

Deliberating on Climate Action:

Insights from the French Citizens' Convention for Climate

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Citizens' assemblies are gaining traction as a means to address complex, value-laden issues such as climate change. We report here on our unique experience in observing the French Citizens' Convention for Climate and highlight its implications for both climate action and the science of deliberation. In general, deliberating on such a wide-ranging issue as climate change requires significant input from external experts, and makes it heroic to carefully assess achievements. France coped with this difficulty through an original "co-constructive" approach, characterized by (i) sustained interactions between citizens and the steering board; (ii) a significant input from 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" is increasingly questioned.

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Introduction

Climate change is sometimes referred to as a “wicked” problem generating ebb and flow in policy-making (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 organised across the world to address these difficulties inherent in climate action. The French Citizens’ Convention for Climate (CCC) and the British Climate Assembly UK (CAUK) provide the latest examples.¹

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, wealth distribution and climate action (Dryzek et al., 2019). Participants, who are randomly drawn among ordinary citizens, submit policy proposals to government executives or elected authorities after a deliberative process (Paulis et al., 2020).² 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 sensible proposals that are better accepted by 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 is epitomized: 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 the research material needed to answer those questions and ultimately contribute to a better understanding of how deliberation by citizens’ assemblies can generate broader support for climate action.

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

² 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.³ The group includes social scientists from various disciplines – sociology, political science, economics, 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 got involved and what is left to understand. 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 organisers of the CCC invited researchers to closely follow the entire process. Our group self-constituted 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 – and at the intersection thereof. We all use different methods which, taken together, blend quantitative and qualitative approaches.

On the quantitative front, we asked citizens to fill 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.⁴ 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 get information and collaborate. 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 organisers, refraining from publicly expressing personal views on the CCC during the process and from communicating preliminary research results (see Appendix).

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

⁴ 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 – can hardly be exploited.

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 organised in early 2019 a so-called “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 and announced the creation of a dedicated citizens’ assembly – the CCC.

The CCC was formally initiated in July 2019 by an engagement letter⁵ 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.”⁶ The letter was addressed to the head of the Economic, Social and Environmental Council (CESE), to whom the organisation of the CCC was delegated.⁷ 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. Though widely commented, the “unfiltered” notion 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 together refer to as ‘the organisers’). First, a Governance committee gathered representatives from various organisations (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 conditions. Third, a group of 19 experts was created later in the process to provide technical background on GHG emission reduction technologies and policies and give feedback on citizens’ recommendations. Fourth, a

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

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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 organisations, unions and business representatives and students. As a by-product, the CCC was meant by the President to serve as an experiment for a reform of the CESE opening it up to the general public or to mini-publics.

group of 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 experiences with 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 organise 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. The composition of the 150 citizens is provided in Table 1. 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 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 former sample.⁸ This bias in favour of the very topic of the CCC is plausibly due to the fact that participation required consent, as for any other citizens’ assemblies.⁹

⁸ 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.

⁹ Interestingly, the CAUK took a different approach. Building on deliberative polling (Fishkin, 2018), the organisers 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 degree	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, from October 2019 to early February 2020. The planned schedule went through two major disruptions. First, protests against a pension reform brought France into its longest strike in decades. Public transports were nearly shut down from early December 2019 to mid-January 2020, which delayed Session 4. By that time, the citizens requested and obtained that a seventh session be held. Second, a few weeks later, soon after Session 6, lockdown was ordered to fight the COVID-19 outbreak. After two 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 so as to cover all relevant aspects of France's GHG emissions: housing (*Se loger*), labour and production (*Travailler et produire*), transport (*Se déplacer*), food (*Se nourrir*), and consumption (*Consommer*).¹⁰ Citizens were randomly assigned once and for all to a thematic group. In parallel, cross-cutting issues such as financing and constitutional changes were treated in plenary gatherings.¹¹ Perhaps surprisingly, the question of the carbon tax hike, which was part of the trigger that led the government to organise the CCC, was left unaddressed. This approach was taken after a few citizens vocally opposed any discussion about the carbon tax in Session 2.

The CCC had several sequences (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 auditioned 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 two 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 discover 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 amend the proposals, to support amendments, and to vote (remotely due to social distancing) on those supported by at least 20 citizens. Altogether, the second sequence resulted in a list of 150 measures submitted by the thematic groups to the Convention as a whole.

In the third and final sequence (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 one 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 asked whether to

¹⁰ Perhaps surprisingly, the role nuclear power should play in electricity generation was not discussed in any of these 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.

¹¹ A dedicated group called "the squad" (*l'escouade*) was constituted to address these cross-cutting issues. Launched in Session 3, it was however terminated at the end of Session 4 after some citizens pointed out that it was competing with, rather than complementing, pre-established groups.

include in the final report 78 funding measures 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	Confrontation 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	Argumentation	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 that of most other citizens’ assemblies. The media were given wide 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 networks or in the traditional media. They were also encouraged by the organisers 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, however, group deliberations and draft proposals were kept confidential from Session 6 onwards by the Governance Committee in an effort to prevent external influences from impinging on the content of the measures.

Also in contrast with most other citizens’ assemblies, the organisers were not required to observe strict neutrality. One of the Convention’s co-chair 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 organised 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 one measure to be rejected. Other blocks of measures were approved with rates in the 85%-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 summarised in Figure 1. Altogether, 149 measures from 43 blocks were thus approved. In the second voting phase, voters approved that two constitutional reforms and recognition of the

ecocide crime be proposed to referendum. Meanwhile, they denied such a follow-up to a broader set of technical measures deemed legally fit. In a final vote, the citizens endorsed publication of a final report detailing their work, including the measures not retained by vote (CCC, 2020). Altogether, 160 citizens participated in the different votes.

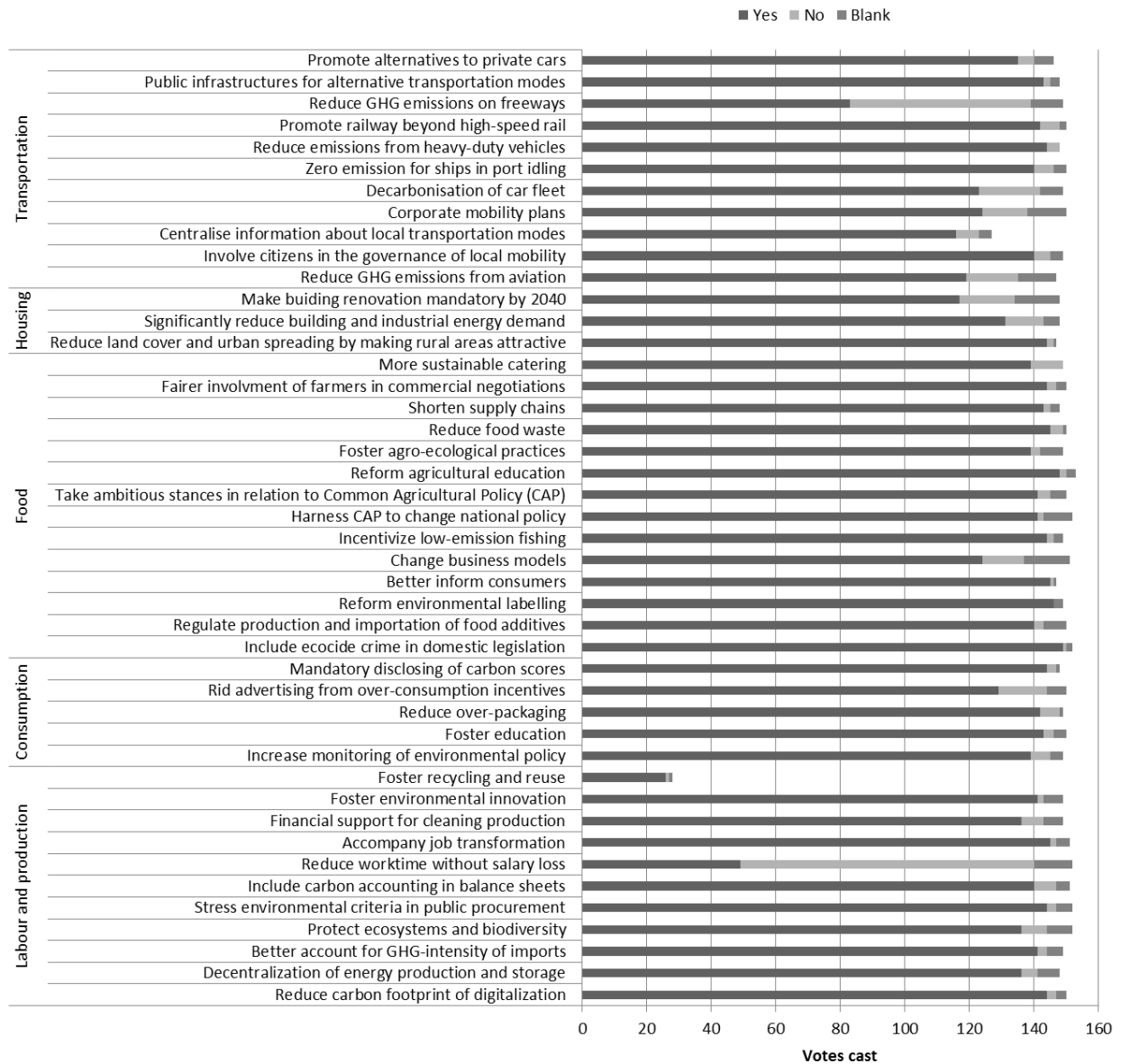


Figure 1: Approval of the 44 blocks of measures. Source: Governance Committee of the CCC

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.¹² He indeed invoked three trump cards (*jokers*) to reject the following measures: changing the Constitution to place the protection of Nature above all

¹² <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/06/29/le-president-emmanuel-macron-repond-aux-150-citoyens-de-la-convention-citoyenne-pour-le-climat>

liberties; imposing a 4% tax on corporate dividends to finance climate action, arguing it would be too damaging for France's competitiveness; and reducing speed limits on motorways, arguing he had done a similar mistake in the past, thereby implicitly referring to one of the measures that sparked the Gilets Jaunes movement.¹³ President Macron closed his speech by announcing that the dialogue would continue and follow-up meetings would be organised.

The 146 measures must now 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 momentum in that several jurisdictions not directly liable 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 organisation with the goal of monitoring and verifying whether and how their recommendations would be followed up (*Les 150. L'association des Citoyens de la Convention Climat*).¹⁴ Some of them are participating in government workshops for policy implementation. By now a dozen citizens have risen to prominence in the public arena, owing to their activity on social networks or repeated appearance in the traditional media.

What the CCC means for France's climate action

At a glance, the fact that 146 measures were claimed retained out of 149 can be seen as a political success. It is important to bear in mind, however, that a long way remains until the 146 measures are effectively implemented. At this stage, the government still has to work on 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 obvious. A fair share of the measures – 15% by some account (Contexte, 2020) – was planned by the government before the CCC completed its work. Also, 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 citizens, 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 cost of a few measures deemed most impactful was assessed earlier in the process, and in more detail.

According to the experts' group's estimates, 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 in public spending (I4CE, 2020). Other measures deemed less impactful, such as advertisement bans, are still important to consider for they represent a significant change in traditional policy.

¹³ Despite claiming 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 organising 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.

¹⁴ <https://www.les150.fr/>

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
Transportation	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
Housing	Make building renovation mandatory by 2040 Reduce land cover and urban spreading by making rural areas attractive		Significantly reduce building and industrial energy demand			
Food	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	
Consumption			Mandatory disclosure of carbon scores Rid advertising from over-consumption incentives		Reduce over-packaging	Foster education Increase monitoring of environmental policy
Labour and production	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)

An important question is whether a citizens' assembly at the national level provides the adequate scale of intervention to address climate change, in essence a global issue. Granted, most of the measures proposed by the CCC have a national scope. This does not mean that other relevant dimensions of the problem were not considered. On the one hand, 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 citizens recommended that negotiations over trade agreements (in particular, Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement with Canada) be paused so environmental

conditions could be added.¹⁵ Yet beyond that measure, they sometimes felt helpless when they realized that they could not affect certain decisions that are made at the European Union (EU) level.

How participating citizens got there

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) helped shape the citizens' decisions. The short answer is: a lot – by design. Again, the question asked 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 one. 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 exposing facts and views. Regarding the first point, expertise mostly relied on external speakers invited for specific sessions. We noted that, in the way the debates were framed by the organisers, invited experts seldom engaged in contradictory discussions. They were typically given turns to expose their views, with very little debate among them.¹⁶ Moreover, the criteria that motivated who would be invited as an expert were never made explicit by the organisers. 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.

Regarding 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 would prevail, but this was not systematic. On the other hand, we also observed a real demand of citizens for expert's input and a sincere gratitude towards experts. Indeed, many citizens exhibited a form of anxiety in 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, can be said to have espoused the experts' views while others – for instance the lowering of speed limits and the regulation of the food industry – were remote from what the majority of experts had suggested to the citizens.

¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ 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.

One thing that struck us is the lack of training to, and use of, deliberation 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 anyone, not interrupting anyone, giving the floor to everyone, elaborating arguments and avoiding bargaining and coercion (Reber, 2016). Perhaps as a consequence, the debates were sometimes confused, with citizens interrupting one another without further policing from the facilitators. And yet the facilitators seemed to avoid conflict as much as possible and instead seek to create and maintain consensus among citizens. In this regard, it is telling that interim votes were seldom organised in thematic groups.¹⁷ Reaching a consensus, as measured by the absence of explicit dissent, was systematically favoured over voting by the organisers.

Finally, the generally high rates 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 finely expressing their preference; it made it in particular more difficult for them to reject a specific measure. Second, citizens were not asked to vote on a random 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 organisers.¹⁸ 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 original an outcome: The citizens have voted against submitting their policy proposals to referendum.¹⁹ Whether or not this recommendation will be followed up will result from a pending decision by President Macron himself.

Concluding remarks

By many aspects, 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

¹⁷ On rare occasions, citizens were surveyed by show of hands, which does not preserve anonymity and thus threatens sincere voting.

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ The reason advanced by many citizens was that the general public would not be as “enlightened” upon voting as they now were, and/or would vote for or against the President of the Republic, instead of voting for or against a measure. Other counter-argued that voting on a group of measures, each considered separately, instead of on a single measure, would be a way to avoid such voting strategies.

dimension of self-selection, but could it be otherwise? Importantly, a survey conducted before the votes of the final session suggests that support for the CCC measures is broad 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 organised.

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 (Courant, 2020). This approach was rooted in both the substance and the procedure. Regarding 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. Regarding the procedure, "co-construction" was built in the design, for instance through the input provided by legal experts and the relatively loose neutrality requirements facing 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 key, and most persistent, question mark associated with the CCC is the notion of proposals being passed "unfiltered." It was unclear in the first place whether this implied a duty for the citizens or for the executive power. Anyway, 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, other trump cards are being hinted at by the government in public debates, including that on the adoption of the 5G mobile technology. Eventually, the success of the CCC will crucially depend on how this notion is settled.

As climate citizens' assemblies are mushrooming at both the sub-national and international (e.g., in Germany, Spain, Scotland) levels, our experience with the CCC suggests that significant scope exists for bringing researchers and the organisers closer. 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, filled, 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. By interviewing citizens, we will better understand the individuals' backgrounds, their motivations in participating, as well as 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.

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Appendix: Observation charter