

NATIONAL MINI-PUBLIC REPORT: THE NETHERLANDS

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REGROUP

REBUILDING GOVERNANCE AND
RESILIENCE OUT OF THE PANDEMIC



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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.



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Content

This report summarises the organisation, discussions, and output of the citizens' jury on disinformation, knowledge circulation, and trust in politics, which took place on Saturdays 10 and 24 June 2023 in the city of Utrecht.

Organisational matters

The organization committee of this Dutch citizens' jury consisted of six people, all affiliated with the University of Groningen. Benjamin Leruth, Scientific Coordinator of REGROUP's Work Package 4, and Elsbeth Bembom, REGROUP's Project and Dissemination Manager, oversaw the process and held meetings with relevant stakeholders. Ines Calixto Piersma, Bas Kuus, and Thijs de Zee co-moderated the citizens' jury and produced the transcripts and translations of all mini-public discussions. Roan Kremer facilitated the procedure by welcoming participants, answering their questions or concerns during the day, and taking valuable notes that served as the basis for this report.

Three experts (introduced as 'resources persons' to the citizens' jury participants in order to help them produce policy recommendations) kindly accepted our invitation to play a role in the setting. [Lisanne de Blok](#) and [Marij Swinkels](#), Assistant Professors at the University of Utrecht, and [Lars Brummel](#), Postdoctoral Researcher at Leiden University, contextualised the state of play, answered questions, and provided feedback to draft recommendations formulated by the jurors. As a small token of appreciation for their participation in this event, a 50 euros gift card was given to all three resource persons.

The citizens' jury took place at the [Quinton House](#), at the heart of Utrecht's city centre. A large room was available for the plenary sessions, and two smaller rooms used for the breakout discussions.

As is the case for all domestic citizens' juries held within the framework of the REGROUP project, Sortition Foundation was subcontracted to recruit participants based on three criteria: Age, gender, and education. Sortition Foundation was also requested to make sure that the jury includes participants living outside of the city. Out of a set of interested citizens, the organisation selected participants with the objective to include a diverse set of citizens regarding several dimensions such as gender, age, education, geography, and types of consumed news sources. Out of 22 invited participants, 20 confirmed their presence for the first session. 19 showed up to attend the first day, and 18 of these took part to the second day as well. As means of compensation, a gift card of 100 euros was given to participants who attended both days.

Table 1: Distribution of participants along three dimensions

Age	
18-24	22%
25-44	39%
45-64	28%
65+	11%
Education	
Primary	0%
Secondary	5%
Tertiary 1	0%
Tertiary 2	11%
Tertiary 3	83%
Gender	
Male	50%
Female	50%

Notes: This data refers to the 18 participants that were present for both sessions of the citizens' jury. Tertiary 1 = Non-university higher education (MBO), Tertiary 2 = Bachelor or equivalent, higher professional education (HBO), Tertiary 3 = University education, bachelor or higher (WO).

Table 1 summarises the composition of the Dutch citizens' jury. In contrast with most domestic citizens' juries held within the framework of REGROUP, Dutch participants were more highly educated than average, with 83 per cent of them holding at least a bachelor's degree delivered by a university. Unfortunately, Sortition Foundation was unable to recruit participants with lower levels of education. This is most likely explained by Utrecht's demographics and geographical location as a major university city.

Content of the discussions

All domestic citizens' juries held within the framework of REGROUP followed a similar structure, which consisted of two full days of exchanges and deliberations, starting at 9:00 and concluding at 17:00. The first day focused on introductions, exploring and understanding the core issues of this jury (trust, disinformation, knowledge circulation, and the role of experts in policy-making), and sharing experiences and future perspectives. The following day was dedicated to crafting policy recommendations for the priority areas that had been identified.

Day 1: Exchanging experiences

The first day of discussion focused on the experiences of participants during the pandemic. The day started with brief introductions about the project, with participants in-

roducing themselves and stating why they are interested in getting their voices heard. Several participants seemed intrigued about the research method and its origins, and asked questions about how and why they were selected. These questions were answered by the organization team.

A moving debate immediately followed introductions, with participants being asked to position themselves in the room depending on whether they agree with a series of statements displayed on the main screen. These statements were:

- I felt competent to understand and process the information I received about Covid-19 throughout the height of the pandemic (2020-22);
- Public authorities communicated the decisions in an effective way;
- The press and traditional media platforms dealt well with the Covid-19 situation;
- I have been confronted to fake news regularly during the pandemic;
- The role played by non-elected experts, such as scientists involved in making political decisions (e.g., regarding the lockdowns, curfews, closing borders, rolling out vaccines) was fair during the pandemic;
- Society is now well-equipped to deal with pandemics in the long-term;
- I personally feel more confident to deal with and understand scenarios like the pandemic in the long-term.

These statements allowed participants to voice their views but also their disagreements on some core issues that arose during the pandemic. As far as disinformation is concerned, some participants displayed high levels of confidence in distinguishing real news from fake ones, and believed the experience of the pandemic even improved their ability to identify disinformation:

[I began] to learn which sources of information you trust [...], which ones [I] feel comfortable with.

Some, however, referred to the information overload as being a challenge to make sense of what was going on, especially with regards to the various domestic policies being enforced across the continent. This led some participants to question whether Dutch policies were the most appropriate ones. The Swedish experience was often referred to, as illustrated by the following quote:

You also get information about Germany, England, from Denmark, Sweden. So, yes, I found that so difficult, that you also get so much information from other countries, how they are there and how they handle it there. And that information and the conclusions I drew from that, they didn't exactly match up. And I found that very confusing. Should I listen to Dutch experts or should I listen to Swedish experts?

As far as knowledge circulation is concerned, most participants believed the government could have done better in communicating policies in a more 'user-friendly' way. The effectiveness of press conferences held by the Dutch government and experts proved to be a divisive topic among participants, with some arguing they were unclear with much complex language being used, and others stating that these press conferences were well-structured and professional.

In these initial discussions, participants mostly agreed that the role played by the Dutch Outbreak Management Team was effective, although some voiced their concerns over its composition, arguing that it would have been useful to have additional voices as part of this team, especially regarding the social aspect of decisions made by the government.

Following these initial discussions, a 14-minutes long video common to all domestic citizens' juries was presented to the participants (in English, with Dutch subtitles). This common video aimed at providing common definitions to the core concepts explored within the framework of the citizens' jury. This video was immediately followed by presentations by two resources persons, Lisanne de Blok and Marij Swinkels, who focused on the state of trust in Dutch politics during the pandemic as well as the role played by experts in shaping decisions. Subsequent questions from participants focused on the nature of conducting research to measure political trust.

In the afternoon session, participants were tasked to envision an ideal-case scenario in which a new pandemic outbreak occurs in the future, but the society is well-prepared to address it. The jury was divided into two breakout groups to discuss this scenario in smaller settings. The first breakout group highlighted the need for transparency and openness in the decision-making processes, the effective protection of more vulnerable people in society, more open discussions between experts and, broadly speaking, a stronger emphasis on the social dimension in the context of such a pandemic. In the second breakout group, participants talked about the potential existence of a 'play-book' or ready-made set of policies to action at the beginning of pandemic outbreaks, stronger levels of education to allow citizens to identify disinformation as well as the existence of a new government agency to counter such instances of disinformation.

In a subsequent breakout session, participants were tasked to identify concrete ideas or issues that should be prioritized in order to reach such an ideal-case scenario. These ideas were to be directly related to the four core themes covered in this jury (trust,

disinformation, scientific communication, and the role of non-elected experts in policy-making). In total, eight ideas were formulated in these breakout sessions. In a final plenary session held before closing this first day of deliberation, participants ranked these proposals individually, based on what they feel most important to discuss in the second day. The ranking was as follows:

1. Trust in political institutions: Promoting active citizenship (16%)
2. Unelected experts: Legal provision and definition of their role in the decision-making process (16%)
3. Scientific communication: 'Tailor-made' delivery of information to citizens (14%);
4. Disinformation: Further education on identifying disinformation (13%);
5. Disinformation: Further regulation, especially with regards to algorithms and AI (12%);
6. Trust in political institutions: More transparency and open-accessibility of government documents (11%);
7. Scientific information: Transparency in the way decisions are being taken (11%);
8. Non-elected experts: Transparency in their visions and positions (4%);

These ideas and subsequent rankings served as the bases for formulating policy recommendations on the second day of deliberation, which took place two weeks later.

Day 2: Deliberation and crafting recommendations

The second day of deliberation built on discussions from the previous day, with participants starting their discussions based on the four top ideas selected by participants (promoting active citizenship; legal provisions on the role of unelected experts; the delivery of information to citizens; and education to identify disinformation). The participants' core task was to formulate at least two concrete policy recommendations for each idea. To do so, participants were subdivided into the same breakout groups as Day 1. They were to receive input from a resource person to determine whether their draft recommendations were concrete enough and also feasible.

On scientific communication, participants quickly discussed the need to make complex information more accessible and legible to the broader population:

[A]t the scientific institutes, as for example in this concrete case with a pandemic, then the RIVM [National Institute for Public Health and the Environment], then maybe more communication scientists should work there, who can better make that translation from the scientific information to the citizens.

Discussions further focused on the actors that would deliver such information, and how to prevent immediate distrust from a part of the population:

How can you give reliable information to citizens, without them immediately distrusting it, because it comes from above from the public authority?

As far as political trust and the need to promote active citizenship are concerned, participants quickly focused on other countries' experiences of participatory democracy. The idea of institutionalising citizens' juries was also discussed by the group. While most participants agreed about the benefits of deliberation, one particularly voiced concerns about the representativeness and legitimacy of citizens' juries, given that politicians are elected to represent the interests of citizens:

What am I supposed to imagine with [a citizens' jury]? And what is it going to judge on? About what decisions? Politics is there to make the trade-offs, especially so that the majority doesn't take it out on the minority saying, I'm the boss. No, the majority has to take the minority into account.

Another concern that arose from the discussion is the impact citizens' juries may have on trust, if the decisions made by participants are not being taken into account:

There are so many [...] citizens' juries that are then done and if nothing is done with them, what does that do to the trust?

On education and disinformation, all participants agreed that school curriculums should include identifying fake news as a compulsory course as early as possible (possibly in primary school), and that older generations should also receive adequate training:

[I]t is important to teach children at school from an early age and to include [disinformation] in the curriculum. We think that might be easier to implement because you can make it compulsory. But you should also see if you can set up pathways for older generations. Because, if you look at which groups in society are susceptible to fake news, we think it is certainly not just young people. Because you also see older people who have not grown up at all in such a digital world with all this social media and all these, still exponential growth of sources where information can come from.

On the role of unelected experts, participants focused on the need to disclose conflicts of interests and avoid biases as much as possible:

The situation that such politics is advised by experts is necessary for me, I think. Only then it is very important, yes this is actually your idea what I am telling you, but that so there is no conflict of interest, and you could maybe make legal provisions about that, for example, that people in certain advisory bodies are not allowed to work in these sectors or something like that.

After an initial morning of breakout discussions, Lars Brummel intervened as resource person to provide feedback to the initial recommendations crafted by participants. In his interventions, Lars Brummel focuses on how to define ‘fake news’, the problems of trust in the Netherlands, how to make scientific research more accessible, and issues surrounding governance in general. Questions were being given to participants as a means to provide feedback on their initial recommendations (for instance: “In a democracy, how do you deal with sounds and information that might be anti-democratic? Should there be room for that in a democracy?”).

Following a lunch break in which participants could further exchange in an informal setting with the resource person, breakout sessions took place again until participants were happy with the formulation of their policy recommendations.

Policy recommendations

At the end of the second day of deliberation, participants to the Dutch citizens’ jury reconvened in a plenary session to present the policy recommendations that were crafted in breakout sessions. Spokespersons for each of the breakout group justified and gave more substance to the policy recommendations, and all participants had the opportunity to ask questions about these. Ultimately, participants were tasked to individually rank all these recommendations in order of preference.

Table 2: Ranking of policy recommendations of the Dutch citizens’ jury

Ranking	Policy recommendations	Points
1	Establishing a communication channel, managed by civil society, journalistic, advisory, administrative and academic organisations, that uses videos, podcasts, and newsletters to inform citizens about new scientific research, including through Open Access channels.	5.82
2	Creating more transparency about the national political decision-making process by presenting the political considerations and rejected alternative options behind decisions in understandable language (B1)	5.18

3	Providing further education (content and facts) about disinformation	4.88
4	Initiating local citizens' juries with a representative group of participants, followed by a local binding referendum and encouraging voluntary participation in these citizens' juries	4.65
5	Transparency through registration and regulation of the public role played by advisory, non-elected experts	4.53
6	Creation and implementation of an independent advisory body for the national parliament	4
7	Stimulating scientific journalism through the dissemination and contextualization of new scientific information*	3.35
8	More research on targeting groups for scientific communication	3.06

Notes: Policy recommendations translated from Dutch.

The shown point score is based on the individual rankings of the eight policy recommendations in a point score between 1 and 8 (with 8 as the highest priority).

* Prior to the vote, participants agreed that this policy recommendation should be considered as a feature of the recommendation ranked first. This is further explained below.

Table 2 offers an overview of the policy recommendations ranked by participants. Overall, across all four themes explored within the framework of this citizens' jury, participants put a strong emphasis on the accessibility of scientific information and the need for more transparency in the decision-making process. The seven policy recommendations were presented by the spokespersons of the citizens' jury as follows:

Recommendation 1:

Establishing a communication channel on scientific information: This channel aims at fostering dialogue between different parts of the society, with the inclusion of an online forum for discussion, "*with the condition that anonymous reactions are not possible - You can only comment using your own name*". This communication channel is to be organised and managed by "*a certain cluster of civil society organisations, [...] with scientific journalists playing an important role in any case, because they will have to play an important role between the translation of science and the message towards citizens*". They also argued that Open Access channels should be further promoted, especially to provide more options for citizens to access scientific studies. Before the vote, participants unanimously agreed to merge this recommendation with one made by another breakout group with regards to the promotion and stimulation of scientific journalism, given the role they would like these journalists to play in being responsible for this communication channel. These two proposals were deemed to be related to the same idea by all participants.

Recommendation 2:

Transparency about the national political decision-making process: Here, participants highlighted the complexity of the language used in public policy, especially when it comes to complex phenomena such as pandemics. *“[We want] to ask the government, the moment a decision is taken, to explain it in understandable language. That it be explained in understandable language and that it be explained what the alternatives and considerations were”*.

Recommendation 3:

Providing further education about disinformation: In line with discussions that took place at the beginning of Day 1, participants believe that more education need to be provided in order for citizens to be able to identify fake news. This is best done in the early stages of life, with participants arguing that such education should be part of the curriculum at primary school level. As mentioned by a participant, *“it is mainly about teaching the skills of recognising disinformation and teaching tools where you gather the right information. So it’s not so much about telling people what the right thing is, but teaching them how to get the right thing, find it. And then they get to decide for themselves what the good is”*.

Recommendation 4:

Initiating local citizens’ juries, with binding referendum, to promote active citizenship and restore trust towards politics. Here, participants argued that holding juries at the local level would work best as a starting point: *“In the first instance it should just be local. And should the experience be so good that you can take it to the national level. That’s possible, but let’s start small, because that’s generally focusing on people’s experience and as close to home as possible”*. These juries should be followed by a legally binding referendum on the decisions made, to ensure the discussions made by the jury are being taken seriously by the local authorities.

Recommendation 5:

Transparency over the role played by non-elected experts: Participants suggest the creation of a registry, similar to the ones used in medical professions, to see *“why experts are experts”*. In this recommendation, they also suggested the creation of a “code of conduct” to determine the rights and obligations of experts involved in advising public policy.

Recommendation 6:

The creation of an independent advisory body to the parliament: This body would consist of experts from different disciplines and parts of the society: *“And that should be diverse in both background of the experts, both as experts by experience, as scien-*

tific experts and also in the demographic characteristics, so that ultimately there is intersubjectivity in the experts advising parliament”. Participants argued that such a permanent advisory body would be beneficial to the parliament because the institution “gets a lot of information sent to them by the government in particular. And they often don’t have the time to get through that properly. And so, it’s useful to have not a temporary but a permanent advisory body that they can use, where there are experts, so that they can hear from different angles what the different views are. And not having to quickly work through those few pages in the evening for tomorrow morning”.

Recommendation 7:

More research on how to reach specific target groups to provide scientific communication. In both days of deliberation, participants to the citizens’ jury agreed that information needs to be tailor-made to citizens (see Day 1, idea #3), but the group could not agree on how to determine these target groups. They therefore suggested that more research need to be conducted on the matter.

To better understand the underlying factors motivating this ranking, we had the participants evaluate these recommendations regarding efficiency, effectiveness, their societal divisiveness, and their political feasibility using a five-level Likert scale. Participants were asked to fill a Google Form to determine whether each policy recommendation would be effective (i.e., reaching their goals), efficient (i.e., providing a good use of resources), and/or polarising the society (i.e., proving to be divisive). Table 3 below summarises the findings of this survey.

Table 3: Individual assessment of policy recommendations in terms of their effectiveness, efficiency, and polarizing effects

Ranking	Policy recommendations	Effectiveness	Efficiency	Polarization
1	Establishing a new communication channel and stimulating scientific journalism	4	3.7	2.92
2	More transparency about the national political decision-making process	4.23	3.47	2.24
3	Further education on disinformation	4.4	4.06	2.53
4	Local citizens’ juries and binding referendum	3.7	3.35	2.88
5	Transparency about the role of non-elected experts (registration and regulation)	4.29	4.41	2.65

6	Advisory body for the parliament	4.29	3.59	2.71
7	More research on target groups for information	3.65	3.24	2.41

Unsurprisingly, this survey demonstrates that participants are quite supportive of the positive impact of their policy recommendations. Three recommendations particularly stand out, and both are related to the broader issue of access to information: More education to identify disinformation, more transparency about the decision-making process, and more transparency about the role and background of non-elected experts. These three recommendations were particularly perceived as effective and efficient. It is worth noting that overall, participants believe most of these recommendations carry a minor risk to divide society further, with all policy recommendations scoring an average of 2.62 on the five-points Likert scale on polarization. However, none of these recommendations were perceived as particularly polarizing.

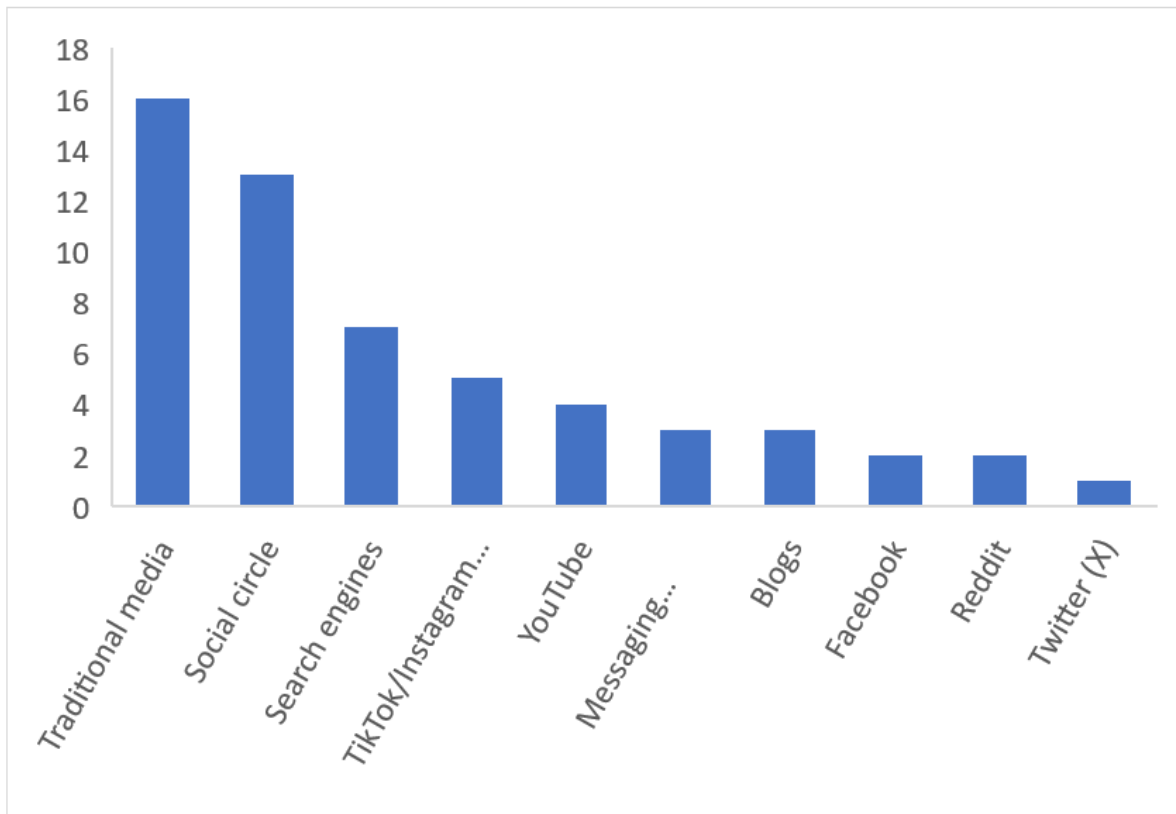
Attitudinal study

At the beginning of the first day of deliberation and at the end of the event on Day 2, participants were submitted a questionnaire in order to (1) analyse their attitudes towards the four themes covered in the citizens' jury and (2) determine whether participating in this citizens' jury generates some attitudinal change.

Background information about participants:

In addition to the socio-economic background summarised in Table 1, participants were asked general questions about their news consumption and trust in society. Figure 1 shows that the majority of participants consume their news through traditional media sources and through their social circles (family, friends, colleagues), with very few using social media channels.

Figure 1: News consumption habits of Dutch citizens' jury participants (N=18)



As far as the participants' trust in institutions and actors are concerned, one can notice significant variation, with participants having very little trust in social media companies (with all participants stating they tend not to trust these companies at the end of Day 2), while trust in scientific experts remained high throughout the event (100% before the event, 94% after the event). Between Day 1 and Day 2, any occurrence of attitudinal changes were statistically insignificant.

Table 4: Dutch citizens' jury participants' trust in political institutions and actors

Institution/actor	Before session 1	After session 2	Evolution of trust	Stat. significant change
The media	0.59	0.59	Same	No
Political parties	0.5	0.44	Less	No
Regional or local public authorities	0.94	0.89	Less	No
The police	0.89	0.83	Less	No
Public administration in our country	0.61	0.61	Same	No
Health and medical staff in our country	0.94	0.94	Same	No
Scientific experts	1	0.94	Less	No
Social media companies	0.11	0.00	Less	No

Institution/actor	Before session 1	After session 2	Evolution of trust	Stat. significant change
The national government	0.72	0.72	Same	No
The national parliament	0.72	0.72	Same	No
The European Union	0.78	0.72	Less	No

Notes: The asked question was “How much trust do you have in certain institutions? Question translated into Dutch. For each of the following institutions, do you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it?” The shown data is based on two answer options, 0 for the tendency to not trust and 1 for the tendency to trust, aggregated across participants.

The identification of statistical significance is based on t-tests.

A series of attitudinal questions based on pre-existing surveys (Eurobarometer, European Social Survey, and other surveys based on deliberative research) were then asked to participants. These questions were all related to the themes covered within the framework of the citizens’ jury. The results, summarized in Table 5, show very little statistically significant change between both sessions, but illustrate that most participants agree that disinformation is a major problem for the Dutch society. Somewhat paradoxically, statistically significant attitudinal change occurred for two related questions: On the one hand, participants were more sceptical in other people’s capacity to understand their own needs; on the other hand, more participants agreed that decisions about science and technology should reflect the views of the majority of the population.

Table 5: Participants’ agreement with various statements

Statement	Before session 1	After session 2	Evolution of agreement	Statistically significant change
(a) Disinformation is a major problem in our society	3.67	3.72	More	No
(b) Scientific experts must play an active role to shape public policy	3.89	3.76	Less	No
(c) Information about the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic was well communicated by the government	2.89	2.44	Less	No
(d) I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialised politician	2.67	2.22	Less	No
(e) Politicians should be like managers and fix what does not work in society	2.67	2.94	More	No
(f) The leaders of my country should be more educated and skilled than ordinary citizens	3.67	3.67	Same	No
(g) Social problems should be addressed based on scientific evidence, not ideological preferences	3.22	3.39	More	No
(h) The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions	2.5	2.28	Less	No

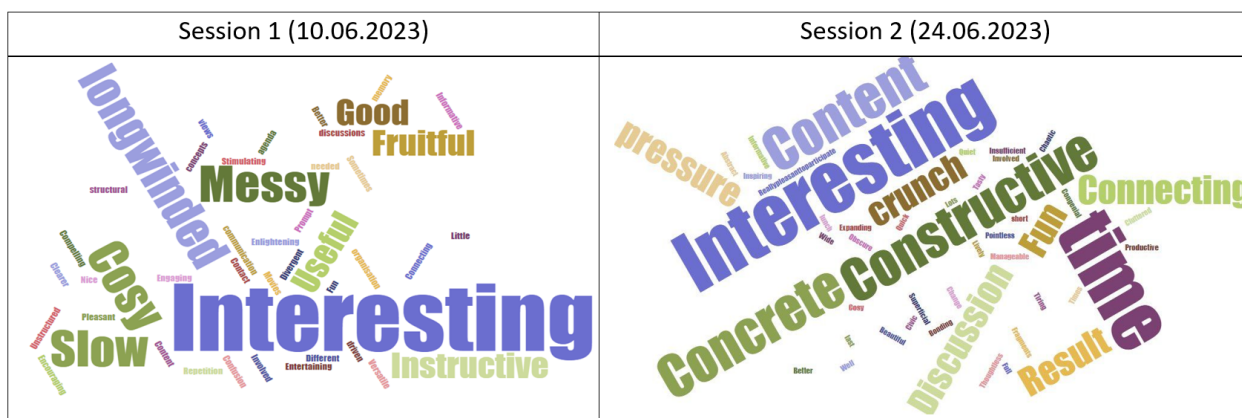
(i) Most citizens have all the competences required to make political decisions	2.44	2.22	Less	No
(j) Most citizens are capable of understanding the needs of people like me	3.72	3	Less	Yes
(k) Politicians do not understand what is going on in society	3	3.06	More	No
(l) Scientific experts know best what is good for people	2.53	3.06	More	No
(m) Decisions about science and technology should be based mainly on what the majority of people in a country think	1.76	2	More	Yes
(n) The government does enough to tackle dis-information	2.36	2.27	Less	No

Notes: The asked question was “To what extent do you agree with the following statements?” Question translated into Dutch. The shown data is based on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, with 1 describing strong disagreement and 5 strong agreement and aggregated across participants. The identification of statistical significance is based on t-tests.

Feedback from participants and resource persons

Participation in this citizens’ jury was a first for all participants, as well as for the resource persons involved in the project. Throughout Day 1, participants were particularly curious and somewhat sceptical of the process, by asking several questions about the event’s structure, its scientific validity, as well as the reasons why they were selected. The objectives of the event remained unclear at the end of Day 1, as reflected in the word cloud produced by participants at the end of the day. In contrast, Day 2 appeared to be a more positive experience for all participants, with most of them voicing their interest in taking part in the transnational citizens’ jury to be held in Brussels in March 2024. In sum, while participants first believed the experience sharing exercises that took place in Day 1 were somewhat messy and unstructured (while some participants remained positive by finding discussions “interesting” and “fruitful”), most changed their views at the end of Day 2. The main point of criticism that was voiced by some participants relates to the time pressure, as the event only took place over two days. Some argued that an additional day of discussion would have been useful to further justify their recommendations.

Figure 2: Word clouds



Self-evaluation

Looking back at the proceedings, the Dutch citizens' jury on trust, disinformation, knowledge circulation, and the role of experts in decision-making was a very positive experience, with participants delivering seven solid and well-justified proposals that will be discussed at the transnational level in March 2024. Despite the tight schedule (meetings over two Saturdays), the level of engagement and enthusiasm of participants was particularly remarkable. The moderators and facilitators, who took part in such a setting for the first time, received adequate training before the event and conducted the citizens' jury in a highly professional way, allowing for all participants to voice their views in a friendly and constructive atmosphere. The high retention level between Day 1 and Day 2 was another positive aspect of this mini-public, with only one participant dropping out.

The main issue that ought to be addressed in the future is the high level of education among most participants: Among all five REGROUP citizens' juries conducted at the domestic level, the Dutch one consists of the most highly educated participants. This could have been avoided by widening recruitment strategies with further financial resources (including a higher incentive for participants). Accordingly, looking back, the process of recruiting participants could have been more specialised. Future multi-level mini-public experiments should therefore consider sending out invitation letters to a larger sample of the local/regional targeted population.