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Institutionalized Policy Evaluation within the Democratic System: Why? When? How?

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ABSTRACT *Philosophers have expressed concerns about elite capture at various stages of the democratic decision-making process. However, there has been no sustained normative analysis of government-driven feedback platforms that enable different actors to formulate recommendations for revising or canceling existing laws and policies. My article addresses and fills this gap. I contend that government-driven feedback platforms serve a dual purpose of influencing the policy-making process and demonstrating that decisions are open to revision. I also argue that these feedback platforms are intended to generate a normatively salient, forward-looking, and balanced integration of technical knowledge and local knowledge, establishing the epistemic foundation for future deliberation. I then provide three normative standards that serve as a guide to balance expert knowledge with citizens' experience and values.*

1. Introduction

Important normative tensions can manifest in phases and spheres of decision-making that escape the attention of democratic theorists. One example is government-driven feedback platforms (hereafter feedback-platforms) that allow experts, politicians, civil society organizations, advocacy groups, lobby groups, trade unions, and, in some cases, citizens to formulate recommendations for revising or canceling existing laws and policies.

The institutionalization of feedback-platforms, widely regarded as crucial for bolstering legitimacy in rapidly evolving societies facing complex challenges, follows a long wave pattern across various policy domains – particularly in climate policy – that supports the iterative review of policies, regulations, and standards.[1] In its *White Paper on European Governance*, facing the widespread perception of a democratic deficit affecting the European Union (EU), the European Commission advocated for robust, effective, and inclusive institutional innovations in policy evaluation as essential mechanisms for enhancing legitimacy.[2] Then, more than a decade after the *White Paper on European Governance*, the Commission launched the Regulatory Fitness Program (REFIT) platform with the aim of promoting the evaluation and revision of existing laws and policies.[3] The REFIT platform was conceived with the idea of strengthening supranational democracy and overcoming the legitimacy deficit of European institutions. Yet the REFIT platform failed to play the transformational role that the Commission claimed it would. And, in 2020, amid general indifference, the Von der Leyen Commission replaced the REFIT platform with the Fit for Future platform, a high-level expert group with the task of simplifying EU laws and administrative burdens.

Over the last three decades, several liberal democracies have implemented various procedures to evaluate their laws and policies.[4] While not all such procedures pose questions

of democratic legitimacy, some certainly do. If we consider that many philosophers view institutional channels for evaluation and contestation as important mechanisms to prevent any majority from claiming the right to a final say on issues of shared concern,[5] an example like that of the REFIT platform introduces us to an often-neglected question: what normative standards should feedback-platforms meet to enhance the legitimacy of democratic institutions?

Although there are many discussions about democratic institutions' capacity to adapt to new circumstances,[6] none has provided a sustained normative analysis of the interplay between epistemic and procedural considerations in institutional innovations that take effect after a decision has been made and implemented. My article begins to fill this gap. To do so, I turn to the experimentalist approach to democracy, conceptualized by John Dewey.[7] Dewey remains the main philosophical reference for scholars advocating a form of governance that takes 'the need to adapt institutions to new circumstances as the continuing challenge to democracy'.[8] From this perspective, policies and laws should be seen as adaptable responses to real, evolving issues that affect people over time. For this reason, in a democracy, ordinary citizens, and not only experts or powerful stakeholders, should participate in formulating hypotheses, deciding between hypotheses, observing the practical consequences, and evaluating such consequences given shared expectations about what constitutes a desirable effect.[9]

Within this framework, feedback-platforms, I will argue, should be understood as bridges between two successive decision-making cycles. Such bridges can be seen either as technocratic gatekeepers or as a proof of the idea that democratic decisions can be continually revisited. Specifically, legitimacy-enhancing feedback-platforms should exhibit, on the one hand, the commitment to making citizens co-responsible for collectively binding decisions and, on the other hand, the commitment to keeping decisions open to revision. In other words, as I will show, they should meet at least three normative standards: transparency (discussions should be accessible to political representatives and ordinary citizens), interactional pluralism (members of society with different backgrounds should have sustained interactions), and congruence (members of society should identify with the standards of evaluation).

To support my claims, Section 2 outlines the most important aspects of feedback-platforms, detailing their main features, their philosophical relevance, and the knowledge they produce. With this in place, Section 3 explains that in the case of feedback-platforms, the interconnection between epistemic and democratic credentials poses a serious normative problem: that is, since feedback-platforms generate normative-salient knowledge about what should be done regarding the policy at hand, they may reinforce a narrative in which experts and technocratic authorities, as opposed to ordinary citizens, ultimately have the last word on issues directly affecting the public. To address this problem, I first look at the overall decision-making process and situate feedback-platforms within a diachronic understanding of the democratic system (Section 4). Building on this analysis, I then outline the three normative standards (Section 5). Such standards serve as a general basis for designing feedback-platforms that can express the right balance between epistemic and democratic credentials. Section 6 concludes.

2. Feedback-Platforms and Political Philosophy

In this section, I locate feedback-platforms within the large empirical literature on policy evaluation. I then elaborate on why several political philosophers regard the presence of

institutionalized feedback mechanisms as an important factor to weigh in our assessments of the legitimacy of a democratic state. Within this framework of analysis, I go on to describe the kind of knowledge produced by feedback-platforms and how it gives rise to a tension between expert knowledge and local knowledge, which holds crucial significance for assessing the legitimacy of democratic states.

2.1. Feedback-Platforms and Policy Evaluation: Two Main Features

Despite the exponential growth of technical knowledge on topics, methodologies, practices, and uses of policy evaluation,[10] democratic theorists have paid little attention to this sphere of decision-making, and to the different procedures and methods that contribute to the revision of policies and laws.

Policy evaluation can be external or internal.[11] External evaluation is carried out by entities like research centers and civil society groups that may not have been contracted by the organization implementing the policy or program under evaluation. Scholars say that external evaluation tends to be more independent and critical.[12] Nevertheless, external evaluators may encounter practical problems, such as limited access to data or *de facto* political and bureaucratic control.[13]

Feedback-platforms like the REFIT platform are a form of internal evaluation. Through the institutionalization of certain evaluation mechanisms, the European Commission, for instance, sought to affirm its commitment to including different actors in its decision-making process. In reality, internal evaluation typically caters to government bodies, with ultimate control resting with program designers and bureaucrats who can continue, modify, or freeze the program. It can be conducted by agencies of ministerial units, by bodies of stakeholders accountable to institutional actors, by private consultancy firms, but also by research organizations and academics, contracted by the pertinent government body. The policy-evaluation literature has found that internal evaluation may have easier access to insider data and better knowledge of the broader policy landscape.[14] Yet internal evaluators, even if they are not formally affiliated with the relevant government body, may have to deal with stringent time constraints and pressures to avoid negative evaluations.[15] When evaluation is government-driven, bureaucrats and representatives can put pressure on evaluators to legitimize preexisting policy directions.[16]

Evaluators and committees often use systematic methods such as focus groups, randomized controlled trials, and statistical techniques. These evaluations test and refine policy assumptions without a clear commitment to democratic values. It is also for this reason that policies and programs may be designed with evaluation in mind. Feedback-platforms offer a less methodologically rigorous process for evaluating laws and policies, involving input from several participants in the discussion. As the European Commission puts it, the REFIT platform can facilitate a balanced assessment of policy efforts and show people that democratic governments' decisions are informed by the shared interests of all those affected.[17]

In reality, an inclusive approach to evaluation has become widely adopted in a variety of policy domains that go far beyond the European domain.[18] For instance, the participatory approach to policy evaluation emphasizes inviting program participants to contribute to defining and analyzing the program, enhancing understanding and active involvement.[19] Utilization-focused evaluation argues that evaluation effectiveness should be measured by

its usefulness to stakeholders, including funders, participants, disadvantaged individuals, staff, and administrators.[20] The empowered-evaluation model stresses the importance of including participants, especially marginalized voices, to increase program success and participants' capacity to plan and evaluate their actions.[21] However, these approaches do not aim to enhance the legitimacy of democratic institutions. They aim to ensure the immediate success of policies and programs. In the case of feedback-platforms like the REFIT platform, inclusion is framed as a means to fulfill the commitment to democratizing the decision-making process. To put in brief, feedback-platforms are a type of participatory internal evaluation of laws and policies. They involve various stakeholders – ideally all affected stakeholders – and employ non-traditional evaluation methods, such as deliberation, to bolster the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

2.2. Feedback-Platforms: Their Philosophical Relevance

Some of the most prominent democratic theorists of our time have argued that the existence of feedback mechanisms contributes to the justification of democratic institutions' claim-right to rule.

One argument justifies feedback mechanisms as a form of control over democratic processes. According to Philip Pettit, people have equal influence on democratic decisions when the system allows them to challenge existing laws and policies.[22] In his view, institutional channels of contestation, including feedback-platforms, are key mechanisms to protect minorities from majority-based decision-making.[23] Pierre Rosanvallon also argues that citizen-oriented evaluation agencies can be instruments to make governments more transparent.[24]

Another argument for feedback mechanisms links them with the fallibility of human beings. Because agents are fallible and their claims to knowledge are compatible with the possibility of errors, there is no reason to deny that collectively binding decisions, which in fact are combinations of partial worldviews, will not be error-free. Decision-making processes should then be designed to help democratic governments and citizens correct mistakes and mitigate the effects of biases. Against this backdrop, Bernard Manin argues that a collective cannot decide once and for all because the definition of what is just 'remains the subject of constant debate'.[25] For Elizabeth Anderson, democratic decision-making 'needs to recognize its own fallibility' and, therefore, institute mechanisms to correct its decisions.[26] In a world in which even our most firmly held beliefs might prove mistaken, as Hélène Landemore also argues, it is important to remember that intelligent decisions made today may turn out to be inappropriate in the future.[27] Furthermore, majority opinion, as Jürgen Habermas writes, must always be regarded as fallible and subject to revisions if the 'minority convinces the majority that [the minority's] views are correct'.[28]

So, feedback institutions, including feedback-platforms, as exemplified by the REFIT platform, are often considered central aspects of a strategy that aims to express a commitment to the idea that in a democracy no individuals or groups have the right to a final say. This commitment can be associated with democratic concerns regarding the translation of fundamental values into procedures. It can also relate to political-epistemological considerations tied to the enduring philosophical idea that our claims to knowledge cannot be established with certainty.

2.3. Feedback-Platforms: The Knowledge They Can Produce

In the remainder of this section, given the state-of-the-art in policy-evaluation scholarship, I offer a view on feedback-platform-produced knowledge (FP-produced knowledge).

Evaluators and evaluation committees, as we have seen earlier in this section, often use sophisticated scientific procedures to test and fine-tune policy theories. Yet many policy-evaluation scholars challenge the idea of policy evaluation as an arena for objective reasoning. Mark Bovens and Paul't Hart, for instance, demonstrate that judgments about policy outcomes and policy fiascos are often influenced by biases and social constructions.[29] Evaluators themselves have struggled to find the right balance between evaluation models and context-specific standards.[30] Against this backdrop, uncritically accepting evaluation results as unbiased may overlook the inherent partiality of the models used, and the fact that the purpose of evaluation is to provide information that guides action and other policy decisions.[31]

FP-generated knowledge, I think, can be compared to functional knowledge, which, in the corporate world, is the demonstrated understanding of the tasks a work group should perform to obtain an outcome within a certain market. Functional knowledge is actionable: it informs standards, judgments on best practices, and the perception of customer needs. FP-generated knowledge is also actionable. Specifically, it describes what should be considered worthy of attention in a society at a given time, what the benefits and costs of a policy have been, what the social effects of a certain initiative have been, what should be achieved in the future, and how it should be achieved.

The findings of policy evaluation have been used not only to fix problems but to open or close new directions for actions, mobilize support for positions that key actors already held, and influence institutions and actors beyond the specific issue at hand.[32] It is against this backdrop that Steffen Eckhard and Vytautas Jankauskas find that evaluation systematically serves the *ex-ante* political interests of policy actors.[33] Julian Hoerner demonstrates that Euroskeptic members of parliament tend to cite evaluations of EU policies to pursue their short-term political interests.[34] A study also shows that lawmakers may have incentives to hinder systematic policy evaluation because it can uncover problems in the actual working of legislation.[35]

In other words, FP-generated knowledge does not necessarily add something to the collective search for truth. But this does not mean feedback-platforms cannot generate a constellation of facts, ideas, observations, experience, and investigations with practical and political consequences. FP-generated knowledge is in fact a combination of the general knowledge of experts – which, as others have argued,[36] should at least result from shared procedures, mutual accountability, and recognized guidelines (however vulnerable it is to disagreement on matters of values and facts) – the value-laden knowledge of political representatives, and the local knowledge (that is, the direct experience of the policy at hand) of the target population.[37]

To bring it all together, FP-generated knowledge is an epistemically imperfect kind of knowledge that combines the technical knowledge of experts with other kinds of knowledge. It is intended to influence forthcoming actions, particularly concerning the policy at hand, and, in some cases, to go beyond that specific domain. From advanced research techniques to deliberation, and the direct involvement of affected members in feedback-platforms, there are multiple ways to combine the knowledge of experts with local knowledge and the knowledge of political representatives. However, even in a context, as we

have seen in this section, in which feedback mechanisms, including feedback-platforms, are generally seen as an essential feature of a democratic government with a legitimate claim-right to rule, not every approach to linking technical expertise with the voice of affected members is equal when viewed through a democratic lens.

3. Striking a Balance between Epistemic and Democratic Credentials

In Section 2, we saw that the deployment of technical expertise in policy evaluation is supposed to facilitate a balanced assessment of policy efforts or to confirm/falsify policy theories. We also saw that feedback-platforms are a relatively peculiar type of policy evaluation procedure. In this case, the inclusion of affected members in the evaluation of laws and policies appears essential to justify two normative claims. The first claim is epistemic in spirit and refers to fallibilism. The idea is that in a democracy, citizens should be given the opportunity to revise decisions and contain the negative effects of biases. And maximal inclusion increases the variety of sources for revision. The second claim is on democratic grounds and refers to a conception of control. The idea is that citizens should be provided with the opportunity to challenge collectively binding decisions. In other words, feedback-platforms are one way to transform fallibilism and control into recognizable features of democratic decision-making. Yet the epistemic and democratic requirements do not necessarily push in the same direction. On the one hand, feedback-platforms can be seen as a response to the demand for more evidence-based, accountable, and up-to-date policy-making; on the other hand, too strong an emphasis on technical knowledge and expert advice may transform feedback-platforms into potential obstacles to enhanced democratic legitimacy and, at the same time, feed into widespread technocratic worries.

In other cases, scholars have addressed this conflict by firmly advocating the democratization of policy-making, particularly within expert bodies. For instance, Peter Weingart contends that democratizing expert bodies necessitates including lay knowledge in knowledge-producing entities, making expert knowledge accessible to non-experts, enabling ordinary citizens to influence the expert-selection process, and providing citizens with access to expert knowledge.[38]

In policy evaluation, however, giving excessive weight to democratic interests also affects the epistemic *raison d'être* of feedback-platforms, which are meant to improve the status quo. Those with greater inclination toward arguments for evidence-based policy-making would then place importance on enhancing the epistemic credentials of feedback-platforms.[39] Nevertheless, a narrow focus on the epistemic credentials may neglect what motivates judgments on the legitimacy of democratic governments – that is, how the general public perceives feedback-platforms as arenas in which democratic governments make amendments to policies and laws based on the experience of those affected by such policies and laws. Against this backdrop, it is also valuable to explore the moderate stances that political philosophers investigating the relationship between democracy and expertise have endeavored to develop in recent years. A systemic approach maintains that the democratic and epistemic benefits of public deliberation can be built through the interaction of different actors operating in different bodies.[40] Within this framework, there can be a division of labor between bodies, such as feedback-platforms, which enhance epistemic credentials, and procedures, such as voting and deliberation

in parliaments, which fulfill crucial democratic functions. In the same vein, in her book *Politics and Expertise*, Zeynep Pamuk proposes to pair expert bodies with an advisory and deliberative committee comprising ordinary citizens – a science court.[41] By enabling deliberation addressing both scientific aspects and value judgments, such a body would offer non-experts the chance to understand, recognize, and assess expert claims. Johan Christensen, Cathrine Holst, and Anders Molander argue that in reforming expert bodies, institutional designers should prioritize upholding scientific norms, establishing hearing procedures, meeting transparency requirements (such as the requirement that reports, minutes, and proceedings be made publicly available), and incorporating experts with different backgrounds.[42]

Yet, when applying these moderate solutions to the case of feedback-platforms, there appears to be a missing element. Feedback-platforms do not necessarily qualify as expert bodies. Unlike other expert bodies, such as the COVID-19 Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies in the UK or the EU Expert Group on Public Health, which are instituted with the goal of advising governments with high-quality information, feedback-platforms are instituted with the dual purpose of influencing the policy-making process and, simultaneously, making people see that decisions can be subject to change and updating within a democratic state. For feedback-platforms to bolster the legitimacy of the government, the public should then be able to see that FP-generated knowledge is a balanced synthesis of technical knowledge and local knowledge. And such a perception appears to be connected not only to how knowledge is produced but also to the substance of that knowledge, which should, in some way, mirror the agency of the targeted population. How can this be done without undermining the feedback-platforms' epistemic credentials? To answer this question, I return to the experimentalist approach to democracy. Dewey argued that the search for solutions and alternatives should be a collaborative endeavor, integrating expert knowledge with the direct experience of citizens.[43] In the same vein, as trust in elites frays in our democracies, Charles Sabel and David Victor write, this kind of collaboration between citizens and experts is how systems of governance can overcome rigidity.[44] With this in place, the next sections will scrutinize feedback-platforms more closely. I first determine the positions of feedback-platforms within democratic systems. Building on this analysis, I then offer three normative standards. Taken together, this analysis will help philosophers to make reasoned judgments on the legitimacy-enhancing capacity of different feedback-platforms.

4. Feedback-Platforms within the Democratic System

If the impact of FP-generated knowledge, as we saw in Section 2, can go well beyond the technicalities of the administrative machine, it seems important to understand how feedback-platforms connect with other institutional and noninstitutional sites of democratic decision-making. To that end, I adopt a time-sensitive approach to democratic decision-making. This diachronic approach considers how informal sites and formal mechanisms can connect with one another throughout the phases of discussion, voting, implementation, and revision of laws and policy decisions.[45]

Policy evaluation is often, and mistakenly, framed as a retrospective exercise internal to the logic of policy implementation.[46] However, this perspective overlooks the possible impact of FP-generated knowledge on ensuing decision-making cycles and, therefore,

on other formal and informal spaces within a democratic system. If feedback-platforms provide legislators and the public with updated knowledge about the effects and benefits of existing policies and, in this way, establish what we can expect from the implementation of a policy in a certain context or what looks like a necessary adjustment to the original policy strategy, it is a misguided belief that feedback-platforms are the mere coda of policy implementation. In investigating what worked, what did not work, and what is changing, feedback-platforms can define what is feasible under certain circumstances and set or update a formal baseline for future deliberative and nondeliberative practices.

To account for this idea, it is important to unpack how the experimentalist approach to democracy conceptualizes the development of democratic decision-making through time. At the beginning of this article, I mentioned the idea that the experimentalist approach to democracy is built on the thought that policies and laws are partial and revisable results. For this reason, after decisions have been made and implemented, proposals for revisions can reactivate and update deliberation on issues of common concern. On this view, the overall process of connecting different formal and informal sites is more important than any specific decision because single decisions are points in a process with different practices and procedures that make all outcomes open to revision in the future.[47] This can be explained by the fact that mistakes and imperfections in implemented policies are not seen as vices that significantly undermine the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Instead, they are a new starting point through which to engage with collective intelligence in the process of revision and readjustment.

To study both the construction of appropriate solutions to shared problems and the implementation of such solutions, the experimentalist approach to democracy divides the democratic decision-making process into different phases that replicate the progress of scientific inquiry.[48] Anderson has translated Dewey's approach to scientific inquiry into a sequence of three phases: *talk*, *vote*, and *feedback*.[49] In *talk*, affected parties, or their representatives selected in a predeliberative stage, discuss what counts as an issue of common concern, communicate their private interests, and, through inclusive deliberation, revise and combine private and partial interests to acknowledge biases and correct them.[50] Here, a problem counts as an issue of public interest when its prominence on the public agenda follows a procedurally fair process of decision-making.[51] In *vote*, participants express their view on what solution to the issue of common concern is in the public's shared interest. The literature on democratic systems has largely focused on *talk* and *vote*.[52] Nevertheless, once a decision has been made, the process of democratic decision-making continues (*feedback*). By testing solutions in practice, affected members may come to consider whether they can live with the consequences of their decisions, and they may change their views.

So far, political theorists have studied different *talk–vote–feedback* sequences as separate units of analysis.[53] However, we should not think of the *talk–vote–feedback* sequence as just a distinct and finite progression that connects deliberation occurring prior to *vote* with *ex-post* deliberation. In reality, for each problem that actors in the democratic system recognize as an issue of common concern, there might be an indeterminate series of interconnected sequences – such as $vote_1$, $feedback_1$, $talk_2$, $vote_2$, $feedback_2$, $talk_3$, $vote_3$, $feedback_3$, and so on. Should new evidence, claims, and ideas become available (or be, even instrumentally, mobilized) in $feedback_1$, $feedback_2$, … $feedback_n$, baseline epistemic constraints for future processes change (such constraints may frame a future course of

action or contribute to establishing what counts as a real issue of shared concern), perhaps activating another cycle of *talk–vote–feedback*.

In this perspective, feedback-platforms transmit evaluative information, both favorable and unfavorable at times, about a law, policy, action, or process to the public or to those who have the power to make decisions. From the philosophy of language, we know that institutional actors and bodies expressing a message tend to be in a more favorable position to be heard, secure uptake, and communicate in an action-generating way.[54] It is against this backdrop that we should, therefore, regard government-driven initiatives such as feedback-platforms as bridges between different decision-making cycles. Feedback-platforms, by advocating for strongly solicited policy revisions, can enhance the perceived legitimacy of democratic institutions and help define the boundaries of what constitutes the common ground on certain issues. In generating knowledge that influences the boundaries of future deliberation, however, they may also be seen as technocratic gatekeepers.

5. Feedback-Platforms: Three Normative Standards

On the experimentalist approach to democracy, experiments are understood as processes of collective inquiry through which people identify common problems and try to find shared solutions.[55] During these collective inquiries, participants identify common problems, extract standards of evaluation from their experience, predict potential effects, formulate reliable hypotheses on feasible solutions, test these solutions, and assess whether the hypotheses are well founded once validated through empirical testing.[56] Since reality is described as always changing, even hypotheses that have proven highly effective in solving common problems should not be considered final. Instead, they should be incorporated into a process that provides communities of inquirers with the tools to revise results in the future.[57]

The idea of democracy as collective inquiry suggests that the justification for the claim of democratic institutions to exercise the right to rule should be tied to a fundamental normative commitment: that is, democratic decision-making should be structured in such a way that ordinary citizens, regarded both as affected subjects and potential knowledge producers, can perceive themselves as co-responsible. This co-responsibility encompasses the identification of shared problems, the deliberation on potential solutions, the subsequent revision of those solutions, and the criteria against which laws and policies are evaluated. But the legitimacy of the claim to rule is also contingent upon outcomes satisfying general quality standards. Specifically, outcomes must emerge from a procedural framework allowing for revisions and adhere to collectively agreed-upon, yet revisable, standards of appropriateness. Then, within a democratic system, various institutional and noninstitutional decision-making sites, both before and after decisions are made, should be designed to contribute to realizing this ideal of democratic legitimacy in diverse ways and to varying degrees. Within this framework, feedback-platforms can be understood as institutional efforts aimed at expressing both the commitment to making citizens co-responsible for collectively binding decisions and the commitment to keeping such decisions open to revision. For this reason, these platforms should be designed to help citizens understand that revising laws and policies according to agreed-upon and evolving

criteria is a common and defining practice of democratic societies, where institutions possess a legitimate claim-right to rule.

To better understand how feedback-platforms can enhance democratic legitimacy, we need to translate the two commitments into normative standards (transparency, interactional pluralism, and congruence). While transparency, interactional pluralism, and congruence do not provide final solutions to all potential conflicts, they serve as guiding standards to ensure that revisions to laws and policies can enhance the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

Regarding the first of these, *transparency*: if all citizens should have the opportunity to know that policies and laws can be revised as circumstances evolve, then the terms of discussion within feedback-platforms should not be kept secret. Instead, they should be made as public as possible. In the literature on democratic systems, it is common to draw attention to the issue of transmitting claims and ideas across different sites.[58] Moreover, as we saw earlier in this article, scholars working on expert groups also highlight the relevance of transparency requirements. Proponents of the experimentalist approach have also argued that by extending the pool of publicly accessible information, increased transparency can promote better accountability.[59] In reality, a closer look at the idea of democracy as a collective inquiry offers us another perspective on the value of disclosing to the broader audience the operations of feedback-platforms. That is, increased transparency displays a commitment to revising policies and laws. It is against this backdrop that according to the first normative standard, during and after the operations of feedback-platforms, discussions that result in FP-generated knowledge should be accessible to political representatives and ordinary citizens.

Concerning the second normative standard, *interactional pluralism*: several philosophers with an interest in social and political epistemology have turned to the practical issue of how to make experts interact with laypeople.[60] According to Lisa Herzog, at least some groups of experts should learn the basics of science communication.[61] With the tools of science communication, experts can explain the strength of evidence for certain results. They can also establish smoother connections with laypeople and, in this way, develop insight into issues that people regard as urgent. Herzog also emphasizes that direct interaction between experts and laypeople can help to build trust and reduce affective distance.[62] In the experimentalist approach to democracy, the application of a scientific method to the political domain of inquiry seeks to establish a process where individuals, regardless of their partial perspectives and differences in intellectual abilities, can express their own interests on issues of shared concern, learn from the views of different people, and see others as fellow contributors to the collective inquiry. Dewey argues that there is indeed something uniquely valuable in having several repeated face-to-face interactions with citizens, who may hold different positions in society.[63] In his model, repeated and frequent interactions help to develop ties despite disagreement.[64] Moreover, as he writes, a practical reorganization of social conditions must always 'remain a matter of face-to-face intercourse'.[65] For this reason, according to the second normative standard, feedback-platforms should be designed so as to strengthen the idea that in a process of collective inquiry, participants from different walks of life relate to one another as a community of fellow inquirers who are able to exchange knowledge and build a shared understanding of public issues.

We now turn to *congruence*. In feedback-platforms, evaluation criteria may affect how insiders and outsiders deal (and will deal) with laws and policies. Different indicators

can motivate opposing judgments on the same policy. Moreover, actors who hold powerful positions may push for adopting criteria that tend to lead to results in line with their ideological commitments.[66] For this reason, it becomes important to recognize the agency of citizens in establishing what counts as a relevant criterion of evaluation. According to the experimentalist approach to democracy, collectively binding decisions, as we have seen earlier in this section, should emerge from processes of collective inquiry in which ordinary citizens can see themselves as responsible for the outcome.[67] In societies where different communities of inquiry can express their problem-solving capacity in several ways and moved by different interests, the criteria for assessing laws and policies should relate to the real-world experience of citizens. On this view, therefore, evaluation criteria cannot be *a priori* or universal.[68] Specifically, different actors, from ordinary citizens to experts, because of their experience of concrete problems and experimental solutions, should be able to evaluate whether proposed ends are desirable and determine those ends that are worthwhile.[69] Considering this, the third normative standard establishes that feedback-platforms should be designed so that ordinary citizens can recognize themselves in the criteria deployed to assess and revise policies and laws.

Based on the approach discussed in this article, legitimacy-enhancing feedback-platforms should, therefore, at least meet three normative standards. Such standards are ways to translate the commitment to making citizens co-responsible for collectively binding decisions and the commitment to keeping such decisions open to revisions into a procedural orientation to design feedback-platforms that can express an appropriate balance between democratic and epistemic demands. The three normative standards discussed in this section are not necessarily the same standards applicable to other institutional and noninstitutional procedures, which, at different stages of the decision-making process, may contribute in different ways to legitimizing or strengthening the democratic credentials of a democratic state. This argument thus aligns with a pluralist view, recognizing that at different phases, diverse standards are needed to realize the commitment to making citizens co-responsible for collectively binding decisions and the commitment to keeping such decisions open to revisions.

Even if my normative standards are broad, they can still assist us in making informed judgments about contemporary institutional innovations. Returning to the example presented in Section 1, the technicalities of EU regulatory policy and the fact that all meetings were held behind closed doors in Brussels transformed the platform into a closed circle of pundits with minimal impact on society. Most national business associations and interest groups, as one report attests, were unaware of the role and functions of the platform.[70] The experience with the REFIT platform also shows that without procedural provisions for including ordinary citizens, feedback-platforms may become the playground of a distinct class of advisers, high-ranking bureaucrats, interest groups, and even representatives of private organizations. Even if the REFIT platform aimed to focus on what was necessary and mattered for citizens, there were no specific provisions to facilitate interactions between citizens, experts, bureaucrats, and interest groups.[71] Since meetings followed a tight schedule and concerned several policies, participants did not have much time to interact meaningfully. Criteria to identify the relevant stakeholders prioritized actors with expertise and technical knowledge.[72] The only connection between ordinary citizens and deliberation on the platform was through the Have Your Say portal, an online platform on which citizens can share their views on European Commission initiatives. Furthermore, in establishing the REFIT platform, the European Commission aimed to

focus on 'the most serious sources of inefficiency and unnecessary burdens'.[73] Yet, in expressing such a strong commitment to efficiency, the platform tended to favor private actors' interests in deregulation over the shared interests of those affected.[74]

6. Conclusion

This article has offered the first sustained normative analysis of feedback-platforms. I argued that feedback-platforms are instituted with the dual purpose of influencing the policy-making process and making people see that decisions can be subject to change within a democratic state. I also argued that feedback-platforms are supposed to produce a normatively salient, forward-looking, and balanced synthesis of technical knowledge and local knowledge that contributes to defining the epistemic baseline for future deliberation on the policy at hand. I then provided three normative standards (transparency, interactional pluralism, and congruence) that can indicate a way to balance expert knowledge with citizens' experience and values.

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NOTES

1 Sabel and Zeitlin, "Learning"; Sabel and Victor, *Fixing the Climate*. See also European Commission, *European Green Deal*; European Commission, *Green Claims Directive*.
2 European Commission, *European Governance*, 7. On this issue, see Streeck and Schäfer, *Politics*.
3 European Commission, *Better Regulation*.
4 Agencies (e.g. the National Agency for Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes in Italy), organizations established within ministries or governments (e.g. the Evaluation Task Force in the UK), private organizations dedicated to conducting evaluations (e.g. McKinsey, Blue Marble Evaluation, Developmental Evaluation), evaluation committees within ministries (e.g. the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy in the Netherlands), *ad hoc* evaluation committees, and external consultants are parts of an evaluation ecosystem aimed at amending and reviewing policies.
5 See sect. 3 of this article.
6 See, for instance, Burelli, "Resilience"; Frega, *Pragmatism*, chap. 4.

7 Dewey, *Logic*. See also Anderson, "Epistemology of Democracy"; Frega, *Pragmatism*, chap. 8; Knight and Johnson, *Priority of Democracy*. One may dispute this methodological choice. Robert Talisse argues that Dewey's theory of democracy is built upon controversial ontological claims about experience and personal growth that make it incompatible with the fact of reasonable pluralism. Yet, if we understand the experimentalist approach in general terms, as a model of democratic decision-making with instrumental and procedural components, it is still possible to study its core normative arguments. See Talisse, "Farewell." See also Erman and Möller, "Pragmatism"; Festenstein, "Spotlight."
8 Sabel and Victor, *Fixing the Climate*, 10. See also Sabel, "Learning by Monitoring."
9 Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, chap. 25; Anderson, "Social Movements," 6–8; Dewey, *Logic*; Dewey, *Public*; Dewey, "Creative Democracy."
10 Vaessen and Leeuw, *Mind the Gap*; Wollmann, "Utilization," 435–6. See also Weiss, "Have We Learned Anything," 27.
11 Weiss, "Where," 100.
12 Schoenefeld and Jordan, "Governing Policy Evaluation," 288.
13 Hesstvedt and Christensen, "Political and Administrative Contol"; Weiss, "Where," 100.
14 Schoenefeld and Jordan, "Governing Policy Evaluation," 287.
15 Nickerson, "Confirmation Bias," 175.
16 Pleger and Sager, "Betterment," 167–9; Højlund, "Evaluation," 46.
17 European Commission, *European Governance*.
18 Abma, "Responding to Ambiguity"; Plottu and Plottu, "Approaches."
19 Cousins and Chouinard, *Participatory Evaluation*.
20 Patton, *Essentials*, 67.
21 Fetterman, "Window," 8, 11. Note that even if they may improve stakeholders' perceptions of government efficiency and accountability, participatory evaluations, often conducted by private contractors, are not necessarily framed as institutional efforts to strengthen the justification of democratic institutions' claim-right to rule.
22 Pettit, *People's Terms*.
23 Ibid., 215–17.
24 Rosanvallon, *Democratic Legitimacy*.
25 Manin, "On Legitimacy," 262.
26 Anderson, "Epistemology of Democracy," 12.
27 Landemore, *Democratic Reason*.
28 Habermas, *Facts and Norms*, 306.
29 Bovens and Hart, "Revisiting," 661.
30 Beywl, "Role of Evaluation," 11.
31 Patton, *Essentials*, 3.
32 Bovens *et al*., "Politics"; Weiss, "Have We Learned Anything."
33 Eckhard and Jankauskas, "Explaining," 679–81.
34 Hoerner, "Adding Fuel," 806.
35 Mastenbroek *et al*., "Closing the Regulatory Cycle?," 1338.
36 Christensen *et al*., *Expertise*; Pamuk, *Politics and Expertise*.
37 I owe this definition of local knowledge to Barrotta and Montuschi, "Expertise."
38 Weingart, *Die Wissenschaft*, 53–54.
39 Holst and Christensen, "Epistemic Quality."
40 Mansbridge *et al*., "Systemic Approach."
41 Pamuk, *Politics and Expertise*, 121–3.
42 Christensen *et al*., *Expertise*, 108.
43 Dewey, *Public*, 207. See also McVea, "Constructing."
44 Sabel and Victor, *Fixing the Climate*, 10–11.
45 On the diachronic approach to the democratic system, see Curato, "Sequential Analysis"; Fumagalli, "Time"; Fumagalli, "When?"; Goodin, "Sequencing"; Parkinson, *Deliberating*.
46 Vedung, *Public Policy*, 3.
47 Dewey, *Public*. On this issue, see Fuerstein, "Epistemic Democracy."
48 Dewey, *Logic*, chap. 6.
49 Anderson, "Epistemology of Democracy," 9.
50 Anderson, "Social Movements," 6.

51 Anderson, "Epistemology of Democracy," 10.
52 See Elstub *et al.*, "Fourth Generation"; Mansbridge *et al.*, "Systemic Approach." For an exception, see Boswell, "Deliberating."
53 Anderson, "Epistemology of Democracy"; Fung, "Continuous Institutional Innovation."
54 Austin, *How to Do Things*.
55 On this issue, see Caspary, *Dewey*; Erman and Möller, "Pragmatism"; Festenstein, "Inquiry"; Frega, *Practice*; Frega, *Pragmatism*.
56 Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, chap. 25; see also Anderson, "Social Movements," 6–8.
57 Dewey, *Public*. See also Fuerstein, "Epistemic Democracy"; Knight and Johnson, *Priority of Democracy*; Sabel and Victor, *Fixing the Climate*.
58 Boswell *et al.*, "Message Received?"; see also Mendonça, "Mitigating."
59 Sabel and Zeitlin, "Learning."
60 On the interaction between ordinary citizens and experts, see Anderson, "Epistemic Bubbles"; Baghramian and Croce, "Experts."
61 Herzog, *Citizen Knowledge*, 194.
62 Ibid., 200.
63 Dewey, *Public*.
64 Forestal, "Architecture," 159.
65 Dewey, *Public*, 211.
66 Christensen, *Power of Economists*.
67 Dewey, *Public*. On this issue, see Rogers, "Introduction," 32.
68 VanderVeen, "Pragmatism," 169.
69 Hildreth, "Reconstructing."
70 European Commission, *Commission Staff Working Document*, 35.
71 European Commission, *Better Regulation*, 3.
72 Alemanno, "Better Regulation."
73 European Commission, *Better Regulation*, 10.
74 Sarpi, "Better for Whom?"

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