

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reconceptualizing and Improving Member Participation in Large Cooperatives: Insights from Deliberative Democracy and Deliberative Mini-Publics

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Abstract

Member control is a central cooperative value that depends on members having sufficient opportunities to participate in decision-making. Most members of large cooperatives participate in decision-making through non-candidacy participation, which entails responsibilities including electing and monitoring their elected representatives and ratifying resolutions and reports. Non-candidacy participation is crucial to ensure that collective decisions and the conduct of representatives are aligned with the interests of the broader membership. However, prior research points to concerns about the level and quality of non-candidacy participation. In this essay, I draw on research on deliberative democracy to propose a novel solution to address these concerns. I begin by disentangling two commonly conflated forms of non-candidacy participation: aggregative and deliberative. I then argue that large cooperatives could improve both forms of participation through the targeted use of deliberative mini-publics. In doing so, I contribute to research on large cooperatives by advancing a novel solution to improving non-candidacy participation and cooperative governance more broadly, articulating a more fine-grained conception of participation to inform future research, and identifying a novel way of conceptualizing and enacting expertise in these organizations.

Keywords: *Cooperatives; Cooperative governance; Deliberative democracy; Deliberative mini-publics*

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In recent years, we have seen a surge in interest in cooperatives. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how cooperatives can make crucial contributions to their members and the communities they are embedded in during periods of crisis (Billiet et al., 2021). Meanwhile, a growing number of cooperatives are being established as a response to concerns about the precarity and exploitation brought on by investor-owned digital platforms (Bunders et al., 2022). More broadly, those spearheading efforts to democratize work (Battilana et al., 2022) and imagining how humans can organize themselves in a world of hyper-automation (Rothschild, 2021) see cooperatives as a promising model.

Perhaps what distinguishes the governance of cooperatives most from that of their investor-owned peers and, in turn, has helped draw so much interest is that cooperatives exist to serve their members and, as such, are owned and controlled by them (Michaud & Audebrand, 2022). The principle of democratic member control is crucial here. This principle emphasizes how members, as owners of the cooperative, have ultimate

decision-making authority that they exercise according to the principle of one member, one vote (Audebrand, 2017; Pönkä, 2018). Democratic control, though, depends on members having sufficient formal opportunities to shape policy decisions through active participation in decision-making (Birchall, 1999). Such participation has long been the object of significant scholarly attention among cooperative researchers (e.g., Birchall & Simmons, 2004a, 2004b; Vieta et al., 2016), particularly among those advocating for more participatory conceptions of democracy (Kokkinidis, 2015; Rothschild, 2016). However, despite the attention it has received, participation remains notoriously challenging for cooperatives to foster in practice.

Members' opportunities to participate in the decision-making of their cooperatives vary widely based on their size. Smaller cooperatives are often governed based on the principles of direct democracy, which, at its core, refers to members of a polity having a direct and unmediated ability to influence decision-making (Altman, 2010; Carson & Martin, 1999). The most common manifestation of member participation in

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smaller cooperatives is general meetings among all members to make important decisions together (see, e.g., Cornforth, 1995; Kokkinidis, 2015). As cooperatives become larger, the nature of member participation shifts markedly as governance structures become more complex. There is no clear-cut standard for what membership size, geographic scope, or amount of revenue is required for a cooperative to be classified as large. As such, for this paper, I draw on Birchall and Simmons's (2004a) conception of large cooperatives, which focuses on changes in governance structures as opposed to specific descriptive thresholds. Per their conceptualization, a large cooperative is one in which:

most decisions are made by a management team and a board, and where members cannot be involved in day to day decision-making but can only hope to control the general direction of the business, and to call their elected directors and managers to account for their actions. (Birchall & Simmons, 2004a, p. 488)

In large cooperatives, participation in decision-making can take various forms (Birchall, 1999; Cechin et al., 2013). It is possible to tease out two overarching forms that I term *candidacy participation* and *non-candidacy participation* due to a lack of appropriate constructs in the literature that capture the unique governance models used in large cooperatives. In contrast with most societal governments, large cooperatives overlay representative democracy—which refers to a governing system in which one or more representatives, usually selected through elections, are authorized to make decisions on behalf of the broader population (Carson & Martin, 1999; Greenberg, 1984)—onto the previously mentioned model of direct democracy. While details vary across cooperatives (see, e.g., Birchall, 2017; Gunn, 1984; Hernandez, 2006), the governance structures of large cooperatives are often grounded in what has been termed the traditional model of cooperative governance, which is a descriptive model of the baseline governance structures in many large cooperatives (Bijman et al., 2013, 2014; see also Cechin et al., 2013; Chaves et al., 2008). This and analogous models focus on the responsibilities granted to two major decision-making organs—the board of directors and the general assembly—that are often legally required in most jurisdictions (Henrÿ, 2005).

Members on the board of directors, elected by the broader membership, initiate and execute decisions on behalf of the cooperative and, when applicable, supervise and control any managers. Board members can implement nonstrategic decisions directly but can only implement key strategic decisions if the membership ratifies them. They provide the general assembly with resolutions for these strategic decisions, alongside reports that also require ratification and, frequently, a proposed list of candidates for election to the board of directors. What I term *candidacy participation* refers to members opting to put themselves forward as candidates to serve as formal elected representatives on the board of directors or other related committees.

In the political science literature, this type of representation is usually termed electoral representation (Urbinati & Warren, 2008). In addition to being legally required in many contexts, it is also often seen as a practical necessity in light of the challenges, costs, and impracticalities of relying solely on direct democracy to make decisions when the size of the membership increases (Cornforth, 1995; Greenberg, 1984; Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004). However, significant concerns have been raised about how electoral representation in large cooperatives can result in low levels of substantive representation (the degree to which representatives further the interests of those they represent, Pitkin, 1967) and descriptive representation (the degree to which representatives share the same characteristics as those they represent, Pitkin, 1967) of the broader membership, and how it can create divisions and distinctions between members and their representatives (Barros & Michaud, 2020; Basterretxea et al., 2020; Kokkinidis, 2012; Pek, 2021).

The general assembly, in turn, formally remains the principal decision-making organ of the cooperatives that, at least ostensibly, grants members significant participation opportunities and responsibilities (Freundlich et al., 2009; Greenberg, 1984; Henrÿ, 2005). These include electing representatives, holding representatives to account, providing feedback on and ratifying resolutions and reports, and proposing new topics of discussion and resolutions (Bijman et al., 2014; Cechin et al., 2013; Freundlich et al., 2009; Hernandez, 2006). While the bulk of these activities occur synchronously at a general assembly, some, like proposing resolutions ahead of general assemblies, can occur asynchronously (Sammallahti & Doherty, 2021). These activities all fall under what I term *non-candidacy participation*, which denotes all the ways members can participate in decision-making aside from serving as candidates for formal representative roles. Non-candidacy participation is crucial in engendering good governance (Birchall, 2015, 2017). Without it, cooperatives can face governance failures and are unlikely to succeed in the long run (Bhuyan, 2007; Birchall, 2012). Given the abovementioned concerns about elected representatives, non-candidacy participation can foster decision-making that is responsive to the needs of the broader membership, prevent and reduce oligarchy among representatives, and increase the legitimacy of decisions made (Birchall, 1999; Birchall & Simmons, 2004b; Pönkä, 2018; Rothschild, 2016).

Nevertheless, despite its importance and existing opportunities for it in the traditional model of cooperative governance, researchers often highlight two significant shortcomings pertaining to non-candidacy participation based on two main dimensions. The first is the level of participation, which is often assessed based on the extent to which different groups of members attend general meetings and vote in elections (e.g., Cechin et al., 2013; Romero & Pérez, 2003; Spear, 2004). The level of participation is often very low (Lees & Volkers, 1996; Spear, 2004), though, in some instances, it can be higher on some topics, like

whether to retain bonuses (e.g., Basterretxea et al., 2020). Moreover, it is often uneven, with some groups of members participating more than others (Cechin et al., 2013; Romero & Pérez, 2003). The second is the quality of participation, whereby researchers stress the importance of members making well-informed and reasoned decisions based on deliberations with each other (Battilana et al., 2018; Brummer et al., 2017; Malleson, 2013; Rothschild, 2016). Unfortunately, the quality of participation is often lacking, too, with prior work pointing to issues like poorly informed and unreflective contributions to decision-making (Basterretxea et al., 2020; Hernandez, 2006; Kasmir, 1996) and experiences of more subtle coercion and self-censorship across different groups of members (Hacker & Elcorobairutia, 1987; Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004). It is no surprise, therefore, that researchers have highlighted the importance of unpacking the dynamics of participation in cooperatives and identifying new ways in which to foster it (Birchall, 1999, 2015; Birchall & Simmons, 2004b; Cheney et al., 2014; Malleson, 2013).

Some prior research has pointed to potential solutions to improving general assemblies, such as boosting participation through vouchers and engaging activities (Gunn, 1984; Hernandez, 2006) and improving the quality of participation through facilitation and better access to information (Gamson & Levin, 1984; Greenberg, 1984). While these strategies are no doubt helpful, they face significant limitations. First, because general assemblies rely on self-selection, participation levels are likely to remain uneven regardless of what incentives are used, as some groups of members will be more likely to participate than others. We know from political science research that relying on self-selection tends to result in the oversampling of those with a greater stake or greater interest in a particular topic, resulting in policy-making disproportionately reflecting their views (Carson & Martin, 1999; Einstein et al., 2019). Additionally, even if they occur multiple times a year, general assemblies provide insufficient opportunities for members to adequately deliberate when undertaking all of their abovementioned responsibilities (Malleson, 2013). In light of these concerns, some researchers have advocated for additional opportunities for member participation in decision-making that often come in two forms. The first is creating additional opportunities for candidacy participation, like member councils or social councils (Bijman et al., 2013; Malleson, 2013). In prioritizing candidacy participation, though, these practices inadvertently displace opportunities for non-candidacy participation and risk exacerbating the abovementioned concerns about electoral representation in large cooperatives. The second emphasizes cultivating more informal interactions among members, like water-cooler conversations that can indirectly influence decision-making (e.g., Jaumier, 2017; Sobering, 2019). These approaches, though, do not have a formal connection to decision-making processes, are likely to result in uneven participation, and may be

hampered by their lack of enabling practices like agendas, background information, and facilitation. Thus, while prior work points to the limitations of relying solely on general assemblies, it leaves us with a limited understanding of specific forms of non-candidacy participation that could improve the level and quality of member participation within the traditional model of cooperative governance.

In this essay, I address this challenge by rethinking how we conceptualize and practice non-candidacy participation. Specifically, drawing on insights from deliberative democracy (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004), I argue for a disentangling between two forms of non-candidacy participation that are often viewed as interchangeable and combined in general assemblies—deliberation and voting—and the use of solutions tailored to each. To improve both forms, I argue for the use of *deliberative mini-publics*, which are:

carefully designed forums where a representative subset of the wider population come together to engage in open, inclusive, informed and consequential discussions on one or more issues. (Curato et al., 2021, p. 3, see also Pateman, 2012; Warren & Gastil, 2015)

Drawing on a rich body of political science research that has explored different functions deliberative mini-publics could perform in specific democratic systems (e.g., Fishkin, 2018; Gastil & Richards, 2013), I develop a framework of four specific applications of deliberative mini-publics that could be incorporated into large cooperatives' governance systems alongside general assemblies and more wideranging opportunities for voting. In doing so, as I argue in the discussion, my essay contributes to research on the governance of large cooperatives by advancing a novel way of improving non-candidacy participation, articulating a more fine-grained conception of participation to inform future research and identifying a novel way of conceptualizing and enacting expertise in these organizations.

My arguments proceed as follows. I begin by disentangling aggregative and deliberative forms of non-candidacy participation. I then introduce deliberative mini-publics and develop a framework of how they could be applied in large cooperatives. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of my contributions, practical considerations, and avenues for future research.

A deliberative reconceptualization of non-candidacy participation

Deliberative democracy is a burgeoning field of research in political science that

is grounded in an ideal in which people come together, on the basis of equal status and mutual respect, to discuss the political issues they face and, on the basis of those discussions, decide on the policies that will then affect their lives. (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 2)

Proponents of deliberative democracy have long argued that legitimate decision-making requires deliberation, and that, in turn, aggregative forms of democracy that center on combining voters' preferences through voting processes are insufficient (Cohen, 1989; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Though as we will see shortly, aggregative and deliberative forms of democracy are intrinsically connected and can be synergistic (e.g., Landemore, 2020; Smith, 2009). As such, deliberative democracy is compatible with both direct and representative forms of democracy (Novkovic & Miner, 2015; Setälä, 2021; Smith, 2009). In the next section, drawing on these insights, I distinguish between aggregative and deliberative forms of non-candidacy participation embedded within the traditional model of cooperative governance. I then discuss how deliberative mini-publics—a prolific democratic practice—could be institutionalized in large cooperatives as a complementary means of non-candidacy participation.

Disentangling non-candidacy participation

As a first step, it is helpful to conceptually disentangle deliberation from voting when analyzing the various participation opportunities and responsibilities associated with non-candidacy participation in large cooperatives, as prior research often treats them as interchangeable. Based on prior research discussing the distribution of these opportunities and responsibilities in the traditional model of cooperative governance that I had discussed earlier, I identify two main aggregative forms of non-candidacy participation and four main deliberative forms of non-candidacy participation.

Regarding aggregative forms, the first form is voting to elect their representatives (Freundlich et al., 2009; Hernandez, 2006). The second is voting on various resolutions (Freundlich et al., 2009; Reynolds et al., 1997), which can either take the form of what political scientists term initiatives or referenda, both of which fall under the umbrella of what has been termed direct legislation (Smith, 2009) or popular vote processes (Cheneval & el-Wakil, 2018). The key factor distinguishing them is the scope of power they grant to citizens: Initiatives grant 'a collective right to statute or propose a piece of legislation or policy for popular vote', whereas referendums grant 'a collective right to refuse (or accept) a decision or proposition of elected authorities' (Cheneval & el-Wakil, 2018, p. 294). In the context of large cooperatives, referenda are very common as the board of directors often prompts members to approve key documents or resolutions. Initiatives are rare but do sometimes take place, such as when members put forward a resolution to recall a representative or implement a new policy (e.g., Sammallahti & Doherty, 2021). These aggregative forms of non-candidacy participation could be assessed based on the level of participation and the extent to which voting decisions

are informed and reflective. Based on my earlier discussion of research evaluating non-candidacy participation, research points to low levels of participation (Ashforth & Reingen, 2014; Spear, 2004) and instances of ill-informed and unreflective voting (Hernandez, 2006; Kasmir, 1996).

Regarding deliberative forms of non-candidacy participation, I identify four main ones in the literature. The first two relate directly to the two aggregative forms just discussed: deliberation is often highlighted as important before voting in elections for representatives on the board of directors and voting on resolutions (Barros & Michaud, 2020; Gunn, 1984). In addition, there are two other forms commonly discussed. The first is monitoring their representatives and holding them accountable (Bijman et al., 2014; Mills, 2008). The second is discussing shared concerns from within the membership (Cechin et al., 2013; Greenberg, 1984). While these last two activities are not directly related to the two previously mentioned aggregative forms, they are, undoubtedly, closely connected with each other. For example, engaging in deliberations focused on monitoring their representatives' performance might eventually prompt an initiative to recall a particular representative.

The internal quality of these deliberative forms of non-candidacy participation can be assessed based on two main criteria: authenticity and inclusiveness (Curato & Böker, 2016; Dryzek, 2009; Kennedy & Pek, 2022). According to Dryzek (2009), inclusiveness captures the extent to which all relevant discourses and perspectives are available within a particular context, and authenticity captures the extent to which deliberations among participants are non-coercive, reciprocal, reflective, and grounded in claims focused on wider principles. As alluded to earlier, when it comes to non-candidacy participation, inclusiveness is hindered by uneven levels of participation (e.g., Cornforth, 1995; Romero & Pérez, 2003) and instances of the exclusion or downplaying of particular discourses (Barros & Michaud, 2020), which limit the extent to which all perspectives and interests can be leveraged in deliberations. When it comes to authenticity, in a general sense, research points to a variety of limitations in large cooperatives. In terms of the extent to which general assemblies induce reflection, direct evidence is lacking, though the abovementioned examples of unreflective voting point to some likely deficiencies (Hernandez, 2006; Kasmir, 1996). In terms of connecting claims to more general principles, perhaps the most limiting factor here is that participants in general assemblies are often poorly informed about their organizations or specific decisions (e.g., Basterretxea et al., 2020). When it comes to non-coercion, while participants in general assemblies are all nominally equal, evidence points to factors that can lead to experiences of more subtle coercion and self-censorship (Smith et al., 2018). For example, members with greater status, who are more articulate, and who are more adept at navigating the procedural rules of general assemblies can dominate them and inhibit broader

participation (Cornforth, 1995; Hacker & Elcorobairutia, 1987; Hernandez, 2006; Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004). Finally, in terms of the extent to which participants exhibit reciprocity toward each other, while some research points to respectful and rule-abiding engagement among participants in general assemblies (e.g., Brummer et al., 2017), other research points to instances of disrespectful behavior among participants (Ashforth & Reingen, 2014; Basterretxea et al., 2020).

In disentangling aggregative and deliberative forms of non-candidacy participation, we can see various nuanced ways members may be prompted to participate in their cooperatives' governance in general assemblies. At the same time, prior work points to limitations in how these forms of participation meet their potential. In light of my earlier arguments about the limits of relying on general assemblies to undertake these various activities—uneven participation and insufficient opportunities for deliberation—I argue that large cooperatives would benefit from using targeted practices to improve each of these categories of forms. To improve the level of participation in aggregative forms of participation, large cooperatives have a wide range of practices available they could use, including applying various convenience voting processes like telephone voting, web voting, and voting before or after general assemblies (see, e.g., Gronke et al., 2008). However, increased opportunities to vote are insufficient in improving the extent to which voting decisions are informed and reflective. To overcome this limitation and to improve the inclusiveness and authenticity of deliberative forms of non-candidacy participation more broadly, I see significant potential in applying deliberative mini-publics in a targeted manner. Large cooperatives could still retain general assemblies open to any interested members as a site for further deliberation and synchronous voting, for symbolic reasons, or to comply with legal expectations (Bijman et al., 2014; Henri, 2005; Malleon, 2013), though they would no longer be the sole or primary site for these activities.

Deliberative mini-publics

A major focus in the literature on deliberative democracy has focused on how the aspirations of deliberative democracy can be enacted in practice (Dryzek, 2010). Deliberative mini-publics are part of a family of democratic innovations that have received significant attention as a way of fostering deliberative democracy in practice in recent decades (Curato et al., 2021; Elstub, 2014; Smith, 2009). Various entities like universities, non-profit organizations, and policy-makers launch them to bring together a representative cross-section of a given population to deliberate together about a specific subject matter (Kennedy & Pek, 2022; Pateman, 2012; Smith & Setälä, 2018; Warren & Gastil, 2015). In recent decades, their use has skyrocketed. They have taken place in a wide range of countries, have tackled a host of topics ranging from climate change to public spending

priorities, and come in a variety of forms based on dimensions including size, medium, mode of decision-making, and whether they are one-off or standing (Curato et al., 2021; Ryan & Smith, 2014). Curiously, with some limited exceptions, they have largely been off the radar of scholars and practitioners of cooperatives. As important exceptions, Apostolakis and Van Dijk (2018) briefly discuss PGM's experiment with a randomly selected member council meant to foster discussion among participants whose conclusions were then transmitted to the board, and Gerlsbeck and Herzog (2020) briefly discuss how they can be used as a form of workplace democracy. Some limited work has discussed how democratic lotteries—a key component of deliberative mini-publics—could be used in cooperatives. Proposed uses include supporting the selection of elected representatives (Bouricius, n.d.) and serving as a substitute or complement to elections when selecting representatives (Pek, 2021). I now briefly overview the main features of deliberative mini-publics—the use of some form of random selection to select participants and multiple practices for high-quality deliberation—and how these features apply to the context of large cooperatives.

Participation in deliberative mini-publics is limited to those selected by organizers through some form of stratified or near-random sampling, with specific approaches varying widely across cases (Curato et al., 2021; OECD, 2020; Paulis et al., 2021; Smith, 2009). Two approaches that have been used in various contexts are particularly promising for large cooperatives. In the first, organizers directly select a group of intended participants through some form of random sampling and invite them to participate. For example, in the Students' Jury on Pandemic Learning, organizers selected 12 intended participants through a process of stratified random sampling that accounted for characteristics including gender and fee status, all of whom accepted their invitations (Kennedy & Leitgeb, 2021). In the second, organizers add an extra step, beginning by sending invitations to a larger random sample of the population, followed by using a second lottery to select the group of intended participants from those who registered their interest in response to the invitation (e.g., Crosby, 2003). A large cooperative could use either approach, stratifying based on criteria including job function, department, gender, ideology, and length of membership. In either case, some element of self-selection remains, as those invited to register their interest or to participate directly can decline (Jacquet, 2017; Smith, 2009; Smith & Setälä, 2018). Techniques used to increase the likelihood of acceptance that could be applied in large cooperatives include communicating clearly how the outputs of the deliberative mini-public will be used and may impact decision-making, covering expenses like child care and transportation and offering an honorarium (Fishkin, 2009; Jacquet, 2017). Overall, the use of random selection as a selection method helps foster a high degree of inclusiveness by convening groups that are at least broadly descriptively representative of a

population of interest and can thus bring to bear a broader array of lived experiences, perspectives, and interests than when participants are selected through elections or exclusively through self-selection (Curato et al., 2021; Pek, 2021; Smith, 2009).

While some, like Manin (1997), saw this use of random selection as a form of direct democracy, I share the perspective of others (e.g., Landemore, 2020; Pek et al., 2022; Urbinati & Warren, 2008), who see participants in deliberative mini-publics selected through lotteries as representatives, albeit ones that are different from elected representatives. Like elected representatives, they are authorized to act in a representative capacity, though, crucially, opportunities to serve in this representative capacity are distributed equitably and are available more frequently, and this form of representation does not create the same divisions and distinctions between representatives and members (Landemore, 2020; Pek, 2021; Urbinati & Warren, 2008). Based on this distinction with elected representatives, I see deliberative mini-publics as a form of non-candidacy participation in large cooperatives.

Turning now to practices fostering deliberation, it is helpful to disentangle learning from deliberation. To prepare participants for their deliberations, deliberative mini-publics often have a comprehensive learning phase focused on providing in-depth and balanced information consisting of written briefing materials and presentations from experts and stakeholders (Brown, 2006; Kahane et al., 2013; O'Flynn & Sood, 2014; Roberts et al., 2020). In the case of large cooperatives, experts could include external consultants or academics with substantive expertise related to the scope of the deliberative mini-public. Increasingly, deliberative mini-publics include some means of gathering feedback and impressions from the broader public of nonparticipating citizens. For instance, Beauvais and Warren (2019) discuss a deliberative mini-public that had three public meetings focused on sharing and receiving feedback on the assembly's work. Landemore (2018) takes this further in her conception of open mini-publics, which not only are accessible to the broader population to observe but also have in place crowdsourcing platforms so that members of the public can engage by, for example, sharing their reactions and making suggestions. These practices are important to adapt to the context of large cooperatives to engage a broader array of members and to provide more insights for participants to consider. When it comes to practices to engender deliberation based on these learnings, deliberative mini-publics leverage numerous practices, including facilitation, procedural rules, small-group discussions, and opportunities to listen and learn from diverse information sources to foster robust deliberation (Curato et al., 2021; Smith, 2009). Based on their review of recent research, Setälä and Smith (2018, p. 304) note that 'the current weight of findings strongly supports the claims of those who see mini-publics as a site of democratic

deliberation', suggesting that they perform well in terms of authenticity.

Later stages of deliberative mini-publics focus on consolidating participants' conclusions and takeaways into a concrete set of outputs. These vary across specific types and instances of deliberative mini-publics and include a comprehensive summary of the main takeaways, responses to specific survey questions, or collective recommendations that participants either vote on or seek to find a consensus on (Curato et al., 2021). These outputs are then disseminated to various audiences, usually a mix of the initiators, policy-makers, and the broader public (Felicetti et al., 2016; Fournier et al., 2011). For example, as I describe further below, in the case of the Citizens' Initiative Review, conclusions are sent to registered voters for them to consider ahead of voting on initiatives (Knobloch et al., 2020). How outputs of deliberative mini-publics are disseminated and used is crucial to their consequentiality—that is, the extent to which they influence actual decisions (Dryzek, 2009)—with prior work highlighting the importance of paying close attention to the connections between deliberative mini-publics and other decision-making bodies (Felicetti et al., 2016; Hendriks, 2016). In the case of large cooperatives, given the centrality of the one-member, one-vote principle and the opportunities members have to engage in aggregative forms of non-candidacy participation, the outputs of deliberative mini-publics could be distributed widely to members via e-mail, bulletin boards, newsletters, information packages ahead of general assemblies, and organizational social media to inform their deliberations and voting decisions.

This unique combination of features generates a number of benefits and conceptual advancements, two of which I highlight here. First, their combination of democratic lotteries and deliberation fuses the democratic qualities of inclusiveness and considered judgment (Smith, 2009), which gives a simulation of what the population as a whole would decide if everyone were allowed to deliberate (Dryzek, 2010, p. 27). Second, they offer epistemic benefits—that is, their contributions to the quality of decision-making. One way they can achieve these benefits is through the unique way they foster dialogue between experts and citizens, 'function[ing] as a sort of clearing-house for expert knowledge on particular topics' (Brown, 2006, p. 215). Brown (2006) argues that participants can identify areas of agreement and disagreement among experts, identify factors like conflicts of interest that may affect the credibility of particular witnesses, and help distill various arguments across experts. Recent work points to how participants in deliberative mini-publics can effectively scrutinize the information provided by experts without being unduly influenced by them (Leino et al., 2022). Another way is through leveraging the benefits of cognitive diversity that are brought about through the use of random selection when making sense of particular problems and solutions to them (Landemore, 2013).

Applications of deliberative mini-publics in large cooperatives

How could deliberative mini-publics be applied in practice in large cooperatives? To translate how deliberative mini-publics could be used to complement the traditional model of cooperative governance, I now turn to develop a framework of four applications of deliberative mini-publics organized around the four deliberative forms of non-candidacy participation I identified earlier. To do so, I leverage a stream of research that focuses on the role deliberative mini-publics can play in different democratic systems to solve particular problems (Curato et al., 2020). In this vein, we see a connection back to more aggregative forms of democracy like voting in elections, initiatives, and referenda (Crosby, 2003; Gastil & Richards, 2013; Landemore, 2018, 2020), and between deliberative mini-publics and representative democratic bodies like legislatures (e.g., Setälä, 2017, 2021). Due to space constraints, I cannot provide an in-depth analysis of what specific types of deliberative mini-publics would be most suitable for each application; however, this would be a worthwhile endeavor for future research. Table 1 provides a summary of these applications and their functions.

Candidate review panels

As introduced earlier, one of the two aggregative forms of non-candidacy participation is electing representatives

(Bijman et al., 2014). However, there is often limited deliberation about the criteria that members should consider when voting and the relative merits of different candidates. In many cases, the candidate selection process is significantly influenced by the existing board of directors through processes like nominating committees that often wholly or partially pre-selected their list of preferred candidates (Basterretxea et al., 2020; Michaud & Audebrand, 2022; Storey et al., 2014). Candidate review panels could be convened to tackle this in two different ways. The first is grounded in Bouricius's (n.d.) suggestion of having a randomly selected group of cooperative members serve as a hiring and/or nominating committee that could interview interested candidates for election and propose a slate based on its assessment of the best group of candidates that meets the cooperative's needs. In this vein, large cooperatives could convene a candidate review panel ahead of each general assembly to propose a slate of candidates for the board and a justification for their proposal that members could vote on during or around the general assembly.

The second builds off Crosby's (2003) suggestion of citizens' electoral forums and Gastil's (2000) suggestion of candidate selection panels. Crosby (2003) conceptualized the former as a series of citizens' jury-like bodies focused on assessing candidates' positions on a handful of core issues for subsequent distribution to voters to inform their decision-making process. Gastil (2000) conceptualized the latter as a way to help voters

Table 1. Illustrative applications of deliberative mini-publics in large cooperatives

	Exemplary actual or proposed uses	Primary functions
Candidate review panel	Crosby's (2003) citizens' electoral forum Gastil's (2000) candidate selection panel Bouricius's (n.d.) use of randomly selected hiring and appointments committees	Proposing a slate of candidates based on an assessment of the organizations' needs and candidates' qualifications, and/or appraising candidates based on their competencies on specific criteria or views on specific issues. Conclusions would be distributed widely to members to support their voting decisions in elections.
Resolution appraisal panel	Citizens' Initiative Review (e.g., Gastil et al., 2014) Gastil's (2000) referendum panels Landemore's (2018) deliberative referenda	Learning and deliberating about the merits and demerits of important or controversial resolutions (initiatives and referenda). Conclusions would be distributed widely to members to support their voting decisions on resolutions.
Monitoring panel	Ostbelgien model's Citizen Council (Setälä, 2021)	Reviewing compliance with major decisions made by members and investigating cases of perceived misalignment with members' interests. Conclusions would be distributed to the board of directors to facilitate their continuous improvement and to members to support their learning about their representatives' performance.
Issue appraisal panel	Lafont's (2017) participatory uses of deliberative mini-publics	Deliberating about topics of high potential importance that the broader membership does not yet have an informed opinion about. Conclusions would be distributed to members to support their learning and, potentially, subsequent decision-making about latent issues.

make more informed choices when voting for nonlegislative candidates without public voting records. It involves a randomly selected group of citizens deliberating about their preferred selection criteria and then appraising each candidate on those criteria with their evaluations appearing on citizens' ballots. A candidate review panel could undertake these functions in three steps: deciding on the criteria or issues to assess candidates; interviewing each candidate and, where possible, reviewing their performance on similar votes in the past; and distilling their ratings for distribution to members ahead of the general assembly. Both uses of candidate review panels would help broaden the scope of influence members have over defining the list of preferred candidates up for consideration and enable members to engage in more in-depth deliberations about candidates and their qualities at general assemblies. I anticipate that this would result in the selection of elected representatives more aligned with the priorities and preferences of the membership.

Resolution appraisal panels

Researchers studying popular voting processes note many benefits of initiatives and referenda. One of the most significant benefits is that they grant citizens a measure of popular control in a relatively inclusive way. Granting voters 'a limited editorial right' over specific decisions can lead to public policy more closely mirroring citizens' preferences (Cheneval & el-Wakil, 2018, p. 296). Initiatives can be a powerful tool to help citizens enact change on topics that elected officials, and their powerful supporters, are not willing to act on through the legislative process (Gastil & Richards, 2013). At the same time, both initiatives and referenda have faced significant criticism, most notably that they lack any significant deliberation and are prone to manipulation by legislators or special interests (Fishkin, 2009; Gastil & Richards, 2013; Landmore, 2018; G. Smith, 2009). We see this dynamic in the context of large cooperatives, where members might, for example, 'rubber stamp' plans brought to the agenda without deliberating about them (Kasim, 1996).

A small body of scholars has focused on overcoming the deliberative deficiencies of popular vote processes through some form of deliberative mini-public. The most prominent example is the Citizens' Initiative Review (Crosby, 2003; Gastil, 2014; Knobloch et al., 2020). The Oregon state legislature first piloted and then institutionalized the Citizens' Initiative Review with the overall goal of helping voters make more informed decisions when voting on initiatives. The process involves a small group of Oregon voters selected through stratified random sampling meeting for a few days to learn about the initiative from experts and advocates of both perspectives, after which they draft a one-page statement summarizing their key findings, their analysis of the pros and cons

of the proposal, and their final vote. This statement is then mailed to registered voters alongside other relevant materials to serve as an additional source of information. At their core, Citizens' Initiative Reviews can serve 'as a trusted and effective information source' for voters (Warren & Gastil, 2015, p. 571). Research finds that participants can engage in high-quality deliberation, and that their statements can boost voters' understanding of the issues at hand and their sense of efficacy (Gastil et al., 2014; Knobloch et al., 2020). While the Citizens' Initiative Review has garnered the most research attention, given its institutionalization, scholars have proposed some similar uses of deliberative mini-publics. For example, Gastil's (2000) referenda panels and Landmore's (2018) deliberative referendums involve the use of deliberative mini-publics to study referendum proposals that would disseminate their findings to voters in a manner similar to the Citizens' Initiative Review.

My proposed resolution appraisal panel is based directly on these suggestions. A large cooperative could have a standing resolution appraisal panel to provide feedback on all initiatives and referenda or create dedicated ones on topics that are of high strategic importance (e.g., resolutions focused on demutualization, mergers, and key strategic pivots) or that are highly controversial (e.g., austerity measures Basterretxea et al., 2020). Large cooperatives could also require the use of resolution appraisal panels for specific topics and allow either the board of directors or a significant enough number of members to initiate them. As in the case of the Citizens' Initiative Review, panelists would have the opportunity to hear from those with varying perspectives on the resolution and relevant experts. Their consolidated takeaways would be shared with all members ahead of their opportunity to vote on them. Resolution appraisal panels have the potential to surface all relevant discourses about key topics, provide members with a broader array of information to consider in their deliberations, and reduce the power elected representatives have in framing and delimiting the scope of issues of concern to the broader membership. Ultimately, this would help foster member control by aligning decision-making more closely with members' interests and priorities.

Monitoring panels

My third proposed application of deliberative mini-publics is to monitor representatives' performance through regularly scheduled or ad hoc monitoring panels. A monitoring panel could be convened automatically to review compliance with major decisions made by the broader membership (e.g., about implementing a new strategy or merging with another organization). Alternatively, it could be convened or in response to sufficient member support in cases where members perceive that the board is not acting in their best interest. This application is uncommon in the societal realm,

though an example of it does exist in the Ostbelgien model, which includes a Citizen Council that has the authority to set the agenda for topics to be taken up by dedicated Citizens' Assemblies and, subsequently, to the parliament and then scrutinize the parliament's responses on those topics (Setälä, 2021). Other such applications have been proposed. For example, Pek (2019) suggested that randomly selected bodies in unions could be used to vet decisions made by the union's leadership, and Setälä (2017) discusses how mini-publics could be granted the power to scrutinize and, when they deem necessary, suspend legislation. Monitoring panels would serve both as a prospective and retrospective check and balance on the actions of the board of directors and, in so doing, would foster greater alignment between its decisions and members' interests.

Issue appraisal panels

The final application I propose focuses on creating the opportunity for participants to deliberate about shared topics of concern to ascertain the broader membership's informed view about them. This use need not have a direct connection to a formal decision-making process, though members could use its outputs to inform subsequent decision-making. An example of a deliberative mini-public that focused on informing the broader public is the 2011 Deliberative Poll held in South Korea that brought together 193 residents of Seoul to deliberate about Korean reunification. The process and outcomes were documented and shared with the public through a special broadcast on South Korea's public broadcaster (CDD, 2012). Lafont (2017) highlights the importance of this use as part of her research on participatory deliberative democracy, which focuses on how deliberative mini-publics could be used to inform broader public deliberations as opposed to directly influencing policy. She argues that deliberative mini-publics have more nuanced uses (vigilant, contestatory, and anticipatory) based on their similarity to the positions of representatives and the broader public on the issue. For instance, she argues that deliberative mini-publics can have an 'anticipatory' use when the public is ignorant about a potentially high-stakes issue by increasing the topic's visibility for subsequent reflection and deliberation. While all three of her suggested uses would make meaningful contributions, I base my illustrative example below on this anticipatory use.

In large cooperatives, members ostensibly have the opportunity to deliberate about any issue they wish by proposing resolutions or new agenda topics, and in some cases, a wide range of issues are open to debate (e.g., Greenberg, 1984). In many other cases, though, participants in general assemblies often focus their attention on a narrow subset of topics, including approving reports and electing representatives (Bretos et

al., 2020; Chaves et al., 2008). Moreover, the selection of topics that make it to the general assembly is often influenced by the board of directors or management (Lima, 2007), who may also seek to close down certain discourses relevant to the membership (Barros & Michaud, 2020). This means that many topics relevant to their cooperative, especially those not brought forward by the board of directors, can pass under their radar, making it difficult for them to decide on whether or how to act on those concerns when participating in general assemblies. These can include long-standing issues like gender equality that might not get sufficient attention in some cooperatives (Hacker & Elcorobairutia, 1987) or newer issues, yet to attract significant attention in general. For example, there are many trends shaping the future of work, including artificial intelligence, the rise of platforms, and growing concerns about inequality. An issue appraisal panel could generate a more reflective and in-depth understanding of the issue and its relevance to the cooperative. It could then diffuse its conclusions to members to spur additional discussions, enable members to be better prepared for their deliberations, or even consider submitting their own initiatives ahead of the assembly based on their learnings. This would help expand the breadth of topics members can make decisions about and enable members to engage in more substantive and nuanced discussions of these topics at general assemblies or in their more informal discussions with each other, ultimately resulting in the prioritization of topics and election of representatives more closely aligned with their interests and priorities.

Discussion

Despite the importance placed on non-candidacy participation in large cooperatives, they often face major challenges with both the level and quality of it. This state of affairs has resulted in calls for more research to understand the dynamics of participation and to identify novel solutions to improve it (Birchall, 1999, 2015; Birchall & Simmons, 2004b; Cheney et al., 2014; Malleson, 2013). Notable solutions from prior research include improving the structure and organization of general assemblies (Greenberg, 1984; Gunn, 1984), creating additional sites in which members could participate as elected representatives (Bijman et al., 2013; Malleson, 2013), and cultivating opportunities for more informal interactions among members (Jaumier, 2017; Sobering, 2019). While these approaches are promising, there is room to add nuance to our way of conceptualizing non-candidacy participation and, in so doing, identify additional ways in which it could be improved. Efforts to strengthen general assemblies will ultimately come up against two limitations: unevenness in levels of participation and insufficient opportunities for deliberation. Creating additional opportunities for candidacy participation displaces opportunities for non-candidacy participation and risks exacerbating

long-standing concerns about electoral representation in large cooperatives like poor descriptive and substantive representation. Finally, additional opportunities for informal participation lack formal connections to decision-making processes, are likely to result in uneven participation, and are likely to succumb to problems with the quality of deliberations.

In this essay, I argued that to improve non-candidacy participation and the quality of cooperative governance more broadly, it is helpful to leverage insights from the field of deliberative democracy. This includes, first, distinguishing between various forms of aggregative and deliberative forms of non-candidacy participation and, second, institutionalizing appropriate practices to support them. The approach I focus on in this essay is deliberative mini-publics, which, when combined with increased opportunities for voting, have the potential to improve the quality and reflectiveness of aggregative forms of member participation and the inclusivity and authenticity of deliberative forms of member participation. In this section, I discuss the contributions my essay makes to research on the governance of large cooperatives, practical considerations, and directions for future research.

Contributions to research

This essay's first and central contribution is to develop a novel solution for improving non-candidacy participation in large cooperatives that complements general assemblies and elected boards of directors, which may be required or desired in many large cooperatives. Wide-ranging opportunities for voting beyond general assemblies will help increase the level of participation and take cooperatives closer to their goal of making decisions on the basis of one member, one vote. However, without supporting deliberation, these decisions risk being ill informed. Given their unique approach to selecting participants and practices to foster learning and deliberation, they are a promising way to engender deliberative forms of non-candidacy participation that are high in inclusiveness and authenticity. If their outputs are distributed widely to members, they will help contribute to more informed and reflective voting decisions. Deliberative mini-publics have flown largely under the radar in research on cooperatives, which is surprising given the growing interest in deliberation (Dufays et al., 2020; Rothschild, 2016) and the use of lotteries (Bouricius, n.d.; Pek, 2021) in this context. As I argued, their use not only has the potential to improve non-candidacy participation, but also, in so doing, can improve member control more broadly by improving the selection and monitoring of elected representatives.

Second, and building off my first contribution, my essay advances a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of participation in large cooperatives. The different ways members can participate in cooperative decision-making are often

treated as interchangeable, and when different practices are highlighted, their conceptual differences are rarely unpacked. Given the unique roles of elected representatives in large cooperatives, it is helpful to distinguish between candidacy and non-candidacy member participation when discussing member participation. Furthermore, I argue that it is important to differentiate between aggregative and deliberative forms of non-candidacy participation, which are often lumped together in research and practice on general assemblies despite having different conceptual underpinnings and practical dynamics (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). A likely reason why so much attention has been paid to general assemblies as a site of non-candidacy participation in the literature to date is that they enable both aggregative and deliberative forms. However, both forms require different practices to be available—widely available opportunities for voting on matters requiring the aggregation of members' decisions, and sufficient opportunities for members to deliberate together—that are translated to a particular organization's context. Both forms can also be evaluated based on different criteria. Regarding aggregative forms, these can be assessed based on the level of participation and the extent to which voting decisions are informed and reflective. When it comes to deliberative forms, these can be assessed based on their level of authenticity and the extent to which they include all relevant perspectives. Future studies seeking to unpack the dynamics of non-candidacy participation in large cooperatives would benefit from an approach that treats these forms as separate yet pays close attention to their interconnections.

Third, in addition to helping improve non-candidacy participation, deliberative mini-publics offer additional insights relevant to research on cooperative governance by advancing a novel way of thinking about expertise and the oft-cited tension between expertise and democracy discussed in large cooperatives. Access to sufficient expertise is a crucial element of good governance to ensure that decision-making processes are sound (Birchall, 2015, 2017). It is typically sought by putting independent expert directors on the board or carefully vetting board members for their expertise (Basterretxea et al., 2020; Cornforth, 2004). However, concerns are often raised about expertise in large cooperatives (e.g., Basterretxea et al., 2020; Birchall, 2017), and expertise is often seen as being in tension with member control and representation (Basterretxea et al., 2020; Birchall, 2017; Cornforth, 2004; Michaud & Audebrand, 2022). Given their epistemic benefits that stem from the unique way they foster dialogue between experts and laypeople and the cognitive diversity of their participants, deliberative mini-publics can bridge this tension. When compared to having independent experts serve as directors, deliberative mini-publics have the potential to maintain a high level of member

control and participation while still ensuring decision-making is grounded in sufficient expertise. This approach to engaging with experts could be adopted in other bodies in large cooperatives, including social councils and boards of directors. However, the dynamics would likely be different, given the different composition of participants.

Practical considerations

Throughout this essay, I have argued that the combination of deliberative mini-publics and expanded opportunities for asynchronous voting could be integrated into the traditional governance model of cooperative governance as complements to the board of directors and general assembly. This proposed approach to governance is applicable to all large cooperatives regardless of their specific size or type, as those with smaller memberships could use smaller deliberative mini-publics similar in size to their existing boards of directors. At the same time, I speculate that some large cooperatives are likely to be more favorable contexts for their implementation. First, those with higher levels of non-candidacy participation are likely to have an easier time attracting a large number of participants to participate in deliberative mini-publics, are likely to experience a larger number of members drawing on the outputs of deliberative mini-publics in their voting decisions, and are likely to see higher participation around deliberative mini-publics. In general, worker cooperatives, given their members' greater incentives to participate in decision-making and level of interaction with each other, are likely to have greater success here than consumer cooperatives (Birchall, 2015; Kaswan, 2014). Second, even though deliberative mini-publics have numerous practices in place to foster deliberation, large cooperatives with stronger norms around deliberation are likely to find it easier to foster more authentic deliberation. Third, those with more access to resources are likely to be able to implement a larger numbers of deliberative mini-publics at a high level of quality. While technologies are being developed that significantly reduce the cost of convening deliberative mini-publics like automated moderators (Fishkin et al., 2019), implementing deliberative mini-publics necessarily requires some financial outlays and time from managers. Fourth, international cooperatives are likely to face additional challenges with translation and time zone differences that, while surmountable, will require additional resources.

Additionally, it is vital to take into account power dynamics that can influence the successful implementation of deliberative mini-publics (Pek et al., 2022). As noted earlier, prior work points to numerous instances of elected representatives and managers influencing the conduct of general assemblies, whether in terms of selecting agenda topics for general assemblies (Lima, 2007), deliberately influencing certain discourses

(Barros & Michaud, 2020), or pre-selecting preferred candidates for elections (Basterretxea et al., 2020). In light of this, it is essential to create safeguards to protect the integrity of deliberative mini-publics. One way to do this is to use independent conveners to plan and execute deliberative mini-publics. Another is to create a new internal function, or repurpose an existing one, like member engagement, to do so independently of management or the board of directors. These changes will likely require amendments to cooperatives' bylaws. Finally, though it may be appealing to use managers or board members as expert witnesses, it would be preferable to use external experts or, at a minimum, develop processes like codes of conduct when using internal experts.

Limitations and directions for future research

I identify two main limitations of my essay that future research could address. First, in proposing my framework of four applications of deliberative mini-publics that complement the traditional model of cooperative governance, I did not have sufficient space to explore what type of deliberative mini-public would be most suitable for each application. Future work could explore this topic in greater depth and may find, for example, that one-off or standing deliberative mini-publics, or deliberative mini-publics of different sizes, are more suitable for some applications than others. Second, this essay was inevitably an initial sketch of how deliberative mini-publics can be used in large cooperatives. While I have focused on illustrating specific applications of deliberative mini-publics based on the four main deliberative forms of non-candidacy participation I distilled from the traditional model of cooperative governance, future research could explore how they can perform other functions in large cooperatives like resolving and adjudicating disputes, providing more ad hoc feedback to the board of directors, or even functionally serving as a replacement for boards of directors on some specific topics. Future work could also explore the specific mechanisms through which aggregative and deliberative forms of non-candidacy participation could be combined.

Conclusion

Members' ability to control the direction of their cooperatives depends on their having sufficient opportunities to participate in decision-making. At the same time, as we have seen, the current opportunities members have to participate aside from serving as candidates for elected office often face significant limitations. Michaud and Audebrand (2022) argue that research on cooperative governance tends to draw intellectual inspiration from research on investor-owned firms. In this essay, I have argued that insights from the field of deliberative

democracy can offer us a new way of conceptualizing and practicing non-candidacy participation in large cooperatives. Doing so can help improve the governance of large cooperatives more broadly and enable them to better achieve their social and environmental objectives.

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