

Chapter 7

Between closure and openness: The fragile legitimacy of the French Citizens' Climate Convention

Abstract: Like other deliberative mini-publics, the Citizens' Climate Convention (CCC) had to respond to a double bind: in order for its conclusions to be considered valid from the point of view of deliberation, it had to appear to be impervious to external influences; but in order for its conclusions to have weight, the members of the assembly were encouraged to develop alliances with other social and political actors, and thus to extend the debates beyond the walls of the assembly. The resulting tensions between openness and closure, deliberation and participation, mini-public and maxi-public, are increasingly problematised within theories of deliberative democracy. In the CCC case, such tensions were navigated through some of the design features of the process, such as the long inter-sessions where citizens were invited to assume certain roles that were decisive in the publicity of the debates. This chapter, based on ethnographic investigation throughout the process, shows how the boundaries of the CCC were constructed and renegotiated by citizens and other actors. We highlight a double movement of importation of external actors into the mini-public and exportation towards the maxi-public, as well as the phenomenon of the progressive separation between the 'We' of the climate assembly and the 'They' of the rest of the population. We argue that this dual movement plays a major role in understanding the political outcomes of the CCC and encourages viewing this experience as a model of "savage deliberative democracy."

Keywords: climate assemblies, legitimacy, deliberative democracy, radical democracy, climate activism

1 Introduction

The legitimacy and impact of citizens' assemblies do not solely rest on the procedural quality of deliberation but also on the relationship the process has and maintains with the general population and political actors and institutions. If the link between deliberation in a limited group and its diffusion in a larger-scale public is at the heart of the design of citizens' assemblies, there is no theoretical nor practical consensus on the form that link should take. The problem of the compatibility of these two criteria questions the very possibility of a renewed democracy that would be deliberative without renouncing the requirements of mass democracy. Indeed, deliberation disconnected from broader public participation could lose democratic legitimacy (Lafont 2020)

and have limited political effects as closed mini-publics can lead to the rejection of their measures by the population (Chambers 2009).

Citizens' assemblies in contemporary electoral democracies, thus, are subjected to a contradictory injunction. On the one hand, the supposed formal quality of deliberation depends on several parameters, including participants' ability to avoid external influences that might interfere with the discourse of experts whose intervention is provided for in the deliberative gathering itself (Chambers 2004). Such a requirement calls for a certain degree of control and closure of the assembly vis-à-vis the outside world. But, on the other hand, the broad legitimacy of the proposals formulated by a citizens' assembly depends also on their capacity to relay the various points of view of civil society, and then on the approval by politicians and the population, and therefore on the overall degree of openness of the assembly. We could, of course, imagine that the closure required to ensure the serenity and integrity of debates would precede the openness needed to publicise and circulate their results. But this would be to overlook the need for participants, during their deliberations, to go beyond the simple statistical representativeness associated with their random selection, and to try to reflect the diversity of existing viewpoints on the subject under consideration.

This tension, that exists in any citizens' assembly, between the contradictory imperatives of closure and openness, may be even greater in climate assemblies because of the complexity of the phenomena at stake, which involves numerous sub-questions and a wide range of viewpoints. Without relative closure of the assembly, deliberations run the risk of going off in many different directions. But without openness, they also run the risk of getting lost in technical considerations cut off from the realities experienced by the population, or being ignored or rejected by political actors who resist putting climate issues and environmental policy measures on the agenda.

These generic characteristics of climate assemblies pose both a methodological and analytical challenge. Indeed, in a context where the assembly is understood as an entity that must simultaneously ensure its autonomy through frameworks of deliberation, and thus the elaboration of boundaries, while also creating relationships with the rest of the population, the assembly cannot be regarded as a pre-existing entity with stable borders and no connection to the outside. Thus, the categories of *assembly*, *interior*, *exterior*, *legitimate*, or *illegitimate influences* are not once and for all given before the deliberative process starts. They are defined and redefined through the very deliberative process itself. Using the French Citizens' Climate Convention (CCC) as a case, this article aims to shed light on part of this process, highlighting, in particular, the permeability of the boundaries of the mini-public and its consequences for the deliberative process as a whole, including its reception and outcomes.

The first section provides a literature review on the theoretical tensions between relative closure and relative openness and the dual requirements that citizens' assemblies, especially climate assemblies, must meet. The second section describes our methodology for studying these tensions. In the third section, we briefly present the case study to highlight the specifics of the process, particularly in terms of openness to the outside. In the fourth section, we present our main results concerning: 1. the ability

of assembly members to criticise and broaden the limits of authorised expertise; 2. the impact of differentiated relationships with external actors on the final recommendations; 3. the role of these relationships in shaping the group of assembly members as a political subject. The fifth section discusses these results focusing on the consequences of these relationships on the political outcomes of the CCC and characterising the type of democracy invented by climate assemblies.

2 Literature Review

Theoretical and scientific literature has extensively discussed the democratic dimensions of deliberation in mini-publics. One of the claims about some mini-publics, such as deliberative polls, is that they should be sufficiently small (and procedurally structured) to be fully deliberative and sufficiently representative to be authentically democratic (Goodin and Dryzek 2006, 219–220). Part of the legitimacy of a mini-public depends on its formal qualities, such as equal access to the floor for all participants (Blondiaux and Sintomer 2002), the plurality and contradictory dimension of the experts (Manin 2011), and an ideal “neutrality” (Smith 2009) of its organisers. In principle, in such mini-publics, good deliberation requires the control of the conditions needed for an enlightened discussion and reliable judgement, and thus a certain closure of the deliberation space which should not be open to external influences. However, for the founding authors of the deliberative tradition, a society is democratic when it provides for the public deliberation of all members (Cohen 1989). Thus, for Cohen as well as for Habermas, the opening of deliberation to all affected individuals is decisive. The *a priori* delimited public space of citizens' assemblies thus constitutes a test for deliberative theory rather than a direct application of its principles.

By involving a small portion of citizens, mini-publics can lead to “participatory elitism” (Chambers 2003, 347). As Manin notes, it is “problematic at best to consider mini-publics as legitimate substitutes for all citizens” (Manin, 2021, p. 18). Random selection recreates a distinction, as strong as that between representatives and represented, between those selected by lot and others (Girard 2019). Girard points out that random selection, by removing the selected from any accountability to the broader population, opposes a decisive democratic criterion. Thus, mini-publics, particularly in the form of “deliberative polls,” constitute a “shortcut” (Lafont 2020) which cannot substitute for the collective deliberation of all citizens and which contributes to neglecting the issue of mass participation (Chambers 2011).

This normative debate involves not considering mini-publics as self-sufficient entities but as part of a larger space. This precaution is all the more relevant for climate assemblies, which seem to constitute somewhat unique entities: the extended duration of deliberation, the number of participants (50–150), and the inherently broad nature of the climate-related subject matter all contribute to this distinctiveness. Indeed, the transition from a “mini-public” to a broader public sphere has been addressed in the literature, primarily by framing citizens' assemblies as mini-publics requiring legitima-

cy within the broader public. However, the literature predominantly overlooks *how* citizens' assemblies need to be known by the broader public to have effects (Jaske 2019).

The duration of certain citizens' assemblies, which can be several weeks or months, partly relaxes the imperative of closing debates traditionally associated with qualitative deliberation. But it does not completely erase the tension that exists between the citizens' assembly and what lies outside it, nor the fact that the nature of the relationship between these two spaces is not stable during and after the assembly. To express this general idea, we say that the assembly's boundaries are variable and that these boundaries are more or less open or closed. This means that the space of the citizens' assembly may include varying numbers of stakeholders. Their nature may vary in diversity and representativeness of existing viewpoints on the issue addressed by the assembly. Conversely, the assembly and its participants may be in more or less intense contact with members of the population and the public, and maintain a range of direct or indirect ties with different segments of society and political life. This degree of openness and closure has effects not only on the form and content of the deliberative process but also on the effects of the citizens' assembly and its political effectiveness.

The study of climate assemblies held in various national settings in recent years does not invalidate this research hypothesis. While claims about the legitimacy of climate assemblies to improve the governance of climate issues have emphasised their internal properties, they have only recently paid enough attention to other elements of the deliberative system, in particular, political institutions, public space, and civil society (Boswell et al. 2022). To be normatively legitimate, climate assemblies need to combine several characteristics (Stasiak et al. 2021). They must be impartial, by being relatively distant from strong external influences and by partly closing their borders to dominant interests in public space or social life. They must be perceived positively, not just by assembly members, but by the wider public. The "visibility and publicity" of the assembly is even a decisive factor in its "resonance" (Stasiak et al. 2021).

To address this issue, it has been recommended to consider mini-publics within the framework of deliberative systems, that is, the entirety of actors participating in democratic deliberation and their relationships (Mansbridge et al. 2012; Curato and Böker 2016). However, the literature on the relationship between climate assemblies and the broader public takes for granted an opposition between these two spaces. It rarely questions how, during the deliberative process itself, external audiences can influence the content of the debate, thereby creating a tension between broadening the audience and threatening the quality of the deliberation. This chapter thus aims to shed light on the potential impacts of external influences on the deliberation process itself.

3 Case Study: The French Citizens' Climate Convention (2019–2020)

The Citizens' Climate Convention (CCC) held in France from October 2019 to June 2020, offers a fertile field of investigation for analysing this progressive construction of the effective climate assembly, as well as the effects of these processes on the final proposals. Indeed, due to its duration (nine months in total), the number of deliberation days (seven sessions of three days each), its wide media coverage, and the opportunity it provided for researchers to observe almost the entire process, it is a recent and fascinating example of a climate assembly (for a general overview, see Giraudet et al. 2022).

Following the Yellow Vests social movement and the Climate Marches that took place in France in 2018–2019, the French President announced in April 2019 the holding of a Citizens' Convention on Climate. 150 citizens were selected by lot to represent the diversity of the French population, according to various social and geographical criteria. Over seven weekends, they met in Paris in an official building to elaborate, as requested in a mission letter signed by the Prime Minister, proposals to reduce “greenhouse gas emissions by 40 % by 2030, in a spirit of social justice”. The CCC had a governance committee composed of three experts in participatory democracy, three climate experts, four experts in the economic and social field, as well as two co-chairs (Laurence Tubiana, an economist and director of the European Climate Foundation, and Thierry Pech, General Director of the Terra Nova Think Tank) and a general rapporteur (Julien Blanchet, former president of a student association).

After listening to presentations by climate scientists during the first session and reflecting on the “levers” and “obstacles” associated with their mission, participants were divided, by lot again, into five thematic groups (Transportation, Housing, Alimentation, Consumption, and Production/Work) defined by the governance committee to “simultaneously” (Pech 2021, 110) establish thematic public policy measures. Each of these thematic working groups was assigned a facilitation team and offered consistent support from a cohort of embedded and external experts. During the following two sessions, speakers from civil society were invited to inform assembly members by presenting on the issues, means, and obstacles related to the themes they had to deal with. From the third to the fifth session, an interdisciplinary embedded team of economic, climate, and energy policy experts, as well as a legal committee comprising legal experts, assisted the citizens in the elaboration of policy measures through impact assessments and discussions, and later, through the legal translation of their original ideas. During the sixth session, the citizens of each group presented their measures to all 150 participants. The final session consisted of a collective vote, in the form of a plenary assembly, on the proposed policy measures and on the ideal procedure to communicate them to the French population at large, particularly to decide whether or not to use a referendum. Finally, assembly members met again in an eighth session in January 2021 to assess the fidelity of their work in the “Climate and Resilience” bill, which

was debated between February and August 2021 in Parliament and presented by the government as the legislative transcription of the CCC's work.

The President of the Republic repeatedly brought public attention to the CCC. He mentioned it, for example, in the customary nationwide New Year's address of 2020, and he organised a question-and-answer session with assembly members during the fourth session in January 2020. This spotlight on the Convention was intended to embody the democratic openness of the executive power and contributed to ensuring a continuous media coverage of the experiment. Journalists were allowed to follow the discussions, although they were not permitted to mention the policy measures discussed before these were made public. All these peculiarities led to a relatively large public audience for the CCC.

The publicisation of the assembly's deliberations and its final recommendations of policy measures entered the national public debate through the deliberation itself, as assembly members had to decide on the modality (e.g. referendum, parliamentary or regulatory) through which their measures would be transmitted into the political and legal spheres. Thus, the question of the CCC's place in the larger political and deliberative system also became, on its own, a topic of deliberation.

4 Methodology

We developed an observation protocol for the CCC that enabled us to pay particular attention to the relationships with external actors. We observed the entire process, particularly focusing on the discussions in the thematic group "Transportation". We chose this group in light of the debates that were animating French political life at the time. The Yellow Vests movement started as a mobilisation against an increase in fuel taxes. This strong social protest led environmental activists to take clearer stances on transportation issues, notably advocating for an increase in the price of kerosene. This demand aimed to articulate a discourse on greenhouse gas reduction with a discourse on social justice, emphasising the responsibility of the wealthiest classes, particularly those who fly frequently. Thus, monitoring discussions around transportation offered a privileged viewpoint to understand how external dynamics to the CCC might impact the content of the deliberations. To better understand it, this internal observation of the CCC was complemented by an observation of various deliberative and protest spaces outside the CCC (such as environmental demonstrations taking place in Paris and across France over the same period).

We also conducted interviews with 10 activists who followed the CCC and 10 assembly members¹. The semi-structured interviews with activists focused on their rea-

¹ The activists were selected because of their participation in monitoring, discussions, or support for the CCC. They were members of various French social movement organisations involved in climate change mobilisations, like Extinction Rebellion, La Bascule, and the Réseau Action Climat. All the inter-

sons for engaging with the Convention, their conceptions of democracy, and the concrete relationships they established with assembly members. These interviews with CCC members covered 1. their life experiences and socio-demographic characteristics; 2. their experience of the CCC, with a particular emphasis on the preparations between sessions; 3. their interactions with external actors; 4. their social and political commitments at the end of the process. These interviews shed light on the relationships maintained between different actors, primarily with environmental activists, throughout the deliberative process and afterwards. They also highlight the progressive construction of a collective identity, developed from the various direct and indirect relationships they had with external protagonists, such as elected officials, union members, senior civil servants, activists, journalists, social media figures or policymakers².

5 Findings

We sought to understand how the boundaries of the climate assembly were renegotiated throughout the process since it is these boundaries that define the discourses that can legitimately circulate among citizens and that define how the deliberations of the assembly can be publicised externally and primarily to whom. These questions are important for the challenge of climate change and climate assemblies, as climate advocacy movements, interest groups promoting democratic innovations, and other actors in civil society have contributed to the emergence of these political experiments. In this context, understanding the permeability between the interior and the exterior becomes an issue for the democratic governance of climate change, which cannot solely be satisfied with discussions in isolation. This is why we will analyse how tensions between openness and closure of climate assemblies were resolved in the case of the French CCC.

From this perspective, several findings can be established. First, citizens were able to challenge the expertise that was chosen by the governance committee through research conducted outside of the strict deliberative process. In addition to this, some of the assembly members built unique relationships with external actors, influenced by the CCC's mandate to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Finally, we stress the importance of the various relationships between citizens and external actors in shaping the identity of their collective body.

viewed assembly members come from the studied "Transportation" group. We made sure to interview both prominent figures who played a major role in the discussions and more discreet members.

2 As we were not allowed to communicate formally with members of the convention during the CCC, the interviews conducted afterwards enabled us to complete the information coming from direct observations of the deliberations and behaviours of assembly members behind the scenes of their working group or of plenary assemblies. The size of this chapter also means that we have chosen to focus on presenting in our own words the key points that emerge from these interviews, rather than using some excerpts as illustrations or presenting a full analytical treatment of this material.

5.1 The renegotiation of internal expertise by citizens

The organisers felt that the theme of climate change could not be dealt with in a fully contradictory way, unlike those of assemblies which dealt with other subjects (e.g. abortion). The CCC governance committee therefore chose experts with different opinions, particularly on the levers and means of action, but not all the positions in circulation were represented. For example, no climate sceptic was invited. During the first and second sessions, citizens were thus invited to tell the moderators which experts they would like to hear from. In the phase of discovery of the themes they had to deal with, the CCC members indicated names of technical and economic experts, of local and national political personalities who could enlighten them on the workings of political power, and of a few media personalities from the field of personal development who they felt could help them understand the process of social change. Eventually, the lists of experts drawn up by the assembly members and the lists of experts who participated in the CCC were very different. Authorised expertise therefore seemed to be primarily delimited by the governance committee.

Yet, to support assembly members in their understanding of the interventions of the different experts, from the third session, CCC's actors (organisers, facilitators, and members) were joined by a "support group." Its objective was to "*follow the citizens throughout the process,*" be "*at the service of the citizens,*" and "*at their technical disposal without ever crossing the red line of giving personal advice*"³. At first, the CCC budget had not considered the need for this stable expertise to serve the citizens' demands. While organisation and facilitation represented 34% of the initial budget, the expertise was to amount to only 1.8% of the budget⁴ and was to be limited to fact-checkers whose mission was to "*respond in the fastest possible way (...) to citizens so that they did not have to go looking for the information they needed in the debates*"⁵. The emergence of this support group in charge of accompanying citizens in their work and then evaluating the impact of the proposed measures, whose form had not been decided at the beginning of the CCC, raises questions.

These experts from the support group had a significant impact on the process. The position of one of them, a then climate specialist at the Institute for Climate Economics (I4CE) think tank, is significant to illustrate the blurred boundaries between the inside and the outside of the CCC. When he was invited as an external guest in session 2 as part of a plenary session, his remarks were noticed, and it led the members of the CCC governance committee to ask him to be part of the support group and to evaluate the impact of the proposed measures⁶. This evaluation work formally began between sessions 2 and 3 and continued regularly between sessions. Initially, it was simply a mat-

³ Quentin Perrier's interview by Maxime Gaborit, Laurent Jeanpierre, Dimitri Courant and Simon Baeckelandt.

⁴ <https://www.conventioncitoyennepourleclimat.fr/budget/> (accessed 25.11.24)

⁵ Julien Blanchet, 1st Session, opening plenary session: presentation of the roles.

⁶ Quentin Perrier's interview.

ter of proposing an impact score –expressed through a number of stars– for the different proposals. Subsequently, the support group, and Quentin Perrier himself, were responsible for assessing the accuracy of the proposals, sometimes recommending, rewording, sometimes proposing their deletion, or sometimes simply asking for clarification of the objective (Courant 2020). Between two discussions with assembly participants, a member of the support group confirmed that *“people think that the Convention is 150 conventionneers deliberating. The reality is that we are there, the day before at 9pm, filling in documents for them”*.⁷

However, this importance of the experts during the deliberations was not unquestionably accepted by the citizens. Some of the revisions to the initial scenario imagined by the CCC governance committee were provoked by their questions. The discussion on the carbon tax provides an example of the rejection of the proposed expertise. From the second session, we observed that assembly members strongly rejected the idea of the carbon tax. Their distrust led them to consider the possibility of a government-hidden agenda, which would consist of getting the CCC into accepting a proposal previously rejected by the Yellow Vests movement. The rejection of an economist defending the carbon tax during a plenary session, or the permanent reminder of the refusal of this measure throughout the sessions, even when it was not explicitly proposed within the “Transportation” group, shows the citizen vigilance on the proposed expertise and its boundaries.

While the need for expertise may have been initially underestimated, it emerged as an integral dimension of both the process and the establishment of the boundaries of the CCC. Rather than being a pre-existing reality implied by the mandate and its subject matter, the sanctioned expertise within the convention signifies a site of power dynamics that plays a role in shaping the assembly's limits.

5.2 Citizens' engagement with external stakeholders

As the CCC was a nine-month-long process, the established boundaries of expertise were also exceeded and displaced by the activities of citizens between sessions. During the multiple inter-sessions, assembly members quite frequently met with civil society actors to discuss before bringing back ideas to the deliberative space. Outside actors used these interactions to feed the debates with more information or with proposals that the activists considered as having limited presence, or even being absent in the deliberative process –e.g. the theme of air transport; the proposal of a carbon quota; alternative framings for the debates.

Between sessions 3 and 4, some climate activists began to build a group of reflection and action around the CCC. In January 2020, those from Extinction Rebellion, an international civil disobedience movement fighting against ecological collapse and cli-

7 Session 4 – during a discussion between members of the Support group and the researchers.

mate disruption, and activists from “La Bascule,” a group of organisations determined to “transition” towards a resilient ecological society gathered to publicise the CCC to passers-by and to exchange with its participants. They organised workshops and invited some assembly members to attend and exchange with the participants and to feed off their proposals. They also organised “Clim’Apéros” –convivial moments where participants came to present their progress, followed by feedback from the public on the content of the measures.

Through the events, these activists reiterated their support to the citizens chosen by lot through the slogan “*You are legitimate, be radical.*” They believed that the legitimacy of the framework could reinforce the radicality of assembly members, and detach them from the injunction to take into account the social acceptability of the measures. Thus, the opening of the CCC to civil society did not only take the form of participation in the technical and political debates on the proposals but also modified the space of deliberation by making it less dependent on the reactions of public opinion. The emergence of these actors at the border of the CCC also reveals the possibility of complementing the exchange of rational arguments with other modes of discourse such as testimony (Mansbridge 1999; Mansbridge and *al.* 2010; Steiner 2011) and activist intervention, which are frequently sidelined from mini-publics (Young 2000; 2001).

Let’s illustrate with one example of these interactions and their effect. Aviation occupied a distinct place in French public opinion during the CCC. Within this context, assembly members from the Transportation group and climate activists consistently addressed this issue in their discussions after session 3. These interactions⁸ partly explain the emergence, during session 4, of a series of proposals aimed at curbing air travel, such as banning flights that can be replaced by train journeys under 4 hours, implementing significant restrictions on individual flights, or prohibiting the expansion and construction of new airports. Ultimately, all these measures were adopted during the final session and constituted some of the CCC’s most widely publicised propositions. This example of interactions shows the fluidity of the boundaries of the civic institution which cannot be reduced to the group of 150 sorted citizens.

This openness and the ties with environmental organisations did not remain unregulated: following the attempts by certain environmental groups to influence the deliberation by proposing, for example, a carbon quota, one governance committee member, who is also very close to the environmental networks, intervened by asking the various associative actors to stop trying to influence the participants. Movements of openness were thus almost always followed by closure mechanisms.

However, the ties with environmental movements had lasting consequences as assembly members continued to interact with activists following the CCC to create alliances to support the adoption of most proposals both in the street and alongside the parliamentary debate on the Resilience and Climate Law. The openness of the institution and the established ties created its specific space in environmental governance.

⁸ Based on our interviews.

In this case, external engagement broadened the discussion and encompassed topics overlooked due to certain presentation biases in expert discourse. Beyond being confined to a set of issues dictated by the choice of invited experts, external engagement allowed for an ongoing challenge of the boundaries of the selected policy measures and contributed partially to the relatively ambitious nature of the final report of the CCC.

5.3 From an assembly to a group

The interactions with the external environment also contributed to shaping the group dynamic and identity of assembly members. The fear present from the first sessions in plenary discussions that their work might adhere to a hidden agenda, or conversely (at the end of the process) be neglected by political representatives, helped to construct the citizens' identity in opposition to elected officials, with several elements highlighted in their discourses: their independence from economic lobbies, the absence of re-election aspirations, and their representativeness of the national population.

During the process, the construction of the group as fully independent from outside influence certainly reached its acme when thirty-five to forty citizens gathered within the CCC premises after asking the governance committee to allow them to meet autonomously, without moderators, and outside the official program, in order to be able to discuss collectively the international treaties that coerce France. That evening, the debate focused on the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), the trade agreement signed in 2016 and partially ratified in September 2017 between Canada and the European Union. This discussion was an opportunity for assembly members to point out that all international treaties represent obstacles to the CCC's goals and should be challenged, or that a moratorium should be called for.

This mechanism of constructing a specific identity culminated in the formation of "The 150" association. With this formalised setting, participants gained more autonomy and attempted to advocate for their measures and organise their follow-up, notably through the website "*sans-filtre.les150.fr*". In doing so, citizens established the boundaries of a specific entity structured by demands and a shared experience, to enhance the political impact of their deliberations. However, while this autonomy-building process was primarily grounded in distancing from political and economic power, nothing better illustrates the fragility of this group than its gradual detachment from the broader French population it was supposed to represent.

The assembly's growing expertise contributed to a gradual distancing. The voluntary activity of citizens on social media grew over time, as proved by the number of accounts and messages sent during the process. By the end of the CCC, it was estimated that there were nearly fifty active and updated accounts (our observations), some of which fed the CCC's media chamber. Some assembly members acquired, unsurprisingly, greater visibility than others. On their accounts, messages in defence of the process largely dominated over critics. The combined effect of all these distinct interactions be-

tween assembly members and the media seemed to make some of them feel they were no longer ordinary citizens and that they should behave above all as “ambassadors,” as the co-chairs put it, of a legitimate collective experience. These interactions also contributed to building a sense of collective identity for the assembly, first distancing itself from the political institutions, then gradually, from the wider French population itself.

Furthermore, the largely negative media coverage of the assembly’s proposals, portraying them as unpopular, progressively led the participants to perceive themselves as detached from the general population. This process culminated, in the final session, in the rejection of referendums on numerous measures, in favour of a singular referendum on constitutional change and the crime of ecocide. This constitutes one of the paradoxes of the CCC: the rise in expertise and the acknowledgement of the assembly members’ evolution throughout the process, which appears as a sign of healthy deliberation enabling opinions and values to evolve, simultaneously engendered a sense of estrangement from the general population. This choice proved deeply disappointing for some of the members of the governance committee especially those more closely involved in activist circles advocating for deliberative democracy.

6 Discussion: Implications for the CCC’s political reception

These findings open up discussions around different dimensions of the scientific literature on climate assemblies and citizens’ assemblies. First, we will discuss how the relative openness of the CCC compared to other climate assemblies had an impact on its political outcomes. Secondly, and on a more theoretical level, we will discuss the democratic qualities of the CCC suggesting that while it may appear deficient from a strict deliberative standpoint, its original design invites us to consider the mutual contributions of deliberative theories and theories of radical democracy.

6.1 Political outcomes and openness of a climate assembly

The dilemma of climate assemblies having to choose between rigid and flexible boundaries was dealt with in unanticipated and variable ways throughout the CCC. These boundaries were the results of a negotiation and even a frequent contestation from a multitude of actors both inside and outside the initial perimeter of the climate assembly. However, even if the CCC appeared to be more open than other citizens’ assemblies of the same type, it did not succeed in expanding its deliberations as much as would have been necessary to call it a political success. As we have suggested, only a few organisations in the climate movement have managed to both insert themselves into the CCC’s deliberative game and integrate their content within the CCC’s debates. This has

undoubtedly affected the CCC's ability to produce the lasting political effects it hoped for: see most of its 150 recommended measures implemented in law or regulation.

Until the end of its process, the CCC failed to articulate the two dimensions of its legitimacy i.e. informed debates of a high deliberative quality within the mini-public, on the one hand, and acceptance of the results of these debates within the wider population, on the other. These tensions in the reception of the measures were reflected, for example, in the resistance of a large proportion of parliamentarians to the CCC's work. Assembly members were throughout the process much closer to activists than to politicians. Members of the government, Prime Minister Édouard Philippe as well as Minister of Ecological and Solidarity Transition Élisabeth Borne, in session 1, and the President of the Republic, in session 4, on January 10, 2020, visited the CCC to debate with assembly members. Several municipal representatives (such as Anne Hidalgo, Mayor of Paris), some members of parliament (such as Barbara Pompili, then Chairwoman of the French National Assembly's Sustainable Development and Spatial Planning Committee) and members of the government (such as Bruno Le Maire, Minister of the Economy) attended some of the CCC's plenary sessions, their numbers growing with each session to peak at the final weekend of voting on the measures, on June 19, 20 and 21, 2020, the dates of the seventh session.

On the other hand, the direct involvement of elected representatives in the CCC's consultation process was minimal. They represent just 1% of those interviewed: this compares with 8% of trade union representatives, around 10% of think tank experts, an equivalent proportion of government officials, academics and researchers, and over 20% of business executives and managers, a proportion barely higher than that of members of civil society NGOs.

On the final day of the last session, some assembly members "called" for local elected representatives to implement some of the CCC's measures. Others, undoubtedly more sceptical, or more vindictive, asked elected representatives to assume their responsibilities with regard to the proposed measures, thus justifying their choice not to resort to a referendum on their proposals. The episode bears witness to a cleavage between those who have drawn closer to their elected representatives, sometimes even going so far as to identify with them, and others who keep them at a distance but rely on them, sometimes with a certain disillusionment on principle.

Thus, the relative openness of the CCC mechanism compared with climate assemblies in other countries ultimately had ambivalent effects on the reception of its conclusions. On the one hand, it made the CCC a national event, a must for both the media and political leaders. But, on the other hand, the parliamentary route favoured by the Convention helped to diminish its impact. However, the consequences of the CCC are not insignificant: the Climate and Resilience bill, voted on in April 2021, aimed to enshrine 46 proposals (30% of the measures) into law (Garric et al., 2021). That is why, at the end of the adventure –the complete process of the CCC and its final legislative and regulatory outcomes– the CCC appears more easily as a revelation of the limits of the institutions of the French Fifth Republic rather than a successful experiment in democratic innovation.

6.2 A savage deliberative democracy?

From the perspective of democratic theory, the experience of the CCC does not reveal the unveiling of a supposed general will of the people, embodied here by a representative mini-public, in the sense of being close to a description of the people (Sintomer 2013). Certain canons of deliberation, which identify the criteria for fair exchange, notably to prevent external influences, do not adequately account for this experience. Here, the democratic dilemma that deliberative proceduralism always faces, namely the impossible *a priori* delimitation of relevant positions in any debate –which become audible through the allocation of limited speaking time– finds in the CCC a precarious yet theoretically stimulating alternative. While the literature on deliberative democracy traditionally opposes particular interests or defends their legitimacy, provided they are well-regulated (Mansbridge et al. 2011), the CCC and its unprecedented characteristics (an extremely large mandate and lengthy deliberation) may explain a broader openness to the outside social and political worlds, allowing for a new articulation between contention and deliberation.

As we have seen, assembly members were free to introduce into the CCC the knowledge, practices and discourses they deemed relevant, notably through the appropriation of discourses from climate activist movements. In this way, they enabled the deliberative process initially anticipated, in particular by the governance committee and public authorities, to find, through these interstices, a way to overcome its limits. Outside assembly sessions, assembly members had the time to choose the events they initiated or took part in. They could also select the information they heard between sessions that they wished to discuss within the Convention. Although it may seem singular, this experience opened the door to a conception of deliberation as the construction of measures from an entanglement of actors exchanging within a political space broader than the assembly itself, and where activist and protest dynamics may find their place.

In this respect, while CCC has of course been influenced in its design by deliberative democracy thinking, it also has affinities with what Lefort, and Abensour following in his footsteps, have called “savage democracy” (Abensour 2004); what Castoriadis has called the self-institution of society (Castoriadis 2006); or what Balibar has called “democratic limitlessness” (Deleixhe 2014). Beyond their differences, all these expressions characterise democracy above all by the permanent questioning of the framework or boundaries that delimit the space of debate. Generalising this idea, we could say that the ecological democracy that may be emerging through the rise of climate assemblies, if it cannot bypass state instruments to assert itself, must not neglect the conditions of possibility for its own questioning.

This current model of the climate assembly, which is developing and distinguishing itself from the jury model (Sintomer 2022) –where all outside influence is proscribed– could pave the way for a hybrid model of democracy, both deliberative and savage, where the savage dimension does not necessarily imply protest or debate outside institutions, but rather deliberation in which the framing of debate can be called into question, through an inquiry with boundaries not fixed once and for all.

7 Conclusion

If mini-publics were first conceived as largely insular collectives, meeting behind closed doors and only benefiting from certain experts chosen by the organisers and, sometimes, the assembly members (Blondiaux and Sintomer 2002), the CCC never really resembled this idealised model and was from the start open to the outside. The differentiated relationships with actors considered external to the process had a decisive impact on both the content of the deliberation, the proposals issued at its conclusion, the impact of the proposals on society, the political arena, and governmental institutions, and on the identity formation of the group of assembly members. Using our case as a reference point, our main argument is to demonstrate that a climate assembly cannot be understood as a clearly defined and immutable entity.

Thus, while much of the observational scientific literature on this type of device starts from a narrow conception of deliberation, we have proposed to describe and analyse climate assemblies by adopting, on the contrary, a broader conception of the deliberative scene. With this type of analytical framework, our attention can no longer be focused exclusively on the internal conditions of quality collective deliberation. It must also focus on the relationships maintained by the protagonists of assembly deliberation with the external social and political ecosystem (Curato and Böker 2016) either by including new actors in the deliberative space, or by extending deliberation to arenas other than the assembly.

By adopting such a point of view, we have shown that the CCC's imperative of openness has enabled a partial renegotiation of the perimeter of the actors involved and of its initial objectives. We thus suggest that it is not self-evident that citizens' assemblies should be considered mini-publics in the strict sense of the term. In the French example of the CCC, the opening features of the deliberative scene were likely more important than in other recent and comparable cases, such as Climate Assembly UK (Elstub et al. 2021). Indeed, these assemblies involve plural interactions, unequal in their intensity and their consequences on deliberation, which are certainly partly linked to the framing of debates, but which nonetheless make it possible to renegotiate the boundaries of deliberation, the sayable and the legitimate.

These considerations lead us to propose a methodological suggestion and a recommendation. From the point of view of developing citizens' skills and their active participation, the CCC has been a success. This progress and commitment cannot be fully captured without taking external influences into account. This is one reason why future investigations could focus on exploring the assembly's external relations, as much as its internal politics, to better understand the dynamics of deliberation.

From a normative point of view, the openness of the process played a crucial role in elevating CCC to a national priority and encouraging citizen involvement. As an innovative experiment in an outward-looking climate assembly, its success depended largely on the positive reception of its results. This reception was limited by the assembly members' refusal to use referenda as a way to translate their propositions into law

or regulation. But the fact remains that this singular experience of “savage deliberative democracy” that took place in France could be revisited in the future on a more conscious basis.

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