics and experts (whereby the latter are, for the most part, either advisors for or implementers of political decisions), this makes boundary crossing by experts both plausible and difficult to detect (Fischer 1990; Tortola and Tarlea 2021). To what extent, for instance, can we separate expert advice from political influence? And does the implementation of a vague political end also contribute to further defining it? Whenever expertise intrudes into the sphere of politics, by defining the end goals of policymaking, it turns itself into technocracy (Meynaud 1969), a model of decision-making that is at odds with the principles of liberal democracy but which some might see as desirable, in the name of its (alleged) superior performance in terms of governmental

efficacy and effectiveness – thus adding yet another layer of complexity to the politics of expertise.

Until now we have implied, for simplicity, what one might call a 'naive positivist' view of science and expertise, which assumes a clear separation between knowledge holders and their objects of study, and a world that can be objectively and univocally classified and measured. In reality, however, this view of science is by now hardly tenable even in the hardest of sciences. A more realistic depiction of knowledge production sees the latter as always dependent, at least in part, on context, interpretations, and ultimately scientists' values. This, in turn, makes expertise itself open to (potential) politicisation and presents an additional source debate concerning its place and role in public policy-making. At one extreme of this debate, science and expertise are seen as just another arena of political struggle; hence, they are not worthy of being insulated and protected from the logic of majoritarianism. At the other end, scholars such as Oreskes (2021) acknowledge the imperfect and ever-evolving nature of scientific activity yet highlight the importance of openness, discussion, and consensus in providing us with some degree of certainty about its methods and conclusions. In between, Pielke (2007) assigns a special role to experts in the policymaking process – not as proponents of specific courses of action but as 'honest brokers' in charge of presenting and possibly expanding the set of available policy alternatives to political decision-makers.

To a large extent, the position of experts in the public decision-making processes of liberal democracies depends on the degree of trust that citizens have in them and in the policy processes that rely on their advice. This is the second key question on the politics of expertise tackled in the paper. While trust is a crucial ingredient for a well-functioning democratic system, the specific issue of trust in experts is particularly complex, for it involves at least two distinct – albeit connected – conceptions of trust. The first is 'epistemic trust', namely trust in the truthfulness of science and the scientific process. Generally speaking, all trust is based on an asymmetry of information. If we were able to know and understand everything that someone does and that affects us, we would not need to trust them. In the case of experts, this asymmetry is particularly wide, as the expert possesses, by definition, a level of specialised knowledge that may only be acquired with significant time, experience, and/or training, and which is therefore unavailable even to the best-informed layperson. The latter is, as a result, epistemically dependent on the holders of specialised knowledge and must base their trust on a significant leap of faith, assuming that experts are acting honestly and according to the best scientific practices (Hardwig 1985; Baghramian and Croce 2021).

Epistemic trust may break down in several cases, of which three are noteworthy here. The first is when the experts are (perceived to be) driven by goals other than the honest pursuit of science and knowledge – in the first place, economic interests (Baghramian

and Croce 2021; Oreskes 2021). In this scenario, the experts violate the implicit contract on which trust is based, as they – at least to the layperson's eyes – no longer pursue knowledge for its own sake, and therefore remain experts in name only. A second factor that may undermine trust is dissonance between what the experts claim and what people expect and observe, albeit at a superficial level. Experiencing a particularly cold winter, for instance, may undermine people's trust in the science of climate change. Anecdotal reports on the (alleged) effectiveness of an alternative cure for cancer may decrease trust in doctors' warnings against it, and so forth (Baghramian and Croce 2021). Finally, epistemic trust may break down whenever laypeople are faced with different and competing expert claims coming from seemingly equally legitimate sources and in the absence of clear ways to adjudicate among them (Goldman 2001). The additional complication here is that, while honesty would require experts to explain science as an inherently imperfect and constantly evolving endeavour, that same honesty might backfire on citizens' epistemic trust, for it deprives them of the comfort of absolute certainty.

The second type of trust in experts is what Bennett (2020) calls 'recommendation trust'. People, Bennett argues, need not just trust the science behind expert advice but also that the advice itself is given in the best interest of citizens. Epistemic and recommendation trust are connected but conceptually distinct. If science is mistrusted per se, then any recommendations or policy decisions stemming from it are also likely to be mistrusted. However, the opposite is not necessarily true; it is possible to conceive situations in which science is fully trusted but advice and policies connected to it are deemed untrustworthy because of some additional factors intervening in their formulation. A policy recommendation may be perceived, for instance, as made in bad faith, compromised by ignorance or incompetence or driven by different values than those upheld by the citizenry (Bennett 2020; Weingart 2023). Needless to say, recommendation trust is more directly political in nature than epistemic trust; as such, it is also more likely to be affected by the political and institutional dynamics within which expertise is embedded – including, notably, public trust in democratic institutions at large.

All the above highlights the key role of information and communication in shaping the trust relationship between layperson and expert; this is the third and final aspect of the politics of expertise explored in this paper. Here too, a distinction can be made between two types of information. The first is information about the holders of expertise; even in the absence of any scientific knowledge or understanding, a layperson will probably find personal and professional information about an expert helpful as a proxy to determine the solidity of her/his advice (Hardwig 1985). Does the expert have prestigious academic qualifications? Does s/he hold an important post? Does s/he have a good publication record? Is s/he held in high regard by her/his peers? And so on. Admittedly, some of these questions only move the information problem one or more steps away.

For instance, to make conclusions based on the expert's reputation among peers, one needs to be able to assess the trustworthiness of these peers, but the crux of the matter here is the availability of 'anchoring information' that affects our confidence in the expert in question.

In addition to information about experts, one can, of course, also seek information about the scientific knowledge mobilised by expertise – the second type. While the epistemic asymmetry between laypeople and experts can, by definition, never be fully eliminated, this gulf is always a matter of degrees. Faced with the expert recommendation to consume less red meat as a way to fight climate change, for example, a layperson might not want (or need) to learn the chemistry involved in details but still find it helpful to seek some information on the causal chain between cattle farming and global warming. This will, ceteris paribus, increase the chances of trust in the recommendation and compliance with any policy coming from it (Bennett 2020). Needless to say, the importance of scientific information for the politics of expertise also calls attention to the role and consequences of epistemic asymmetries among laypeople due to, for example, education, time, and opportunities to seek good information, as well as the horizontal dynamics of sharing and receiving such information, for the diffusion of trust in science and expertise.

Communication plays a key role in the production and circulation of information on experts and scientific advice. This in turn highlights in the first place the importance of communication by experts themselves as a factor in the dissemination of knowledge and the building of public trust. Public communication, however, may also produce perverse effects when over-exposure on the part of experts reinforces the perception of their politicisation (Pielke Jr 2007; Weingart 2023). The media – both traditional and new – plays an obvious role in affecting what scientific information circulates, how much, and in what form. The gatekeeping power of traditional media has declined over the past few years as a result of the rise of the internet and social media, which have created new spaces for previously marginalised sources of expertise (Townsley 2023) and communication-savvy experts (Della Giusta, Jaworska, and Vukadinović Greetham 2021; Van Dijck and Alinejad 2020). At the same time, the openness and increasing algorithms of social media amplify the chances for faulty or altogether fake scientific information to circulate and gain traction in the absence of proper counterweights (Oliveira, Wang, and Xu 2022; Townsley 2023).

Trust, knowledge, and information in the COVID-19 pandemic

Like other crises, the COVID-19 pandemic placed, from the very start, the question of knowledge right at the centre of public policymaking. Almost overnight, political leaders in Europe and elsewhere found themselves faced with a new threat, whose nature, mechanisms, consequences, and best countermeasures they needed to learn rapidly to mount an effective defence (Boin et al. 2017). Experts were front and centre in government policies to counter the virus, and debates and struggles over the science of COVID-19 quickly became a prominent part of the politics of the pandemic. The latter featured all three broad questions explored in the previous section – the place of expertise in policymaking, public trust in experts, and scientific information and communication – mixing familiar traits and debates with aspects that were more peculiar to the case at hand. In this section, we briefly go over the most salient of these.

Institutionally speaking, a recurrent model among European countries was to convene special advisory bodies to monitor the real-time development of the pandemic both globally and in their national settings to provide input to public policies for the containment of the coronavirus. Examples of such bodies are the Scientific and Technical Committee in Italy, the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) in the UK, and the Outbreak Management Team (OMT) in the Netherlands. While national variations existed as to, among others, the precise institutional embedding of these bodies (e.g. within the health ministry or under central government authority), their membership, the fields of expertise represented in them, and their specific powers and competencies, the goals of these institutions remained similar across cases and so did their role as focal points for the COVID-19 expertise and scientific advice in their respective countries (Hodges et al. 2022).

The operations of these expert bodies and pandemic policies, in general, were complicated by at least two distinctive traits of the COVID-19 crisis. First is the complexity of the pandemic from a thematic standpoint. Clearly, the COVID-19 challenge was first and foremost a matter for virology, epidemiology, and public health and experts thereof. However, as the pandemic progressed, it became increasingly evident that this was a multi-dimensional problem with ramifications that reached well beyond these areas. Border and business closures had adverse economic consequences across the board. Prolonged lockdowns affected people's physical and mental well-being. School closures generated educational deficits among pupils. Finally, both restrictive measures and mandates (such as in the areas of facemasks and vaccinations) posed a range of thorny questions on the legitimacy and legality of these limitations with respect to individual rights and freedom (Fabbrini 2023). Mobilising and combining the various fields of expertise touched by COVID-19 –some of which were driven by different, if not incom-

patible principles and values – proved to be challenging everywhere, and the ways this was achieved in different national settings led to different framings of the COVID-19 problem (Camporesi, Angeli, and Fabbro 2022; Pamuk 2021b).

The second key feature of the COVID-19 challenge was the speed at which it evolved (Weingart 2023). This refers, in the first place, to the rapidity with which the coronavirus spread across and within borders, which made for a constantly evolving situation on the ground and necessitated frequent updates to public health postures throughout Europe. However, the COVID-19 challenge evolved also epistemically, as the collection of ever-increasing data on the pandemic allowed scientists to amend and refine their knowledge of it – and on best countermeasures – on a virtually daily basis (Vespignani 2022). The emergence of new virus variants, with partially different behaviour and consequences on human health, was a further complication to this epistemic dynamic.

The complex and fast-evolving nature of the COVID-19 pandemic had many effects on the politics of it. In the first place, it laid bare the inherently provisional nature of science in a way that made it difficult for many to come to terms with, which in turn affected trust towards COVID-19 experts. Complexity also provided a favourable context for the circulation of misinformation, as well as attacks on established science, which were all the more effective when framed with a language of confidence and certainty. The fact that different countries in Europe and beyond had different countermeasures formulated to what was essentially the same public health challenge across borders added to the overall sense of uncertainty and scepticism towards expertise. More generally, COVID-19 complexity opened the door to different responses and analyses, as well as the emergence of a variety of sources of (alleged) expertise on the pandemic, whose trustworthiness was not always clearly distinguishable. This applied along the entire chain of events and policies but culminated quite visibly with respect to coronavirus vaccines and related policies.

The COVID-19 pandemic also occurred in societal contexts that were and had been for a while, culturally and politically polarised, primarily (but not only) due to the rise of populist and/or far-right movements all around Europe and beyond. After an initial period of the 'rally 'round the flag' effect in many countries, the debate on the COVID-19 threat and response policies became increasingly politicised, adding yet another thematic layer to the cultural and political struggles that were pervading Europe (Mazza and Scipioni 2022; Volk, de Jonge, and Rensmann 2023). Nowhere was this more obvious than in the case of restrictive measures to contain the virus (such as lockdowns and face mask mandates) and, later, the implementation of coronavirus vaccines. In all these instances, the combination of distrust towards experts and institutions and the polarisation of political values made for particularly bitter public debates (Bennett 2020; Douglas 2021).

As a final point, COVID-19 was the first pandemic unfolding in the era of the internet. This greatly influenced its information and communication environment. Citizens in democratic countries were exposed to massive flows of data and information and constant updates on the state of the coronavirus worldwide. Both traditional and new media were laser-focused on the vicissitudes of COVID-19 and related policies, giving prominence to a number of more or less institutionally embedded experts, who quickly became household names in the public debate and, depending on the audience, either heroes of the fight against the pandemic or symbols of technocratic arrogance and overreach (Anthony Fauci, at the time the director of the United States National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, was probably the single most prominent example). This context gave rise to virtuous cases of effective scientific communication and instances of overexposure on the part of some experts, with deleterious effects on public trust. At the same time, traditional and social media dynamics encouraged the emergence and establishment of all sorts of 'heretic' public figures (at times, but not always, supported by credentials in relevant academic areas) questioning the scientific and policy consensus of the moment (Cairney and Toth 2023; Hodges et al. 2022). All this took place in a communication environment that had been democratised by the spread of social media and whose low entry barriers to the production and dissemination of misinformation further exacerbated political polarisation and the mistrust of experts and policymakers (Böck and Kettemann 2024).

Studying the politics of COVID-19 expertise through citizens' juries

The conceptual framework described in the preceding sections defines the perimeter of a normative and political debate on experts' place, role, and functions in liberal-democratic systems. Empirical scholars of technocracy and the politics of expertise, coming primarily from political science and sociology, have substantiated this debate with a wealth of bottom-up data on citizens' opinions on the role of (carriers of) science and knowledge in politics and governance, including, recently, in connection to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Bertsou and Caramani 2022; Vittori and Paulis 2024; Bundi and Pattyn 2023; Dommett and Pearce 2019). Using primarily survey methods, these studies have highlighted some interesting and at times counterintuitive findings on citizens' support for expert involvement and technocratic policymaking. The methodological setup of these analyses, however, forces them to trade depth for breadth; albeit sound, survey conclusions tend to remain relatively 'thin' with respect to the complexity, nuances, and dilemmas of the politics of expertise.

The rest of the paper connects to the bottom-up analysis of the politics of (COVID-19) expertise by means of an alternative methodological approach, which complements and addresses gaps in existing research, namely the use of mini-public, and more specifically citizens' juries. The latter stems from the literature on deliberative democracy and represents a form of mini-public in which small groups of citizens engage in structured deliberation about specific issues to reach a consensus on a 'verdict' (Smith and Wales 2000). Connecting expert decision-making to citizens' juries is not unprecedented. Pamuk (2021a), for instance, advocates for the use of juries in public policy areas that require scientific input to acknowledge and respond to the inevitable political implications of expert advice. In a similar vein, Moore (2017) argues from a position of 'critical elitism' that bottom-up deliberation may enable meaningful citizen engagement with expert decision-making, albeit in a context of unavoidable knowledge asymmetries.

In what follows, we propose a slightly different use of citizens' juries, in which deliberation addresses more openly and directly the 'meta' questions of the politics of expertise rather than the substance of the issues to which experts contribute. In other words, and connected to the COVID-19 pandemic, we are less interested in a jury's stance – say, the vaccination policy of its country – and more on its position on the role of scientists in setting such a policy and connected aspects of information and trust. Ultimately, we want to leverage the citizens' jury method to achieve two main goals: (1) gather bottom-up empirical information on all the questions explored in the first part of this article – the place and role of expertise in policymaking, trust in experts, and scientific information and communication – in more granular and nuanced fashion than previous analyses; and (2) via deliberation, formulate actionable policy recommendations on how to best structure and deploy expertise in policy and society.

Within the European Union context, the politics of science and expertise does not have just a national dimension but also a transnational and a supranational one due to the many cross-border implications of COVID-19 and related national policies, as well as the EU institution's involvement in tackling the pandemic. To reflect that, we use an innovative format, which organises citizens' juries at two levels. The first is national and consists of five juries organised in France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Poland, respectively. This first level allows us to gather comparative information on a mix of national contexts representing at least four key social, political, and institutional divides within the EU: northern vs southern, richer vs poorer, large vs small, and old vs new member states. In the second stage, we bring together representatives of the five national juries into a sixth one, designed to deliberate at a transnational level, building on the results of the national-level discussions (Leruth 2023). The remainder of this section describes the composition and procedures of the six citizens' juries in greater detail.

Setting up the REGROUP citizens' juries

In line with most existing studies using citizens' juries, participants were selected using stratified random sampling. While such a selection method has a negative impact on the overall representativeness of the citizens' juries (Smith and Wales 2000), in our case it was deemed more appropriate for ensuring diversity across key demographic characteristics and facilitating meaningful deliberation among a manageable group size. This sampling method allowed us to recruit participants from different backgrounds. As such, diverse views were represented.

The selection of participants followed a three-stage process. In the first stage, the research team agreed on where to hold the citizens' juries. In consultation with the recruitment agency (Sortition Foundation, an agency specialised in recruiting mini-public participants through stratified random sampling), it was decided to recruit participants within a 30-km radius of the selected cities (namely Paris for France, Hamburg for Germany, Florence for Italy, Utrecht for the Netherlands, and Krakow for Poland). In the second stage, on-street recruiters made contact with a pool of potential participants in different districts, with respondents being asked to fill out an online form to provide the research team with information that would help us select a diverse group based on their age, residence, gender, education level and main sources of news used on a daily basis (i.e. newspapers, television, online news, or social media). Age stratification was crucial given the differential impact of COVID-19 across age groups (e.g. with respect to health risks, vaccine prioritisation, or digital adaptation capabilities). The 30-km radius set for the residence criterion allowed us to include participants from urban, suburban, as well as peripheral areas, acknowledging that pandemic experiences and access to services varied significantly by location. Gender stratification sought to ensure balanced representation, which is particularly important given the documented gendered impacts of the pandemic, from employment effects to care responsibilities. Education level was included as a proxy for socio-economic status to ensure participation across different social strata while avoiding direct questions about income, which might deter participation. A distinctive feature of our sampling strategy was the inclusion of participants' primary news consumption channels as a stratification variable. This addition was particularly relevant given the study's focus on trust and disinformation during the pandemic. It allowed us to ensure representation from citizens with varying information-seeking behaviours and exposure to different media narratives about the pandemic (e.g. including regular newspaper readers and participants who mostly get their news through their social media feeds).

In the third and final stage, the Sortition Foundation randomly selected participants from each pool of respondents. Selected participants were offered a modest incentive

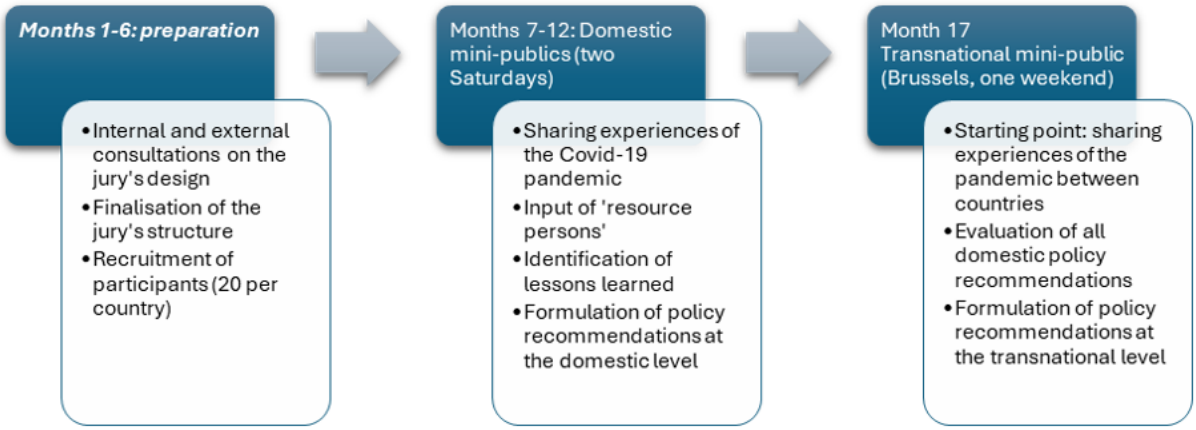
of EUR 90 per day for participating in the citizens' jury over two Saturdays. This amount was chosen to facilitate their involvement without creating undue financial motivation.

To provide continuity between the domestic and transnational levels, a random set of four participants from each of the five domestic citizens' juries was invited to take part in the European Union-level jury, which was held in Brussels in March 2024, over a weekend (Saturday and Sunday). This time, participants were randomly selected based only on their age, gender, and education level. The project covered the selected participants' travel and accommodation expenses (amounting to approximately EUR 500 per participant) to incentivise them to participate in the jury in recognition of the additional commitment required for international participation.

Each domestic citizens' jury followed a common structure to allow for comparability and methodological consistency across national contexts. The structure, which was prepared by the research team with support from the specialised third-party agency Missions Publiques, aimed at maximising unscripted discussions between participants on how they experienced the COVID-19 pandemic with regards to trust, disinformation, and the role of non-elected experts in making decisions that directly affected them. To avoid groupthink and ensure that the structure of all events would remain as comparable as possible, each citizens' jury was led by a team of two professionally trained moderators under the supervision of the research team. From the onset, participants were told to formulate and vote on policy recommendations related to the core themes covered within the framework of the project: the place of experts in policymaking, trust in expert-based decision-making, and how to tackle scientific (dis)information, and communication. To facilitate informed deliberation, participants were also offered the opportunity to ask questions and discuss with 'resource persons', namely academics and professionals with experience on the topics covered in the juries, during both days of discussion.

While participants in the transnational jury were familiar with the citizens' jury structure and the deliberative approach introduced at the domestic level, linguistic differences needed to be addressed to allow for good communication while letting participants communicate in their native languages (Verhasselt 2024). To tackle these challenges, a team of live interpreters was recruited, with participants and intervening parties (moderators, resource persons, note-takers) wearing multi-channel headsets. Figure 1 below summarises the structure of our multi-level citizens' jury approach.

Figure 1. Summary of the multi-level citizens' jury timeline, structure, and objectives



Results: Policy recommendations formulated via citizen deliberation

The REGROUP multi-level mini-public experiment generated rich data from the deliberations at both the national and transnational levels. This section analyses the key findings that emerged across the interconnected thematic areas explored. As some of these areas overlap, some themes have been brought together to offer a cohesive summary of the discussions that took place across all six citizens' jury settings.[2]

Trust in expert-based policymaking

The issue of declining political trust emerged as a critical concern across all the domestic juries. Participants widely perceived a deficit in how political institutions, especially at the EU level, communicated their decisions and rationale to citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a similar vein, the (perceived) lack of transparency as to how decisions were made concerned a majority of citizens' jury participants, who saw a clear link between transparency, trust, and compliance with policies implemented during the pandemic.

In the French jury, participants felt that politics seemed disconnected from citizens' daily realities, allowing disinformation to rapidly spread and fill the vacuum. The Dutch jury called for more transparency around the national political decision-making process, mainly on the considerations and alternatives behind policies. The Italian deliberations highlighted the pandemic's 'unsettling effect' on trust, with participants describing

2. Technical reports summarising the core findings of each citizens' jury are available on the REGROUP website: https://regroup-horizon.eu/publications/

that the politics of COVID-19 management further created uncertainty, scepticism, and confusion among themselves and a large part of the Italian population. The Polish jury put a stronger emphasis on how bureaucracy and complex procedures undermined trust, with a need for institutions to communicate more simply and empathetically. Across all domestic juries, participants perceived a link between this communication deficit and declining trust levels – a theme further emphasised at the transnational level. The German jury proposed an expert council to independently evaluate the pandemic response and 'derive lessons learned' to rebuild public trust.

While all juries saw deliberative participation as a potential solution, the Dutch jury specifically debated the legitimacy of citizens' juries in organising legally binding referendums. This was also reflected in discussions that took place during the transnational citizens' jury, with the majority of participants favouring direct democracy and holding referendums to 'craft' policy. Still, the jury could not reach a consensus on the referendum question, showcasing a split between national perspectives (Dutch participants were mostly in favour of holding such referendums, while French and Polish participants were more opposed). However, based on the discussions that took place over the two days, participants in the transnational jury clearly indicated the need for deeper and more meaningful public participation in the decision-making process.

The appropriate level of influence for non-elected experts in shaping public policies emerged as a polarising issue across the domestic mini-publics. While a majority seemed to appreciate the necessity of relying on expert advice during crises like COVID-19, there was also scepticism from a significant minority about increasing expert influence in decision-making processes.

In the French jury, several participants expressed the view that experts' legitimacy stems from their specialised knowledge in narrow fields. They argued that important decisions impacting the whole of society should ultimately remain in the hands of elected officials accountable to citizens. However, other participants highlighted the pandemic's complexity, necessitating expert input across disciplines. The Dutch deliberations revealed similar divides, with some arguing that elected politicians should be the ones weighing trade-offs and protecting minority interests, not unelected experts. However, others saw value in an independent expert advisory body to complement parliamentary committees by providing multidisciplinary perspectives.

The German jury proposed creating a 'permanent council of experts' with a diverse interdisciplinary composition to advise policymakers. The majority of Polish participants also endorsed establishing an independent expert body to advise EU institutions during crises. However, the Polish jury discussions highlighted the need for transparency around expert selection, potential conflicts of interest, and codes of conduct. There were calls for clear legal provisions defining the roles, rights, and obligations of policy

advisors. The Italian deliberations too emphasised transparency, with recommendations for disclosure of experts' funding sources, political affiliations, and curricula vitae. Participants argued that this was crucial for public trust in the expert advice shaping policies.

At the transnational level, recommendations converged further on establishing a permanent, interdisciplinary expert advisory council to advise EU institutions while preserving democratic accountability. Proposals included involving citizen representatives, ensuring diversity in experts' backgrounds, and rotating expert members regularly. There was also a perceived need for institutional mechanisms to effectively integrate expert advice into policymaking processes without ceding democratic control entirely to unelected technocrats.

Overall, the declining trust in policymaking institutions during the pandemic formed a key part of the multi-level deliberations, with citizens across contexts converging on recommendations for more transparency, public communication, and direct participation as ways to rebuild public trust. This reflects findings from other large-scale studies, according to which transparency and communication are positively linked to political trust (e.g. Enria et al. 2021). Furthermore, while valuing expert inputs, the multi-level deliberations revealed a societal tension around balancing technocratic decision-making with democratic legitimacy. Transparency around expert selection, affiliations, and a well-defined advisory role for experts emerged as vital for public trust. Box 1 summarises the policy recommendations formulated by citizens' jury participants in all six settings, with key common terms and rationales underlined.

Box 1: Summary of the policy recommendations on trust in expert-based policymaking per citizens' jury

France

- Increase transparency by regularly publishing material benefits received by high-level officials
- Introduce a fact-checking system during election periods by a dedicated body
- Create a website/app for citizens to rate the popularity of political figures
- Create a permanent, interdisciplinary European expert committee on topics such as climate and health, with members chosen by peers and mediators to communicate to the public

Germany

- Evaluation/review of measures and political responsibilities during the pandemic to derive lessons learned
- Disclose participation of political representatives in interest groups outside parties for

transparency

- Permanent Council of Experts with interdisciplinary, diverse composition to advise policy-makers, assisted by situational specialists
- Clear allocation of competencies for expert council, developing concrete action plans made public in a comprehensible manner

Italy

- Strengthen dialogue between institutions and citizens through polls, communicating decisions in a simpler fashion, and developing continuous participation mechanisms
- Include courses in training curricula to provide basics of how institutions function at all levels
- Ensure plurality of expert voices and perspectives
- Recommend a European commission to certify and promote fact-checking websites across EU, with experts verifying information

Netherlands

- Create more transparency about the national political decision-making process by explaining rationales and alternatives
- Initiate local citizens' juries with representative participants, followed by local binding referendums
- Establish transparency through registration and regulation of the public role played by non-elected experts
- Create an independent advisory body for the national parliament with diverse disciplinary experts

Poland

- Educational reforms promoting critical thinking, higher status for teachers, and modern curricula
- More frequent use of referendums, available online with simple questions after awareness campaigns
- Create clear, effective legislation at national/EU levels that is more easily understandable
- Training for professionals, citizen-friendly public administration
- Establish an expert committee and emergency action plans, with members from NGOs, scientists, practitioners, and citizens during crises
- Disclose the criteria for selecting experts, ensure their independence, and establish a code of conduct

EU (transnational) level

- Provide clear guidelines for when referendums should be held, on what EU-wide topics, how the questions should be formulated, and what the threshold that can validate the vote, and commit to providing citizens with feedback on how the result will be used

- Engage in communication campaigns at all levels of government in the member states (e.g. local, regional, national) and join forces with different stakeholders on the ground (e.g. academics/scientists, civil society, media, activists, etc.) to amplify and raise the visibility of the plurality of positions so that people are aware of the different choices and can make informed decisions
- Hold regular opinion polls that are more widely distributed with a delay in publishing between 6 and 12 months (It should be clear how polls are used by policymakers. There should be a sequence of polling, a preferendum and then a referendum)
- Create an interdisciplinary, permanent, and consultative European expert committee, whose members are chosen by their peers (The Committee should ensure the preparation and standardisation of concrete emergency action plans.)
- Ensure transparency in media communications by clearly presenting experts' credentials, disclosing any potential conflicts of interest (e.g., funding, public or private commitments), and identifying news sources

Scientific information and communication

As mentioned in the previous section, the production of complex scientific information posed a series of problems in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, mostly in fostering misinformation and disinformation on social media platforms. Across all five countries covered in this study, most participants acknowledged having been exposed to certain forms of disinformation. In addition, some argued that being exposed to competing views on pandemic management led them to question what can be considered 'the truth'. In all five domestic juries and at the transnational level, participants viewed tackling disinformation as an urgent issue, directly impacting trust and requiring immediate attention from public authorities. However, based on the recommendations formulated by participants, while public bodies should provide citizens with the tools to identify disinformation, the ultimate responsibility should be borne by individuals themselves. As such, participants favoured prevention over reaction, for instance, through sanctions directed at disinformation channels.

While most domestic citizens' juries developed recommendations to be implemented at the domestic level, participants in the French jury suggested creating a European 'label' or certification system to identify reliable online sources of scientific and health information. In the Italian deliberations, participants grappled with the multiplicity of sources available, whose conflicting information created uncertainty. Italian and Dutch participants directly called for investing in education to familiarise citizens with the scientific method and enable them to evaluate the credibility of scientific information. Throughout the setting, Polish citizens emphasised the need to reform education as a means to prevent polarisation and disinformation from spreading within society. This led them to formulate a very broad policy recommendation under the title of 'educational reforms', as the current system was perceived by participants as ineffective.

At the transnational level, in addition to a strong focus on education across all ages and professions (including journalists and politicians), discussions converged on the need for an EU-wide certification to centralise access to credible, verified scientific information and research from authoritative sources across disciplines. Participants argued this could serve as a 'single source of truth' to counter disinformation. Yet, through the discussions, there were divergent views on whether the EU should take an enforceable regulatory approach to disinformation or rely more on voluntary codes, education, and media literacy. As such, the discussions oscillated between prevention and sanction, although education was perceived as a predominant tool to tackle the issue of disinformation.

In addition to combating such disinformation, the communication of complex scientific research and data to the general public in an accessible and understandable manner emerged as a major challenge across the mini-public deliberations. It was widely acknowledged that scientific information was not disseminated in a compelling way, which in turn fostered the spread of disinformation and ultimately distrust towards pandemic management policies.

Interestingly, participants emphasised that tackling disinformation can best be achieved through transparent communication, including making data as open and accessible as possible. The Dutch jury recommended promoting open-access scientific publishing to provide more options for citizens to directly access studies and data. In the Dutch jury, participants lamented that authorities used overly complex language to communicate about the pandemic, which hampered public understanding. A core recommendation was to establish a communication channel managed by scientific journalists and civil society organisations to translate and disseminate new research findings in user-friendly formats. The French jury echoed this, calling for the training of bespoke 'science communicators' and the popularisation of scientific information through diverse multimedia formats tailored to different audiences. French participants further advocated for funding more science communication training and platforms. The German deliberations took this idea further, proposing the creation of a 'European, interdisciplinary information body' dedicated to explicating the scientific contexts, situations, and rationale behind public policies in plain language. The German jury also called for any expert advisory councils to communicate its recommendations in a fact-based and comprehensive way, so as to reach a broad audience. Participants stressed the importance of using multiple channels to reach all segments of the population. In Italy, discussions centred on the need for education to foster scientific literacy and the ability to understand and scrutinise scientific communication from authorities. There was a perceived gap between the highly technical messaging from experts and what was comprehensible to the general public during the pandemic's rapidly evolving situation.

The transnational deliberations synthesised these domestic insights into recommendations for EU-level scientific communication strategies for experts, science communicators, and journalists. The objective of such EU-wide initiatives would be to task experts and governments with distilling complex research into accessible formats tailored to diverse audiences across member states. There were also discussions regarding integrating science communication skills into educational curricula from an early age to foster scientific literacy and the ability to engage with and scrutinise the bases of public policies.

Overall, the scientific information and communication theme highlighted citizens' concerns about the chaotic development of scientific information, with the world grappling with a fast-paced and unprecedented phenomenon in the digital age. Recommendations aimed to provide access to trusted sources, enhance skills to identify misinformation, and establish authoritative repositories of verified scientific evidence as antidotes, thereby favouring preventive tools over reactions (such as sanctions) to combat the production and spread of disinformation. The need to bridge the gap between scientific expertise and public understanding through dedicated communication efforts and initiatives further emerged as a core theme across the multi-level deliberations. This was viewed as crucial for enhancing trust and the legitimacy of science-informed policymaking.

Box 2:Summary of the policy recommendations on scientific information and communication, per citizens' jury

France

- Create a European 'label' for the reliability of news sites, managed by a non-profit organisation and integrated into search engines/browsers by default
- Raise public awareness of fact-checking through training journalists, educating children, and highlighting fact-checking content in media, supported by public funding
- Introduce audits to monitor misinformation on platforms to identify problems and introduce corrective measures
- Introduce mediators in major French research institutes to communicate and popularise research through new formats, such as videos for young people
- Provide basic science education to all ages through various proposals in schools, media, and society by promoting the training of science communicators

Germany

- Establish an EU funding programme on 'Media Competence in Educational Institutions' through teacher exchanges
- Provide further training for teaching staff in media literacy

- Create a European interdisciplinary information body to explain contexts, situations, and rationale behind political decisions in plain language
- Ensure that the information body presents contexts and decisions in understandable language

Italy

- Reform the education system and introduce training methods to provide tools to unmask disinformation sources and strengthen civic education
- Provide tools to encourage active participation and critical thinking development at all ages through proposals in schools, media, and society to understand communication dynamics
- Ensure transparency by disclosing experts' CVs, conflicts of interest, and sources when communicating in media

Netherlands

- Provide further education (content and facts) about disinformation
- Further regulation of social media platforms, especially algorithms and the use of artificial intelligence
- Establish a communication channel managed by civil society, journalists, and advisors, to inform citizens about new scientific research, including through open access
- Conduct more research on targeting specific groups for tailored scientific communication

Poland

- Support education by teaching how to verify information at group and individual levels through campaigns, as well as in schools
- Create an institution to increase 'popular science' communication tailored to specific audiences
- Popularise and disseminate expert committee work through simple government websites and social media during crises

EU (transnational level)

- Strengthen education from a young age and through lifelong learning programmes to improve the citizens' ability to fact-check the information to which they are exposed
- Educate journalists and politicians on disinformation through continuous training
- Establish an EU-level institutional body to investigate disinformation practices in member states
- Establish an EU certification system for content creators
- Popularise and disseminate the results of EU expert committees' work in times of crisis through government websites, and simple, intuitive, and active social media platforms, coupled with a universal app. Expert group members should also act as mediators respon-

sible for communicating with the general public.

- Develop EU programmes that advise mediators and communicators by sharing best practices and providing funding. EU support should be dependent on the fact that research institutes have a dedicated mediator responsible for communicating and popularising the work of researchers, making it accessible to everybody
- Introduce additional open European communication channels which are independent and transparent and provide information to the general public in clear and easily accessible language, ensuring that different voices are represented. There should also be dedicated support and funding of independent experts and science communicators in different fields

Note: No vote took place on disinformation in the transnational citizen's jury due to time constraints.

Conclusions

The multi-level mini-public experiment conducted across five European countries and culminating in transnational deliberations provides a rich, empirically-grounded perspective on citizen attitudes towards the politics of expertise in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. By leveraging an innovative deliberative format, this study offers a nuanced, holistic understanding that captures both areas of consensus and points of divergence across diverse national contexts. The insights generated have significant implications for academic scholarship and policy deliberations alike.

A key finding that emerges is societal tension around the appropriate level of influence for non-elected experts in shaping public policies, especially during crises. While a majority of participants appreciated the necessity of relying on expert advice given the complexity of issues like pandemics, a significant minority expressed scepticism about increasing technocratic decision-making at the expense of democratic legitimacy. Recommendations therefore converged on establishing permanent, interdisciplinary expert advisory bodies while preserving democratic accountability through citizen involvement, transparency mechanisms, and well-defined advisory roles.

This tension is intrinsically linked to another core theme that cut across the deliberations, namely that of declining political trust, exacerbated by a perceived communication deficit from institutions during the pandemic. Participants widely felt that political authorities, especially at the EU level, failed to effectively communicate rationales, evidence bases, and alternative policy options to the public. This perceived disconnect and lack of transparency was viewed as creating an information vacuum that disinformation and misinformation were quick to fill, further eroding public trust. Recommendations therefore prioritised enhancing transparency, public communication strategies, and institutionalising direct participation channels such as referendums or mini-publics.

Underpinning these issues of trust and technocracy were concerns about scientific communication and combating disinformation surrounding scientific information. Participants expressed a desire to bridge the gap between technical, jargon-laden messaging from experts and public understanding. This fueled recommendations for dedicated scientific communication bodies and initiatives to distil complex research into accessible formats tailored to diverse audiences. Complementing this was an emphasis on enhancing skills like media literacy through education to equip citizens with tools to identify misinformation and engage critically with scientific evidence-informing policies.

Collectively, these findings reveal an evolution in societal perspectives in the wake of the pandemic. While valuing expert inputs, there is a growing demand for increased transparency, accountability, and public participation in how scientific expertise is integrated into decision-making processes. This represents a shift away from a technocratic, top-down model of governance towards a more participatory, inclusive, and deliberative approach to expertise in democracy.

From an academic standpoint, this study contributes to scholarly debates around expertise and technocracy by providing a novel, empirically grounded, and multi-level analysis of citizen perspectives. It highlights nuances often lost in quantitative studies while also revealing convergences across contexts that lend analytical weight. Methodologically, it shows the value of innovative deliberative formats in capturing rich qualitative insights while retaining aspects of demographic representation.

For policymakers and institutions, this analysis offers a comprehensive evidence base to inform strategies for rebuilding public trust, combating misinformation, enhancing scientific communication, and redefining the role of expertise in governance and democracy. The recommendations that have emerged from citizen voices across multiple levels provide a legitimacy anchored in public reason that can guide institutional reforms and policy decisions, especially within the European Union.

Ultimately, this study underscores that the COVID-19 pandemic has catalysed a reframing of the politics of expertise, which prioritises transparency, participation, and accountability as vital complements to robust scientific input. As societies navigate future crises that will invariably require heavy reliance on expert knowledge, institutionalising these principles will be crucial for sustaining democratic legitimacy. The interdisciplinary, multi-level approach modelled here provides a framework for continual dialogue between citizens, scientists, and institutions to shape this evolutionary process of reconciling expertise with democracy.

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