Section 1: **Introduction**

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Chapter 1
The present of climate assemblies

Abstract: Climate assemblies are a fast-growing phenomenon in the fields of democratic innovation and environmental governance. These new civic institutions empower citizens to participate in evidence-informed deliberation to advance collective action on the climate and ecological crisis. Climate assemblies are part of ongoing efforts to democratise environmental governance and respond to the challenges of our climate-changed world. This introductory chapter provides a state-of-the-art overview of this emerging field of research and practice. We cover the history and development of climate assemblies, reflecting on the environmental, socioeconomic, and political contexts that explain their emergence. We also provide an overview of their characteristics, critiques, and impacts, and argue that practice is progressing faster than research. Then we outline how this book contributes to narrow that gap by focussing on both the internal and external dimensions of climate assemblies, and how they are intertwined. All chapters are introduced and summarised to offer an accessible guide to key insights, before concluding with reflections about the hope and hype that underpins the present state of the field.

Keywords: climate assemblies, climate and ecological crisis, democratic innovation, citizen participation, public deliberation, democracy

1 Introduction: Hope in a climate-changed world

What do Extinction Rebellion, the United Nations and governments of various ideological stripes have in common? All have supported climate assemblies in the last decade. Climate assemblies are civic institutions that include a cross-section of the public in evidence-informed deliberation to influence policy, governance, public discourse or collective action on the climate and ecological crisis.

This book examines the state of the field and the reasons behind the growing hope and hype about climate assemblies. Covering the latest research, the book provides insight into their capabilities and limitations and asks whether the citizens' assembly model of public engagement *works* in the context of environmental governance and climate action. We consider both the internal dimensions (i. e. agenda-setting, design, facilitation, expertise, deliberation, proposals) and the external dimensions (i. e. communication, public engagement, media, politics, policy), and explore the complex relationships between them. The book thus offers an empirical assessment of the field, as well as normative proposals to improve climate assemblies and their prospects for making a difference in a climate-changed world.

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Humankind is running out of metaphors and superlatives to underline the urgency of addressing the climate and ecological crisis. In 2024, the United Nations (UN) Secretary General stated: "In the case of climate, we are not the dinosaurs. We are the meteor. We are not only in danger. We are the danger. But we are also the solution … We need an exit ramp off the highway to climate hell."[1] Scientific assessments indicate that we are approaching ecological tipping points at a faster rate than expected: human activity is transgressing "planetary boundaries" and taking humanity beyond the "safe operating space" (Richardson et al. 2023; IPCC 2023). Our economies are overshooting the capacity of Earth systems (Victor 2023) and the global poor are already suffering at the sharp edge of climate injustice (Dryzek and Pickering 2019; McKinnon 2022). The climate and ecological crisis is now understood as an accelerating *polycrisis* where "climate change, nature and biodiversity loss, and pollution and waste" coalesce to fuel not just ecological catastrophe but also conflicts over territory and resources, population displacements and health crises (United Nations Environment Programme 2024, xi). We are not just facing an emergency; we already live in a climate-changed world.

The diagnosis has been clear for some time, but the ways forward are contested. There is, nonetheless, public support for action. For example, a recent survey indicates that 71% of people in G20 countries believe that major action is required, but only 39% believe that governments will lead such action (Ipsos 2024). It can be difficult to find hope in the current landscape of environmental politics and governance. Some are giving up and argue that a better "end of the world is possible" and we should prepare to rebuild communities in new ways after environmental collapse (Servigne et al. 2021). Even if the worst scenarios don't materialise, social upheavals and concomitant states of emergency related to heatwaves, floods, wildfires, forced migration, homelessness, hunger, disease, and violence are expected to cause unimaginable human suffering, challenge political systems and undermine democratic governance (Fischer 2017).

Dystopian prospects often inspire utopian thinking because utopias "demystify the spell of the status quo's unchangeability" (Thaler 2022, 91). Since the turn of the century, the field of *real utopias* has thrown into relief grounded experimentation with social, economic, and democratic innovations (Wright 2010). Climate assemblies can be understood as part of this broader agenda to reimagine democratic governance. It is difficult, however, to overstate the challenge. Democracies around the world are under considerable strain from autocratic trends and democratic backsliding in a global context of growing power inequalities (Dalton 2017; Coppedge et al. 2022). In his revision of the structural transformation of our public spheres, Habermas (2023, 27) argues that democratic governance is undermined by the "centrifugal forces of social disintegration" driven by contemporary capitalism. Three decades ago, Jameson

1 See https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/secretary-general/speeches/2024-06-05/discurso-especial-sobre-la-acción-climática-"la-hora-de-la-verdad"#:~:text=António%20Guterres,our%20world%20so%20desperately%20needs (accessed 03.01.25)

(1994, xii) noted that it seemed easier to imagine "the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations." Today it is argued that capitalism has reached the stage at which it is devouring the planetary conditions for its own existence (Fraser 2022; Raworth 2018; Victor 2023). The crisis is thus not just environmental, but also a crisis of political, economic, and public imagination (Escobar 2024).

By now readers may wonder what climate assemblies might bring to this carnival of despair. Can they make a difference in the face of such structural challenges? There is no need for a book to state the obvious answer: no, on their own, they cannot. Despite failures in collective governance, however, humanity has been busy envisioning, practicing, and working towards alternatives. Some find hope in participatory governance, indigenous wisdom, and commons-based just transitions (Fischer 2017; Escobar 2020; Bollier 2021). Many are working towards socioecological economies underpinned by democratic governance and innovation (Raworth 2018; Trebeck and Williams 2019; Steinberger et al. 2024), harnessing the transformative power of science and technology (Ritchie 2024), and participating in grassroots initiatives, civic activism, and social movements (Grasso and Giugni 2022; Jones and Youngs 2024). From local to global levels of action, and from communities to institutions, wide-ranging efforts are under way (Rask et al. 2012; Stevenson and Dryzek 2014; Howarth et al. 2022;) and some find plenty of reasons for cautious optimism about a sustainable future (Ritchie 2024).

Nevertheless, democratic means and environmental ends are not always easily coupled (Schlosberg et al. 2019). This book starts from the premise that there is a need to build new bridges between citizens and institutions; between local, national, and global publics; between community power and state power; between activism and public administration; between scientific evidence and political action; between humans and nonhumans; between current and future generations; and between the realities of the present and the demands of the future. We see potential in climate assemblies to be part of this bridge-building effort, acting as new civic institutions that enable citizens to participate directly in environmental governance and collective action. As we will show, they are far from being a panacea but can contribute to reimagine democratic governance in a climate-changed world.

This book brings together 25 authors to offer novel perspectives, critical insights and practical reflections on this growing phenomenon. It is the second book (see Smith 2024b) to focus on climate assemblies as a distinctive strand of democratic innovation, and the first to gather primary research from diverse scholars working at the cutting-edge of the field. The result is a theoretically rich and empirically-informed collection that can be read as an advanced introduction to the field (see also our *Special Issue* on barriers and enablers for change via climate assemblies, Elstub and Escobar forthcoming).

The book focusses on the recent wave of climate assemblies developed across Europe, and at global level, in the last decade.[2] These new civic institutions are populated through *sortition* (aka civic lottery) and designed to embody principles of deliberative democracy. With the rapid spread of this approach to public engagement on environmental governance, practice has developed well in advance of research. This book helps address that gap by analysing the internal and external dimensions of climate assemblies and how the two relate to each other. The chapters are based on original research about cases in countries like Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Poland and the United Kingdom as well as at transnational and global levels of governance. The collection aims to advance systemic understanding and to establish under what conditions climate assemblies can make a meaningful contribution. Therefore, the book investigates not only how climate assemblies work but also what kind of work they can and should do.

This introductory chapter sets the context by reviewing both the practice and research of climate assemblies. We consider the historical, geographic, thematic, and institutional contexts in which assemblies have proliferated, and review the evidence base about their characteristics and impacts. We also introduce an analytical distinction between internal and external dimensions, which provides the structure for the book. Before concluding, we introduce and summarise all chapters, highlighting their relevance and contributions.

2 Climate assemblies as a field of practice

Climate assemblies are a contemporary phenomenon, but *popular assemblies* are the oldest known democratic institution. They existed in various parts of the world at least 2,000 years before Athenian democracy (Keane 2022, 17, 21). Assembly-based forms of democratic governance have been found across continents since pre-historical times (Isakhan and Stockwell 2012; Graeber and Wengrow 2021). In that sense, assemblies are a quintessential part of the human story.

Different kinds of assemblies have developed over time (see Keane 2022). Today we can distinguish at least three types, associated with different theories of democracy (i. e. participatory, representative and deliberative). First, *popular assemblies* are the oldest and are, in principle, open to everyone, so participants are self-selected. They are a staple of participatory democracy and common in local governance, community organising or social movements like Occupy and Extinction Rebellion. Second, *elected assemblies* feature representatives chosen through election. Early precedents are the assemblies in Faroe Islands and Iceland from the year 930, and the first parliaments in northern Spain in 1188 and England in 1215 (Keane 2022, 85 – 88). These assemblies

2 The Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies has been mapping these developments: https://www.knoca.eu/climate-assemblies#Map-of-climate-assemblies (accessed 09.01.25).

evolved to epitomise representative democracy in contemporary political systems. Finally, *lottocratic assemblies* select participants via *sortition* (aka civic lottery), a form of random or quasi-random selection that aims to give everyone in the relevant population an equal chance of being chosen. These originated in ancient Athens, where both sortition and elections were used to form democratic bodies (Sintomer 2023, 2). Sortition re-appeared in public institutions in late medieval Italy (Guerrero 2014, 55) and more recently with the emergence of *mini-publics* in the 1970s, which have become a staple of deliberative democracy (Elstub 2014).

Climate assemblies belong to the lottocratic tradition and are a type of *mini-public.* Mini-publics are a diverse family of democratic innovations including citizens' juries, people's panels, planning cells, consensus conferences, citizens' councils, deliberative polls, citizens' assemblies and more. Shared features are selection through some form of civic lottery; opportunities for participants to examine diverse evidence and perspectives; and process design and facilitation that seek to translate deliberative norms into communicative practices (Escobar and Elstub 2017). But they vary widely in terms of funding and size; commissioning and governance; duration, internal design and decision-making; and role in their social and political context (for a practical guide see Escobar and Henderson 2024). Around 800 mini-publics have been counted just in OECD countries (Mejia 2023), which suggests a much larger number around the world.[3] There are two aspects of mini-publics that makes them distinctive as sites for citizen deliberation (Elstub 2014). First, using civic lottery reduces the self-selection bias that favours certain social groups, and thus helps to include a cross-section of the public. This is aided by measures to reduce barriers to citizen participation (e. g. stipend, transport, accommodation, childcare, technology). Second, they can be designed to support normative standards of deliberation that may be difficult in other public fora –i. e. inclusion, open mindedness, active listening, respect, reciprocity, evidence-informed argumentation, productive challenge, reasoned justification, considered decision-making.

The 1998 Aarhus Convention marked a turning point for citizen participation on environmental decision-making, making it a "standard expectation and often a legal obligation" (Smith 2024a, 6). Environmental governance was by then already prolific in public engagement processes, including small mini-publics (Newig et al. 2019). In OECD countries, for instance, the environment has been the most frequent focus of mini-publics in the last 40 years, with 125 cases (Mejia 2023). This number is small, however, given the geographic and temporal spread. Mini-publics have clearly been the exception, rather than the norm. Nevertheless, the first process of international citizen deliberation via mini-publics was on the future of climate policy. In 2009, the project World Wide Views on Global Warning organised 44 simultaneous mini-publics in 38 countries, with 4,000 citizens deliberating on issues feeding into COP15 in Copen-

3 See databases and cases in Democracy R&D https://democracyrd.org/our-work/#highlighted, LATINNO https://www.latinno.net/en/, and Participedia https://participedia.net (accessed 09.01.25).

hagen (Rask et al. 2012). Similar, but larger, processes followed, including in the lead up to the Paris Agreement (Rask et al. 2019). All these mini-publics were important precedents to climate assemblies.

Citizens' assemblies are one of the largest types of mini-publics, featuring between 50 and 1000 participants.[4] They started in Canada in 2004 and spread across other countries, and supranational organisations like the European Union, covering issues as varied as electoral reform, constitution-making, equal marriage, abortion, assisted dying, taxation, social policy and genetic modification.[5] Climate assemblies are a type of citizens' assembly. As previously noted, we define climate assemblies as *civic institutions that include a cross-section of the public in evidence-informed deliberation to influence policy, governance, public discourse or collective action on the climate and ecological crisis.* At this point, two terminological clarifications are in order.

First, we use the term *climate assemblies* because it has become popularised, but it is a shorthand for all citizens' assemblies (*not* all mini-publics) that focus on addressing the climate and ecological crisis. They are therefore not just focussed on climate, but on wide-ranging environmental issues, and can cover both mitigation and adaptation work. Climate assemblies have deliberated on areas as diverse as carbon reduction and net zero strategies, just transitions, conservation, biodiversity, air quality, natural resources (e.g. land, water), transport, housing, public health, flood protection, energy production and consumption, food systems, fossil fuel sovereign wealth, institutional reform, and so on. Second, we conceptualise them as *civic institutions* because they entail direct citizen participation according to procedures and norms that have gained stability and value over time (cf. Huntington 1968, 12). This does not mean that they are yet part of formalised institutional systems, albeit there are developments in this direction as we explore in Chapter 10.

Momentum for climate assemblies has been building up for almost a decade, mainly in European countries, but with cases in other parts of the world (see Chapter 10) and recent initiatives in the Global South[6]. The first national citizens' assembly to address climate change was Ireland's, albeit this was only one amongst several issues covered by their 2016–2018 omnibus assembly. The 2019 French Citizens' Convention on Climate was the first to focus solely on climate governance (see Chapters 5 and 7), followed by climate assemblies starting in 2020 in the UK and Scotland, and in 2021 in Denmark, Spain, Austria and Germany. The Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis also took place in 2021 leading up to COP26 in Glasgow (see Chapters 3

4 The boundary of what constitutes a citizens' assembly compared to smaller mini-publics is contested, but here we adopt a bracket that includes most cases.

5 See https://participedia.net/search?&query=citizens%27%20assemblies (accessed 27.01.25).

6 See the South-North Learning project by Democracy R&D https://democracyrd.org/new-frontiers-project/south-north-learning-snl/, the DemoReset initiative https://www.demoreset.org/en/, and the WHO guide which reflects on the adaptability of mini-publics across different contexts https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240081413 (accessed 09.01.25).

and 9). It was the first of its kind: a single global citizens' assembly rather than a transnational network of country-level mini-publics.

Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, the field accelerated since 2020 and by 2024 there have been at least 200 climate assemblies in Europe at local, regional, sub-state and state levels, usually commissioned by public institutions but some by civil society organisations (Smith 2024b, 119)[7]. Although most climate assemblies have emerged at the initiative of governments, legislatures and other public institutions, they have often been the result of the interplay between civil society, social movements, and state authorities. For example, the French climate assembly was convened by President Macron as part of the response to the Yellow Vests mobilisations (see Chapters 5 and 7). In Scotland, it was constituted through an amendment to the 2019 Climate Change Act introduced in the Scottish Parliament by the Green Party following demands in civil society and by Extinction Rebellion.

Apart from their origin stories, and commissioning procedures, climate assemblies also vary greatly in terms of funding, size, duration, participant selection, agenda, governance, public engagement, process design, facilitation, decision-making, reporting, implementation and monitoring. For example, funding has ranged from €100,000 in Denmark to €7 million in France; size has usually been between 50 and 150 participants; and duration from 2 to 8 weekends typically over several months (Smith 2024b, 45, 47). Participant selection also varies because sortition can be conducted differently to reflect a cross-section of citizens in terms of demographics and views (Sintomer 2023; Dryzek and Niemeyer 2024). Setting the agenda for the assembly –i. e. the task it pursues, and its role in the broader political system– has also been undertaken in varied ways (see Chapters 2 and 5; also Elstub et al. 2021b).

Approaches to the governance of assemblies differ in terms of who provides scrutiny and oversight for the overall process (see Chapter 2; also Carrick 2022; Dean et al. 2024) and there is also variation in media and public engagement strategies (see Chapters 6 and 7). Likewise, process design can vary greatly in terms of how evidence is shared (see Chapters 4 and 5), how sessions are sequenced, the participatory methods deployed, and the approaches and techniques used by facilitators (see Chapter 3). Some assemblies are delivered by in-house teams within the commissioning institution or organisation, while others hire external participation practitioners, and there are options in between (Smith 2024b). Finally, the ways decisions are made by assembly members, how these are turned into recommendations or proposals, and how these are reported, implemented and monitored are further areas of varied practice (see Chapters 3, 5 and 9; also Boswell et al. 2023; Smith 2024b).

We will delve into some of these practical considerations throughout the book. Readers will find a list of practice-oriented networks and resources in Chapter 10

7 For a live map of climate assemblies, see the Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies: https://www.knoca.eu/climate-assemblies#what-is-a-climate-assembly. For a list and case studies of climate assemblies see Bürgerrat: https://www.buergerrat.de/en/news/climate-action-through-citizens-assemblies/climate-assemblies-worldwide/ (accessed 09.01.25).

(Box 10.1), where we will also reflect on current trends and future possibilities. This is a vibrant field of evolving practice, which highlights the importance of an ambitious research agenda to match. The next section reviews existing research and positions the book within that emerging body of evidence.

3 Climate assemblies as a field of research

Research on climate assemblies is recent but burgeoning and combines normative and empirical work across disciplines. Researchers are studying how climate assemblies work, the work they do in diverse contexts, and their potential to challenge and change the status quo in climate governance. These research foci reflect public opinion in a range of countries, which is growing in support for systemic changes to political systems and for the use of citizens' assemblies in public governance (Wike et al. 2021a; Wike et al. 2021b; Pilet et al. 2023b). Support for assemblies appears particularly strong amongst disadvantaged or underrepresented groups, driven by dissatisfaction with traditional politics as well as belief in the capacity of fellow citizens to engage in competent political work (Jacquet et al. 2020; Talukder and Pilet 2021; Pilet et al. 2023a).

The main protagonists of public deliberation on the climate and ecological crisis have tended to be politicians, interest groups, social movements and scientists, with most citizens often rendered as spectators (Rask et al. 2012; Ghimire et al. 2021). However, the importance of participation in environmental democratic governance is now more frequently acknowledged: citizens must be involved in shaping the decisions that affect their lives (Willis 2020; Smith 2021). It is argued that public engagement can advance understanding of the causes and consequences of the climate and ecological crisis, thus mobilising stronger support for the socioeconomic changes required to address it, which in turn can enable more ambitious policymaking, as well as stimulate action across society (Mellier and Capstic 2024; Alnscough and Willis 2024; Curato et al. 2024). Politicians, policy workers, participation practitioners and activists are creating space for democratic innovations in various policy arenas, seeking to boost legitimacy and capacity for collective action via citizen participation (Elstub and Escobar 2019). This context has provided fertile ground for the first generation of climate assemblies.

Researchers have questioned the capacity of current democratic governance to address the climate and ecological crisis, given the power of economic interests, political failures and systemic incentives to avoid action (Fischer 2017; Curato et al. 2024). It has been argued that participants in climate assemblies can be better equipped for cultivating the long-term thinking required to address the crisis than traditional representative institutions, as they are free from electoral incentives and short-term political and market cycles. Assembly members do not need to respond to volatile public and media opinion to win votes or bow down to powerful interests (Fischer 2017; Smith 2021). At least for now, they are less likely to be the target of lobbyists and therefore less prone to sectoral capture (Willis et al. 2022), and arguably less susceptible to cli-

mate delay discourses (Lamb et al. 2020; Curato et al. 2024). Nevertheless, these themes will require ongoing scrutiny: 1,773 fossil fuel lobbyists attended the latest UN climate conference, constituting the fourth largest delegation at COP29 (Frost 2024). If, or when, climate assemblies become prominent institutions in environmental governance, they will also become prime targets.

Climate assemblies are seen as a better way to engage people than other approaches to public engagement, because of their efforts to provide balanced evidence and diverse perspectives, which reduces silo-thinking and misinformation (Howarth et al. 2020). Engaging in public deliberation has been shown to improve citizens' ability to deal with the complexities of climate change (Niemeyer 2013). Climate assemblies also offer new possibilities for the formation of transnational or global publics needed to address global issues like climate change and ecological breakdown (Dryzek et al. 2011; Curato et al. 2023). Moreover, they can create new opportunities for including the voices of natural worlds and future generations (Kulha et al. 2021; Ejsing et al. 2024).

Based on deliberative theory, and empirical research on mini-publics more broadly, climate assemblies are expected to deliver a range of social, political, and environmental outcomes. Researchers have illustrated the power of mobilising the collective intelligence of citizens through deliberative processes that enable public-spirited reasoning to address complex governance challenges (Landemore 2020; Smith 2024b, 31). Accordingly, Curato et al. (2024, 2–3) argue that, under the right conditions, citizen deliberation can: deepen environmental governance, empower citizens, break political deadlocks, reduce polarisation, transform protest demands into actionable proposals, reduce elite control, render social mandates visible to official power-holders, build deliberative capacity in communities, foster broader public deliberation, raise climate policy ambitions, and support broader democratisation agendas.

Research on climate assemblies has explored their effects on participants' views and policy preferences (Muradova et al. 2020; Kulha et al. 2021; Andrews et al. 2022). It has also considered the troubled relationships between climate assemblies and environmental governance actors (Sandover et al. 2021; Boswell et al. 2023; Buge and Vandamme 2023), their impact on government policy (Lage et al. 2023; Galván Labrador and Zografos 2024;) and on broader publics (Andrews et al. 2022; Averchenkova et al. 2024; Fernández-Martínez and Bates 2023), and how this is affected by the scope of their agenda (Elstub et al. 2021b; Pfeffer 2024) and the reasons to initiate climate assemblies (Oross et al. 2021; Lewis et al. 2023).

Although most climate assemblies have taken place in the last 5 years, efforts to evaluate their impact are evolving at pace. Demski et al. (2024, 11–12) propose considering three *areas of impact:* state actors, civil society and other non-state actors, and systems and structures; as well as three *types of impact: instrumental* impacts such as direct influence on environmental policy and action; *capacity* impacts such as changes to resources and governance; and *conceptual* impacts, for instance changes to knowledge, attitudes or political discourse. This framework highlights that climate

assemblies should not be seen just as processes that feed into policymaking, but as civic institutions with a broader range of contributions to the political system.

Smith argues that the impact of climate assemblies on people, institutions, discourses, and policies has been rather mixed (2024b, 71–80). People who participate in assemblies tend to enjoy the experience, find it transformative, and become more supportive of such processes. However, there has been limited impact on political discourse, media interest, public awareness, and broader public engagement –with exceptions for instance in France, Austria, and Ireland (Smith 2024a, 9). In terms of impact on institutions, there are recent developments to institutionalise climate assemblies, but as we show in Chapter 10, they remain marginal. There have also been some limited efforts (e.g. Ireland, Denmark, Scotland) to create new parliamentary or governmental mechanisms that link climate assemblies to legislative and administrative processes.

Actions proposed by climate assemblies tend to go further than existing environmental policies, for example in seeking to restrain consumerism and production, in supporting state intervention, in questioning capitalist growth models, and in adopting social justice principles for just transitions (Smith 2024b, 65–70). A study comparing recommendations from the first wave of climate assemblies to existing mitigation policies shows that citizens propose stronger sufficiency policies and regulation than their representatives (Lage et al. 2023). Climate assemblies have thus demonstrated potential in terms of policy formulation, but policy translation and implementation remain underdeveloped.

Once climate assembly proposals are handed over to institutions, the process is at the mercy of traditional decision-making arenas where recommendations may be accepted, reconceptualised, rejected, or ignored (Poole and Elstub 2025). After Scotland's Climate Assembly, for example, members were disappointed with the governmental response to their 81 recommendations. It is estimated that a third matched existing or planned policy; another third were rejected; a fifth were to be explored without commitment; and 14 were communicated to the UK Government as they fell within its jurisdiction (Andrews et al. 2022, 140–141). Some of the more radical proposals, such as adopting Passivhaus standards for new houses or reorienting the economy away from GDP growth, were ignored. The French Citizens' Convention on Climate seems to have fared better. It is estimated that 20% of the recommendations were fully implemented, 51% were partially implemented, and 22% were abandoned (Averchenkova et al. 2024). A ban on internal flights when there is a low carbon alternative is amongst the measures partially implemented[8], whereas the proposal to legislate for the crime of ecocide was rejected.

The citizen empowerment dynamics promoted within climate assemblies are in stark contrast to the disempowering dynamics that often follow in their aftermath (Galván Labrador and Zografos 2024). Often, institutions are not ready to work with the

8 The assembly proposal was for journeys up to 4 hours, whereas the final policy reduced it to 2 hours.

outputs of assemblies because they don't plan for their aftermath, or because they don't know how to integrate them in systems that are not designed for citizen participation and deliberation (Smith 2024b, 92–98). Planning challenges can be addressed through new practices, but systemic challenges require institutional reform as well as culture change (Escobar and Henderson 2024, 66–74). Even when climate assemblies are coherently integrated into governance systems, or precisely because of it, there is always a risk of co-option, manipulation, and cherry-picking –for example, when authorities select their preferred recommendations while discarding the rest, or when an assembly is convened for symbolic rather than substantive purposes (Elstub and Khoban 2023, 118). Organisers in Poland have sought to prevent this by committing municipalities to implement proposals that command 80 % of support by assembly members, while action below that threshold is discretionary. In Gdansk, for instance, direct implementation of assembly recommendations has strengthened the city's flooding defences (Smith 2024b, 104).

The impact of climate assemblies, as we will illustrate throughout the book, is inextricable from their internal and external dimensions, and thus it is not the only area that has attracted scrutiny. There is still much to improve in how climate assemblies work, as shown in evaluations of the Global Assembly (Curato et al. 2023) and national assemblies (e. g. Elstub et al. 2021a; Andrews et al. 2022), as well as in this book (Chapters 3, 4, 5, 7 and 9). There are also some more fundamental critiques and ongoing debates. For example, climate assemblies can be seen as lacking legitimacy and accountability according to established democratic norms, and therefore Lafont (2019) argues that their role should be limited. In practice, like any other institutions, climate assemblies are embedded in governance systems with checks and balances –for example, pre-authorised by elected assemblies or governments, or authorised post-hoc through plebiscitary, executive, or parliamentary processes. In any case, these civic institutions encompass new ways of defining and exercising legitimacy and accountability (Elstub and Khoban 2023; Vandamme 2023).

Another fundamental critique concerns the consensus-building orientation of climate assemblies, which is alleged to crowd out "alternative strategies and imaginaries for socioecological transformation" (Machin 2023, 857) thought necessary to address the climate and ecological crisis. This has led some critics to argue that climate assemblies currently "do not deliver breakthrough ideas" (Ufel 2021, 88; see also Chapter 8 in this book) and that they need further development to elicit substantial change (Mulvad and Popp-Madsen 2021). For this reason, they are accused of being reformist and lacking capacity for political transformation (Berglund and Schmidt 2020, 7, 70), which leads to questions about whether climate assemblies can "really challenge the very regime by which they have been instituted" (Machin 2023, 859). Some point to the opportunity cost of directing energy and resources to civic institutions that are tethered to flawed systems of governance underpinned by state bureaucracies and electoral politics (Ejsing et al. 2023, 73). In their current form, Machin (2023) concludes, climate assemblies may become a distraction from more robust forms of political contestation to confront the interests that sustain the status quo, thus ultimately obstructing meaningful

change. These critiques are eliciting reflection about how climate assemblies may play a genuine role in systemic transformations (Ejsing et al. 2023; Mellier and Capstic 2024), a theme that runs through the book and is revisited in Chapter 10.

All in all, this emerging body of evidence provides valuable groundwork about the contribution climate assemblies can make to environmental governance. However, more research is required to understand how the internal and external dimensions of climate assemblies relate to each other and there is a need for more conceptual, comparative, and systemic research. Whilst research on mini-publics has progressed substantially (Curato et al. 2021; Reuchamps et al. 2023), research on climate assemblies is in its infancy. It is important to address this gap because the climate and ecological crisis is such a unique, urgent and multifaceted challenge that findings from research into other mini-publics will not necessarily apply to assemblies in this context.

Therefore, this book makes three timely contributions. First, it covers *internal dimensions* of climate assemblies, including how climate and ecological issues are framed, how agendas are formed, how governance is organised, how evidence and expertise are mobilised, how participants are involved, how processes are designed and facilitated, and the effects that these factors have on citizens, the actions they propose and the recommendations they produce. Second, it covers *external dimensions*, including the relationships between climate assemblies and other parts of the political system such as government, parliament, civil society, business, epistemic communities, the media, other forms of citizen participation such as social movements, and broader publics. Finally, the book makes a further contribution by developing comparative insights into the relationship between internal and external dimensions –in particular, how design choices affect an assembly's impact and how contextual and systemic factors affect assembly processes. The collection therefore advances our theoretical and empirical understanding of the role climate assemblies can play in environmental governance. In doing so, it contributes to narrow the gap between the rapid roll-out of assemblies in practice and the evidence base available.

4 Overview of the book: Exploring internal and external dimensions in climate assemblies

The following chapters analyse the climate assembly phenomenon through diverse perspectives and cases to advance research and practice. The authors draw on deliberative, participatory, and agonistic schools of democratic thought across various disciplines. Collectively, we take a critical approach that foregrounds questions about power, inequalities, impact, and the democratisation of environmental governance in a climate-changed world.

We use the distinction between internal and external dimensions as an analytical device that elicits practical and normative insights. It allows us to zoom in on the internal workings of climate assemblies and zoom out to study their broader context and

relationships. Section 2 (Chapters 2–5) focusses on internal dimensions such as agenda-setting, governance, design, facilitation, and the role of experts and expertise. Section 3 (Chapters 6–9) addresses external dimensions related to media and communication, legitimacy, political actors, unfavourable conditions, and the challenges of developing local, national, and global deliberation that is consequential. Section 4 presents our conclusions (Chapter 10), where we draw learning from the chapters and reflect on the present and future of the field.

In **Chapter 2**, Pfeffer examines the complexities of setting the agenda for climate assemblies. Drawing on research from eleven cases, alongside practical experience, Pfeffer analyses options and trade-offs for agenda-setting, and outlines guiding principles to help researchers and practitioners. Agenda-setting is one of the most contested and consequential dimensions in climate assemblies. It encompasses the overall *role* or purpose for the process (e.g. advising an institution; informing public opinion), as well as the specific *remit* or task for the assembly (e.g. developing proposals; scrutinising policies). Questions such as who initiates, sets and controls the agenda, and what issues are prioritised, have a domino effect on the entire process. For example, regarding the internal dimensions of climate assemblies, agenda-setting shapes their design and facilitation, informs their governance, and influences the types of evidence, perspectives and experiences included. In turn, regarding the external dimensions, agenda-setting has implications for the legitimacy of the process, the constellation of actors involved, its public and policy relevance, its prospects for impact, and the scope of that impact – e.g. from moderate to transformative possibilities. These wide-ranging issues are fundamental to assess the value, risk and potential of climate assemblies. Pfeffer lays out the thinking process to analyse agenda-setting in different contexts, while offering useful and usable strategies to inform practice.

In **Chapter 3**, Morán, Stasiak, von Schneidemesser and Oppold study the crucial role of facilitators in climate assemblies. The chapter draws on empirical research about the paradigmatic case of the 2021 Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis. Based on field observations, survey data, document analysis and qualitative interviews, the authors offer perceptive analysis of the creative and relational work that supports deliberative engagement. This includes work behind the scenes (*backstage*) as well as in participatory spaces (*frontstage*), which allows for a dynamic understanding of how practitioners navigate tensions between planning and improvisation. The study illuminates the significance of agency, co-design, shared ownership, learning by and while doing, building relationships, and developing a community of reflective practice. The findings warn against the commodification and marketisation of facilitation practice and highlight the importance of emancipatory and communitarian approaches to facilitation. Morán and colleagues thus provide a nuanced account that will resonate beyond climate assemblies, including novel insights about the challenges of facilitating online global deliberation.

In **Chapter 4**, Salamon, Lightbody, Roberts, Reher, and Reggiani analyse the role of experts and expertise in climate assemblies –an internal dimension crucial in all mini-publics, and particularly salient when addressing the climate and ecological crisis. The

chapter explores the influence of experts over the provision of evidence and arguments, the governance and oversight of the assembly, and the review of recommendations. Offering a nuanced understanding of what constitutes expertise, and who counts as an expert, the authors outline key debates but also take them in a new direction. They make the case for foregrounding EDI (equality, diversity, inclusion) not just in the composition of the assembly, but also in the pool of experts. Their compelling study provides both normative justification and empirical research through the analysis of 23 UK cases featuring 476 experts. The findings are unequivocal: EDI considerations rarely enter public accounts of the recruitment and participation of experts in climate assemblies. Overlooking this dimension, they argue, can undermine the democratic quality, legitimacy, and impact of deliberative processes. The chapter proposes guidance to inform how research and practice can take EDI seriously regarding experts and expertise.

In **Chapter 5**, Tilikete shows that the climate and ecological crisis can be conceptualised in different ways within and across climate assemblies. This influences the actions proposed as well as the political functions of assemblies. Diverse conceptualisations emerge from the interplay between citizens and different kinds of expertise. That interplay is analysed as a form of co-production that shapes the framing of problems and solutions, the ways citizens develop proposals, and how the assembly relates to its broader political context. The empirical research compares four climate assemblies at different levels of governance including sub-state (Wallonia, Belgium), national (France), transnational (European Union) and global. The result is a typology of different assemblies according to the type of participant that citizens are invited to become (cf. Escobar 2017): citizens as policy users, citizens as constituent assembly members, and citizens as legislators. The analysis connects the internal and external dimensions of climate assemblies. It shows how contextual factors and design choices influence the elaboration of proposals and their reception and impact beyond the assembly. Tilikete outlines key implications, including reflection on the risks of technocratic approaches, the importance of participants' affective engagement, the consequentiality of how expertise is mobilised, and the scope for transformative climate assemblies.

Section 3 focusses on external dimensions, starting with **Chapter 6**, where Fleuss and Suiter develop a framework to investigate media and communication around climate assemblies. Bridging deliberative scholarship and communication studies, the authors develop a *Communicative Flows Framework* to map out sites and actors that drive political discourses about climate change and environmental action in the public sphere. The framework interrogates how assemblies relate to diverse actors through a complex media landscape, and how this influences their impact. The chapter is grounded on systemic deliberative theory and hybrid media research, but sensitive to the political economy of media ecosystems. It argues that research and practice must pay more attention to the influence of vested industries (e.g. fossil fuels, transport, agribusiness) and discourses of climate delay. The authors conclude that assessing communicative flows across media networks can inform strategies to support the impact of climate assemblies.

In **Chapter 7**, Rozencwajg, Gaborit and Jeanpierre question assumptions about established practices in mini-publics. They examine the potential contradiction between the autonomy needed for assembly deliberation and the need to connect with the rest of the population. The fluid and negotiated boundaries of assemblies are thus scrutinised, showing how assembly members relate to activists, lobbyists, policymakers, experts and the broader citizenry. Conducting an ethnographic study of the French Citizens' Convention on Climate, the authors illustrate how external influences can permeate the assembly and shape how members seek to influence environmental policy and action. The case demonstrates how complex entanglements between internal and external dimensions elicit fundamental dilemmas. For example, should assemblies constrain external relationships even if this increases public irrelevance? Or should assemblies be more open and risk undue direct influence by organised interests? The study of the Convention indicates that permeability allowed for the inclusion of a wider range of discourses, which informed the level of ambition of the proposals, thus stretching the initial scope set by the organisers. By asking how open assemblies should be, the chapter illuminates tensions between structure and agency, between autonomy and interdependence, and between the established canon of mini-publics and the relational and thus evolving quality of participatory processes. The authors conclude that this case shows a departure from the *jury model* that proscribes unplanned external influence and towards a form of climate assembly that blends deliberative and savage democracy.

In **Chapter 8**, Dániel Oross and Zsolt Boda analyse a climate assembly in the context of illiberal politics and democratic backsliding. Studies of climate assemblies often cover cases in relatively favourable political contexts. This chapter offers a distinctive contribution by investigating the case of the first climate assembly in Hungary, a context that the authors characterise as unfavourable for citizen participation and deliberation, particularly on environmental issues. The case study is the Budapest Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change, examined through mixed methods research. The analysis unpacks how contextual factors influenced the internal and external dimensions of the assembly. It scrutinises the level of ambition of the recommendations and their policy impact, the quality of media coverage, and the effects of participation on assembly members. Exploring how the political context influenced the climate assembly elicits insights that can inform comparative research, as well as practical strategies by organisers. The conclusion offers some hope: unfavourable contexts do not necessarily render climate assemblies as futile. On the contrary, they throw into relief the double role assemblies can play in supporting environmental action and rebuilding democratic governance.

In **Chapter 9**, De Pryck, Chalaye, Elstub, Conway-Lamb, Sanchez and Sari provide an insightful account of the 2021 Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis. This case was the first of its kind, seeking to prototype a new civic institution for citizen deliberation on global climate governance. The chapter draws on a rich dataset, developed through mixed methods research, to address questions about the inclusiveness, authenticity, and consequentiality of the assembly. This framework helps to in-

vestigate internal and external dimensions, including the selection of participants, the deliberative quality of the sessions, the governance of the process, the external relationships of the assembly, and the level of impact. The authors analyse the challenges that stem from involving citizens around the world, as well as from the idiosyncrasies of the current system of global climate governance. The chapter draws lessons to inform the development of future assemblies. It shows that, despite substantial shortcomings, the Global Assembly provided proof of concept to expand our collective imagination and inspire global democratic innovation.

Section 4 features our conclusion, **Chapter 10**, which summarises key learning across the book to inform research, policy, and practice. We pay attention to how internal and external dimensions are dynamically intertwined and consider the implications for the next generation of climate assemblies. We assess whether climate assemblies work, what kind of work they do, their shortcomings, and how they should work to play a stronger role in democratising environmental governance and advancing collective action. The chapter puts the book's findings in conversation with wider work on democratic innovation, thus providing normative and practical reflection about the frontlines and frontiers of this emerging field.

5 Conclusion: Research between hope and hype

Climate assemblies are capturing the imagination of people interested in how citizens can participate in decision-making to address the climate and ecological crisis. This chapter reviewed the state of the field to provide context and situate the contributions of the book. Here we conclude with broader reflections about the present of climate assemblies.

In almost two decades involved in the research and practice of mini-publics, we have seen the field evolve from the fringes to the mainstream, with a mix of positive and negative effects. On the positive side, these processes have shown citizens in a new light. The first time that people observe a mini-public tends to be eye-opening. Observers are often surprised by the dedication, solidarity and thoughtfulness that citizens bring to the process. This surprise is expected given habitual misrepresentations of the citizenry in media and political narratives –e.g. distrust in citizens' capacity to deliberate on complex issues; questions about their commitment to democratic participation; doubts about their ability to deal with disagreement beyond shallow debate. Narratives about people being selfish, self-interested and self-centred have become prevalent (Bregman 2020).

In that context, it is striking to see how some participatory processes bring forth the best in people. This begs the question: what kind of citizen are citizens invited to be in our political systems? (Escobar 2017). People have the capacity to be collaborators, problem-solvers, co-producers, critical thinkers and so on, but are often restricted to acting as spectators, complainers, protesters and occasional voters. All these are important roles, but the governance of the future in a climate-changed world requires an en-

larged notion of democratic citizenship and institutions to embody it. Climate assemblies, alongside other democratic innovations and reforms, are working towards that goal (Elstub and Escobar 2019).

However, as the field of practice evolves rapidly, counterproductive narratives and expectations are emerging about climate assemblies (Smith 2024a, 5). In our experience, most discussions, events and advocacy in this field are reflective and critical; but some problematic narratives are also noticeable:

- *Silver-bulletism:* narratives that present assemblies as the solution to wide-ranging problems, without attention to systemic factors and the need for broader social, economic, and political reforms (Knops and Vrydagh 2023; see also Chapter 10).
- *Reductionism:* narratives that reduce the problem to the need for institutions to make better policies and decisions, overlooking the challenges of contemporary capitalist economies, state incapacities, and policy implementation gaps (Dryzek 1996; Cairney et al. 2023).
- *Synecdoche:* this rhetorical move makes one part stand for the whole; in this case assuming that assemblies are all that is needed to build a deliberative democracy.
- *Proceduralism:* much effort goes into perfecting the internal dimensions of assemblies, which matters for credibility, legitimacy, and impact; but perfecting institutions that need to survive in very imperfect systems requires more attention to external dimensions (see Chapter 10).
- *Hype:* some narratives bluntly claim unrealistic potential for these civic institutions e. g. "Citizens' assemblies can help save the world order" (Schwab 2020).

It is understandable why hope and hype often go together. Advocates who are hopeful about climate assemblies sometimes hype them up so that the message can cut through noisy public spheres and jaded political systems. This can be counterproductive because it makes it difficult to live up to expectations, but research can play a preventative role. Democratic innovation requires constant learning and adaptation. The chapters that follow offer critical analysis and actionable insights to inform work on climate assemblies. The book aims to make sense of current developments and future possibilities to probe the hype and substantiate the hope.

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