

Stack, Shauna; Griessler, Erich

## Working Paper

From a "half full or half empty glass" to "definitely a success":  
Explorative comparison of impacts of climate assemblies in Ireland,  
France, Germany and Scotland

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IHS Working Paper 39

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From a “half full or half empty glass”  
to “definitely a success”. Explorative  
comparison of impacts of climate  
assemblies in Ireland, France,  
Germany and Scotland

Shauna Stack  
Erich Griessler



INSTITUT FÜR HÖHERE STUDIEN  
INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES  
Vienna

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**Author(s)**

Shauna Stack, Erich Griessler

**Editor(s)**

Katrin Auel

**Title**

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**Institut für Höhere Studien - Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS)**

Josefstädter Straße 39, A-1080 Wien

T +43 1 59991-0

F +43 1 59991-555

[www.ihs.ac.at](http://www.ihs.ac.at)

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## Abstract

In recent years many countries, including Austria, have commissioned citizen assemblies in response to the complex issue of climate change. Based on an explorative qualitative study, this paper examines the impact of climate assemblies on policy making and looks at elements that further or impede their impact. In addition, the paper identifies several other impacts of climate assemblies such as those on deliberative democracy and quality of discourse around contentious topics. The paper compares climate assemblies in France, Germany, Ireland and Scotland.

**Key words:** climate assembly, citizen assembly, deliberative democracy, cross-country analysis, impact of participation

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# 1 Introduction

Austria, which currently carries out a citizen assembly on climate change (<https://klimarat.org>, n.d.), is one among many countries to commission such democratic innovation (OECD, 2020) in response to the complex issue of climate change. Given the rise of protest movements such as Fridays for Future (<https://fridaysforfuture.org/>, n.d.), the 2018 IPCC report (IPCC, 2018), an increase in extreme climate related weather events and intensifying consensus around the urgency of transitioning towards sustainable ways of living (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2021), climate change has become ever more prominent on the political agenda (World Wildlife Fund, 2021). In addition to politics, these events demonstrate how climate decisions are also social, cultural, economic and pathway defining. Climate, therefore, is a ‘wicked problem’ (Rittel & Webber, 1973) which does not instigate effective decision making within the traditional political system due to a multitude of conflicting interests, stalling negotiations, and short-term thinking (Gupta, et al. 2007).

The observable result of political gridlock on climate action has been a wave of citizens assemblies focused on the topic of climate change which has swept across Europe in the past five years. National assemblies have taken place in Ireland (2016-2018), France (2019-2020), the United Kingdom (2020), Scotland (2020-2021), Denmark (2020-2021), Germany (2021), and Finland (2021) while more are currently under way in Austria and Spain, and are being negotiated elsewhere. Citizen assemblies are one of a collection of participatory devices considered to be democratic innovations (Smith, 2009), or “institutions or processes that reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance” (Escobar & Elstub, 2019, p.3). The recent proliferation comes on the back of a variety of democratic innovations in the past decade ranging from citizen juries on voter reform to participatory budgeting (Dryzek et al., 2019). Regarding climate change, organisations such as Extinction Rebellion (<https://rebellion.global>, n.d.) are making explicit calls for citizen assemblies as means of citizen engagement and inclusion for better climate policy. Coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic, movements such as these are gaining traction as governments and citizens alike are now familiar with crisis-era experiences.

As stated, many European citizen assemblies on climate are currently underway. On the one hand, this signals that governments and organizations see value in spending the time and resources on commissioning and participating in such events. Some have argued that climate change as a topic is specifically relevant to citizen participation considering the lack of momentum coming from traditional policy processes to proactively lead change (Vlerick, 2020). Representative institutions face multiple paradoxes on the climate topic such as (1) the traditional technocratic nature of climate policy which tends to exclude everyday citizens’ meanings from political decision making as compared with



other topics of civic life, (2) the deep-rooted corporate interests and lobbying efforts which have a long history in environmental decision making at the regulatory level, (3) the timescale of the climate issue opposed to policy and election cycles, and (4) the inability of younger generations most directly affected by climate change to vote in elections (Harris, 2021; Verret-Hamelin & Vandamme, 2021; Blue, 2015). On the other hand, the value of including citizens into policymaking is still a contested issue (Kersting, 2021).

In terms of practical examples from which to legitimize such processes, there have only been a handful of cases on the topic climate change which can be studied with the benefit of retrospection, while many have been recently completed in the past year or less. Illustrative of the recent surge, an international *Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies* (<https://knoca.eu/>, n.d.) was formed in 2021 to organize and exchange learning across these various cases, and projects such as *Climate Citizens' Assemblies: learning with, from and for Europe* (cca-project.org, n.d.) have sought to consolidate learnings into insights for strengthening future initiatives.

The empirical basis for understanding what citizen engagement on climate policy can and cannot accomplish, is therefore expanding. The aim of this working paper is to add to this knowledge base by comparing four cases; two of which are well-researched, Ireland and France, and by bringing in the two recent cases of Scotland and Germany. For the scope of this paper our main concern is the impact of citizens assemblies on the political system, using the established distinction between polity, policies, and politics (e.g., Heidenheimer 1986). However, we also broaden our framing of impact to include a variety of societal and contextual factors. Through comparison, we aim to bring these factors more into discussion around the impacts of climate assemblies. One assumption that we rely on is that actors organize citizen assemblies to have an impact – otherwise critical voices can logically dispute the point of hosting them at all. Thus, our aim is to further develop the knowledge base on the important variables furthering or hindering the impact of citizens assemblies' resolution on policymaking.

To address this, the paper is structured as follows: first it outlines the relevant scholarly literature on the topic of citizen assemblies, mostly focusing on national assemblies on the topic of climate and when relevant, including adjacent studies; secondly, it outlines the primary research question based on the addition of two new assemblies into the empirical analysis – Germany and Scotland – and the comparison with the more established cases of France and Ireland; thirdly, it details the methodological approach of qualitative interviews and publicly available information on these case countries; fourthly, it presents and describes the empirical results, concluding with a brief discussion and suggestions for further research.

## 2 What do we know from literature about the impact of climate assemblies?

Before turning to the results of our literature review, we explicate the methods applied to accomplish this overview.

### 2.1 Methods

The first step of our inquiry was a literature review on the topic of climate assemblies as democratic innovations and how they interact with traditional policy making processes. To obtain a substantial amount of literature, papers which address local citizen assemblies were also included, as well as some assemblies which did not focus on climate specifically but do include empirical and theoretical material on how deliberative processes feed into the decision-making processes of representative institutions. The first step of the literature was desktop research on the topic of climate assemblies to familiarize us with the most recent national instances and the professional networks which have formed around the topic. From here, the KNOCA network, as previously mentioned, served as a launching pad with consolidated materials on the current state of the art. Next, Google scholar was used to experiment with keywords in order to find the appropriate search strings. The first keywords used were: ‘citizens’ assembly’, ‘citizens’ climate assembly’, ‘climate change’, ‘democratic innovation’, ‘deliberative democracy’. From these results, ‘citizens’ assembly’ and ‘climate change’ and ‘democratic innovation’ produced the most appropriate set of initial papers, around 70. Next, the abstracts were screened to eliminate papers which were not related to the topic of citizens assemblies or relevant to the development of democratic innovations.

### 2.2 Results

Research on the topic of citizens assemblies can be traced to multiple disciplines and concepts. Due to the scope of this paper, the background literature presented here is primarily concerned with two bodies of research. Firstly, we present a very brief introduction to work on democratic innovations, the strand of democratic theory focusing on participatory and deliberative approaches for bringing citizens closer to decision making processes. Secondly, literature on citizens assemblies is presented, with a focus on studies of local and national assemblies addressing climate as a primary topic.

#### 2.2.1 Contextualizing citizen assemblies: Democracy and deliberation

In the early 2000s, a century’s long accumulation of theoretical and practical concepts addressing the shortcomings of representative democracy began to concretize as

democratic innovation (Smith 2009; Elstub & Escobar, 2019). Some pioneers of the field trace its early origins to Dewey's (1934) calls for more participation from citizens in democratic decision making, while more contemporary manifestations are linked to the deliberative theory behind devices such as consensus conferences introduced by the Danish Board of Technology in the 1980s (Elstub et al., 2016, Fournier et al., 2011; Karlsson et al.; 2021; Dryzek & Tucker, 2008). The literature characterizes the specific democratic innovation in focus in this paper, citizens assemblies, as 'mini-publics', meaning that they follow a deliberative approach, represent the diverse background of the public, take seriously the reasoning and ideas of the assembly members, and that they provide information to assembly members on the political issue of deliberation (Fung, 2003).

Scholars advocating citizen assemblies have argued that relative to other forms of democratic innovations, mini publics are the most promising in terms of their ability to create informed opinion change and democratically legitimate impact on political institutions (Gary et al., 2021; Well et al., 2021; O'Malley et al., 2020). Scholars who advocate for their use claim they can be utilized "to improve the quality, legitimacy, and feasibility of policy outcomes" (Capstick et al., 2020, pg. 1) and can "facilitate societal buy-in for tough policy decisions by including the concerns and ideas of citizens in policy-making, increasing the legitimacy of decisions and actions taken" (Devaney et al., 2020, pg. 145). The empirical grounds for studying citizens assemblies began in 2004 in British Columbia when a citizen assembly was initiated to deliberate on the topic of electoral reform. Despite the recommendations falling short of .03% of the required 60% majority in the public referendum, precedent was set that citizen assemblies could serve as legitimate tool for enhancing and reforming political institutions (Warren & Pearse, 2008).

However, the introduction of a democratic innovation can complement or act in addition to formal processes of representative democracy within a preexisting political system, and thus its effectiveness relies on a strong and articulate society amenable to participation (Joss, 1998; Hendricks, 2005). If such a context is not receptive to participatory democratic innovations, even an experimental introduction of these processes can create significant tensions. One the one hand, citizens assemblies can generate awareness about the wickedness of problems and solutions around issues such as climate change, potentially generating support for bolder policy decisions (Sandover et al., 2021; Renwick, 2017). On the other hand, they can also be manipulated by policymakers to achieve their own goals, or they can portrait politicians as lazy and inactive if they do not translate the assembly resolutions into immediate policies (Courant, 2021b; Boswell et al., 2013). Some scholars also critique the practical inability of mini publics to affect change or improve policy formulation, as well as question their

democratic desirability based on concerns over legitimacy (Papadopoulos, 2007; Hammond, 2021; Lafont, 2017; Mansbridge et al., 2012).

It is evident that the interface between democratic innovation and democratic political systems requires delicate care and reflection, and one critical way to further understanding is to empirically study the impacts of available cases. Some suggestions for analysing this interaction have been proposed in the literature. Goodin & Dryzek (2006) propose a typology of desirable ways in which deliberative mini publics might be connected to the 'macro' political system: (1) making policy such that gathered citizens are empowered in the decision-making process of policy (2) outcomes of mini-publics being taken up in the policy process (3) informing public debates (4) shaping policy by using mini-publics to market test (5) legitimating policy decisions (6) confidence building and constituency building amongst policymakers (7) popular oversight over decision making processes 8) resisting co-option of policy making by special interest groups. While these theoretical propositions provide broad ways by which mini-publics can be taken up by the political system, Setälä (2017) provides more specific strategies for forging links between the outcomes of a mini-public to the political system by designing this interface for impact. The author's propositions include: (1) including representatives in the deliberation process (2) providing ways for the public to respond or interact with the process (3) provide mini-publics suspensive veto powers (4) and setting clear procedures for initiating mini-publics and on which topics. This section outlined how citizens assemblies are situated in the broader field of democratic innovations, the theoretical challenges and some conjectures of how these might be navigated; the following sections outline the empirical research which has been done on citizen assemblies focusing mostly on climate.

As stated, empirical research on climate assemblies has experienced a proliferation in the past decade or so, such that specific analytical foci have emerged. The following sections outline these.

### 2.2.2 Design choices

One important theme in the literature is the discussion on the process and design of citizen assemblies for achieving maximum independence (Devaney et al., 2020; Byrant & Stone, 2020).

#### **Neutrality**

A normative stance towards neutrality is essential in the design of citizen assemblies to give opportunity for proposals to cross partisan lines which otherwise tend to dominate policy debates in representative institutions (Farrell et al., 2020; Fitzgerald, et al., 2021). For example, Beauvis & Warren (2019) examine a local citizens assembly in Vancouver

on the topic of urban planning and show that when citizen assemblies are designed and timed well, a politically hostile environment can be fertile ground for using the process to reform and revitalize institutions with significant democratic deficit.

### **Procedural and representative justice**

Design variables include procedural and representative justice, as discussed by Ross et al. (2021) in their analysis of how facilitation can be used as a tool to recognize and overcome power differentials during the assembly process. The authors pointed to a significant issue in a local UK climate assembly whereby the younger generations were excluded, which the authors argue undermines the representativeness and the deliberative process – ultimately missing an opportunity to create hope for the future.

### **Framing and division of work**

In terms of content, narrower topics can lead to desirable SMART recommendations – “specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound” (Wells et al., 2021, p.11). However, researchers on the Climate Assembly UK found that siloing assembly members into smaller thematic groups generated significantly less support for the recommendations which members did not directly deliberate on. As a result, policymakers were disincentivized from taking up the recommendations after witnessing bifurcation amongst members (Elstub et al., 2021). However, a counterargument is that the absence of thematic groups and or an agenda that is too broad may hinder the policy uptake as members are left with the difficult process of coordinating recommendations with little guidance. The implication is that with a broad or entirely bottom-up process comes the risk that assembly recommendations may fall outside the scope of practical applicability or interest to policymakers or might be too abstract to trace to actual policy implementation (Duvic-Paoli, 2021).

### **Agenda setting and making decisions**

Furthermore, Courant (2021b) argues that despite most of the importance being placed on the “deliberative role” in citizen assemblies, there are many critical roles which must be made clear in their design. The author argues that two roles can be used to differentiate between models of institutionalizing citizen assemblies based on how the roles are configured in the design of the assembly: (1) who sets the agenda and frame of the topic for deliberation and (2) who ratifies, rejects, or approves the proposals. Courant (2021b) argues that different assemblies have varied widely in regard to these two questions, and either explicitly or implicitly, determine whether and how the outputs of assemblies connect to policy.

### 2.2.3 The significance of polity and cultural context

Torney (2021) uses Ansell & Trondal’s (2018) concept of ‘political turbulence’<sup>1</sup> to compare French and Irish climate assemblies in their ability to enact turbulence in a political system. The author demonstrates that when comparing the design elements of the different citizen assemblies, it might be expected that France’s assembly would be more politically turbulent compared to the Irish assembly. In fact, the opposite was true as the Irish citizen assembly generated more turbulence in the policy landscape which leads Torney (2021) to conclude that design elements are not deterministic, and political and cultural context and contingencies are of equal importance in evaluating the citizen assemblies.

### 2.2.4 Broader notion of impact

In the UK context, Wells et al., (2021) conducted a comparative study between two local citizen assemblies to demonstrate a diversity of impacts. The authors distinguish between the direct and indirect impacts, which are impacts by citizen-centered policymaking on climate policy and impacts on broader support and momentum for climate policies and action, respectively. The paper brings attention to expanding notions of impact to relate to an assembly’s ability to generate public awareness of deliberative processes, communication around climate change, and broader support for policy action. Such factors might be crucial in providing short to mid-term units of analysis for the impacts of citizen assemblies on policy up-take where legislation might otherwise be under debate. Wells et al. (2021) goes on to argue that instead of only looking at direct legislative implantation of recommendations, the main impact of citizen assemblies on policymaking is a political mandate for more ambitious climate policy on a broader level. Also, in the context of Climate Assembly UK, Bryant & Stone (2020) report on best practices of citizen assemblies and conclude that “there are multiple outcomes of a citizens’ assembly other than creating citizen-designed policy” (p. 10) and challenge research that only focuses on to what extent recommendations are adopted into policy. Similarly, to Wells et al. (2021), their report names the creation of a political mandate for bold climate action as a primary impact of citizen assemblies, highlighting three virtues of citizen assemblies: 1) in depth exploration of public support; 2) impartial, diverse, and representative membership; and 3) trusted in terms of public perception. Analyses such as these demonstrate the need to frame impacts farther beyond the direct uptake into climate legislation and illustrate how comparative approaches are apt for expanding notions of impact.

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<sup>1</sup>Another relevant example of how this concept has been used to investigate climate policy is Dobbs et al. (2021) who argue that the European Green New deal did not cause as much political turbulence as desired and thus was an ineffective policy tool.

### 2.2.5 Connection with political institutions

With some exceptions, citizen assemblies are for the most part commissioned by political actors or governments on an ad-hoc basis, thus institutionalization is not yet normal practice, leading to issues around incentive to take their outputs seriously (Setälä, 2017). Through interviews, Niessen (2019) found a variety of political and stakeholder attitudes towards mini publics, demonstrating a clear lack of consensus around how both the recommendations should be implemented in political decision making on the micro level and how deliberative processes should fit into representative democracy on the macro level. In some cases, such as Germany, governments reject proposals to set up a climate assembly, and they are instead initiated by civil society or sustainability groups (Kersting, 2021). In other cases, such as a locally organized citizen climate assembly in Budapest, politicians are instrumental in encouraging their use in order to fulfill their election pledges and promote sustainability (Oross et al., 2021). In this vein, citizens assemblies can sometimes be rejected by the public when there is suspicion that politicians are using the process to avoid the difficulty of the subject matter ahead of elections, as was the case in Australia in 2010 (Nieymar, 2013).

### 2.2.6 Legitimacy

A range of different political and public reactions towards citizen assemblies have created obstacles to seriously considering their recommendations, primarily in the form of skepticism towards their legitimacy (Garry et al., 2021). However, there are some instances where legitimacy is less questioned, such as in Ireland, which Farrell et al. (2019) claim provides some indication of legitimate systematization between citizen assembly and political institutions. The authors draw attention to a special parliamentary body called the Oireachtas Committee and how it was created to handle the assembly recommendations during the 2016-2018 citizens assembly. As the secretariat of the assembly was disbanded after the conclusion of the assembly's finalization of recommendations, this sub-committee was intended as an official overseer responsible for the assembly's recommendations. Despite general call for agreed and transparent follow-up procedures for the outputs and recommendations of citizen assemblies, Ireland's Oireachtas Committee is an exceptional case, being one of the only citizens assemblies to have such a responsible body whereas other processes typically conclude with the finalization of the recommendations (Wells, 2022). However, challenging the notion that Ireland can actually be deemed a model of any sort, Courant (2021a) brings in additional empirical cases from major Irish citizen assembly experiences to show "contrasted institutionalization" through comparison. Due to these differences, the author argues that it is too soon to claim an "Irish model" and rather argues that "the lack of institutionalization allows for greater flexibility and adaptation to various situations" (pg. 13), which the author claims can be useful when navigating

experimental phases with deliberative tools. However, Courant (2021a) does point to the pitfalls of lacking such a model as “institutionalization could render the articulation between deliberation and referendum systematic, without giving the political class the opportunity to decide whether they want to give a voice to the electorate” (pg. 10).

### 2.2.7 Policy uptake

Scholars have also analysed the content of the recommendations in determining their impact, as propositions must be reasonably feasible for policy implementation in order to be taken up. Font et al. (2018) conducted a large-scale systematic analysis of 571 proposals from 39 different deliberative processes to test claims about certain proposals being cherry-picked by policymakers. Not unsurprisingly, the authors found that recommendations were most likely to be taken up and transformed into policy when the deliberative process was of high democratic quality and when the contextual economic and political factors were favorable towards the recommendations. Beyond direct policy translation, recommendations also provide governments with an evidence base for the public’s understandings, attitudes, and perceptions around climate goals. One example of this is the Estonian Citizen’s Assembly in 2012, where Jonsson (2020) describes the impact as consequential because while only three out of fifteen proposals were directly implemented, the process served as a platform for engagement between the public and political decision makers. Indeed, research emphasizes the important relationship between the broader public and the assembly in terms of communication and engagement with the assembly deliberations, process and outcomes (Goodin & Dryzek, 2006; Fournier et al., 2011; Devaney et al., 2020). With adequate engagement, Niemeyer (2013) argues that citizen assemblies can act as “trusted arbiters” of information between political representatives who are embedded in party politics, and the public. The author suggests that consequently, such a platform can improve the larger polity’s capacity to deal with climate change, which then leads to overall better environmental governance.

## 2.3 Research question

This working paper focuses on the impact of climate assemblies, in particular the impact generated, or not generated, when climate assemblies produce policy recommendations and hand these over to political institutions. As the literature outlines, many researchers have pointed to the complexities of introducing citizen assemblies into political institutions. Our assumption informed by the literature and desk research on previous assemblies is that impact has very broad and diverse meanings and depends on many different factors. Some of these factors include representative makeup of the polity in question, the design and execution of the citizen assembly process, the perceived



legitimacy at many levels including the public and political institutions, the information and framings of the topic used to guide the deliberations, and the level of interest sparked in the wider discourse and media.

With this broader framing of variables which determining the impact of climate assemblies, our main research question is as follows: **what furthers and impedes the impact of climate assembly resolution on policy making?**

Our analysis also assumes that first iterations of national climate assemblies are mostly experimental and pre-institutionalization, and our aim is to provide deeper comparative and empirical insight into the effects of experimenting with democratic innovations on a political system.

## 3 Experiences from in France, Ireland, Germany, and Scotland

### 3.1 Research Methods

#### 3.1.1 Case selection

Our comparative approach is based on four national climate assemblies from France, Ireland, Germany and Scotland. We chose Ireland and France as cases which have been evaluated in the literature and therefore provide analytical foundation for studying democratic innovation and mini publics (Smith, 2009; Fung, 2003; Escobar & Elstub; 2019). Secondly, we chose Germany and Scotland as more recent cases to bring into the analysis and further develop the empirical basis on impacts of climate assemblies. The criteria for our cases were as follows.

- The cases consist of national level citizen assemblies where the topic of climate was clearly stated in the mandate for the assembly.
- Secondly, following the characteristics of mini publics, each case recruited a similarly sized group of (approximately 100-150) citizen participants through sortition based methods and members were provided with expert information on climate as it relates to policy action
- Lastly, the assemblies produced recommendations which were recognized by the political institutions.

In the case of France and Ireland, substantial time has passed in order to evaluate the short, medium and arguably, long term impact. For Germany and Scotland, recommendations were produced only very recently. However, at the time of writing there have been official responses by political representatives and therefore very recent

empirical grounds on which to conduct our research, although with only a lens on short to medium term impacts. Furthermore, including Germany and Scotland offer opportunity for deeper comparative analysis into the effects of embeddedness in traditional polity, as Germany was primarily grassroots, bottom-up initiative, while Scotland provides further data on top-down initiatives in a moment of increasing observation and knowledge production on the topic of national climate assemblies.

### 3.1.2 Expert assessment as proxy to impact

In our research, we did not address our research question by following traces of the climate assemblies' recommendations into political institutions, vis-à-vis papers and laws, (social) media or surveys. Instead, we asked important stakeholders in the process how they assessed the impact of the climate assembly. These stakeholder assessments were taken from the perspective of organizers of climate assemblies (4 interviewees), researchers involved in climate assemblies as expert witnesses (2 interviewees), and researchers of climate assemblies (1 interviewee) and these assessments were used as approximation for the impact.

### 3.1.3 Interviews

We obtained our interviews after collecting informed consent from one organizer and one member of the scientific advisory board for each of the climate assemblies from France, Ireland and Germany. The exception was Scotland due to timing issues since the official final assembly meeting took place only on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2022, with an additional follow up meeting scheduled for spring 2022. This made it very difficult to speak with a member of the scientific advisory board, however we did manage to obtain an interview with one of the organizers.

The altogether seven interviews were conducted remotely via MS Teams over the course of three weeks from February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022 to February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2022. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour each.

The interviews were semi-structured and followed a guideline that was derived from main findings of our literature reviews. The interview guideline is included in the Annex (see chapter 5.2). The interview started with an introduction of the project and a request for permission to record the conversation. Thereafter, the interviewee was asked to introduce him/herself and his/her role in the climate assembly. Theme 1 of the interview covered process aspects of the climate assembly; Theme 2 addressed the recommendations developed by the climate assembly; Theme 3 was concerned with political attitudes towards the climate assembly; Theme 4 covered the role of the public (attitudes); Theme 5 the context of the climate assembly. The interviewee did not necessarily follow this sequence of questions, but the interviewer made sure that all

themes were covered. The interviewee also was encouraged to raise any other topic which he/she considered relevant for the research question. Shauna Stack carried out six interviewees whereas one interview was done by Shauna Stacks and Erich Griessler in tandem.

### 3.1.4 Data analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed over Microsoft Teams. The transcripts were then imported into F4 for further editing and finally qualitatively analyzed using Atlas.ti. A total of 35 codes were developed using an inductive approach. The code list is included in the Annex in chapter 5.3.

## 3.2 Overview on country cases

In the following section we shortly portray the four cases. The description of the country cases in this section relies heavily on material provided at the KNOCA (<https://knoca.eu/>) and the assembly websites.

### 3.2.1 France

The Citizens Convention on Climate (Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat)<sup>2</sup> took place from October 2019 to June 2020 and was considered by its organizers as “democratic experiment” (<https://www.conventioncitoyennepourleclimat.fr/en/>, n.d.). It was commissioned by the President of the Republic Emanuel Macron and part of his response to the Gilets Jaunes crisis. The mandate of the assembly was that participating citizens should “to define a series of measures that will allow to achieve a reduction of at least 40% in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 (compared to 1990) in a spirit of social justice” (ibid.). According to the website, the President “committed [himself] to submitting these legislative and regulatory proposals ‘without a filter’ either to a referendum, to a vote in Parliament or to direct implementation” (ibid.). The citizen assembly involved 150 citizens and three experts each on climate and participatory democracy, four from the economic and social sector. The convention was organized by the Economic Social and Environmental Council (ESEC). Co-Presidents were from Terra Nova Foundation and Directorate of the European Climate Foundation. It was initially scheduled for 9 months and had a budget of 5.5 mil euros. The convention produced a total of 149 policy proposals. However, President Macron rejected three of them, despite his promise of “no filter”, with what he called his “three jokers”. These “three jokers” involved changing the constitution to include ecocide, tax on corporate dividends

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.conventioncitoyennepourleclimat.fr/en/> (22.3.2022)

to finance climate and reducing speed on motorways (KNOCA 2022, Tourney 2021, Giraudet et al. 2021).

### 3.2.2 Ireland

The Irish Citizens' Assembly (Tionol Saoranach) was held from March 2017 to April 2018. It was not the first citizen assembly in this country and did not only discuss climate change, but covered a total of five topics,<sup>3</sup> abortion being the most prominent and controversial amongst them. The Citizen Assembly was organized by the Houses of the Oireachtas and both Houses approved its organization in July 2016 by Resolution as part of the partnership programme. The Assembly involved 100 citizens. During the Assembly, the climate topic was discussed on two weekends between September 2017 and October 2017 and the question the Assembly addressed was how Ireland can become a leader in tackling climate change. There were separate expert advisory groups for each topic, which took a more observational role. Expert witnesses presented during thematic sessions. There was a budget of 1.5 mil euros and the result was 13 recommendations and a final report. (KNOCA 2022, Courant 2021a, Devaney et al. 2020, Farrell et al. 2019, Harris 2021, Muradova 2020, Torney 2021).

### 3.2.3 Germany

The German Bürgerrat Klima (The Citizen Assembly on Climate) was organized from April 2021 to June 2021.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the three other country cases, the German assembly was a bottom-up activity, organized by civil society organisations such as “More Democracy”, the BürgerBegehren Klimaschutz (BBK, Citizens' Climate Protection Initiative) with Scientists for Future, Germany. The former German Federal President Horst Köhler took over patronage. The citizen assembly was meant to encourage more ambitious and effective climate policy to realize Germany's commitment to the Paris Agreement (limiting the global rise in temperature to 1.5 degrees) by presenting the results to politicians during the federal election campaign and before formation of the next Parliament and government in September 2021. The Assembly involved 160 citizens in altogether 12 meetings. The scientific advisory board selected four areas for deliberation including mobility, buildings and heating, energy production and food. The budget of 1.9 million euros was raised via donations; there was not public funding. The Bürgerrat had no official links to political institutions, but the assembly was timed to publicly influence election and new coalition negotiations on climate. The Citizens'

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<sup>3</sup> The Eight Amendment of the Constitution (on abortion), manner in which referenda are held, challenges and opportunities of an ageing population, fixed term parliament, making Ireland a leader in tackling climate change (<https://2016-2018.citizensassembly.ie/en/>, 23.3.2022).

<sup>4</sup> <https://buergerrat-klima.de/> (22.3.2022)

Report (Citizen Climate Report 2021) was released on June 24, 2021 and handed over to the parties in the German Parliament in autumn of that year.

### 3.2.4 Scotland

Scotland's Climate Assembly (Seanadh Gnàth-shìde na h-Alba) was held from November 2020 until March 2021<sup>5</sup>. The Scottish Climate Change Act (2019) required ministers to organize a citizen climate assembly supported by two independent conveners. Its mandate was to inform government decision-making on the climate crisis in line with Scotland's Climate Change Act. The task was decided by a Stewarding group, to address the question "How should Scotland change to tackle the climate emergency in an effective and fair way?". The key themes identified in a "Pre-engagement Overview" guided the selection of expert speakers and organisation of evidence throughout the Assembly process. The Pre-engagement Evidence Summary outlined which suggestions from the Dialogue Exercise were to be incorporated into Scotland's Climate Assembly. Assembly members met over the course of 6 weekends however, at weekend four, assembly members requested additional time for learning and deliberations by voting for a seventh weekend. In the end, 81 recommendations were agreed on by consensus and the final report was submitted to the government on June 23rd, 2021. After the Scottish Government responded to the Assembly's recommendations in December 2021, Assembly members were invited back for one final meeting. This eighth and final weekend took place in February 2022. Budget Information for the assembly is not yet available.<sup>6</sup>

## 3.3 Impact on policies

The country cases differ in terms of impact of citizen assemblies on policies. Whereas in the French case both interview partners were rather critical about the impact of the climate assembly on climate policies, interviewees in the Irish, German and Scottish case considered this issue much more favorably.

### 3.3.1 France

*"I found the direct output very substantial; the governments follow up disappointing" (interviewee 1)*

*"In the end those citizens produced good work, and the politicians did not much about it. And (...) each party they did what was expected. The citizens did their job*

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.climateassembly.scot/> (22.03.2022)

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.climateassembly.scot/sites/default/files/2021-09/620640\\_SCT0521502140-001\\_Scotland%E2%80%99s%20Climate%20Assembly\\_Final%20Report%20Goals\\_WEB%20ONLY%20VERSION.pdf](https://www.climateassembly.scot/sites/default/files/2021-09/620640_SCT0521502140-001_Scotland%E2%80%99s%20Climate%20Assembly_Final%20Report%20Goals_WEB%20ONLY%20VERSION.pdf) (22.03.2022)

*and maybe in a sense the politicians and the policymakers did theirs too. But (...) the (...) added value (...) the device could have created was kind of missed because of this lack of reaching out to the broader public [with a referendum, the authors]" (interviewee 1).*

*"Impact of the recommendations? Not a lot! (...) it depends how we evaluate it" (interviewee 2).*

Interviewee 1 on the French citizen assembly assessed the success of the climate assembly by using the metaphor of a bottle which is "half full or half empty". He considered the citizen assembly's 149 recommendations as substantial output and thought that they made a "huge difference for climate policy". However, he was disappointed by the actual impact of these recommendations in terms of tangible policies because "the government's response (...) really strongly undermined the proposals to the point of not really adding much to current policy". He also mentioned that the citizen assembly had a strong role in curtailing its policy impact by avoiding a public referendum because of anxiety about public support. According to the mandate such a referendum would have been possible. Although he considers it speculative whether voters would have adopted the assembly's propositions or not, not putting them before the electorate reduced their chances to generate more policy impact. The second interviewee assessed the citizen assembly's impact similarly. He thinks the convention did not have "a lot" of impact.

President Macron diminished the policy impact of the Assembly when he pulled what he called and became known as his "three jokers". He rejected three propositions he did not agree with. Interviewee 1 commented that the President excluded these propositions for different reasons. First, the proposition to change the constitution in terms of making environmental protection a priority was a difficult legal issue; a speed limit on motorways could have raised public criticism; the green tax was excluded for "clearly ideological reasons", not wanting to jeopardize, as the President argued, France's competitiveness. The interviewee stated that most measures were already in the government's pipeline and therefore were easy to follow up on. However, he also observed that some measures, in his perspective for understandable considerations, were softened because of costs (e.g., stricter regulations for insulating houses) or potential conflict with stakeholders (e.g., reducing the limit for airline connections from 4 to 2,5 hours).

Interviewee 2 was very critical about France's citizen assembly's policy impact as well. When launching its citizen assembly, the government promised, as already stated, that it would not "filter" propositions. However, once recommendations were formulated the President excluded three propositions. In addition, the law that was finally enacted

was not the same as the propositions.<sup>7</sup> The government tabled the bill in Parliament by a procedure that inhibited amendments by the opposition parties which would have reinstalled the citizen assembly's propositions. Thus, the citizen assembly's propositions were, as he explained, "watered down":

*"So (...) when they started (...) backtracking (...) that (...) had an effect on the credibility of the (...) process, but also (...) had a direct effect on the proposition themselves, (...) they were (...) watered down, (...) cut entirely, they were reframed (...) for instance, there was something (...) concerning attacks on heavy vehicles, because they pollute more, (...) the weight threshold was specific and (...) around 20% of the automobiles, so population of vehicles to 20% is a big deal, right? And the government was like 'OK, but the threshold is too low, so we need to put it higher' and then it concerned 3% of the automobile population. So then, there's nothing right. (...) And then they say: 'Oh, but we kept the proposition'. (...) But (...) if you go from 20% to 3% (...) that's not the same proposition. (...) Everything was a bit like that."*

Interviewee 2 summarized his impression that the government "said 'without filter' all the time and in the end, it was one of the most filtered processes I've seen".

As concerns the uptake of the citizen assembly's results by political parties, it very much fell in line with the political spectrum. Whereas the left parties wanted to adopt the radical propositions of the citizen assembly, the parties on the right spectrum criticized the propositions as going too far and the citizen assembly as biased and its process as poorly organized without, according to the interviewee, observing it.

### 3.3.2 Ireland

*"I think, overall, it was a success (...), a qualified success. And (...) the elements of qualification are, not all (...) recommendations were ever implemented, particularly the one about agriculture (...) and that I think it took place at just the right time in the policy cycle in Ireland. So, it was lucky if you like so. Its success is partly down to design and policy entrepreneurship and so forth. But I think there's also an element of luck and serendipity to it. And (...) that's hard to replicate."*

According to an interviewee on the Irish cases, politicians in the parliamentary Joint Committee adopted most of the propositions<sup>8</sup> except for the tax on greenhouse gas emission from agriculture. This was not surprising because he indicated agriculture the hardest and most divisive topic in this context in Ireland. In terms of policy impact, this interviewee drew a direct line between the proposition of the climate assembly and both

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000043956924> (28.3.2022)

<sup>8</sup> In contrast to France, the Irish interviewees did not mention any "watering down" of these recommendations.

the enactment of a climate law in July 2021, which "enshrines" among other policy measures "a Net Zero by 2050 at the latest and a target for 2030 of 51% reduction relative to 2018 levels" and a steadily increasing carbon tax. However, he also mentioned that five years passed since the citizen assembly concluded and that he thinks that "whatever effects the citizens assembly deliberations and climate change, we're going to have (...) kind of played out by now. (...) attributing anything further to the citizens assembly five years on is a bit of a stretch".

### 3.3.3 Germany

*"I think it (...) definitely was a success (...) it's not 100% success (...) it's not (...) black and white, but (...) it's something like 80% success"*

Already before the citizen assembly was organized, several political parties said they would take the recommendations seriously into consideration. The citizen assembly therefore was under time pressure to arrive at recommendations to impact the 2021 coalition treaty between SPD, the Greens and the Liberals (FPD). According to interviewees the climate assembly impacted the coalition treaty in several ways. The recommendations were much in line with the new government's positions. As concerns policy impact, one interviewee perceived a pattern that each party picked arguments from citizen assembly's propositions according to their political preferences. Whereas the Greens pointed out that the assemblies' ambitious goals would confirm the positions they already had before entering government, the SPD highlighted the citizen assembly calls for fairness in climate policy. The Liberals highlighted the need to not spend too much money. The conservatives, which are in opposition since autumn 2021 kept rather quiet, according to the interview partner.

Given the short time that passed since the climate assembly concluded, the policy impact of the exercise is limited to promises from Government, which is that the Government would consider the assembly's output. Time will tell whether these promises materialize into actual policies. However, recognizing the legitimacy of the bottom-up initiative and the promise to take its results into consideration, as well as plans for more citizens assemblies on different topics (see 3.4.4), indicate first steps towards policy impact.

### 3.3.4 Scotland

*The government was "not saying we're going to do them all' (..), but actually overall quite positive, some very specific recommendations implemented, but also a broad direction of travel that I think the assembly's recommendations have given the government of bit of (...) a license to see that actually people are up for some significant change, and recognizing the need to move towards significant change"*



*and have an ambition for Scotland to take a bit of a lead and doing some of this work”.*

In Scotland, government was required to respond to the citizen assembly about policy implementation. In a detailed and extensive response, government did not say that it would carry out all recommendations in detail but that they felt encouraged and endorsed by the citizen assembly that people see the need for change and that Scotland should take a lead in that. The citizen assembly reconvened in early 2022 to discuss the government’s response and was partly critical about the uptake of its recommendations and asked for another meeting in one year’s time. The process of implementation is still ongoing and worthy of further research.

### 3.4 Other forms of impact

Apart from direct impact on climate policies, interviewees mentioned several other forms of impact which indirectly affect climate policies and their discourse. This includes impact on 1) discourse, 2) participants, 3) the public, 4) the media and finally, 5) on the future of deliberative democracy.

#### 3.4.1 Impact on public debate and political discourse

The Irish case spotlights an important aspect of impact of citizen assemblies, i.e., on the quality of public debate and political discourse. One interviewee recalls that the assembly had a "a kind of catalytic effect on the overall policy making process" because it provided a "counterpoint to the argument" that people would not support policies which would impact them directly and do not care about climate change. In that way it changed basic assumptions about the topic, actors, and the discourse.

As already stated, the Irish citizen assembly tackled several, partly constitutional, questions of which the right to abortion was one, climate another topic. As concerns abortion, one interviewee witnessed that the citizen assembly created "a safer space to have a conversation" and allowed a factual discussion which dismantled many abortion myths which persisted for decades because the previous, heavily antagonistic discourse obstructed raising them in a factual manner. Thus, the discourse within the citizen assembly shifted the quality of public debate and the political discourse. The discussion became less based on myths but on evidence and factual arguments.

An interviewee of the German case explained why citizen assemblies can have such an impact on public debate and political discourse. He described that the process of a citizen assembly differs strongly from what politicians normally experience as ‘citizen assemblies’ in local pubs where controversy and defending one’s self-interest would prevail:

*Politicians "see citizens discussing in a very informed manner, seeking for the "bonum comune", best for everything, not defending (...)their particular interests, what they normally (...) consider to be (...) citizens participation; shouting, citizens which defend (...) their very special interests, their own interests, often against public interest".*

From his perspective, it is not necessarily the goal of a citizen assembly to create new ideas, there are other tools for that, but to arrive at recommendations for conflictual problems. In this process, randomly selected citizens would be more liberated to discuss conflictual problems because they would also leave the roles, they are accustomed to. Citizen assemblies are not like an opinion poll, but they are a process of developing an opinion. This development moves towards the common good and the development of collectively binding recommendations and solutions even if this means suspending one's own individual interest. The interviewee explains:

*"We need in democracy tools which offer you the role to think in general interests and statistical based deliberative tools do this in a wonderful way and people they take this role. They come with a tie (...) and they argue like an expert. After one or two days, they jump into this (...) attractive role or senseful interpretable role. They think it makes sense to do it (...) and to discuss in small groups, what is the best for society? And that is for them, it's really (...) like a (...) revelation experience. (...) They start to believe in democracy again. (...) It is, of course not the only solution for everything, I wouldn't go so far, but the main reason that these general interests can get a majority is that these tools, because of statistical based offer a different role. So, it's the psychological or social psychological explanation."*

According to the interviewee "the core idea" of a citizen assembly is "to come up with [proposals for] collective binding decisions about these conflictual questions". Thus, the process of a citizen assembly promotes a focus on common good and compromise and, to a certain extent, suspension of self-interest. In the end, an important outcome of the process is this change in discourse quality based on deliberation within the climate assembly and a willingness to suspend self-interest. This has also an impact on the broader public discourse as exemplified in the Irish abortion case.

### 3.4.2 Impact on the public

In all countries there seems to be low awareness of the process amongst the public.

In France, the general public's awareness of the citizen assembly was low according to one interviewee. People who knew about the process were sympathetic but skeptical about the way government would handle it. Media coverage peaked during certain moments such as when the President addressed the citizen assembly, when the

assembly handed over their propositions, and upon a follow-up meeting with the President.

As concerns the impact on the German public, one interviewee observes that most people did not notice the climate assembly. One interviewee mentioned that he does not think that the climate changed attitudes towards climate policy very much. He speculates that more than 80 % of the German population is in favor of climate protection and this did not change over the last two or three years.<sup>9</sup>

For the Irish case, climate change did not have the same prominence in 2016 at the time of their assembly, compared to the attention it has today. One interviewee remarked that the abortion issue permeated the public much more than the climate issue.

In Scotland, climate change is quite high on the policy agenda as the interviewee explained. But public did not much engagement with the climate assembly, though there were social media activities, and the public could contribute at the beginning of the process.

### 3.4.3 Impact on media

One interviewee considered media coverage in France as good, however also critical in terms of criticizing the propositions. In the Irish case, media coverage in terms of numbers (number of articles?) was higher on the climate topic, but public interest was much higher on the abortion issue. In the German press, according to one interviewee, there was only limited negative coverage of the citizen assembly. In some cases, the representativeness of the process for the entire population was questioned as well as sufficient representation of less privileged groups. However, the interviewee emphasized that the organizers never claimed representativity in the strict scientific sense. There was little criticism that the citizen assembly would be manipulated or that the agenda was not appropriate. In general, the process was accepted in the media and seen novel and interesting.

### 3.4.4 Impact on deliberative democracy

The way in which the different climate assemblies played out also has an impact on the future of deliberative democracy, in other words, using the above-mentioned distinction of policies, politics and polity, on polity. Climate assemblies can set positive or negative examples and as a result, can legitimate or delegitimize claims for deliberative democracy. Comparison shows that whereas in the Irish and the German case initiatives

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<sup>9</sup> This high concern about climate does not necessarily mean an equally high appreciation of climate policies.

for deliberative democracy were strengthened, in the French case it seems that they were weakened. Scotland?

### France

One interviewee perceives a desire for participation in the French public but at the same time skepticism. He considers the climate assembly as a "big, missed opportunity" because of its limited political impact and the decision not to put the resolutions to a referendum. He resumes "to me the referendum issue is central (...) If you if you want this kind of device to have an impact to me that's the only solution. There should be a referendum or something that it's transparently clearly built-in right." The other interviewee is of the opinion that the credibility of the concept of citizen assembly is damaged on the one hand by politicians who do not keep their promises and on the other hand by existing deficits in the process. He mentions that

*"When they [the government] started like going backtracking on that [watering down the proposals of the citizen assemblies], I think that (...) had an effect on the credibility (...) of the process".*

The other French interviewee also perceived damage to deliberative democracy because the propositions were not sufficiently adopted.

*"Since the government (...) hardly followed up, this created further skepticism among the population, which is a bad news. Because a common feeling among the general public about the device was that it was just instrumenting people (...) for the government to meet (...) their goal (...) and I think the (...) final way things turned out confirmed, can only confirm those that were skeptical like this".*

He explained that a subsequent citizen assembly on COVID 19 received little media attention and met with skepticism. He concluded that the climate assembly showed that "the precedent [of the climate convention] kind of really dampened expectations about this kind of devices". On the other hand, the convention also strengthens arguments for pro-environmental policy because now their advocates can refer to the fact that the assembly supported their claims.

### Ireland

In contrast to France, Ireland had positive experiences with the climate assembly. One interviewee draws a straight line between becoming familiar with the idea in academic experimentation to first application and learning to work with it as a legitimate, yet still not institutionalized, instrument:

*"[Here in Ireland] they're really quite familiar now. And so, (...) if you're doing something like this for the first time (...) it can seem a bit alien and it's a quirky*

*idea. But, you know, we have a decade of experience now because it wasn't just the Convention on the Constitution that ran from 2012 to 2014. That was preceded by a kind of proof-of-concept [that] was funded by philanthropy and run by a number of academics (...). And then that underpinned the 2012-2014 process. Then there was the 2016 to 2018 assembly on the five topics. (...) Then we had a citizen assembly during the pandemic on gender equality and it issued its recommendations a few months ago and yesterday the government approved the establishment of two more citizens assemblies and now they've been well flagged (...) on biodiversity (...) and (...) on the question of whether Dublin should have a directly elected mayor. (...) And (...) there's at least one more promised in the programme for government on drones policy. And I think there might be another one, so you know, they're kind of multiplying it at this stage. And if you went out onto the street and asked a random member of the public, they might not know what a citizen assembly is but certainly anyone in policymaking in Ireland has some understanding of these processes, so they're really quite familiar at this stage".*

*"so the this specific impact of the recommendations or the deliberations on climate change I think that's waning, but and I (...) think what this succession of citizens assemblies has done is - so we're not quite at the point of institutionalizing these in the sense that some scholars suggest that you (...) have a permanent citizens assembly or something like that, but we're (...) kind of moving in that direction. (...) actually in the (...) media reporting today of the government decision to set (...) these two new assemblies there is some suggestion that there might be a more enduring structure around (...) the assemblies themselves would still be once one? off, but that you would have like a permanent secretariat or something like that."*

Thus, the citizen assembly is currently a viable and legitimate instrument in the Irish system:

*"Yeah it is (...) really important now. I wouldn't say that it necessarily has permeated the consciousness of the public or anything like it but the political system, it really has and ... look they've just this week announced two new citizens assemblies here in Ireland, one on biodiversity and one on a local government. So, (...) the political system believe[s] in the possibility of what a citizens assembly can deliver, you know, so it's interesting."*

## **Germany**

Currently there seems to be a trend in German politics towards citizen assemblies. The first citizen assembly sponsored by German Parliament on "More Democracy" was well received and was followed by a citizen assembly on "Germany's Role in the World".

Currently, the Science Ministry has a citizen assembly on research, looking into citizen participation in research and research policy<sup>10</sup> and there is another citizen assembly on health policy.

One interviewee took a long-term perspective on the development of deliberative democracy and citizen assemblies in Germany. He observed a succession of ups and downs, or “waves” for more than 50 years, which are caused by different reasons. Currently, he again witnessed a peek because politicians perceive citizen assemblies as a way out of the confrontational situation, they find themselves, for example with radical citizens posting hateful rhetoric on social media. He stated that in contrast to the planning and foresight approach of the past, which carried previous “heights” of public participation, the personal benefit politicians see today, i.e., handling situations in which they are personally attacked, makes a difference. He mentioned three kinds of impact of the climate assembly on the level of deliberative democracy. First, the coalition framework at the beginning of coalition negotiations already mentions citizen assemblies as one important element of policy advice. Also, the coalition agreement mentioned citizen assemblies as democratic innovations. Under the climate change program more citizen participation is demanded, and the science section of the agreement mentions more testing of participatory processes for policy advice.

### **Scotland**

In Scotland, the climate assembly also gave legitimacy to, and contributed to building trust in deliberative democracy. The interviewee stated that it provided policy makers with a package of useful recommendations although not all proposals were implementable or would have had the impact the citizens intended. Overall, the climate assembly showed political institutions the usefulness of the process. As the interviewee described: “you can see people within government and parliament starting to think, who maybe were less sure about this sort of process and that level of investment seeing that actually. You know it is an increase [of] its legitimacy, but also increasing its usefulness to policy as well as (...) less cherry picking”

### **3.4.5 Impact on participants**

Interviewees also reported about the impact of the climate assembly on the participating citizens.

In the French case, the citizen assembly raised participants’ awareness about climate crises and the seriousness of the problem and politicized them. As one interviewee describes “they were struck by (...) the scientific facts and how serious the problem was,

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.bmbf.de/bmbf/de/ueber-uns/wissenschaftskommunikation-und-buergerbeteiligung/buergerbeteiligung/buergerraete-1/buergerrat-fuer-forschung/buergerrat-fuer-forschung.html>

much more so than they thought in the first place". The involvement of some participants did not cease when the assembly stopped. Some participants stood for local elections and took political mandates. Several participants formed an Association to monitor the implementation of the proposals they had worked on for such a long time. Similarly, in the Irish case an interviewee mentioned that a participant became so interested in the topic that she started studying climate change at the university.

In the German case, one interviewee observed that citizens were politicized and wanted, like in the French case, to maintain the momentum of the assembly, e.g., by participating in talk shows or giving presentations to State parliaments. However, he was skeptical about the chances of temporary organizations like citizen assemblies to keep momentum going when compared with regular political institutions, such as Parliaments, governments, and lobbying organizations. Similarly, in the Scottish case, participants became engaged in the topic, raised their awareness about the urgency of the issue and were politicized in terms of wanting to continue to engage in the policy process, asking for a follow up meeting again in one year's time.

## 3.5 Elements that affect impact

### 3.5.1 Explanations why implementation is obstructed or curtailed

The interview partners provided different explanations when propositions were not adopted.

One French interviewee explains that governments do not represent the public, but the interest of an elite who fund their election campaigns and that the propositions of the citizen assembly opposed their interests. Rather than taking up the propositions, they mobilized counter expertise to mitigate measures as well used the pandemic as an excuse that far reaching proposals would weaken the economy during a crisis.

Another explanation the interviewee provided was that the gilet jaune movement had already lost considerable momentum when the proposals were finalized, and the President did not face any opposition from social movements. He explained that "power stops power and there was nothing to stop his power". He also refers to the institutional context of the Fifth Republic, in which the executive centralizes power, e.g., according to the interviewee 90% of the bills enter the Parliament by government motions.<sup>11</sup> He exemplifies the power of the President in relation to the adoption of propositions by the citizen assembly:

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<sup>11</sup> France is not an exception here. In many countries, the executive has a strong in legislature sure and the famous 90% rule applies to many parliamentary democracies.

*"In the institutional context of the Fifth Republic, I mean, if tomorrow the President wants to launch (...) on 20 topics and have 1.000 citizen in each, he can, if he wants, you know, (...) and (...) if he wants to make paper planes out of the proposition, he can as well. So, (...) when you have such a powerful entity, with no regulation of any sort it's, it's difficult to, to know what you think of as such a process [the climate assembly], because it can be anything, like it can I mean, if Macron actually wanted to (...) do the 'no filter', he could have. But he didn't want to and, if he wanted to take even less proposition on board, he could have as well and there is, you know, what's stopping him?"*

The second French interviewee explained that the softening of propositions through/in negotiations with stakeholders led to compromises because the government wanted to avoid costly measures.

In the Irish case, as both interviewees pointed out, the issue of agriculture is a critical issue in climate policy. The agriculture lobby is strong and tried to inhibit policy implementation.

A German interviewee pointed to another aspect of implementation. Policy implementation takes time and preparation until a policy shows effect. Also the interviewee for the Scottish citizen assembly mentioned that citizens would ask for immediate implementation and sometimes would be unaware of the practical requirements of policy making and the time needed to implement policies. For them six months would be “ages” but in terms of policy making this “actually is not very long”.

### 3.5.2 Interface with political system

One critical factor for citizen assemblies to generate impact is the existence, design, and management of the interface between this democratic innovation and the existing political institutions. This raises questions such as: Is there a procedure in place or is it created ad hoc? Is there precedence for such an interface? Do political actors publicly commit themselves to how they would/will deal with recommendations? How strongly do they commit themselves? We observe differences between the cases in this respect.

In the French case, the phrase of "no filter" captures very well the drama of policy impact. The French climate assembly, according to interviewee 2, is not without predecessors. The Grand Debate<sup>12</sup>, which was the President's attempt to capture and pacify the unrest of the gilet jaune movement, had elements of mini publics. However, the President, according to the interviewee 2, dismissed their recommendations. In the

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<sup>12</sup> The gilet jaune movement, or the 'yellow vest movement' were a wave of protests in France initially in response to a fuel tax reform but which proliferated into other international cities and spanner many topics; a common theme was disappointment in the political class (Grossman, 2019).



case of the climate assembly, the President, as already stated, promised that there would be "no filter" on the proposals of the assembly. However, this was only a promise in a letter from the Prime Minister to the President announcing the assembly in the form of a "mission letter"<sup>13</sup>, without any legal power. According to interviewee 2, one can believe a promise or not. And indeed, the "no filter" promise, which according to interviewee 1 gave people the feeling that they would directly address the President, was not kept. The President's promise turned out to be "false (...) completely void, blank (...) [with] nothing quite behind it". This generated great disappointment in the process. After the citizen assembly, the propositions, as already described, were "watered down" in the traditional political process. Interviewee 1 points to weakness in the transfer between climate assembly and conventional politics and attributes it to the novelty of the instrument. He observes that "it was quite an experiment with no clear rules and had it one, maybe it would be different, but again, I mean this is a this is still experimental everywhere, (...) I know of no country that has institutionalized the device". He thinks that clear and transparent, tangible institutional commitments and follow up structures would be necessary after a convention. This would also fix existing skepticism towards these instruments.

In the Irish case a link between the citizen assembly and traditional politics was created based on the model of the abortion issue. Abortion was the main topic amongst several topics of the citizen assembly. For the abortion topic, a referendum then endorsed the proposal of citizen assembly which at the beginning was perceived by observers as radical and not in line the opinion of the Irish electorate. Based on the positive experience made in the abortion case, the same instrument, a Joint Parliamentary Committee, was established for climate change as well although this was not planned at the outset of the citizen assembly. For the climate topic, the citizen assemblies' recommendations did not directly enter a popular referendum but first went to a parliamentary Joint Committee of the Upper and Lower House which also involved experts from both sides. The Joint Committee deliberated several months on climate change and finally formulated their own recommendations which were much in line with the citizens' recommendations. This did not happen without resistance, but environmental NGOs pushed for it and finally succeeded. No such Committees were created for the remaining three topics. This Joint Committee then resulted in cross party plan for climate change which again informed the climate action bill which was enacted in 2020 and a second climate action plan last year. An interviewee mentions this direct line of impact of the citizen assembly: "in the narrative on that plan the ministers still referring to the Citizens Assembly. The Citizens Assembly started this process, so it is

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.conventioncitoyennepourleclimat.fr/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/lettre-de-mission.pdf> (28.3.2022)

ingrained in the consciousness now of the political system that we've gotten as far as we have on climate policy because of the Citizens Assembly"

An interviewee thought that creating this link between citizen assembly and representative democracy increased the legitimacy of the participatory process,

*"to kind of imbue the whole process with a kind of democratic legitimacy (...) because it was (...) no longer just 'these are the recommendations of a randomly selected group of 100 citizens', it was those recommendations filtered through the lens of the elected politicians and most of the recommendations from the assembly were kind of endorsed and recommended in turn by parliamentary committee".*

How to forge a link between citizen assembly and regular political institutions is a topic that is also pondered in the German case. According to one interviewee, there is general agreement in Germany that the propositions of the climate assembly are only recommendations and have no "imperative mandate". But the "power of the recommendations" and the extent to which policy makers should consider them is under discussion. The interviewee stated that policy makers should honor the recommendations and suggested that they should be obliged to provide a written explanation if they decide not to follow a recommendation. The second interviewee of the German case perceived citizen assemblies not as competitive to, but as consultative and supplementary to representative democracy. He ponders a model of "combinatoric democracy" in which, according to the problem, elements of direct and representative democracy as well as citizen assemblies are combined to achieve legitimacy for decisions on conflictual problems. He suggests a follow up meeting after some time in which politicians report to the citizen assembly how they followed up their recommendations.

In Scotland, there are some indications for institutionalization because of a procedure of exchange between Citizen Assembly and regular political institutions. The Citizen Assembly handed over its recommendations in June 2021. Government had six months to directly respond. The interviewee thinks that government gave quite a detailed and considerate response, which was different to many citizen assemblies she knows. In the citizen assembly meeting in early 2021 the citizen assembly asked for a follow up meeting in one year to stay involved in the process of policy implementation. In Scotland the citizen assembly was called for by legislation and the requirement for meaningful response was in the legislation. Also, all party leaders spoke at the final weekend of the citizen conference and confirmed that they were looking forward to the recommendation

*"So there was this momentum to (...) actually be demonstrating it was having influence and making a difference". That showed that there was a fertile ground for that and that this was a great accomplishment".*

What's innovative in the Scottish case is that the citizen assembly re-convened after six months for a weekend to respond to the government's response. This was not foreseen at the beginning of the process and was not done, according to the interviewee, in any other climate assembly she knew of. There was also interaction between the members of the citizen assembly and civil servants and politicians during this six-month responding period. Additionally, there is a call for reconvening again in one year from the citizen assembly. Also, there is a Parliamentary debate on March 1st, 2022, on the climate assembly and the response of the citizen assembly on the government's response where members are also invited and encouraged to observe if they can.

### 3.5.3 Context

The context in which the citizen assembly is situated is highly important. The French citizen assembly, as already stated, is placed in the context of social unrest of the gilets jaunes. To mitigate this unrest, President Macron held the Grand Debate. The citizen assembly is placed in the context of attempts to calm these social unrests and address distrust in government. In addition, interviewee 2 perceived a strategic placement of the French climate assembly before the European election. He interpreted that the organizations of the climate assembly should secure green voters, who are in favor of the climate assembly, in this election for the President's party. The interviewee perceived the organization of the climate assembly as primarily motivated by these strategic considerations.

In Ireland, the climate assembly was not the first citizen assembly in the country. It has precedence based in the citizen assembly on the constitution which included the issue of same sex marriage from 2012-2014 which led to a highly publicized referendum which ultimately was successful at changing the constitutional ban on same sex marriage. The citizen assembly was a succession to that. Climate change was only one among altogether five topics put before the assembly, the most controversial and important being abortion policy. Climate change was adopted as a topic because of pressure from an opposition party, and interviewees describe it as an "accident" or "surprise" that the government adopted the issue which by then was much less in public focus as it is today.

Although in Germany, the history of participatory experiments reaches back well into the 1970 (Planungszellen), representative democracy was for a very long time reluctant to adopt them on nation level. However, in 2020 the Parliament contracted the Bürgerrat "More Democracy" and after positive reception by the Parliament continued in the next year with the Bürgerrat "Germany's Role in the World".<sup>14</sup> A citizen assembly on climate was not funded by Parliament because the parties in government had already

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2021/kw02-buergerrat-816534> (27.2.2022)

agreed on a climate policy. Therefore, the CSO “BürgerBegehren Klimaschutz e.V.” independently contracted three research institutes to organize the Klimarat initiative. The Klimarat therefore was not funded by Parliament, but by CSOs. There was no official link to political process, but the assembly was timed to publicly influence new coalition negotiations on climate and there was keen interest in the outcomes of the assembly by some political parties forming the current coalition government of SPD, Greens and Liberals.

Institutional context matters also in the Scottish case. The Scottish parliament is relatively new and defines itself also by wanting to do things differently compared to Westminster. The interviewee explained that there is a stronger commitment in this parliament to participatory processes which are built in the system, than in older parliaments.

### 3.5.4 Legitimacy

#### France

In the French case, the citizen assembly was created by the President who is at liberty to grant and withdraw legitimacy. As one interviewee put it, he can decide to listen, or not. In the political spectrum, the citizen assembly is perceived in two opposite ways as democratic innovation or as an attempt to undermine the parliament. The following quotation exemplifies these arguments:

*"On the on the conservative side they were saying: 'This (...) is a populist ploy to skew parliament and undermine its authority and also it is a puppet. So, it is like a puppet parliament in the hand of the President to actually discredit the real Parliament". Because the [climate assembly] was created by Macron and organized by people that Macron chose and pick (...), so it is not a counter power, 'It is something that Macron uses against the actual Parliament and it is (...) undermining us, the representatives that people elected in Parliament' and (...) then the other side of the spectrum, which is 'Oh, my God this is the newest, this is a complete democratic revolution. It's going to change everything we are'".*

#### Ireland

Legitimacy was a topic in Ireland as well; the legitimacy of the citizen assembly was contested, but the instrument slowly built legitimacy. The citizen assembly was under scrutiny from the outset by opponent advocacy groups of the abortion conflict. Time and time again, the impartiality of the citizen assembly was scrutinized and questioned. The legitimacy of its participants to speak and the legitimacy of the assembly in relation to Parliament was questioned. The organizers spent much time explaining the process. An interviewee recalls the narrative of opponents of the citizen assembly at that time:

*"We already have a citizens assembly; it's called the national parliament. Who are these people? Why do we want to hear from them? (...) Who selected them? And then there was the whole scrutinizing of every member (...), trying to establish whether there was inherent biases within any of the membership. It was very intense. From the outset, I have to say so, our recruitment processes were and did need to be and were very robust to be able to withstand that."*

However, as one interviewee recalls, scrutiny from both sides, activists against and for the right to abortion, improved the quality of the process because the organizers had to thoroughly think through each decision they made and how they would answer critics.

A consequence of this scrutiny because of the high charge of the topic was that the organizers took an active media strategy, engaging in detailed briefings explaining the process and the decisions made and building trust. As an interviewee recollects:

*"It was really effective because we built up trust with the media and the media really believed that whatever the outcome was going to be of the process that the process was run really well".*

This was stronger in the abortion issue and less in the climate issue.

Another important factor was engagement with the public.

*"I guess (...) that was kind of a hallmark of everything we did (...) with the team. It was, (...) 'make sure that we engage with the public, make sure that we respond to the public, make sure that nobody can legitimately say that they (...) couldn't engage with us at that there was any hidden agenda or that we weren't transparent."*

Regardless of being granted in one moment, legitimacy can be questioned again if actors are not satisfied with the results. This happened when the Irish agricultural community criticized the quality of the discussion and the citizens' understanding of the topic as poor. From hindsight, one interviewee regrets that only two weekends were reserved for the entire climate change topic. This made it impossible to involve more speakers, discuss more topics and ultimately raise public awareness. This also left the citizen assembly open to attack by critiques because issues could not be discussed in necessary depth. The interviewee summarized: "if you have problems about the (...) robustness of the process, it does undermine your recommendations ultimately." In this way, independence, process quality, legitimacy and impact are closely linked.

## **Germany**

In the Germany case legitimacy was an issue as well, because the Bürgerrat Klima was organized by private foundations and NGOs and not by Parliament. Therefore, one

interviewee from Germany recalls how there was some criticism from the conservative press that the citizen assembly was biased and lopsided towards climate activists. However, he thought that most of the media was interested and sympathetic towards the process and the critique was less heavy than he had feared at the outset. The strategy the Bürgerrat used to counter criticism of partisanship was to emphasize the independence of the citizen assembly and that the expertise presented must be solid and peer reviewed and not lopsided.

### **Scotland**

The question of legitimacy was not a widely discussed issue in the Scottish case. According to the interviewee there might have been some voices who criticized costs and legitimacy of convening 100 randomly selected people. However, in general there is "a different culture of participation in Scotland and (...) a really strong commitment to public participation and engagement and consultation (from the current government who's been in place for a while)".

## **4 Summary and Lessons**

This paper addresses the question “what furthers and impedes the impact of climate assembly resolution on policy making?”. For this purpose, we use the assessment of organizers and experts involved in the climate assemblies as well as researchers studying citizen assemblies as a proxy.

Taking climate assemblies in France, Ireland, Germany and Italy in recent years as examples and using qualitative expert interviews with organizers and experts as sources, we found varied impact of climate assemblies in these four countries. In three of our cases, interviewee partners mentioned substantial impact of climate assemblies on policies; in France, both interview partners agreed that the impact was left wanting.

As concerns policy impact, the reasons our interview partners provided why certain proposals were not transformed into policies ranged from explanations (1) that elites would be rather interested in their own than public interest, (2) a lack of bottom-up pressure from social movements, (3) the influence of strong stakeholder groups who oppose certain measures, (4) that policy makers would avoid unpopular policy if that means high costs for consumers and (5) that policy implementation is complex and takes a long time.

Our research showed that the notion of policy impact needs qualification. Impact depends on time passed since the conclusion of the citizen assembly. In Scotland, the interaction between citizen assembly and Parliament was still in process in spring 2022;

in Germany, the impact is limited to statements of intents; in France and Ireland, countries in which climate assemblies have been organized much earlier, laws have already been enacted.

One important factor for the impact of citizen assemblies on policies is the existence of an established and legitimate interface between this democratic innovation and traditional polity and politics. In France, a referendum could have been such an interface, but the citizen assembly shied away from it for fear that the electorate would not endorse their propositions. Therefore, traditional French politics and polity took over and softened the edges of citizen assembly's proposals, diminishing their policy impact, and therefore, the legitimacy of deliberative democracy. In contrast, Ireland might be well in the process of establishing such interfaces, Scotland is currently in the very midst of experimenting with a formalized interface and Germany is discussing different options for such an interface.

National context, politics and polity are crucial when looking at the impact of climate assemblies. The history, self-perception, and role of actors (e.g., civil servants and politicians) and institutions (e.g., parliaments, governments, associations) within a particular political system, the perception of citizen participation within this system as well as long-, medium- and historic experiences, play an important role. An example is Scotland, where Parliament wants to differentiate itself from Westminster style policymaking and emphasizes citizen participation as a defining aspect of Scottish identity.

Legitimacy of the process is also crucial, and legitimacy is more contested in one country than in others. For instance, the legitimacy of the climate assembly was strongly contested in France, where a challenged President used strategically it to pacify civic unrest. In contrast, the climate assembly's legitimacy is less contested in other countries. However, legitimacy is not a given, it can increase or decrease as the cases in Germany and Ireland exemplify.

We also found other important forms of impact of climate assemblies than their impact on policies, politics and polity. They can affect the content and quality of a discourse, provide a safe space for interaction, pacify a conflict, give rise to new arguments, clarify deeply held assumptions or further the orientation towards the common good. In addition, climate assemblies can have an impact on participants, e.g., raising awareness of a topic, creating commitment and politicizing participants. In contrast, our cases did not show much direct impact on the public and media despite some interviewees speculating that this could be one avenue for increased impact. The way that citizen assemblies are organized and managed also has an impact on deliberative democracy.

In Germany, Ireland and Scotland participatory practices have currently gained momentum because of good examples. This seems not to be the case in France. In terms of discourse on climate change and action, many felt that the assembly offered unrealized opportunities to communicate climate science.

All cases raise the question about the interplay between deliberative, direct, and representative democracy. Thus, further research is needed, in particular to better understand potential interfaces between citizen assemblies (deliberative democracy), representative and direct democracy. There has been very recent experimentation in Scotland and a proliferation of deliberative devices in Germany. These should be investigated further as lessons for Austria.

## 4.1 Lessons

Several lessons can be learnt from the cases:

1. A citizen assembly needs thorough management. Process quality, legitimacy, independence of the process, output quality and impact are strongly interlinked. Therefore, the process should be as transparent as possible. The organizers should be aware that they might be held accountable for the process and all decisions they take. Problems of process backfire on the robustness of recommendations, the impact and finally, the legitimacy of the initiative.
2. It is important to engage with the public and to build trust (e.g., with the media) by explaining the process and being available for questions.
3. Failure to implement policy recommendations or explain the response to them delegitimizes citizen assemblies.
4. Clear interface with traditional politics is key. There should be clear and transparent, tangible institutional commitment structures and interfaces that allow follow up after an assembly in order to counteract skepticism. These should be clearly communicated. Examples we found in our cases are:
  - Parliamentary Committees (done in Ireland)
  - Written comments provided by policy makers about how each proposition was handled by political institutions (done in Scotland; discussed in Germany)



- Referendum (done in Ireland on abortion which increased the legitimacy of citizen assemblies; missed opportunity in France)
- Policy makers clearly communicate timeframes for policy implementation (done in Scotland; emphasized by German interviewees)
- Policy makers clearly communicate the requirements, duration and difficulties of policy implementation.
- There is experimentation with trying to keep the momentum of citizen assemblies (done in Scotland, bottom-up activities in France and Germany)

## 4.2 Limitations

This small scale, explorative study has several limitations. First, as already stated, we used the assessment of organizers and researchers as an approximation to impact. Thus, the study is based on expert interviews and not on systematic content analysis of output of the climate assemblies and its traces in political institutions. Second, due to the limited size of the study, it was only possible to interview a very limited number of experts. Third, most of the interviewees either organized or provided expert advice to the climate assembly. Thus, their assessment of impact might be biased based on their role in the assembly. Further research should broaden both the methods being used, to also include document analysis as well conducting additional interviews, e.g., with politicians, civil servants, participants, media, different representatives of different stakeholder groups and CSOs.

## 5 Annex

### 5.1 Literature

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## 5.2 Interview guideline

### Introduction text

*Introduction, project, and interview context*

*Ask to record*

- Could you introduce yourself and tell me about your role in the \_\_\_ climate assembly and how you came to be involved?
- What impacts you have observed, what are the first observations that come your mind?
- Would you share your impression of the general perception of the CA, particularly in terms of its legitimacy (epistemically and democratically)?
- How has the output of the climate assembly impacted the policy making process?

### Theme 1: Process

I would like to talk about the process of the CA.

- Was the process of the CA important for its impact on policy making?
- How?
- How did you envision that the recommendations should be taken up by politics?
  - What do you think were members expectations?
- How did CA members respond after the recommendations were complete?
  - Was there desire to remain involved?
- Could participants influence or voice opinions about the uptake process?
- What was the role of scientists during the deliberation process?

### Theme 2: Recommendations

Some research suggests that the contents of recommendations influences to what degree they are taken up.

- How would you describe this relationship?
  - In terms of unanimity and division on certain recommendations (banning SUVs, personal travel limits).
  - In terms of financial cost to government and taxpayers?

### Theme 3: Political attitude

There has been some attention in the literature to party membership and how CAs are received.

- Were there observable political attitudes towards the CA recommendations?

- If so, along which lines? (Political, regional, businesses, capital and labor, gender, minorities)
- What conflicts or compatibilities existed between the CA recommendations and the existing climate policy agenda?
  - How so? (If recommendations were in conflict, were they able to overthrow existing policies?)

#### **Theme 4: Public**

One important impact is the impact on public attitudes.

- Did you observe something in this direction?
- Was the scope of public interest and media attention of the recommendations?
  - CA process?
  - Were there changes (+/-) in this interest– before, after, during?
  - identifiable reasons? (Scandal, interview, doku, examples from other countries, calls to action, etc.)

#### **Theme 5: Context**

Literature suggests that tradition of deliberative democracy or not has an impact on how recommendations are received.

- How would you describe the political environment of \_\_\_\_\_ in terms of previous experiences with deliberative forums?
  - Is this kind of process completely new? Was there something to connect to? obvious or nonobvious kind of process?
- Is there anything else I forgot to ask that is important to you for this discussion?
- Do you consider the CA a success or a failure and why?

### 5.3 Code list

<b>Code</b>	<b>Grounded</b>
Impact on policy	18
Interface with policy making	14
Impact on Deliberative Democracy	11
Institutional context	9
Framing	9
Legitimacy	8
Quotation	8
Impact on members of Assembly	7
Impact on discourse	7
Independence	6
Strategic use of the climate assembly	4
How does citizen assembly work	4
Impact Media	3
Expert citizens relationship	3
Impact on Legitimizing Climate Policy	3
Referendum	2
Impact on the public	2
Why were propositions not adopted?	2
public awareness and expectations	2
Precedence	2
Context of the political system	1
output	1
Role of experts	1
First reaction to Climate Assembly	1
Innovation	1
History of Climate Assembly	1
Building Trust	1
Success of Failure	1
Engagement	1
Transparency	1
Predecessor	1
expectations from policy makers	1
Process	1
In which context is the Climate Assembly placed?	1