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# Deliberating on Climate Action:

## Insights from the French Citizens' Convention for Climate

20 October 2020

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*Citizens' assemblies are gaining traction as a means to address complex issues such as climate change. We report on our unique experience in observing debates among the 150 members of the French Citizens' Convention for Climate and highlight its implications for both climate action and the science of deliberation. We note that France took an original approach characterized by (i) sustained interactions between citizens and the steering board; (ii) a significant input from technical and legal experts; (iii) and a strong emphasis on creating consensus, leaving little room for expressing dissent. This resulted in the citizens approving 149 measures, 146 of which President Macron committed to follow up on. Yet as implementation is now under discussion, the promise that measures would pass "unfiltered" appears increasingly questioned.*

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## Introduction

Climate change is sometimes referred to as a “wicked” problem (Lazarus, 2008). Indeed, soon after its adoption, the integrity of the Paris Agreement – a major accomplishment in international climate cooperation – was endangered by the withdrawal of the United States. Even in countries showing strong support for the Agreement, implementation is facing serious obstacles. In France for instance, the carbon tax hike ignited the “Gilets jaunes” movement, a major political crisis (Nature, 2019). Building on an emerging trend in participatory and deliberative democracy, citizens’ assemblies are increasingly organized across the world to address these difficulties inherent in climate action. The French Citizens’ Convention for Climate (CCC) and the Climate Assembly UK (CAUK) provide the latest examples.<sup>1</sup>

Citizens’ assemblies involve citizens in deliberations and decisions about complex, value-laden social issues. They are meant to both feed into and complement representative democracy in an attempt to overcome stalemates on issues such as family policy and climate action (Dryzek et al., 2019).

Participants, who are drawn randomly from among ordinary citizens, come together to deliberate and submit policy proposals to government executives or elected authorities (Paulis et al., 2020).<sup>2</sup> The most commonly discussed examples include assemblies deliberating on changing the electoral laws in British Columbia in 2004, in the Netherlands in 2006, in Ontario in 2007 (Warren and Pearse, 2008; Fournier et al., 2011) and, in Ireland, on same-sex marriage in 2013-14 and on abortion in 2016-18, among other topics (Farrell et al., 2019; OECD, 2020).

As citizens assemblies are gaining traction, they raise a number of legal, political and philosophical questions. These include: what is the legitimacy of a mini-public in participating in decisions involving a broader public? How does the framing of deliberation shape its outcomes? Do such assemblies produce sound proposals that are more acceptable to the population? Do they put traditional policy-making at risk?

Beyond those general questions, specific questions arise when it comes to using citizens’ assemblies to address climate change. On the one hand, the issue of representativeness emerges: how can a mini-public of a few hundreds make sensible recommendations to solve a problem that virtually involves every single individual on the planet? On the other hand, the issue is both wide-ranging – it infuses nearly every aspect of our daily lives – and highly technical – in terms of the physical processes to tackle, the technologies to deploy, and measures to implement. One important implication is that experts are expected to play a crucial role in climate citizens’ assemblies.

Citizens’ assemblies offer unique opportunities for social scientists to collect research material to begin to answer such questions and ultimately contribute to a better understanding of how deliberation by citizens’ assemblies can generate broader support for climate action.

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<sup>1</sup> CAUK was in development before the CCC was announced and other climate citizens’ assemblies happened years before the CCC (in Australia and Ireland).

<sup>2</sup> Citizens’ assemblies are sometimes also referred to as mini-publics. They are in fact a specific form of deliberative mini-public, one involving a critical number of representative participants and lasting long enough for participants to produce readily implementable policies.

The authors of this paper are part of the group of accredited researchers who observed the CCC from its inception.<sup>3</sup> The group includes social scientists from various disciplines – political science, economics, sociology, philosophy, geography, law. We provide below a first-hand account of how the CCC unfolded, highlighting what it means for France’s commitment to climate action, how participating citizens became involved and issues where we still need to undertake further research. While it is too early to draw definite conclusions on a process meant to have enduring consequences, our interim remarks will hopefully provide scientists, policy makers and the general public with practical insights in a context of fast growing interest in citizens’ assemblies.

## **Researching the French Citizens’ Convention for Climate (CCC)**

Through an open call, the organizers of the CCC invited researchers to closely follow the entire process. Our group worked collaboratively with the goal of collecting and sharing observations during and after the CCC. Broadly speaking, our research interests fall into two distinct categories – which we refer to as the procedure and the substance – although we are also interested in how they intersect. We all use different methods which, taken together, blend quantitative and qualitative approaches.

On the quantitative front, we asked citizens to complete questionnaires at each of the seven sessions of the CCC. Building on questions routinely used in national and international surveys, we surveyed citizens’ values, attitudes towards climate change and their feelings and views about the Convention.<sup>4</sup> On the qualitative front, we were granted access to plenary and group discussions, which provided us with the opportunity to observe citizens’ interactions, take notes and make audio recordings of their conversations. We were also allowed (with camera and audio turned off) to attend the webinars that took place between the face-to-face sessions. We shared our notes and recordings on a common repository and we are now exploiting them. In addition to producing our own data, we had access to an online internal platform that was set up for the citizens to aid circulation of information and enable collaboration. It provides a repository for all draft documents, including the experts’ feedback on those drafts. All material from the CCC, including our questionnaire forms, will be preserved by the French National Archives.

In observing the CCC, we adhered to a charter in which each of us committed not to interfere with the process. This implied observing debates at reasonable distance, engaging as little as possible with participants and organizers, refraining from publicly expressing personal views on the CCC during the process and from communicating preliminary research results (see Appendix).

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.conventioncitoyennepourleclimat.fr/chercheurs-observateurs/>

<sup>4</sup> Some questions were specific to each session while others were repeated to capture changes. Unfortunately, while the response rate was high in the first two sessions, it sharply declined thereafter, to the point that later questionnaires – except that of Session 7 – are challenging to exploit.

## How the CCC unfolded

### Background and preparation

In November 2018, France was hit by a major political crisis. In response to a set of governmental measures deemed unfair to the poor – a planned increase in the carbon tax, a reduction of speed limits from 90 to 80 km/h mainly applying in rural areas and tax cuts benefiting the rich – protesters started gathering every Saturday and occupying roundabouts on a daily basis. What came to be known as the *Gilets Jaunes* movement made the headlines of French political life for nearly six months, with aftershocks still being felt. Among other responses, the government organized in early 2019 what was termed the “Grand National Debate,” which included elements of participatory and deliberative democracy, in particular through 18 “regional citizen conferences,” each inviting about a hundred of randomly selected citizens to deliberate for a day and a half. In closing the Grand National Debate, President Macron took a step further, making a public commitment to create a dedicated citizens’ assembly on climate – the CCC.

The CCC was formally initiated in July 2019 by a letter<sup>5</sup> from the Prime Minister inviting participants to “define structuring measures to manage, in a spirit of social justice, to cut France’s greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by at least 40% by 2030 compared to 1990.”<sup>6</sup> The letter was addressed to the head of the Economic, Social and Environmental Council (CESE), to whom the organization of the CCC was delegated.<sup>7</sup> It further said that the recommendations would be submitted to the President of the Republic, who in turn committed to bringing them “unfiltered” to the appropriate level: referendum, governmental or parliamentary action. While generating widespread comment, the “unfiltered” commitment lacked a common understanding. From a political perspective, it suggested that the President had a duty to take the citizens’ proposals as is. From a legal perspective, it suggested that the citizens had a duty to produce readily implementable bills. Both understandings were prevalent in public debates.

Steering of the CCC relied on five committees (which we refer to collectively as ‘the organizers’). First, a Governance committee comprised representatives from various organizations (think tanks, unions, businesses), government officials and scholars with expertise in climate science, public policy and democratic practices. Its fifteen members were joined between each session by two citizens randomly drawn from the CCC. The role of this enhanced committee was to set the agenda and the rules for deliberations. Second, a group of three Guarantors were nominated by representatives from the National Assembly, the Senate and the CESE to ensure independence of the CCC and good working

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.conventioncitoyennepourleclimat.fr/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/lettre-de-mission.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> The target corresponds to France’s intended nationally-determined contribution submitted in compliance with the Paris Agreement. Note that adaptation to climate change was not within the scope defined by the engagement letter. As it turns out, adaptation issues were effectively left unaddressed.

<sup>7</sup> The CESE represents civil society in the third Assembly of the Republic, alongside the National Assembly and the Senate. It is a Constitutional Assembly which advises the Executive on legislation. Its members include non-governmental organizations, unions and business representatives and students. The President also intends for the CCC to serve as an experiment for a reform of the CESE that would open the institution to the general public or to enable further mini-publics.

conditions. Third, a group of 19 experts was created in the process to provide technical background on GHG emission reduction technologies and policies and give feedback on citizens' recommendations. Fourth, a group of six legal experts was gathered to help the citizens formulate their proposals in "juridically sound" terms, a prerequisite for them being submitted "unfiltered." To our knowledge, such a committee is unparalleled in other citizens' assemblies. Fifth, a consortium of facilitators was assigned by public procurement the role of leading the debates. A budget of €4.5 million was initially planned to organize the CCC, most of which dedicated to logistics, compensations for citizens and the facilitators' fees. Total costs eventually reached €5.5 million.

Selection of the participating citizens started in August 2019. Quota sampling was applied to an initial pool of 300,000 randomly generated phone numbers. The selection criteria consisted of age, gender, education level, geographic origin, settlement (urban versus rural) and type of job (if any). In the end, a pool of 190 voluntary citizens was selected to ensure participation of at least 150 citizens in each session. Of the 190 selected participants, 178 were effectively selected to participate; among those, 104 effectively participated in all sessions, 56 participated in some but not all sessions, 10 never showed up and eight dropped out along the way. The composition of the 150 citizens is provided in Table 1.

The question naturally arises as to the degree to which selected participants are representative of the general population based on a broader set of criteria. As it turns out, the views expressed in questionnaires by participants on general issues such as education and political leanings match fairly well those expressed by 1,003 representative respondents surveyed in an external study (Fabre et al., 2020). The key difference is a more pronounced concern for climate change in the Convention sample.<sup>8</sup> The positive bias towards the topic of the CCC is plausibly due to the fact that participation in a citizens' assembly is not compulsory but instead requires consent on the part of participants.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The protection of the environment was deemed important with an average score of 8.95 (on a 0-10 scale) by the CCC participants, versus 7.87 in the population. Another difference is regarding redistribution from the rich to the poor, deemed important with a score of 5.23 among the CCC participants against 6.05 in the population.

<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, the CAUK took a different approach. The organizers included attitudes towards climate change in the selection criteria, thus avoiding this specific bias.

Table 1: Composition of the CCC. Source: Governance Committee of the CCC

		French population N=67 million	Participants in Session 1 N=159	Participants in Session 7 N=160
Gender	Female	47.8%	49.1%	48.1%
	Male	52.2%	50.9%	51.9%
Age	16-17	3.0%	3.1%	4.4%
	18-24	10.6%	9.4%	8.8%
	25-34	15.3%	16.4%	15.0%
	35-49	25.3%	21.4%	21.9%
	50-64	24.1%	30.2%	31.9%
	Over 65	21.8%	19.5%	18.1%
Socio-economic group	Farmers	0.9%	1.3%	0.6%
	Small entrepreneurs	3.5%	3.8%	4.4%
	Managers and professionals	9.2%	13.8%	13.8%
	Technicians and associated professional employees	14.3%	17.0%	15.0%
	Clerks and skilled service employees	16.8%	12.6%	14.4%
	Industrial skilled employees	13.3%	8.2%	9.4%
	Retired	27.2%	27.0%	26.3%
	Other non-employed	14.9%	16.4%	16.3%
Highest qualification	No diploma	27.6%	23.9%	25.0%
	Pre-baccalaureate	22.0%	17.0%	18.8%
	Baccalaureate	15.1%	18.9%	17.5%
	Post-baccalaureate	25.9%	28.3%	26.3%
	Currently student	9.4%	12.0%	12.5%
Settlement	Urban	59.0%	61.0%	62.5%
	Sub-urban	24.0%	21.4%	18.8%
	Rural	17.0%	13.8%	15.6%
	Other	0.0%	3.8%	3.1%
Location	Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes	11.8%	10.1%	12.5%
	Bourgogne-Franche-Comté	4.4%	1.3%	1.3%
	Bretagne	5.0%	5.0%	5.0%
	Centre-Val de Loire	3.9%	4.4%	3.8%
	Corse	0.5%	0.6%	0.6%
	Grand Est	8.6%	6.3%	7.5%
	Hauts-de-France	9.0%	12.0%	11.9%
	Île-de-France	17.9%	25.2%	23.1%
	Normandie	5.1%	2.5%	1.3%
	Nouvelle-Aquitaine	9.1%	8.2%	8.8%
	Occitanie	8.8%	7.6%	6.3%
	Pays de la Loire	5.5%	5.7%	5.6%
	Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur	7.7%	7.6%	9.4%
	Guadeloupe	0.6%	1.3%	1.3%
	Martinique	0.6%	0.6%	0.0%
	Guyane	0.3%	0.6%	0.6%
	La Réunion	1.2%	1.3%	1.3%

## Progress and outcomes

The CCC was initially scheduled to span six two-and-a-half-day sessions (Friday through Sunday), from October 2019 to early February 2020. The planned schedule was affected by two major disruptions. First, protests against a pension reform led to the longest strike in France in decades. Public transport was nearly shut down from early December 2019 to mid-January 2020, thus delaying Session 4. By that time, the citizens requested and were granted a seventh session. Second, soon after Session 6, lockdown was ordered to fight the COVID-19 outbreak. After two interim sessions were held remotely during the lockdown period, the final session was held at CESE with social distancing measures on June 19-21 – four months later than initially planned.

The CCC sessions combined plenary gatherings and thematic gatherings in smaller groups. Five thematic groups were defined by the Governance Committee to cover relevant aspects of France's GHG emissions: housing (*Se loger*), labor and production (*Travailler et produire*), transport (*Se déplacer*), food (*Se nourrir*), and consumption (*Consommer*). Citizens were randomly assigned to a thematic group. In parallel, cross-cutting issues such as financing and constitutional changes were treated in plenary gatherings.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, the question of the carbon tax hike, which was part of the trigger that led the government to organize the CCC, was left unaddressed after a few citizens vocally opposed any discussion about the carbon tax in Session 2.<sup>11</sup>

The dynamic of the CCC varied over time (See Table 2). In Session 1, citizens heard from experts on the science of climate change and were introduced to the objectives and the schedule. In a second sequence spanning Sessions 2 to 6, they interrogated experts, debated and elaborated policy proposals. Under the guidance of facilitators, they would alternate hearings of external experts and stakeholders and table discussions, in either plenary or thematic gatherings. Between sessions, members of the experts' group would assess the proposals and legal experts would reformulate the citizens' proposals in a more precise and formal fashion. At the beginning of each session, the citizens would then review the reworked version of their proposals and use it as a basis for further discussion. In Session 6, each group presented their work in plenary gatherings to get feedback from other groups. After Session 6, once each group had completed their proposals, citizens from all groups were invited to suggest amendments to the proposals, to support amendments, and to vote (remotely due to social distancing) on those supported by at least 20 citizens. Altogether, this second sequence of activity resulted in a list of 150 measures submitted by the thematic groups to the Convention as a whole.

In the third and final element of the process (Session 7), the full body of citizens participated in a series of votes. In a first voting phase, they were asked whether they approved of each of the measures (grouped into 44 blocks of 1 to 13 measures). In a second phase, they were asked whether they were willing to propose a subset of measures deemed legally fit for referendum. In a third phase, they were

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<sup>10</sup> A dedicated group called "the squad" (*l'escouade*) was constituted to address these cross-cutting issues. Launched in Session 3, it was terminated at the end of Session 4 after some citizens pointed out that it was competing with, rather than complementing, pre-established groups.

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps also surprisingly, the role nuclear power should play in electricity generation was not discussed in any of the thematic groups. The issue was deemed settled by the Governance Committee, due to the fact that nuclear power already significantly contributes to France's relatively low GHG emissions.



asked whether to include 78 funding measures in the final report along with their approval rates on those measures. All voting procedures abided by the majority rule of the votes cast.

**Table 2: Timeline of the CCC. Source: CCC's website**

Session 1 4-5-6 October 2019	Session 2 25-26-27 October 2020	Session 3 15-16-17 November 2019	Session 4 10-11-12 January 2020	Session 5 7-8-9 February 2020	Session 6 6-7-8 March 2020	Session 7 19-20-21 June 2020
Introduction	Thematic overview	Initiation	Consolidation	Finalisation	Validation	Closure
Introductions	State of the art	Preliminary solutions	Separation of proposals and recommendations	Engagement with policy-makers and stakeholders	Thematic work presented in plenary gatherings	Final votes
Objectives	Controversies	Preliminary assessment of their contribution	Identification of cross-cutting issues	Debate	Advanced writing of the report	Formal submission of the report
Introduction to climate change	Solutions		Initiation of report writing	Validation of report outline  Writing assignments		

There was extensive communication among the citizens behind the scenes – at their hotel and through WhatsApp groups in particular. The publicity of the CCC was relatively open, at least more so than other citizens' assemblies. The media were given extensive access to the CCC's gatherings and proceedings. The citizens had their anonymity (i.e., their surnames) preserved by default but they were free to go public on social or traditional media. They were also encouraged by the organizers to reach out to their local community between sessions and meet with various stakeholders such as businesses, unions, members of parliament and local elected representatives. While some plenary gatherings were broadcast on YouTube, the Governance Committee decided that group deliberations and the drafting proposals were kept confidential from Session 6 onwards in an effort to prevent external influences from impinging on the content of the measures.

In contrast with most other citizens' assemblies, the organizers were not required to observe strict neutrality. One of the Convention's co-chairs for instance intervened as an expert. We also witnessed a co-chair, a Guarantor, and members of the Governance committee give their own opinions to the citizens on some measures.

At different points in the process, plenary meetings were organized with the highest executives of the French State – the Minister of the Ecological and Inclusive Transition (Session 1), the Prime Minister (Session 1) and the President of the Republic (Session 4).

The first voting phase resulted in all blocks of measures being approved but one. A proposal to reduce working time from 35 to 28 hours a week was the only measure to be rejected. Other blocks of measures were approved with rates in the 85% to 100% range, save for one block – comprising a lowering of speed limits from 130 km/h to 110 km/h on motorways – which was only approved by 60% of the votes cast. Vote results are summarized in Figure 1. Altogether, 149 measures from 43 blocks were approved. In the second voting phase, participants approved two constitutional reforms and recognition of the crime of

ecocide be proposed for referendum. Meanwhile, a majority voted against a subset of their technical measures deemed legally fit be proposed for referendum. In a final vote, the citizens endorsed publication of a final report detailing their work, including the measures not supported (CCC, 2020). Altogether, 160 citizens participated in the different votes.

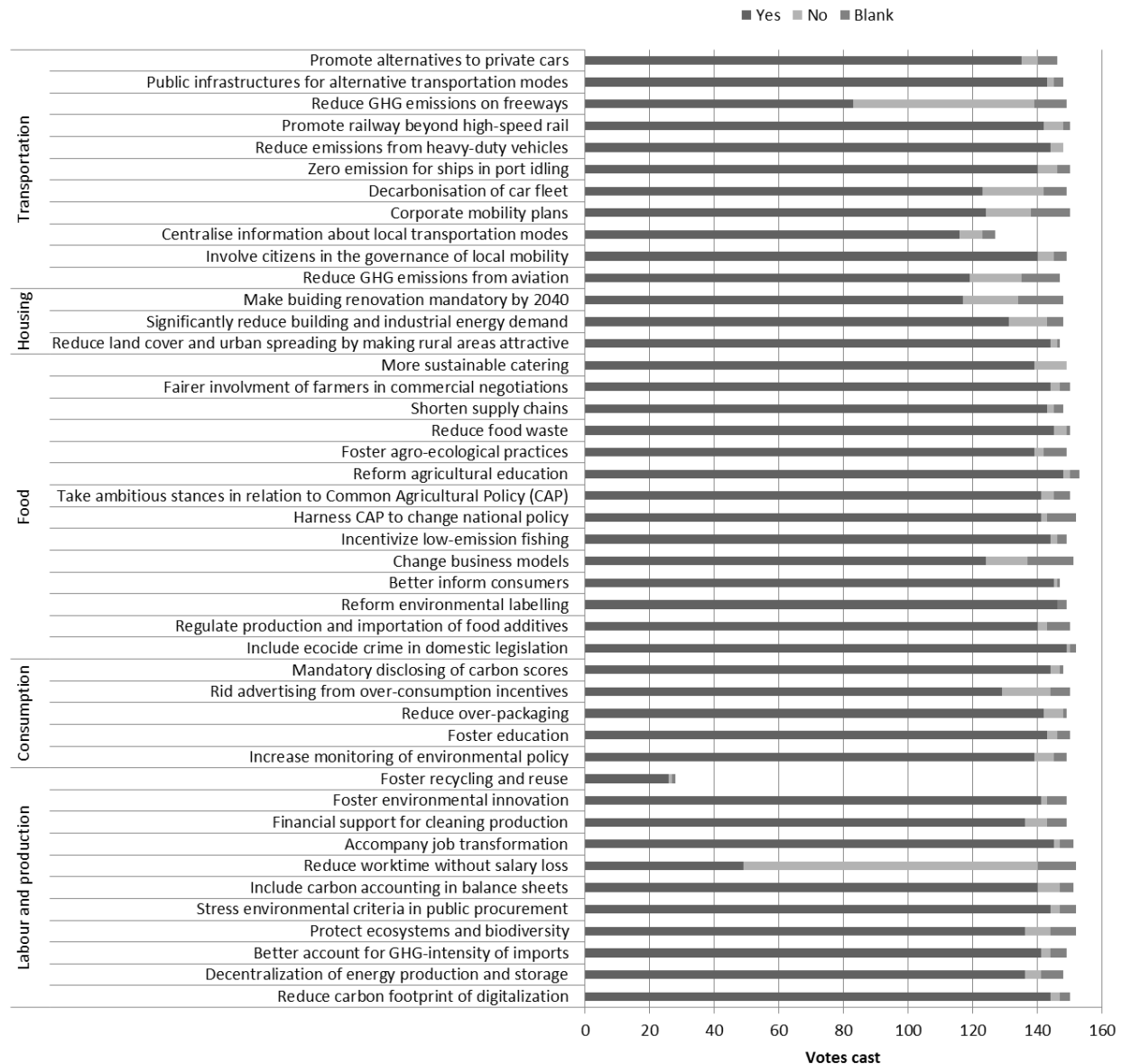


Figure 1: Approval of the 44 blocks of measures. Source: Governance Committee of the CCC

In a public address held at the Elysée Palace a week after the final session, President Macron committed to supporting 146 of the 149 proposed measures.<sup>12</sup> He indeed invoked three “trump cards” (*jokers*) to reject the following measures: changing the Preamble of the Constitution, arguing it threatened to place the protection of Nature above all liberties; imposing a 4% tax on corporate dividends to finance climate

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.elysee.fr/front/pdf/elysee-module-15714-fr.pdf>

action, arguing it would be too damaging for France's competitiveness; and reducing speed limits on motorways, arguing he had made a similar mistake in the past, implicitly referring to one of the measures that sparked the Gilets Jaunes movement.<sup>13</sup> President Macron closed his speech by announcing that the dialogue with the Convention would continue and follow-up meetings would be organized.

The 146 measures are now expected to be translated into laws and decrees. A new bill is being prepared by the government, to be submitted to the Parliament at the end of 2020. The CCC can be said to have created a broader political momentum in that several jurisdictions not legally responsible for implementing the CCC's measures have committed to do so, in particular a group of mayors of the largest French urban areas (Le Monde, 2020). The participants of the CCC, in turn, have created a non-profit organization with the goal of monitoring and verifying whether and how their recommendations are considered (*Les 150. L'association des Citoyens de la Convention Climat*).<sup>14</sup> Some of them are participating in government workshops for policy implementation. Around a dozen citizens from the Convention have risen to prominence in the public arena, owing to their activity on social media or repeated appearance in the traditional media.

## What the CCC means for France's climate action

The fact that 146 measures were retained out of 149 following presidential scrutiny can be seen as a political success. This does not mean, however, that 146 measures will be effectively implemented. There is a long way to go. At this stage, the government still has to take forward the bills and decrees, and nothing guarantees that all measures will pass "unfiltered" – whatever this means.

From a climate perspective, how to assess the significance of the 146 measures is less clear cut. A fair share of the measures – 15% by some account (Contexte, 2020) – were planned by the government before the CCC completed its work. Whether the measures will lead to a reduction of France's GHG emissions by 40% by 2030 has not been comprehensively assessed. Only rough estimates of the impact (low, medium, high) of each measure were provided to the participants, with no assessment of their combined impact (Table 3). These estimates were put together by the experts' group and sent to the citizens only days before the final vote was held. In contrast, the financial cost of a few measures deemed most impactful was assessed earlier in the process, and in more detail.

According to the estimate of the experts' group, four blocks of measures will be most impactful, each with an annual public cost exceeding €1 billion. These include: an obligation to retrofit energy inefficient dwellings by 2040, increasing fuel efficiency standards, encouraging the development of rail transport, and putting restrictions on air travel. Taken together, the 146 measures will require €6 billion every year

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<sup>13</sup> Despite playing only three "trump cards," the President effectively rejected more measures. While the citizens proposed to ban domestic flights when a train alternative of less than four hours was available, he lowered this threshold to two and a half hours. He also rejected organizing a referendum on the recognition of the ecocide crime, a measure he nevertheless committed to re-work with the government and push at the European level.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.les150.fr/>

in public spending (I4CE, 2020). Other measures deemed less impactful, such as advertisement bans, are still important as they represent a significant change in traditional policy.

**Table 3: Rough assessment of the impact of each block of measures. Source: CCC (2020)**

	Impact					
	High	High/Medium	Medium	Medium/Low	Low	N/A
<b>Transportation</b>	Decarbonisation of car fleet	Promote alternatives to private cars Public infrastructures for alternative transportation modes Promote railway beyond high-speed rail  Reduce emissions from heavy-duty vehicles	Reduce GHG emissions on freeways Reduce GHG emissions from aviation		Zero emission for ships in port idling Centralise information about local transportation modes Involve citizens in the governance of local mobility	Corporate mobility plans
<b>Housing</b>	Make building renovation mandatory by 2040 Reduce land cover and urban spreading by making rural areas attractive		Significantly reduce building and industrial energy demand			
<b>Food</b>	Foster agro-ecological practices		More sustainable catering Fairer involvement of farmers in commercial negotiations Shorten supply chains  Reduce food waste Reform agricultural education Take ambitious stances in relation to Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Harness CAP to change national policy Change business models Better inform consumers Include ecocide crime in domestic legislation		Incentivize low-emission fishing Reform environmental labelling  Regulate production and importation of food additives	
<b>Consumption</b>			Mandatory disclosure of carbon scores Ban advertising from over-consumption incentives		Reduce over-packaging	Foster education  Increase monitoring of environmental policy
<b>Labour and production</b>	Better account for GHG-intensity of imports		Financial support for cleaning production  Include carbon accounting in balance sheets Stress environmental criteria in public procurement Decentralization of energy production and storage	Foster environmental innovation	Foster recycling and reuse  Accompany job transformation  Protect ecosystems and biodiversity  Reduce carbon footprint of digitalization	Reduce worktime without salary loss (not retained)

A question that remains is whether a citizens' assembly at the national level provides the adequate scale of intervention to address climate change, in essence a global issue. Most of the measures proposed by the CCC are national in scope. This does not mean that other relevant dimensions of the problem were not considered. On the one hand, the French territories differ in their exposure to, and ability to fight, climate change. Accordingly, a number of measures on agriculture, land-use, and public transportation were differentiated at the local level, with particular attention placed on the constraints specifically faced in overseas territories. On the other hand, global GHG emissions do not originate from France alone and it is legitimate that citizens make recommendations for France's foreign policy in relation to

climate action. In this regard, the Convention recommended that negotiations over trade agreements (in particular, Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement with Canada) be paused so environmental conditions could be added.<sup>15</sup> Yet beyond that measure, they sometimes felt helpless when they realized that they could not affect certain decisions that are made at the level of the European Union (EU).

## How participating citizens worked

When it comes to assessing the procedure, the question that most naturally arises is the extent to which the experts' group and other groups involved in informing the citizens (e.g., law experts) shaped their recommendations. The short answer is: a lot – by design. Again, the question asked of the Convention was broad and technical, requiring a great deal of expert input. In turn, a glimpse at the 460-page report and the profusion of technical and legal details it contains is telling of the degree to which experts effectively intervened (CCC, 2020).

A more relevant question therefore is not really how much experts intervened, but rather whether their intervention preserved the citizens' creativity and freedom of choice. This is a tougher judgment. For one thing, two levels of analysis must be distinguished: the nature of the expertise the citizens were exposed to, and the role experts played beyond simply articulating facts and views. On the first point, external speakers invited for specific sessions provided the expert input. Our observation was that the way the debates were framed by the organizers meant that invited experts seldom had the opportunity to challenge each other's evidence. They were typically given turns to articulate their views, with very little debate among them.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the criteria that motivated who would be invited as an expert were never made explicit by the organizers. On several occasions, citizens made specific invitation requests that were not followed up. In the same vein, what qualified as expertise was broad, with no clear separation between scholarly expertise and advocacy.

On the second point, members of the experts' group actively contributed to the elaboration of policy proposals. Although their degree of intervention varied across thematic groups, their overall contribution can be said to have been significant. The extent to which this affected the citizens' output is difficult to gauge. On the one hand, we witnessed situations in which experts pushed for certain measures that in no way originated from the citizens' will, and others in which an expert lectured citizens as they were leaning towards measures he or she did not consider fit. In some cases, some citizens would complain, and sometimes the facilitators would intervene to make sure the citizens' views prevailed, but this was not systematic. On the other hand, we also observed strong demand by citizens for experts' input and a sincere gratitude towards them. Many citizens exhibited a form of anxiety in the face of a "double bind" requiring them to propose aggressive, yet feasible, measures. Our take is that some measures, in particular in the building sector or in relation to the EU Common Agricultural Policy, strongly reflected expert views while others – for instance the lowering of speed limits and the

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<sup>15</sup> Citizens were also concerned with global biophysical and environmental issues, for example when they discussed the feedback loops implied by an increasing use of air conditioning.

<sup>16</sup> Granted, the degree of scientific consensus varies from one issue to another, and nothing warrants that contradiction should be systematic. Our point here is that the degree of consensus was not systematically accurately represented.

regulation of the food industry – were some way removed from what most experts had suggested to the citizens.

One issue that struck us is the lack of training given to citizens in deliberative methods. Citizens were introduced to climate science, technology and policy. In contrast, they were not systematically introduced to the basics of deliberation, which includes the prerequisites of listening to others, not interrupting, giving the floor to all, elaborating arguments and avoiding bargaining and coercion (Reber, 2016). Perhaps as a consequence, the debates were sometimes confused, with citizens interrupting one another without intervention from the facilitators. The facilitators seemed to avoid conflict as much as possible and instead sought to create and maintain consensus among citizens. In this regard, it is telling that interim votes were seldom organized in thematic groups.<sup>17</sup> Reaching a consensus, as measured by the absence of explicit dissent, was systematically favored over voting by the organizers.

Finally, the generally high rate with which measures were approved was sometimes celebrated as evidence that giving citizens the appropriate scientific background was sufficient to generate informed and consensual decisions. Indeed, citizens reacted strongly to the introductory presentations on climate change, many of them publicly expressing in different media how radically it had changed their attitude towards climate change. Yet while informing citizens is certainly necessary for consensus, we do not think it was a sufficient condition here. We see at least two alternative explanations for the high approval rates, both rooted in the procedure. First, the fact that citizens had to vote on blocks of measures, instead of voting on a measure-by-measure basis, prevented them from more finely expressing their preference; in particular, it made it more difficult for them to reject a specific measure without rejecting a whole block. Second, citizens were not asked to vote on a set of measures submitted by an external body, but instead on those measures they and their fellow citizens had devised beforehand. As we pointed out earlier, a great deal of consensus had already been achieved in this process, owing to the specific approach taken by the organizers.<sup>18</sup> This resulted in citizens approving nearly all measures, despite having been actively involved in the elaboration of only about a fifth of them – those produced by their thematic group.

Lastly, by citizens' assemblies' standards, the CCC has produced quite an original outcome: the citizens voted against submitting their policy proposals to referendum.<sup>19</sup> Whether or not this recommendation will be sustained depends on a future decision by President Macron.

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<sup>17</sup> On rare occasions, citizens' opinions were sought by show of hands, which does not preserve anonymity and thus threatens sincere voting.

<sup>18</sup> Additionally, timing issues were probably relevant, too. All the votes occurred in the final session, with only five minutes devoted to debating each block of measures. This left little room for expressing dissent.

<sup>19</sup> The reason advanced by many citizens was that the general public would not be as "enlightened" in their voting as the members of the Convention had become, and/or a referendum would more likely become a vote for or against the President of the Republic, instead of voting for or against the Convention's recommendations. Other counter-argued that requiring referendums on groups of measures, each considered separately, instead of the recommendations as a whole, would be a way to avoid such voting strategies.

## Concluding remarks

The French CCC is an important achievement. It sets a possible path to aggressive reductions in France's GHG emissions. This was achieved in a fairly consensual manner by a truly representative assembly – with the caveat that participation was voluntary and therefore implied a dimension of self-selection. But could this be otherwise? Significantly, a survey conducted before the votes of the final session suggests broad support for the CCC measures among the general population (Fabre et al., 2020). While a referendum would be the ultimate test of this support, there is no guarantee that it will be organized.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the French CCC, as compared to other citizens' assemblies, is its approach based on “co-construction” between citizens and experts. Coined by the Prime Minister in his letter, the co-constructive approach was rooted in both the substance and the procedure of the Convention (Courant, 2020). On the substance, the climate issue is so complex and wide-ranging that it requires a great deal of expert input. In this context, the “social justice” imperative is interesting in that it perhaps better lends itself to deliberation. On the procedure, “co-construction” was built into the design, for instance through the input provided by legal experts and the relatively loose neutrality requirements adopted by the steering committee. A thorough comparison of the CCC's outcome with that of other citizens' assemblies will generate important insight into the relevance of the French “co-constructive” approach.

A persistent question mark is the notion of proposals being passed “unfiltered.” It was unclear in the first place whether this implied a duty on the citizens or on the executive power. The citizens can be said to have done their duty. With the help of legal experts, they effectively submitted rich proposals, almost ready for governmental or parliamentary action. On the other hand, in rejecting some of the proposed measures, President Macron did not fully deliver on his “unfiltered” promise. This is all the more concerning that, since his public address, further cherry-picking is being hinted at by the government in public debates, including on the adoption of 5G mobile technology. Eventually, the success of the CCC will depend on how this notion of “unfiltered” is realized.

As climate citizens' assemblies are mushrooming at both the sub-national and national (e.g., in Germany, Spain, Scotland) levels, our experience with the CCC suggests that significant scope exists for enhancing the collaboration between researchers and the organizers. Our work seeks to understand whether and how citizens' assemblies can make a difference in climate action. It could be greatly facilitated if audio and video recordings were systematically collected, or if questionnaires were more systematically distributed, completed, and collected.

Research into the French CCC is far from being finished, and our group is now entering a second phase freed from the restrictions placed in the observation charter. Some of us are conducting in-depth interviews with key stakeholders: 70 voluntary citizens and members of the steering committees have agreed to participate. Through interviewing citizens, we will better understand individuals' backgrounds, motivations to participate and their feelings about the process and its outcomes. Interviews with representatives of the steering committees will provide insights into the professional networks which influenced the design of the CCC. We look forward to producing further and richer insights from the Convention.

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## Appendix: Observation charter

The charter was translated with [www.DeepL.com/Translator](https://www.DeepL.com/Translator), with only minor edits by the authors.

The Citizens' Convention for Climate is an unprecedented event in French democratic life and a crucial moment for the orientation of climate policies. The Governance Committee wishes to facilitate access to research teams who want to make direct observations of its proceedings and produce data useful for various research works. The resulting observation, analysis and critique will be valuable in order to draw lessons for the future from this original exercise in deliberative democracy.

At the invitation of the Governance Committee, various French and foreign researchers and doctoral students, as well as participation practitioners have expressed their interest in observing the deliberations of the Citizens' Convention and studying its proceedings for research purposes. The Committee will be careful to coordinate the planned work and will ensure the diversity and plurality of approaches proposed by the researchers. To this end, the Governance Committee deems it necessary to come up with a single common questionnaire proposed to the participants. It wishes to define by mutual agreement a framework for the presence of observers that does not disrupt the smooth running of the Citizens' Convention and, above all, the work of the citizens.

The Governance Committee asks the observers to respect the following rules and guidance for the relations they will establish during their observations of the Citizens' Convention.

In order to fully understand how the Citizens' Convention will unfold and the facilitation protocol that will be used, the Governance Committee invites them to attend a presentation with the facilitators that will take place on Friday, October 4 at 11:00 a.m. at the CESE.

### ***Relations and exchanges with the Governance Committee and the facilitators***

Observers are requested to identify themselves to the Convention's chief facilitators at its first working session on Friday, 4 October, upon arrival in the Convention room.

At the opening of each session of the Citizens' Convention, the main moderator will inform the participants of the presence of observers (role and nature), except in those moments when a closed session seems necessary for the smooth running of the session.

The total number of observers who may take part in a session is limited to one person per table during group work, i.e., 20 people in plenary session.

### ***Relations and exchanges with participants during the work of the Citizens' Convention tables***

In order not to disrupt the work of the citizens during the table deliberations, only one observer will be allowed to attend their discussions.

He or she will have to introduce him or herself to the table participants and indicate whether he or she wishes to make an audio recording of the proceedings. The participants are free to refuse him or her access or the recording of their comments.

Above all, he or she must respect the dynamics of each table, without interfering in any way in the exchanges between the participants during all working hours. His or her presence will remain discreet and mute.

He or she will have to adopt a neutral stance in all his or her exchanges with the participants with regard to the Citizens' Convention and the issues being discussed, so as not to influence them.

During breaks or lunch, observers will be able to freely exchange with participants, maintaining a neutral stance and taking care not to take them away from the group for more than a few minutes, for which informal collective moments are important. For this reason, observers will not be able to participate in dinners with citizens.

### ***Questionnaires to participants and personal data***

In order not to overly solicit citizens, only one anonymous questionnaire may be submitted to participants at the beginning and one at the end of each session of the Citizens' Convention. Each questionnaire should not exceed 15 minutes in order to fit easily into the planned facilitation process. The wish to submit these questionnaires will be communicated to the participants at the opening of each session. The facilitators will encourage them to answer them on a voluntary basis. Before each session of the Citizens' Convention, the questionnaires to be submitted at the beginning and end of the session will be sent to the Governance Committee for information. The database containing the questionnaires at the end of the Citizens' Convention will be made available to all research teams wishing to analyse them.

Personal data may be requested from participants during the last session of the Citizens' Convention, for the purpose of interviews to be conducted with consenting persons after the end of the Convention. The collection of this data can only be done with the person's written and informed consent. Observers will forward the planned informed consent form to the Governance Committee prior to its release. The database collecting these personal data will be kept by the CESE and may be made available to teams who justify the need for it for research purposes.

### ***Relations and exchanges with the media***

Observers may respond to the media if questioned. However, the Governance Committee asks them not to do so during the sessions of the Citizens' Convention, so as not to disrupt the work of the Convention. It also asks them to maintain a neutral stance throughout the Citizens' Convention with regard to its proceedings and the issues addressed. The Governance Committee reserves the right to exclude any observer who does not comply with the rules set out in this charter, or whose behavior in any way disrupts the proceedings of the Convention.