
Section 2: **Internal dimensions in climate assemblies**

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Chapter 2

Setting the agenda for climate assemblies: Key dimensions and dilemmas

Abstract: This chapter examines the critical role of agenda-setting in climate assemblies (CAs), highlighting its significant implications for both their internal operations and external impacts. Agenda-setting decisions can shape the policy influence, legitimacy, and transformative potential of CAs, often requiring trade-offs between competing objectives. For instance, aligning the agenda with ongoing policy processes may enhance policy impact but can limit the exploration of transformative proposals. To aid researchers and practitioners, this chapter provides a systematic overview of agenda-setting options and their contextual trade-offs, drawing on expert interviews and experiences from the first wave of CAs in Europe. After outlining key objectives and contexts for CAs, the chapter explores substantive dimensions of agenda-setting—formulating eleven guiding principles and reflecting on how to frame remits and sub-themes. It further addresses procedural dimensions—discussing CAs’ institutional roles, initiation rights and mechanisms, who should be involved in agenda-setting, and how to organise agenda-setting governance. The chapter proposes strategies for managing disagreements in collaborative agenda-setting. It concludes by arguing that CA objectives and agenda-setting trade-offs depend on context, such as powerful actors’ commitment to climate action and participation. Deliberate, context-sensitive design choices, like sharing or sequencing agenda-setting powers, may balance these trade-offs, offering a path forward.

Keywords: mini-publics, agenda-setting, impact, climate change, governance

1 Introduction

Setting the agenda for a climate assembly (CA) can have several knock-on effects on the internal procedures and external impacts of assemblies. Agenda decisions can, among other things, influence the policy impact, perceived legitimacy, or emancipatory value of deliberative processes (Elstub et al. 2021).

CA agenda setters face difficult trade-offs because their decisions can have contradictory effects for different objectives related to climate change and democracy. For example, constraining the agenda to fit an ongoing policy process may increase policy impact but is less likely to elicit proposals challenging dominant policy rationales and practices that prevent more profound transformations (Pfeffer 2024, 2022).

This chapter aims to support researchers and practitioners in thinking more systematically about agenda-setting decisions in CAs by providing an overview of options, and their potential trade-offs considering different contexts and objectives. Many de-

bates are far from settled because CAs are a young phenomenon, and CA effects are complex and contextual.

In the next two sections, I outline the methodology, define agenda-setting, and review relevant literature. Section 4 summarises different objectives and contexts for CAs. Then, I address the substantial dimension of agenda-setting by introducing eleven guiding principles, exploring how to frame CA remits, and what sub-themes to cover (section 5.1). Next, I turn to the procedural dimension of agenda-setting including questions such as who should be involved and with how much power (section 5.2). Section 6 addresses how to navigate disagreements in collaborative agenda-setting, while section 7 provides discussion and conclusions.

2 Methodology

This chapter is based on expert interviews with members of the Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies (KNOCA)¹, related publications (Brancaforte and Pfeffer 2022; Pfeffer 2022), and discussions with practitioners. It summarises current discussions based on different forms of knowledge—scientific, experiential, and tacit. Most insights are drawn from past CAs at the national level (Table 2.1), but more might be learned from practices at other levels.

The guiding principles in section 5.1 are based on 14 semi-structured expert interviews sourced through KNOCA and conducted in 2022. These experts have served as commissioners, public officials, process advisors, academic researchers, organisers, facilitators, and advisory activists. They have been involved in CAs in at least 14 countries and at supra-national levels (2021 Global Assembly). Most experts (12) were based in western Europe, and two in Australia and the United States. I developed the guiding principles by recursively incorporating expert responses until reaching saturation (Hennink, Kaiser, and Marconi 2017) (for more information, see Pfeffer 2024).

The other sections build on insights from the extant literature, informal interviews conducted by Stephanie Brancaforte in 2021–2022 (Brancaforte and Pfeffer 2022), information gathered from KNOCA and policy documents related to CAs in Europe, and my practical experiences².

¹ KNOCA is a European Network gathering knowledge and facilitating exchange on CAs that provides information on all national-level European CAs, hosts learning calls, and publishes research reports. See <https://knoca.eu/> (accessed 20.11.23)

² Alongside my academic research, I am a member of Klimamitbestimmung e.V.—a German non-governmental organisation advocating for and consulting on deliberative processes. I have contributed to the implementation of Berlin's climate assembly and consulted elected and public officials. I have regular exchanges with process organisers, politicians, and public officials in Germany to gain insights from multiple perspectives.

Table 2.1: Climate assemblies informing the analysis

Assembly	Place	Year
Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat	France	2019 – 2020
Climate Assembly UK	United Kingdom	2020
Scotland's Climate Assembly	Scotland	2020 – 2021
Borgerting på Klimaområdet	Denmark	2020 – 2021
Kansalaisraati	Finland	2021
Bürgerrat Klima	Germany	2021
Asamblea Ciudadana por el Clima	Spain	2021 – 2022
Berliner Klimabürger:innenrat	Berlin, Germany	2022
Narada Obywatelska o Energii (energy poverty)	Poland	2022
Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss / An Tionól Saoránach	Ireland	2022 – 2023
Bürgerrat "Ernährung im Wandel" (nutrition)	Germany	2023 – 2024

Note: This table lists cases referred to in the text. Not all cases underwent systematic in-depth analyses.

3 Agenda-setting for climate assemblies

Agenda-setting has been described as “the process through which issues attain the status of being seriously debated by politically relevant actors” (Sinclair 1986, 35). Agenda-setters exert considerable power over policymaking not only by selecting issues for debate but also by keeping issues off the agenda (Bachrach and Baratz 1962), and by choosing from competing interpretations of political problems which often implicitly favour some solutions over others (Cobb and Ross 1997).

Mini-publics like CAs can have an agenda-setting function in the cycle of public policy processes (Gastil and Richards 2013), for example by selecting issues to be discussed by elected officials as practiced in East-Belgium (Niessen and Reuchamps 2019). However, this is not what I refer to as agenda-setting in this chapter.

Here, agenda-setting for CAs refers to setting the boundaries and guidelines for deliberations within the process. I distinguish between a substantial and a procedural dimension of agenda-setting. The substantial dimension includes the choice of a general issue for deliberation; the framing of the process including the formulation of a remit; and the selection of sub-themes (or even proposals) for discussion or exclusion (also see Barisione 2012). The procedural dimension addresses who are involved in setting the substantial agenda, with how much power, and how this is organised.

Only a few scientific studies (Bua 2012; Blue 2015; Barisione 2012; Lang 2008; Parlinson 2006), reports (Shaw and Wang 2021), and practical guides (Carson 2018; Rourke 2014) have addressed agenda-setting for mini-publics. Parkinson (2006) argues that,

in theory, the more open the agenda the more legitimate the process. He found that tightly set agendas following a bureaucratic-instrumental (or system-supporting) rationale to ‘solving a delineated problem’ can imply preference assumptions that many deliberating citizens do not share (Parkinson 2006, Ch. 6). Moreover, political elites can exert co-optive influence over mini-public agendas to legitimise decisions that have already been taken (as summarised by Bua 2012). Elite control over agendas has also led to technocratic framings at the expense of competing frames such as those focusing on justice dimensions (Barisione 2012; Blue 2015). Nonetheless, constraining agendas in mini-publics may be necessary to enable high quality deliberation and arrive at decisions (Lang 2008). Parkinson (2006, Ch. 6) notes that the more open the process, the more vague are the outcomes, and the less likely practical solutions and policy impacts. Finally, Elstub et al. (2021) found that a large scope—a high number of issues to be covered by the mini-public—has reduced the policy impact of Climate Assembly UK (see Scope in section 5.1.1).

4 Objectives and contexts of climate assemblies

When discussing CAs, people often have diverging objectives and contexts of climate politics in mind (Hammond 2020; Bussu and Fleuß 2023; Sandover, Moseley, and Devine-Wright 2021). While some may be confident that governments are intrinsically motivated to act on climate change, others may believe that governments need to be pressured. This can lead to misunderstandings, because such implicit notions influence beliefs and attitudes about what roles CAs should play and how they should be designed. This section provides a tentative map of different contexts and objectives to help navigate through this jungle. I will base latter discussions of trade-offs between different agenda-setting decisions on categories introduced in this section.

The climate political context can be defined as widely shared informed beliefs about what constitute the main barriers to climate mitigation and/or adaptation (henceforth, climate action) (Pfeffer 2024). Contextual elements hindering climate action can include lacking government motivation; conflict within government; influential lobby interests; government wariness of public resistance; entrenched worldviews and paradigms; authorities lacking capacity (knowledge, time, money) (also see Jordan et al. 2022). This list of barriers is illustrative rather than exhaustive. Some barriers can occur simultaneously.

One can distinguish between CA objectives and concerns that are related to climate change or to democracy. Regarding climate concerns, it is useful to recognise two ideal-typical rationales about CAs (Hammond 2020). A *system-supporting rationale* is primarily concerned with supporting policymakers in their efforts to address climate change, typically assuming a context of general willingness to act among policymakers. This rationale emphasises the need for uptake of proposals which would require cooperation and the need to design rather constrained processes in line with political and administrative requirements. A *system-disrupting rationale* typically emphasises the need for

conflict, public attention and pressure, and the necessity to allow for more open deliberations that can challenge dominant practices and paradigms in policymaking. This rationale typically assumes insufficient willingness or unwillingness to act among policymakers and/or emphasises the need for fundamental systemic transitions that are unlikely to occur by following system-supporting logics. These are ideal-typical rationales that can underly attitudes towards CAs and their design, rather than accurately describe specific cases. In practice, one may find both supporting and disrupting elements combined (Bussu and Fleuß 2023).

Turning to the democratic dimension, one can distinguish between emancipatory, educational, critical, political, and scholarly objectives and concerns (e.g. Rangoni, Bedock, and Talukder 2021). Emancipatory objectives are about empowering citizens, and especially marginalised groups in democratic decision-making. Many politicians emphasise educational objectives stating that CAs can (re-)connect elites and citizens. They hope that CAs can sensitise citizens about the difficulties of their political work, increase citizens' knowledge, and promote other civic values, while also informing politicians about 'what the people think' in a more deliberative way than polls and informal exchanges. Others are critical of CAs, for example because CA members are not elected (and hence seen as undemocratic³), or because they pose a threat to their power. Importantly, some actors follow political objectives such as gaining public popularity among voters or silencing opposition by means of a CA. Finally, there is a rich scholarly literature proposing criteria for assessing whether mini-publics like CAs improve democracies. Scholars suggest asking, for example, whether mini-publics generate factually informed preferences (Mansbridge et al. 2012), enhance critical scrutiny in public discourse (Curato and Böker 2016), or lead to any political or societal consequences (Dryzek 2010).

5 Trade-offs and guidance for agenda-setting in climate assemblies

With these varying contexts and objectives in mind, this section considers a range of agenda-setting decisions, discusses their trade-offs, and points to empirical examples. I begin by focusing on the substantial dimension of agenda-setting—that is, the choice of suitable issues for deliberation—before covering the procedural dimension addressing who is involved in setting the substantial agenda, with how much power, and how this is organised.

³ This perspective is based on theories of democracy that see elections, rather than sortition, as the only legitimate basis for a mandate for political office or public service.

5.1 Substantial dimension

This subsection addresses how to frame the remit of a CA and which sub-themes to cover. I begin, however, by presenting guiding principles for setting the substantial agenda in CAs.

5.1.1 Guiding principles

Table 2.2 summarizes eleven guiding principles. These may be used as a checklist by practitioners tasked with setting the agenda for an assembly. The table includes each principle and contextualises it in light of the categories introduced in section 4. More elaborate discussions of each principle can be found in Pfeffer (2024).

The first principle, *context*, highlights that there is no single 'right' way for setting the agenda. Rather, good agenda decisions—and design decisions more generally—depend on the context of climate politics (also see Pfeffer and Newig 2025). For example, if the main barrier to climate action is political deadlock around a limited number of clearly defined policy issues, it appears sensible to focus the CA on these issues. If, however, a polity is lagging behind its climate targets in almost all areas with little capacity, knowledge, and vision where to begin, then a CA covering a broader range of topics may be an effective way of opening up policy debates (also see Smith 2023). The Irish CA may be seen as an example for it was convened to address Ireland's status as laggard (Devaney et al. 2020). The principle of context means that the relative importance of the other guiding principles, and how to implement them in practice can vary depending on the context and the main objectives.

Table 2.2: Guiding principles for setting the agenda in climate assemblies (adapted from Pfeffer 2024)

Guiding principles	Context and objectives
Context. The agenda fits the context of climate politics.	Underlying foundation
Resource efficiency. Societal benefits outweigh invested resources.	Necessary foundation
Dilemmas. Clear trade-offs must be made.	
Legitimacy. The agenda is seen as legitimate by most groups.	
Authority. The sponsoring authority has sufficient power to act on recommendations.	System-supportive rationale; Policymakers willing to act on climate change
Political relevance. Policymakers see a need for change on the issue.	
Receptiveness. Policymakers welcome citizen input.	

Table 2.2 (Continued)

Guiding principles	Context and objectives
Societal relevance. The issue is important for citizens. Openness. Citizens are not unjustly constrained by the agenda.	System-disruptive and emancipatory rationale ⁴
Scope. Citizens have sufficient time to develop recommendations, understand consequences, and provide justifications.	May be implemented in line with both system supportive and disruptive rationales
Timing. There is an opportunity to affect change.	

Considering the principle of *resource efficiency*, ensuring a basic level of perceived *legitimacy*, and addressing the trade-offs of societal *dilemmas* are seen as necessary foundations for successful CAs, largely independent of context. Many in the field highlight the importance of focussing on trade-offs and citizen priorities to avoid long wish lists of recommendations that do not provide sufficient guidance for policymakers, for example on how to finance measures. The German assembly on nutrition was asked to limit their number of recommendations to a maximum of nine, intentionally forcing the assembly to debate priorities. While this proved challenging for members, it led to clearer guidance and to more focused discussions in political follow-up. Moreover, interviewed experts believe the agenda should be perceived as legitimate by most groups, because salient criticism of the process may undermine democratic and system-supporting objectives, such as policy impact. However, full consensus on agenda decisions is unlikely to be achieved and may even be undesirable. Full consensus can come at the price of selecting issues of low political relevance, e.g. issues of little controversy that agenda-setting actors think are unimportant enough to leave to citizens (Pfeffer, Renn, and Newig 2023). The principle of resource efficiency is a reminder to reflect whether a large-scale citizens' assembly is worth investing the time and money given the magnitude of the selected issue. Other democratic processes exist that may be more suitable.

The guiding principles *authority*, *political relevance*, and *receptiveness* are closely linked to system-supporting rationales and contexts where those in power are generally willing to act on climate change. These principles can justify constraining deliberation but can go at the expense of emancipatory and system-disruptive objectives. Policymakers sometimes lament the lack of usefulness of recommendations addressing areas beyond their authority. Some interviewed experts argue that many climate problems spread across boundaries and authorities, and thus CAs should address problems holistically as counterweight to silo structures. Some past CA recommendations explic-

⁴ Although these principles are connected to system-disruptive objectives such as empowering citizens, citizens might follow system-supportive rationales.

itly encourage policymakers to lobby for policy change at other political levels⁵. If the political relevance is low, i. e. policymakers do not see the need for change on an issue, or are generally sceptical of citizen input (not receptive), the direct policy impact of a CA will likely be low (Averchenkova and Ghilan 2023). From a system-supportive perspective, a CA would be ineffective. From a system-disruptive perspective, however, a CA could be a way of raising the political relevance of an issue and pressure policymakers to be more responsive to citizens.

The principles *societal relevance*, and *openness* emphasise system-disruptive and emancipatory concerns. David Farrell (2022) has echoed these concerns when he criticised that too much government control over the agenda has led to “rather daft issues” not resonating with citizens being assigned to Irish citizens’ assemblies. Focussing on issues important to citizens may also spark higher public attention and increase citizens’ motivation to participate. Conversely, if policy impact through bureaucratic pathways is deemed more important than public attention, relevance to policymakers may be more important than relevance to citizens. What is important to citizens and politicians may or may not align depending on context. Ensuring open-ended deliberations is fundamental for the democratic integrity of CAs. Constraining the agenda can undermine CA members’ sense of ownership and be (perceived as) illegitimate. On the other hand, constraining the agenda is effective, if not necessary, for enabling high-quality deliberations helping CAs to arrive at considered recommendations useful for policymakers. To attend to concerns of both legitimacy and usefulness for policymakers, agenda-setters should justify their agenda constraints and allow citizens to reflect on and deviate from them (see section 5.2).

Timing and *scope* can serve different objectives depending on how they are implemented. A more system-supportive rationale might suggest aligning a CA with the time-scales of existing policy processes and avoiding to schedule it too close to elections to prevent its results from being ignored by a new government or delayed by the election period and its aftermath (as in Spain and Berlin). A more system-disruptive rationale, on the other hand, might suggest running an assembly shortly before general elections to spark public attention and influence an election or a subsequent coalition agreement, as was practiced in Germany (2021). The ‘right’ scope of an assembly is a widely discussed topic. Scope refers to the extent of issues to be covered in an assembly and is connected to the number of resulting recommendations (Elstub et al. 2021; Pfeffer 2024). Many argue that the scope of past CAs has often been too broad. Elstub et al. (2021) found that a large scope—a high number of issues to be covered by the mini-public—has reduced the policy impact of Climate Assembly UK, because it led public officials to doubt whether all participants had sufficient time to work on each issue. They also argued that holding policymakers accountable regarding their response to CAs is more difficult, if the number of recommendations is too high. Smith (2023) cau-

5 In Scotland, some recommendations were passed on to the UK Government, and in France, some recommendations stated explicitly that France should take the issue to the EU (e.g. Proposition PT9.1).

tiously notes: “Remits are arguably more effective when focused on aspects of policy that have the most significant negative climate impacts and/or where government is finding it difficult to act” (p. 8). However, Smith also points out that there are contexts where broad scopes might be more suitable, e.g. when CAs are meant to open the policy debate where little progress has been made. Large scopes may also be suited where administrations have low capacity to develop policy themselves, because they can out-source the work of policy formulation to a structured process combining the knowledge of experts and citizens. Notably, the most influential first-wave national-level climate assembly in terms of policy impact—the French—had a very large scope. This suggests that other factors, such as those related to political will, are more important determinants of impact. Finally, scope relates to the time a participant has to effectively deal with an issue. This depends on the number of issues but is relative to the complexity or knowledge intensity of the issues, the overall deliberation times, and the way the deliberations are structured.

5.1.2 Framing and remit

In some remits, CAs have been asked explicitly to consider certain societal values, e.g. “social, economic, and environmental factors” (Germany 2021), “fairness and impact” (Finland), “in a spirit of social justice” (France), “fairness and effectiveness” (Scotland). This can constrain deliberation or may be seen as illegitimate, e.g. if the emphasised values carry partisan meanings or include (dominant) framings worth questioning. On the other hand, this can help organisers to structure and deepen discussions because it focuses deliberations on questions like ‘What does fair mean?’ and ‘How is the proposed policy measure expected to perform on our conception of fairness?’. This may even add reflexivity and transparency to the framing because value dimensions are made explicit. An option is to include widely shared societal values in CA remits while inviting citizens to prioritise them and/or add new value dimensions if they want.

CAs can vary regarding the level of detail and nature of proposals they produce. Analytically one can distinguish between:

- normative guidelines for policymaking (e.g. polluter pays principle, Scotland),
- targets (e.g. 100 % renewable electricity by 2035, Germany 2021),
- strategic priorities (e.g. prioritise renewables over carbon capture technologies, UK),
- specific policy measures (e.g. ban domestic flights where train alternatives exist, France).

Many CAs have produced recommendations with different levels of detail. From a system-supportive perspective, it is sensible to focus the assembly on those issues where policymakers think they require input and avoid wasting resources by deliberating on settled issues, such as widely accepted emission reduction targets. From a system-dis-

ruptive perspective, one may criticise that this will cement just those worldviews, strategies, and practices that need to be challenged, or at least confronted with people's normative perspectives. It may have benefits to contextualise each specific policy proposal with underlying normative principles, targets, and/or strategic priorities. This may increase the quality of proposals by increasing their consistency while reducing ambiguities. This would offer opportunities for administrations to reject proposals due to concerns of effectiveness, efficiency, legality, or practicality while still responding to the underlying goals with alternative policy proposals.

5.1.3 Sub-themes

Often CAs are structured along several carbon intensive sectors (e.g. mobility, electricity, heating, or food and agriculture). This approach facilitates the integration of results into the policy process if it mirrors climate governance regimes that are organised along sectors with clear responsibilities assigned to ministries and committees. Some, however, argue that dealing with climate issues requires integrative approaches beyond sectoral silos, and that CAs should foster integration across sectors instead. Whether a sectoral or cross-sectoral approach is more effective in achieving climate objectives will depend on context. For example, if conflicts between ministries and sectors are a major barrier to climate action, a cross-sectoral CA addressing these conflicts is likely a more effective vehicle for enabling change than a sectoral CA that ignores these conflicts (Pfeffer and Newig 2025). Recent CAs have had narrower scopes focusing on issues connected to climate change like energy poverty in Poland, biodiversity loss in Ireland, or nutrition in Germany.

Another approach is to focus on issues that are close to citizens' everyday lives because they are seen as particularly competent in those areas. This approach is sometimes driven by concerns that citizens are not capable of dealing with more technical issues (Averchenkova and Ghilan 2023). Past decades of experience and research on mini-publics, for example those on genetic engineering (e.g. Dryzek and Tucker 2008), wind farms (Roberts and Escobar 2015), or science and technology⁶, strongly contradict this concern. Deliberation on technical issues requires more time, resources, and effort dedicated to suitable learning activities but it is not doomed to fail due to citizens' lack of capability.

CAs have also been focusing on cross-cutting issues, particularly those with high leverage across sectoral siloes. Issues have included carbon pricing (Germany 2021) or decarbonising through finance (France). While such issues can be technical and may require additional time dedicated to informing participants, it may still be an efficient approach due to the leverage of potential solutions.

⁶ See the Danish Board of Technology: <https://tekno.dk/?lang=en> [Accessed on November 29, 2023]

Yet other processes deliberated on reforms to the climate governance regime and proposed changing legal frameworks or introducing standing bodies. The French CA proposed criminalising ecocide while, in Denmark, a permanent CA was proposed. Structural changes to climate governance can have transformative potential if they significantly alter incentive and power structures.

A promising approach might be to focus on areas where governments find it most difficult to act (Smith 2023). This may end up being a collection of seemingly unrelated issues across different sectors, each facing their own barriers. CAs on such issues should hold the potential for high added benefits by breaking deadlocks and driving climate policymaking.

While most CAs have dealt with climate mitigation, some deliberated on climate adaptation (e.g. Spain and Scotland). Mitigation focuses on limiting climate change by reducing net emissions of greenhouse gases; adaptation refers to diverse ways of dealing with climate changes to reduce harms that cannot be avoided.

To conclude, CAs can deal with all issues outlined above but not at once (Brancaforte and Pfeffer 2021). A good choice depends on the main objectives and context of climate politics. CAs should hold the most potential for effective climate policymaking if they focus on areas where climate impacts are highest, and policymaking is facing barriers (Smith 2023).

5.2 Process dimension

Having dealt with trade-offs of substantial agenda decisions, this section focuses on the process by addressing who should be involved in agenda-setting, and with how much power. Considering this is important not just to increase the epistemic quality of agenda decisions by integrating diverse knowledge, but also because it influences whose concerns and interests are prioritised. Before diving into this, I provide some reflection on the institutional roles of past CAs.

5.2.1 Institutional roles

CAs have played different roles along the policy process. Most CAs were asked to formulate policy proposals and appraise them through deliberation and voting. They varied, however, in the freedom given to members in formulating proposals. Some processes were more expert-driven (e.g. Germany), others more citizen-driven (e.g. France or Denmark). In Finland, the CA was tasked to only appraise policies proposed by government.

CAs have been initiated with varying political agendas or roles ascribed. Such ascribed roles most often meant supporting governments in their climate action efforts through advice (e.g. Scotland), but also included supporting parliament in holding government accountable (e.g. UK), affecting coalition negotiations (e.g. Germany), or, most

powerfully, to draft legislation in a politically collaborative rather than advisory role (France). Role formulations are often influenced by what is politically opportune and are characterised by a sensitivity to the attitudes and strategies of those with initiating and/or decision-making power.

5.2.2 Initiation rights and mechanisms

How CAs get initiated is a key question because it influences the range of productive roles assemblies can play in governance systems (Setälä 2021). Two dimensions can offer insightful analysis: Who has *motivation* and who has *power* to initiate a CA? Assemblies on a specific issue only get initiated if both coincide. Usually, CAs only get initiated through state structures if governments or parliamentary majorities (power) expect to benefit from them (motivation). This limits CAs' capacities to fulfil system-disruptive functions. Perhaps one can only expect CAs to lead to disruptions where powerful initiators did not anticipate them or where initiators were willing to accept the prospect of disruptions. An increasing number of CAs is being initiated by motivated civil society actors outside of state structures (e.g. Germany, Poland, Norway). Mini-publics initiated by civil society actors without stronger ties formal decision-making can have difficulties in achieving public and political impact. Because such processes can, arguably, more legitimately be ignored by governments, it is more difficult to generate and maintain their political relevance and hence media value (e.g. Germany). In practice, CAs often emerge from the interplay between state institutions and civil society demands (as seen also in other democratic innovations; Escobar et al. 2018). The Berlin CA, for instance, originated from a citizen initiative, and in France and Scotland, the Yellow Vest protests and activists of Extinction Rebellion were vital.

If CAs are to play roles beyond supporting those in power, new rules for their initiation are likely required. These can include initiation rights for citizens, for parliamentary minorities, or other political bodies. In East-Belgium a permanent sortition-based citizens' council can initiate temporary mini-publics on issues of its choice (Niesen and Reuchamps 2019). Moreover, initiation mechanisms can be integrated into governance regimes that require a CA under certain conditions (Setälä 2017)—for example, if governments fail to meet certain targets, if policymaking has reached a deadlock, or as regular part of a cyclical policy process (as recommended by the Danish CA). Institutionalising CAs (or mini-publics more broadly) in such ways may hold co-benefits with other democratic objectives highlighted in section 3, but potential trade-offs require further investigation. It remains to be seen how much impact on climate politics and policy institutionalised CAs will have, or whether they might still be ignored or subject to strong “cherry-picking” by governments (Font et al. 2018).

Under conditions where no novel initiation mechanisms exist, one strategy to potentially increase the disruptiveness of CAs through agenda-setting is to limit the power of politicians and include a diverse range of other actors when choosing the framing and the sub-themes.

5.2.3 Who should be involved in agenda-decisions?

Politicians, civil servants, citizens, scientists, stakeholders, and process organisers can each hold different interests and contribute complementary forms of knowledge. Giving significant agenda-setting power to each of these groups has merits but also risks (Table 2.3).

Politicians and civil servants know the political context, including key policy dilemmas, political conflicts, policymaking timelines, and jurisdictions. Including political actors and considering their demands increases their interest in CA results and likely policy impact. However, giving politicians too much or exclusive power to shape the agenda can decrease CA members' sense of ownership. Moreover, strategic political considerations will likely influence agenda decisions. Politicians tend to shy away from hot topics if they see a risk of not generating their preferred outcome (Pfeffer, Renn, and Newig 2023).

Assembly members or the general public can contribute issues of societal relevance that they see neglected and politicians shy away from, and might challenge dominant agendas, values and practices. Including citizens in agenda-setting can increase their sense of ownership. However, leaving agenda decisions mostly or exclusively to citizens can lead to less informed choices (e.g. Denmark), such as a selection of sub-themes with relatively low potential for cutting greenhouse emissions. Moreover, the fit with policy processes, relevance for politicians, and policy impact may be hindered. The risk that politicians and civil servants come to perceive assemblies as unnecessary burdens on their already overloaded schedules may increase further.

Scientists and policy experts (see also Chapter 4 in this book) can help identifying areas of climate policy where changes are most effective, highlight neglected issues, and contribute new perspectives and policy rationales. However, depending on the choice of experts, and who is choosing them (Roberts et al. 2020), they can also reinforce dominant perspectives and technocratic frames (Blue 2015). This can lead to a neglect of moral dilemmas and injustices that often underlie political inaction.

Stakeholders—i.e. interest groups and other representatives—can provide the practical knowledge and concerns of those affected by political decisions. This contributes to the democratic legitimacy of the process and may increase acceptance of the CA and its results. Including a diverse range of stakeholders can elicit conflict but also show areas of agreement. Stakeholders may challenge dominant agendas and framings, and introduce marginalised concerns and new ideas. However, involving stakeholders may, in some contexts, lead to contestation and slow down the process. Depending on the selection of stakeholders, it may also decrease the perceived legitimacy of the process and reinforce dominant agendas.

Participation experts and organisers have process experience and can assess what is feasible and effective given time and resource limitations. Process organisers are often externally contracted non-profit or for-profit organisations, but with institutionalisation of democratic innovations growing, public authorities are increasingly building in-house capacities (see Escobar 2019 for a more detailed account). If public author-

ities lack willingness for genuine participation and deliberation, in-house or external organisers sometimes act as ‘internal activists’ (Escobar 2017, 2019). On the other hand, external organisers can sometimes be (and/or feel) bound contractually, and may, at times, be hesitant to criticise the process or the commissioner, or propose further actions. In contexts where this is the case or internal activism is needed, more independent participation experts may serve as mediators.

There is merit in involving multiple actor groups in agenda-setting, and some CAs have done so (see next section). However, this will increase coordination costs and may induce conflict. Conflict can be productive or unproductive (see section 6).

Table 2.3: Risks and benefits of involving different actors in climate assembly agenda-setting

Actors	Benefits	Risks
Politicians and civil servants	– know political contexts including barriers, timelines, responsibilities – higher interest in results	– strategic political choices – lower societal relevance – lower ownership by CA members
Citizens	– higher citizen relevance – higher ownership by CA members – less strategic	– lower political relevance and interest – less climate effectiveness
Scientists and policy experts	– more climate effectiveness	– reinforce technocratic framings – potential neglect of moral dilemmas underlying political inaction
Stakeholders	– challenge dominant agendas and framings – introduce marginalised concerns and new ideas – can increase legitimacy	– can decrease legitimacy – reinforce dominant agendas – slow down process – unproductive conflict
Participation experts	– process experience – know feasibility	– can be constrained by their institutional or contractual roles

5.2.4 How to organise agenda-setting governance?

Agenda-setting is not just about who should be involved but more precisely on what, and with how much power. The devil is in the detail when it comes to the governance of CAs.

In France and Scotland, stakeholders played an important role while government commissioners had less influence compared to other processes (Carrick 2022). In Scotland, legislation provided a broad mandate for the assembly but the final decision on the remit and its details was taken by a stewarding group. This stewarding group included stakeholder representatives (i.e. activist groups and social movements; sectoral interests in housing, business, agriculture, etc), members of parliament, civil servants,

participation experts, and academics dealing with climate issues but no assembly members. Deliberations within the stewarding group were facilitated. While finding agreement was not easy—environmental activists from Extinction Rebellion (XR) left the group after six months because decisions were not ambitious enough, in their view, and to apply pressure from outside—many have reported overall appreciation for the collaborative process, including the XR representatives. In France, a governance committee of fifteen stakeholders with diverse political views and interests was the centre of power through the whole CA. In this case, there were reports of mutual distrust and paralysis. Two CA members regularly joined the meetings which helped the committee to overcome disagreements (Carrick 2022, 17–18).

In the UK and Berlin, parliament or government commissioners retained more control over agenda decisions (Carrick 2022). This task is often transferred to expert bodies, seconded civil servants, or contractors delivering the process. The nature of interactions between the actors involved is often described as collaborative but the final decision-making power remains with the commissioner.

In Denmark, CA members significantly influenced the selection of sub-themes (similar in Germany [nutrition]). Members first heard from 18 different expert witnesses before voting which areas to focus on. A selection of members subsequently met with the responsible parliamentary commission and minister to exchange views. The Danish CA had a second iteration where members set their agenda with less expert input. Organisers and members seem to have preferred the iteration with expert input because members became more confident in their capabilities to decide, and decisions were more attentive to climate effectiveness (Brancaforte and Pfeffer 2022, 12).

In sum, the goal of good agenda-setting governance is to generate decisions that are informed, motivated deliberatively (as opposed to strategically), and perceived as legitimate by affected actors. Including policymakers and stakeholders in facilitated deliberations but leaving the final decisions to informed assembly members could be a way of attending to all three aspects. The perceived legitimacy of such processes, however, will be context-dependent and might change over time.

6 Navigating disagreements in collaborative agenda-setting

Involving multiple actors in agenda-setting can cause conflict. Conflict and contestation is productive when marginalised agendas are elevated and dominant ones questioned, or diverse agendas are explored and navigated to foster learning and mutual respect; but unproductive, when tensions are exacerbated, and action is delayed. A lack of contestation risks suppressing tensions and reinforcing the status quo (Chambers et al. 2022).

Chambers et al. (2022) make suggestions on how to navigate tensions between diverse actors to foster sustainability transitions, based on 32 worldwide case studies. Here I adapt some ideas to CAs.

The foundation is to acknowledge that different actors can contribute legitimate concerns. If actors behave in ways that are unproductive, one can attempt to induce more productive behaviours by reframing their roles and argumentation, and/or by breaking through ideological divides:

A) Unproductive tensions can occur when any control by commissioners is seen as co-option, or commissioners perceive ceding power as a threat to their goals and roles. Such concerns may be reframed productively by valuing commissioners' expertise and power as means to empowering others, or by noting that strategically ceding power to others can enable collective action and increase legitimacy of decisions. Unproductive tensions can also occur when actors believe that a focus on impact harms the process, or conversely, when time spent on process is seen as unnecessary distraction from goals. Both notions may be reframed productively by seeking agreement that only high-quality processes can lead to significant impact.

B) While disagreements are sometimes based on irresolvable conflicts between interests, they frequently exist only on the surface. Information provided in this chapter may help solving disagreements by moving away from overly generalising statements opposing each other to appreciating practical trade-offs for almost every design choice. This may open doors to balancing trade-offs by combining elements of system-disruptive and -supportive design in ways sensitive to context.

7 Final remarks and way forward

Without careful agenda choices, any CA will struggle to meet its goals, but agenda-setting is not everything. Other design elements are crucial, such as how administrations respond to CA inputs, or how information is presented to members. Moreover, the degree to which agenda-setting is weaved through internal procedures such as the selection of expert witnesses, the framing of informational content or the structure of deliberations remains an area for investigation (Shaw and Wang 2021; see also Chapters 4 and 5 in this book).

This chapter summarised the state-of-the-art knowledge on CA agenda-setting to date. The knowledge base, however, remains limited from a scientific perspective—with most evidence stemming from informed experts but sometimes being tacit and anecdotal. The mini-publics and CAs community is a flourishing network fostering social learning which, at times, outpaces research in producing knowledge. There is, however, a risk of groupthink and oversimplification.

In sum, agenda-setting for CAs encompasses many distinct choices with crucial implications for their internal operations and external effects, such as policy impact, perceived legitimacy, or emancipatory value of deliberative processes. Almost every choice comes with trade-offs regarding different CA objectives. Objectives and trade-offs are

highly dependent on context, e.g. the willingness of powerful actors for climate action and genuine participation. This complexity, however, offers potential. We are beginning to see how design choices are deliberately combined to balance trade-offs, e.g. how agenda-setting powers are shared between actors or sequenced in ways that enable informed agenda-setting by assembly members themselves. Such context-sensitive approaches to mini-public design are the way forward (Bussu and Fleuß 2023; Pfeffer 2024; Pfeffer and Newig 2025). More experimentation and careful study are needed to assess the interactions between design choices amid varied contexts.

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