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AUTHOR(S): Marjan Marjanović, Yannis Papadopoulos, Philipp Trein, Sean Müller

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Co-Creation across the Policy Process: Contributions, Democratic Promise, and Political Limits

Philipp Trein[1]

Marjan Marjanović[2]

Yannis Papadopoulos[3]

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Abstract

Co-creation—sustained collaboration between state and non-state actors to jointly solve problems on society's behalf—has been studied mainly as a feature of service delivery. This

[1] University of Lausanne; email: josefphilipp.trein@unil.ch; https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6217-6675
[2] University of Lausanne; email: marjan.marjanovic@unil.ch; https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5462-3228
[3] University of Lausanne; email: ioannis.papadopoulos@unil.ch; https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6741-8477

paper argues that co-creation performs distinct functions at each stage of the policy cycle, and that a cycle perspective clarifies where its democratic contribution is greatest and where its political limits bind. We show that co-creation is most consequential at agenda-setting and policy formulation, where it combines collaborative governance with constructive civic activism, and more constrained at implementation and evaluation, where programmes are already designed and funded. We then specify the scope conditions under which co-creation can move from advice to binding choice: the suitability of the policy problem, the localisation of the policy process, its coupling with representative institutions, and the genuinely collaborative rather than tokenistic design of its leadership.

Keywords: Citizen participation; deliberative democracy; direct democracy; lay knowledge; social learning.

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1. Introduction

Public policy is required to do various things at the same time. On the one hand, it needs to provide responses challenging problems, such as public health and climate emergencies based on cutting edge technologies and most recent scientific insights. On the other, it needs to be understandable and acceptable for citizens, in order avoid that the public loses faith in authorities and becomes difficult to reach for authorities (Ansell, Sørensen, and Torfing 2024; Aurich-Beerheide et al. 2015; Cairney 2016; Head and Alford 2015).

Against this background, researchers in political science, public administration, and public policy have emphasized the importance of augmenting the participatory dimensions of the policy process beyond electoral participation (Alford 2014; Osborne, Nasi, and Powell 2021; Ostrom et al. 1978). In other words, citizen participation entails implementing public policies as well as providing feedback on existing public services. Yet this tradition centres on how policies are carried out and adjusted once they already exist, leaving open the question of citizen involvement earlier in the process. Building on this tradition, a more recent strand of scholarship has proposed that citizen participation and the involvement of non-state actors in specific policy processes should extend beyond top-down implementation and take the form of co-creation. This type of sustained, shared interaction between state and non-state actors should allow not only for consultation but also for the joint development of visions about how public policy ought to be designed in order to increase public value (Ansell, Sørensen, and Torfing 2022; Ansell and Torfing 2021a, 2021b; Voorberg, Bekkers, and Tummers 2015).

In this paper, we contribute to the literature in developing specific contributions that co-creation can make to the policy process. We assume that co-creation strengthens democratic policymaking only if it is embedded in the entire policy process rather than limited to its later stages. We argue that co-creation in the policy process can contribute in four ways to the policy process: a.) bottom-up civic activism, b.) knowledge production and policy learning, c.) deliberative advice and collaborative decision-making, c.) and policy-oriented feedback to the different stages of the policy process. These four contributions can add to the different stages of the policy cycle—agenda-setting, policy formulation, decision-making, implementation and evaluation. Whether and how co-creation can contribute to the policy process depends on the suitability of the policy problem, the ability to conduct the policy process at the regional and

local level, the coupling of co-creation to representative democracy, and the intention and leadership in the co-creation process. Based on this analysis, we are able to distinguish the fit of problems to co-creation according to administrative feasibility as well as democratic desirability.

More broadly, this paper this paper contributes to the public policy literature in two ways. Firstly, it examines in a realist fashion how citizens can be included more explicitly into the policy process along the trajectory from agenda-setting to the evaluation of public policies. This input is important, because it helps us to understand how it is possible to make public policies more legitimate. Moreover, it contributes to how the contributions by citizens and other non-state actors can improve the design of public policies. Secondly, the paper outlines challenges and political scope condition for co-creation in public policy for the different stages of the policy process.

The paper proceeds in five steps. Section 2 defines co-creation and distinguishes it from neighbouring modes of shared decision-making. Section 3 situates it within debates about democracy and policymaking. Section 4 specifies the scope conditions—problem suitability, localisation, coupling with representative institutions, and leadership—under which co-creation becomes consequential rather than merely advisory. Section 5 identifies four contributions of co-creation to the policy process and points to the challenges they generate for the practice of policymaking, while Section 6 develops a typology of which problems co-creation suits best. The conclusion draws out the implications for how we understand the policy process and its democratic foundations.

2. Co-Creation in Public Governance

Scholars of public governance have defined co-creation as a process where public and private actors work together to solve problems together for the common good (Torfing, Sørensen, and Røiseland 2019, 802). The concept of co-creation assumes that actors participating in public governance are highly motivated to collaborate and to address shared problems in ways that cut across hierarchical levels and actor statuses. Such actors may include elected officials, heads of interest groups, senior bureaucrats, experts, or ordinary citizens. The concept underlines a form of cross-hierarchical and cross-status cooperation that can be distinguished from other forms of shared decision-making in public governance.

Notably, scholars have argued that co-creation differs from corporatism, which entails bargaining at the leadership level of peak associations – for instance, over wages – in order to reach negotiated solutions. Co-creation has also been distinguished from collaborative governance, which is primarily a form of co-decision-making in which the bureaucracy establishes processes involving non-state actors, but typically only to deliberate over proposals that have already been predefined (Ansell and Torfing 2021b, 55). Finally, although the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, co-creation differs from the co-production of public services, in which the state interacts with citizens and other users to improve existing services delivered within already-established policy programs (Ansell and Torfing 2021b).

Co-creation is distinct from these forms of shared decision-making because it entails the idea that public actors and non-state actors, including citizens, work together to develop a shared vision and to devise innovative approaches to pressing problems (Ansell and Torfing 2021b; Lember, Brandsen, and Tõnurist 2019). The concept builds on the literature of product co-

creation, which brings together consumers and companies to design new products (Ind and Coates 2013). Transposed to the realm of public governance, co-creation aims at generating processes that produce social innovation to improve public values (Voorberg, Bekkers, and Tummers 2015). However, it differs from social innovation in that while both are forward-looking and solution-oriented, co-creation places greater emphasis on inclusive participation and power-sharing (Torfing et al. 2021). In terms of policy change, such an approach may give rise to new policy concepts that change paradigms of public governance and suggests entirely new approaches on how to deal with policy problems. In other words, it proposes a process of deep social learning where the basic principles and values of how policies are made change (Hall 1993; Moynihan 2005). For example, co-creation has been emphasized as a tool to transform communities in order to adapt to climate change (Ziervogel et al. 2022).

Originally, scholarship on co-creation, which has focused heavily on policy implementation, service design, urban experimentation and problem-solving during service delivery (Nevens et al. 2013; Trein, Marjanovic, and Papadopoulos 2026; Voytenko et al. 2016). In a more recent book, Ansell and Torfing have conceptualized the initiation, the design, the implementation and the evaluation of co-creation, taking a public management and public governance perspective (Ansell and Torfing 2021b, 134). In this article, we extend further the discussion of co-creation, by connecting it do different literatures related to the policy process.

3. Democracy and the policy process

To understand how co-creation can be integrated into the policy process, it is necessary to examine the relationship between democracy and policymaking. In the standard model of representative democracy, researchers have assumed that the electorate is sufficiently

competent to determine its policy preferences and to voice them on Election Day. As a consequence, political parties are expected to translate these preferences into policy changes. Scholars have developed the thermostatic model of democracy, demonstrating that public policies change in response to voters' will and that representative democracy is capable of accurately reflecting the preferences of the electorate (Soroka and Wlezien 2010; Wlezien 1995).

The idea of a competent electorate has however been criticized for a long time. Theorists of participatory democracy have pointed out that political stances emerge in the process of participation itself, rather than through isolated reasoning by rational individuals (Pitkin 1967; Urbinati 2006). Recent empirical and theoretical research confirmed this insight. First, researchers have pointed out that it is very difficult for voters to accurately estimate their policy preferences, and that voter opinion is heavily shaped by their social environment as well as by political parties. As a result, electoral outcomes do not straightforwardly represent what voters want (Achen and Bartels 2016). Second, political parties have been found not always to be optimal vehicles for translating voter preferences into policy, as they tend to pursue their own agendas (Mair 2014) – a dynamic that becomes visible in research showing that politicians are, on average, more conservative than their electorates (Pilet et al. 2024). Third, research has highlighted that modern democracies face a series of structural challenges, including increasingly complex policy systems, difficult-to-solve policy problems, and deepening international integration (Papadopoulos 2013). As a consequence, voters feel alienated from representative democracy and may turn to anti-establishment and far-right parties, favouring forms of governance incompatible with the principles of liberal democracy (Gratton and Lee 2025; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012).

It is against this background that scholars have argued in favour of integrating co-creation into the policy process. Researchers have emphasized that co-creation offers a promising avenue for reinventing democracy in the face of the challenges confronting contemporary representative democracies. They contend that co-creation could contribute to a revitalized form of democracy capable of overcoming democratic disenchantment, countering ideological polarization, and resisting anti-politics sentiments by generating a form of constructive "counter-democracy" from the bottom up (Ansell and Torfing 2021b, 161–91; Rosanvallon and Goldhammer 2008). Notably, co-creation can have two "democratic potentials." Firstly, it may reinforce creative problem-solving by including new and unheard actors. Secondly, it may facilitate power-sharing between involved actors (Ansell, Sørensen, and Torfing 2024, 166).

It is important to note that research on co-creation has also pointed to the dark sides of co-creation, which need to be taken into account when implementing it. Amongst others, co-creation generates the risk of destroying public value, reinforce existing inequalities, suppress differences, put pressure on individuals, or become a Trojan Horse to legitimize public service cuts (Ansell and Torfing 2021b, 237-241; Steen et al. 2018). Existing research has not ignored the potential challenges of implementing co-creation in practice

This research contrasts the scholarship that emphasizes a crisis of democracy. Rather than pointing to the challenges for representative democracies and the necessary reform of established institutions and processes of democracy, the work on co-creation and democracy takes a more optimistic stance. It argues that through a co-creation approach that focuses on finding create and shared solutions for pressing problems, it is possible to rejuvenate democracy. Nevertheless, in order to harness the potential for such an approach, it is important

to engage in more depth with insights from policy process scholarship, because this work has examined the conditions under which policy change is possible.

4. Scope conditions for co-creation in the policy process

Against this background, it is important to examine the scope conditions under which it is possible to use co-creation in the policy process. Scope conditions are contextual factors that moderate whether co-creation can have a positive impact on the policy process, in the sense that it augments legitimacy and potentially effectiveness of the policy process. In our view, there are four such scope conditions. First, the suitability of the policy problem determines whether co-creation is an appropriate mode of engagement at all. Second, co-creation implies a regionalization and localization of the policy process. Third, co-creation requires clarifying the relationship of the exercise to representative democracy and whether it serves an advisory or discretionary function. Fourth, the intended use of co-creation and its leadership need to be adapted to the problem at hand. These four conditions are obviously related and reinforce one another. In the following, we go through each of them in turn.

5.1 Suitability of the policy problem

Co-creation is unlikely to be equally appropriate for all policy problems. The public policy literature has repeatedly emphasised that policy problems differ, and scholars have identified several dimensions along which they can be compared. One important dimension is the technical complexity of a policy problem—that is, the extent to which arriving at a particular solution requires recourse to professional specialists. With respect to co-creation, it seems plausible that a highly technical problem will be difficult to address through this mode, because

the gap in expertise between specialists and lay participants may be too large for the approach to be feasible (Gormley 1983; Trein and Maggetti 2020).

A second dimension concerns the degree to which a problem is structured. This turns on whether there is agreement about the knowledge relevant to solving the problem, and agreement about the norms that a solution should uphold. Where there is consensus on neither the applicable norms nor the relevant knowledge, the problem is unstructured; where there is certainty about both, it is structured (Hisschemöller and Hoppe 1995, 44). Co-creation may be especially relevant for unstructured problems, yet this very feature also makes it demanding. If normative disagreement runs deep, co-creating a solution with the actors involved may prove hard to achieve, since a workable outcome ultimately depends on compromise. A related consideration is the salience of a policy problem and the degree of public involvement it attracts. Research has stressed that the extent to which citizens are aware of a problem and of its consequences may, in turn, bear on whether co-creation is a suitable approach (May 1991; Trein 2018).

5.2 Scale of the policy process

In many cases, the examples from the literature show that co-creation is used very often at the local or regional levels (Ansell, Sørensen, and Torfing 2026; Marjanovic et al. 2025), or with regard to specific policy problems such as fisheries (Stephenson et al. 2019). Although it is possible to imagine co-creation at the national or supranational level, the specific problem orientation inherent in the approach requires applying it to specific policy problems, specific solutions, and a specific spatial context. This scope condition poses a challenge because transformational change in public policy is rarely possible without involving institutions at the national level as well as other instances of representative democracy. As a result, for co-creation

to work, there needs to be a willingness of upper levels of government to delegate some degree of autonomy to lower levels of government in order to creatively solve problems by horizontally engaging with citizens and other non-state actors.

5.3 Coupling with representative democracy

The next scope condition important for successful uses of co-creation in public policy is the link between the co-creation arena and institutions of representative democracy and it relates to the previous one. It is important to clarify from the outset whether the participatory exercise is consultative for other institutions or whether it is genuinely influential on formally binding decisions. This aspect is also important when it comes to designing the co-creation arena, because it should be clear from the beginning what the process is supposed to achieve and what its limitations are. This is particularly important in relation to how co-creation is perceived from the outside—whether it is seen as a tool to genuinely solve societal problems, or whether it is regarded as a window dressing exercise (Loisel and Rio 2024; Molenveld et al. 2020). Furthermore, representative institutions possibly consider delegating decision-making functions to co-creation arenas more easily on matters of more limited scope, such as service provision, because in this case it is easier to ensure accountability (Papadopoulos 2023). Nevertheless, co-creation has been defined explicitly as generative governance that goes beyond shared design of service provision. Against this background, it is a challenge for institutions of representative democracy to delegate competences to co-creation arenas.

5.4 Intention of uses and leadership

In order to realize co-creation in the policy process, it is necessary to establish a dedicated space for such interactions. Ansell and Torfing have argued that co-creation requires generative

institutions. Within these institutions, there are arenas specifically designed for this purpose – settings in which authorities, interest groups, citizens, and experts come together to develop new solutions (Ansell and Torfing 2021b, 100–106). To take a concrete example, such an arena might bring together the relevant actors to devise sustainable fisheries policy (Stephenson et al. 2019). Importantly, co-creation arenas can span across different jurisdictions that share responsibility for a given problem space.

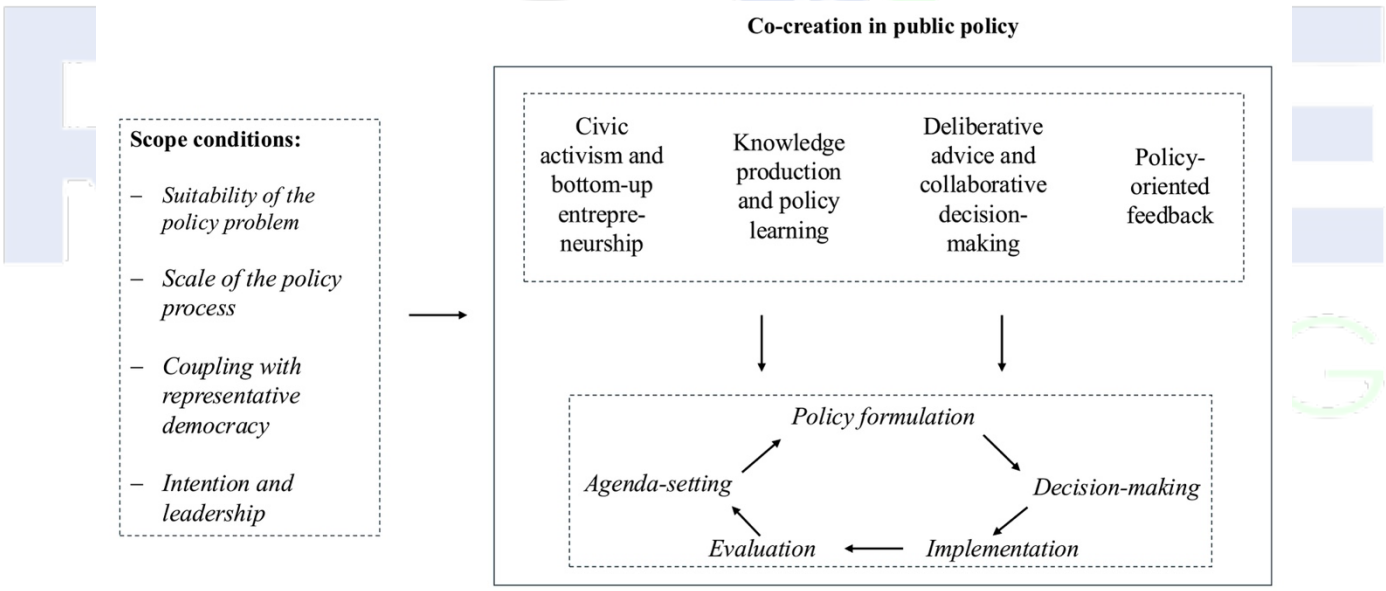
Related to the dimension of the intention of use is the leadership in co-creation. Two aspects deserve particular attention in this regard. First, when setting up a co-creation arena, public authorities are most likely to assume a leading role, which also means they will decide who is included in the arena and, by extension, who participates in the co-creation process itself. Research on collaborative governance has shown that this gatekeeping function provides authorities with opportunities to make strategic decisions about inclusion and exclusion and may thereby predetermine outcomes before deliberation has formally begun (Ansell et al. 2020; Purdy 2012). Second, once the co-creation process is underway, facilitative leadership becomes essential—that is, a form of leadership that enables deliberation, fosters mutual understanding among participants, and guides the process toward a shared output (Ansell and Torfing 2021b). If this aspect is not assured, co-creation may turn into a manufacturing of consent where leadership becomes political partisan instead of facilitative (Ansell, Orr, and Trein 2026).

5. The contributions of co-creation to the policy process

In the next step, we establish how co-creation works in the policy process. To achieve this aim, we contend that co-creation can make four different contributions to the policy process. Notably, these are a) civic activism and bottom-up entrepreneurship, b) knowledge production

and policy learning, c) deliberative advice and collaborative decision-making, and d) policy-oriented feedback. These different forms can appear in different stages of the policy process, notably agenda-setting, policy formulation, decision-making, implementation, as well as feedback and evaluation (Hill and Varone 2021; Howlett, Ramesh, and Perl 2020; Knill and Tosun 2020). In the following, we present each of the different forms of co-creation in the policy process and then we discuss how they can be linked to the stages of policymaking. Figure 1 illustrates our thinking. On the right side of the graph, it shows the two contributions that co-creation can make to the policy process

Figure 1: Co-creation along the policy cycle



Furthermore, Figure 1 addresses the scope conditions that affect the inclusion of co-creation in the policy process. The way according to which these different elements then impact on co-creation in the policy process requires to be determined when applied to individual cases. It is also important to note that the different dimensions of the scope conditions interact with one another. For example, the coupling of co-creation with representative democracy may overlap with the intention and leadership. A national government may use co-creation as a window

dressing exercise where the results do not affect actual decisions. As a result, leadership in the co-creation process may also be to come to a specific result. We return to the impact of the scope conditions in the end of the paper.

4.1 Constructive civic activism and bottom-up entrepreneurship

The first contribution of co-creation to the policy process is through constructive civic activism and bottom-up entrepreneurship. If we look at co-creation in the empirical literature, examples show that co-creation entails citizens and non-state actors contribution to the definition of policy problems. For example, citizens, experts, stakeholders and policymakers work together through foresight exercises to identify social needs and translate them into research and innovation priorities (Gudowsky and Peissl 2016). Early engagement of citizens and local knowledge can feed into the co-design of solutions and shared problem definition (Bradley and Mahmoud 2024), for example in urban labs (Nevens et al.'s (2013). In terms of policy literature, co-creation is what analysts of the policy process would call a form of policy entrepreneurship "from the bottom up" (Frisch Aviram, Beeri, and Cohen 2021), in the sense that elites listen to how citizens define the policy problem. At the same time, citizens engage in a form of collaborative activism, where they actively seek to work together with representatives of authorities in order to define the policy problem.

This form of co-creation differs from another form of democratic engagement, namely civic activism linked to social movements. In recent years, citizens across many countries have engaged in activism aimed at addressing pressing problems such as climate change. Activists have undertaken a wide range of actions to raise awareness and demand more decisive state intervention, while others have initiated their own projects to address the consequences of the

climate crisis, such as ocean pollution (Hong and Kim 2021; Weissberg 2005; Youngs 2019). Co-creation in the policy process differs from this type of civic activism—whether it takes the form of protest or privately governed problem-solving initiatives—in a crucial respect. Co-creation entails what may be called collaborative civic engagement. It requires that citizens and other societal actors not only recognize a problem and feel a sense of responsibility to participate in its resolution, but also actively seek to collaborate with public authorities and other actors in order to find shared solutions. It requires social movements to change from a radical stance in their demands to a more collaborative posture that involves negotiation and win-win solutions with authorities. Such a process is challenging. In order for this method to work requires consequential incentives for citizens, for example that the problem affects them (Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh 2012, 9). In addition, authorities need to provide scope conditions that are attractive for participants.

This collaborative orientation implies a particular mindset among participating individuals. At the individual level, this includes mutual respect, understanding, and trust towards other participants, the perception of collaboration as being in one's own interest, and a willingness to compromise, remain flexible, and learn from others. It also requires that participants have sufficient time and resources to engage meaningfully in the collaborative process (Mattessich and Johnson 2018). A collaborative mindset stands in contrast to the rational actor model, in which individuals seek only to maximize their own preferences. In other words, it assumes that individuals are willing to collaborate and seek shared solutions, at least in the specific case the collaboration deals with.

Challenge for policymaking: Setting the agenda through co-creation, that is from the bottom up is challenging. One important criticism of civic activism is that citizen often remain apathetic in the face of discontent and government failure (Weissberg 2005; Zhelnina 2020). Related to this aspect is the risk of unequal access and interest. There is a risk that only few citizens—often those who are well off and educated—participate in the process of co-creation. To deal with this problem requires inciting pro-social emotions amongst citizens (Thomas, McGarty, and Mavor 2009).

4.2 Co-creation as knowledge creation and policy learning

The second contribution of co-creation to the policy process is knowledge creation and policy learning. For decades, researchers have analyzed the policy process through the lens of how decision-makers learn and update their beliefs collectively (Dunlop, Radaelli, and Trein 2018; Heikkila and Gerlak 2013). While this work is centrally concerned with learning as a process, it has also engaged with the question of how evidence relates to policy-making (Cairney 2016; Head 2016). Scholars of policy learning have emphasized that actors in the policy process can be conceived as learning agents who seek to update their beliefs on the basis of new information (Dunlop and Radaelli 2018). This updating of beliefs can take different forms. In most cases, it is assumed to be oriented toward improving policy outcomes—for instance, developing public policies that address unemployment more effectively (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993; Zito and Schout 2009). However, researchers have also highlighted that learning can involve the strategic use of knowledge to formulate policy proposals that are popular among particular constituencies, even when such proposals do not contribute to solving the underlying problem or may render collaboration with certain actors more difficult (Trein and Vagionaki 2022).

Co-creation in the policy process can contribute to learning and evidence-informed policymaking. We have defined co-creation as a process that brings together state and non-state actors—including, citizens, professionals and outsiders to the policy process—to generate, decide, and implement policy solutions. Nevertheless, researchers have pointed out that the process of co-creation can mean that this process co-creates a) new knowledge, and / or b) public value (Ansell and Torfing 2021b; Marjanovic et al. 2025). From a policy formulation perspective, co-creation entails both dimensions.

The creation of knowledge through co-creation recognizes the plurality of knowledge systems. These include scientific knowledge, local or indigenous knowledge, intuitive knowledge, and expert knowledge, and the aim is to integrate these different forms of knowledge to develop shared understandings of how to address complex public policy problems. This perspective emphasizes co-creation as a social learning process that cuts across disciplinary and institutional boundaries (Djenontin and Meadow 2018; Latulippe and Klenk 2020; Turnhout et al. 2020). Key features of this dimension include transdisciplinarity and mutual learning among actors with different epistemic backgrounds (Ziervogel et al. 2022), as well as boundary work aimed at bridging institutional, cultural, and disciplinary divides (Clark et al. 2016). The ultimate goal is to produce knowledge that is context-sensitive and therefore socially legitimate (Chambers et al. 2021).

In this sense, co-creation as knowledge production can constitute a contribution to learning in policy formulation. Notably, this form of policy learning has been conceptualized as learning from those who are affected by public policies—such as drug users—or as learning from the narratives and lived experiences of those who have encountered a given problem firsthand

(Cairney 2022; Jauffret-Roustide 2009; Popay and Williams 1996). This mode of learning is distinct from learning derived from past policy outcomes, and also from learning based on research that tests policy options through experimental methods such as randomized controlled trials (Cairney 2022). The underlying idea is to incorporate the perspectives of all those affected by a policy problem into the knowledge base that informs policy-making. At the same time, this form of learning mixes "factual knowledge" and values, because learning from the narratives by affected parties is necessarily involving their values and beliefs.

In certain respects, such dynamics bear a resemblance to consultation processes in the policy process, in which a wide range of interest groups and stakeholders are invited to provide input. These are often open consultation processes to which any actor may respond (Albareda 2024; Varela 2009). Such processes differ, however, from knowledge co-creation, insofar as they do not involve a setting in which all relevant parties sit together and engage in a shared, iterative reflection on what the problem is and what an appropriate solution might look like.

> ***Challenge for policymaking:*** An important challenge for learning through co-creation is to integrate insights by experts and lay people (Kinsella 2002). On the one hand, co-creation of knowledge requires avoiding group think and emotions taking over the process of knowledge generation (Dunlop and Radaelli 2018). On the other it requires avoiding that the hierarchy of knowledge (Pamuk 2021) imposes itself on the co-creation process.

4.3 Co-creation as deliberative advice and collaborative decision-making

The third contribution of co-creation to the policy process is deliberative advice and collaborative decision-making. In policy process research, this aspect is often explained through dynamics of actor coalitions or the presence of policy windows (Herweg, Huß, and Zohlnhöfer 2015; Jenkins-Smith et al. 2018). Regarding co-creation, it takes a form of decision-making that is like collaborative governance, where state and non-state actors debate and decide together about measures to solve difficult problems (Ansell and Gash 2008; Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh 2012).

Political science research informs us that political decision-making involves aggregation or competition conflicting demands or interests. Different interest groups lobby politicians and government (Albareda 2024). Parliamentarians seek to maximize the interests of their constituents including their links to interest groups (Binderkrantz, Christiansen, and Pedersen 2015; Gava et al. 2017). In many cases, there are conflicts between different advocacy coalitions that lead to adversarial rather than collaborative forms of decision-making (Ansell and Gash 2008; Ingold and Gschwend 2014). In other words, the model of constructive negotiation that is implicit in the idea of collaborative governance is replaced by decisions through majority vote, where one coalition defeats another one, or by bargaining at best (Elgström and Jönsson 2000; Scharpf 1997). Concerning the role of value creation, this logic implies that there is a clash of different values and it may not be possible to resolve conflicts between these values constructively and in a policy-efficient manner (Weible and Heikkila 2017).

One way to deal with this problem would be to regard co-creation from the perspective of deliberative democracy. Co-creation can be viewed as a functional equivalent to forms of

deliberative democracy, such as deliberative forums and citizens' assemblies. In these forums, different actors—often citizens—deliberate on specific principles or policy proposals. The main difference is that deliberative democracy focuses on the process of interaction, whilst co-creation is more oriented towards problem-solving. This process includes the goal to not only develop shared knowledge about the nature of a problem and its potential solutions, but also to generate insights into the feasibility and acceptability of those solutions (Dryzek, Bächtiger, and Milewicz 2011; Reuchamps, Vrydagh, and Welp 2023). Nevertheless, arenas for co-creation may be other venues than citizen assemblies. For example, different types of actors may join a project to engage in planning at the urban level (Hambleton 2020).

Therefore, to understand the role of co-creation in decision-making, the distinction between co-creation as consultation and advice on the one hand, and co-creation as decision-making on the other is crucial. In the literature on collaborative governance, authors have oscillated between different definitions: some refer to collaborative governance broadly as any form of policymaking in which public administration reaches out to non-state actors (Emerson, Nabatchi, and Balogh 2012, 2–3), while others have argued that genuine collaborative governance requires formalized co-decision-making over services and programs (Ansell and Gash 2008, 544). This distinction is important for the implementation of co-creation in the policy process, for example if citizens participate but their input is only consultative (Keinonen and Hooli 2026).

To develop this distinction further, it is useful to draw on the literature on policy coordination. In this body of work, authors have examined different degrees of coordination between jurisdictions and public sector organizations in the context of policy-making and

implementation. At one end of the spectrum, coordination may take the form of mere information exchange or negative coordination aimed at avoiding conflicts. At the other end, it involves developing shared positions or agreements on strategic plans, amounting to deep collaboration and joint decision-making (Braun 2008; Schout et al. 2006).

This reflection brings us to the relationship between power and collaboration. Scholars of collaborative governance have examined the role of power imbalances as well as the importance of power dynamics within collaborative settings (Torfing et al. 2026). A recurring observation is that collaborative governance—and by analogy co-creation more broadly—rests on balancing power differences among participating actors, particularly when these include citizens on the one hand and representatives of government, parliament, and interest groups on the other (Ansell and Gash 2008). At the same time, it is important to vest collaborative arrangements with sufficient authority to produce real impact and to foster change, rather than merely deliberating about problems without consequence (Purdy 2012). Research has shown that participation in general, and collaborative governance in particular, must translate into concrete and substantive changes rather than amounting to mere window dressing—otherwise participants will lose trust in such exercises (Loisel and Rio 2024). On the other hand, a collaborative or co-creative process must also generate balanced solutions with mutual gains, rather than manufacturing consent in accordance with the preferences of the most dominant participants (Ansell, Orr, and Trein 2026).

Against this background, it is important to distinguish between co-creation as consultation and co-creation as decision-making. In co-creation as consultation, the interaction aimed at knowledge production and value generation constitutes a process that provides input and advice

to decision-makers, without including formal decision-making in the co-creation process and leading to binding results. In the context of representative democracy, this form of co-creation appears to be more feasible. It is, however, also potentially less satisfactory for participants as they may question the extent to which their contributions genuinely shape policy outcomes and find co-creation "toothless". Co-creation becomes, for instance, more "biting" if participants not only develop proposals for changing public policies but also decide (de facto) which of these proposals will be implemented or ratified by formal representative institutions.[4]

> ***Challenge for policymaking:*** The main challenge for co-creation relates to the role of power in collaboration. It needs to be clarified whether co-creation aims at deliberation and consultation for decision-makers, or if it is also aimed at strongly impacting binding decisions. Furthermore, co-creation needs to balance the power differences between participating actors, in order to produce legitimate results.

4.4 Policy-oriented feedback

The fourth contribution of co-creation to the policy process is policy-oriented feedback. Scholarship on policy process theories and public policy has emphasized the role of evaluation in the policy process as well as the role of policy feedback (Bundi and Trein 2022; Varone, Jacob, and Bundi 2023). While policy evaluation as a formal process often deals with questions about the effectiveness of public policies in addressing societal problems, the role of policy feedback has often been linked to the more diffuse electoral acceptability of policy programs as well as their support by affected interest groups (Béland, Campbell, and Weaver 2022). For

[4] In many cases, the results will always need to be approved by governments and legislatures. Nevertheless, it possible to imagine that these institutions delegate authority to co-creation arenas, as long as they are constitutional and remain in a fixed regulatory and fiscal framework.

example, scholars have examined how existing public policies shape electoral preferences, due to their material benefits or symbolic values (Mettler and SoRelle 2018).

From the co-creation perspective, the notion of feedback is similar, but the focus of the research is not on the electoral consequences, but on the approval of specific projects. In a way, instead of waiting for feedback on election day, elected officials and interest groups seek feedback in a more deconcentrated fashion. Instead of just having elections about representatives who are responsible for making and implementing public policies, hiring professionals to the public administration, and reporting back to citizens, co-creation aims at involving citizens and citizen associations more directly into the policy process, along with other non-state actors. The goal is to have more project- and issue-specific feedback loops rather than one general one.

The empirical literature on co-creation has put forward some examples that illustrate how feedback can work in the context of co-creation. For instance, the use of digital feedback tools and participation tools to solicit citizens' feedback on specific services and projects. Local governments use websites to collect citizens' feedback and then work from that input to improve policies and services (Bonsón, Royo, and Ratkai 2015; Lee-Geiller and Lee 2019). Authorities can then use insights from citizens to design policies based on specific feedback rather than waiting for Election Day. This constructive, design-oriented perspective on policy feedback has been developed in the literature on socio-technical transitions, where authors have taken into account the feedback effects produced by technological developments as well as environmental changes (Sewerin, Béland, and Cashore 2020).

Challenge for policymaking: The challenge for generating constructive policy feedback through co-creation is that participation and cooperation exercises are often concentrated amongst those who are already politically engaged and have the time and resources to participate. Other groups of the population are much less represented in such exercises, which makes them more biased and makes it difficult to achieve truly representative feedback. Furthermore, filtering such feedback is difficult and may be biased.

These different contributions of co-creation to the policy process can appear at different stages. For example, civic activism and bottom-up policy entrepreneurship can contribute to agenda-setting in a way that pushes the agenda from the bottom up, which is different from the standard literature on agenda-setting that focuses on elites (Baumgartner, Breunig, and Grossman 2019; Herweg, Huß, and Zohlnhöfer 2015). At the same time, civic activism may also contribute to policy formulation, decision-making, or implementation. The same holds for the other functions of the policy process. For example, deliberative advice-giving and collaborative decision-making may, of course, contribute to deciding on rules and regulations—that is, the program dimension of public policy—while also contributing to implementation, understood as all the decisions taken once a policy program, with its goals and instruments, has been put into place (Sager, Mavrot, and Keiser 2024). In this context, co-creation goes beyond the involvement of citizens in the design and provision of services, which has been quite prominent in the literature on co-production (Bovaird 2007).

6. Administrative feasibility and democratic desirability

Against the background of the previous analysis, we now develop some reflections on the administrative feasibility and the democratic desirability of co-creation in the policy process. High democratic desirability means that using co-creation is appropriate from a democratic point of view, in the sense that there is some level of value difference related to the issue, which makes it sensible to organize an inclusive deliberative process with diverse participants. Low democratic desirability, by contrast, means that the type of problem is clearly structured in terms of knowledge and values and highly technical, which makes it difficult to engage in a meaningful democratic process. The dimension of administrative feasibility, in turn, refers to the consequences of implementing co-creation from the perspective of government, because the results of the co-creation process need to be something that can be implemented. Low administrative feasibility means that either there is already a response available based on public administration expertise and existing policies. In this case, co-creation may also end in ambiguity, and the process might not lead anywhere, or simply remain a deliberative exercise without the capacity to produce solutions. High administrative feasibility, on the other hand, means that it is easy for the administration to conduct co-creation and to implement its results.

Table 1: Fit of problems to co-creation

	Low administrative feasibility	High administrative feasibility
Low democratic desirability	**Hierarchy or market: Poor fit** *Problem type:* structured problems with concentrated expertise and low interdependence.	**Thin democratic case: optional / managerial** *Problem type:* technical coordination where knowledge is dispersed but values

	Examples: routine rule enforcement, emergency response requiring speed. *Suited mode:* bureaucratic-expert routines or market mechanisms.	are settled and no organized public exists. *Examples:* inter-agency data standards, technical interoperability. *Suited mode:* professional or user co-production, where delivery gains justify the cost.
High democratic desirability	**High democratic pull, low feasibility:** **Desirable but hard** **Problem type:** unstructured, value-laden, redistributive problems with concentrated authority and contested knowledge. **Examples:** asylum and migration policy, contested facility siting. **Suited mode:** deliberative mini-publics and mediated formats rather than open co-creation.	**Co-creation as first choice: Strong fit** **Problem type:** moderately structured problems with dispersed knowledge and resources and an engaged, mobilizable public. **Examples:** local climate adaptation, neighborhood service co-design. **Suited mode:** full co-creation, drawing in users and cross-sector partners.

Table 1 summarizes this argument in a two-by-two table. In the context of a combination of low administrative feasibility and low democratic desirability, hierarchy or the market can provide good solutions—for example, in the case of rapid crisis responses, where there is no time for debate. Then there is the configuration in which democratic desirability is low but administrative feasibility is rather high. This is often the case for technical problems, for example related to public services. In this context, the co-production of public services is possible, but a democratic process with debates about values and the generation of new ideas and visions is limited. The third option is the combination of low administrative feasibility and

high democratic desirability. These are highly polarized policy issues, such as migration or asylum policy, where value differences are large and co-creation might help the different sides hear one another, but where it will be very hard to arrive at a solution to the problem—either because existing policies impede such a solution or because the result would not be implementable. Finally, there is the case in which co-creation is the first choice. These are, in many instances, policy issues that are moderately structured, where co-creation can contribute knowledge and help reduce value differences. Oftentimes, this concerns local and regional projects regarding climate adaptation or matters related to planning.

7. Conclusions

This paper has argued that co-creation is best understood not as a single practice attached to service delivery but as a set of stage-specific functions distributed across the policy cycle. Reading co-creation through the cycle clarifies a tension that the existing literature tends to leave implicit. The democratic promise of co-creation is greatest precisely where it is politically hardest to realise. At agenda-setting, co-creation can reshape how problems are defined and which solutions are imagined, combining collaborative governance with a constructive form of civic activism and policy entrepreneurship from the bottom up. At knowledge creation it can widen the evidence base of policy formulation by integrating scientific, professional, and lay knowledge. At decision-making it oscillates between an advisory role and genuine co-decision, and it is here that questions of power, authority, and coupling to representative institutions become acute. At implementation and feedback, by contrast, co-creation largely reduces to the co-production of services and to issue-specific feedback loops, valuable but more limited, because the central choices about rules and resources have usually already been made.

These findings carry a clear implication. Co-creation contributes to democratic policymaking only when it is connected to the full policy process rather than confined to its downstream stages. Confined to service design and feedback, it may improve services without redistributing influence over policy. Extended to agenda-setting and formulation, it gains political weight but also becomes more contested, because it touches authority, expertise, and representation directly.

Whether co-creation realises its potential depends on the scope conditions we have specified. It tends to operate at the regional and local level and on bounded problems, which means that transformational change requires upper levels of government to delegate genuine autonomy. Its relationship to representative democracy must be clarified at the outset—whether the exercise is consultative or truly influential on binding decisions—since ambiguity invites the charge of window-dressing. The process must be genuinely collaborative rather than a device for manufacturing consent, and it must balance power among unequal participants. Finally, co-creation suits some problems far better than others. Notably, it is most useful where problems are complex, contested, localised, and dependent on contextual knowledge, and least useful where issues are highly technical, time-sensitive, irreconcilably conflictual, or where authorities are unwilling to give co-created outputs any real role.

Seen this way, co-creation is unlikely to replace representative democracy; it operates in its shadow, as a form of second-order democracy whose value lies in complementing, not substituting for, electoral and parliamentary institutions. This is where our analysis stops and a future research agenda begins. The scope conditions specified above tell us when co-creation can plausibly move from advice to binding choice, but not yet how, institutionally, that

transition can be engineered and safeguarded. Tracing how co-created knowledge and proposals actually move through the policy process, and designing the institutional arrangements that let them inform authoritative decisions without being neutralised by existing power structures or undermining the representative institutions on which their legitimacy ultimately rests, is a task we leave for future analytical and empirical work.

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