



# French Citizens' Convention on Climate

Issue 4 – February 2021

shortcut  
*What it's all about*

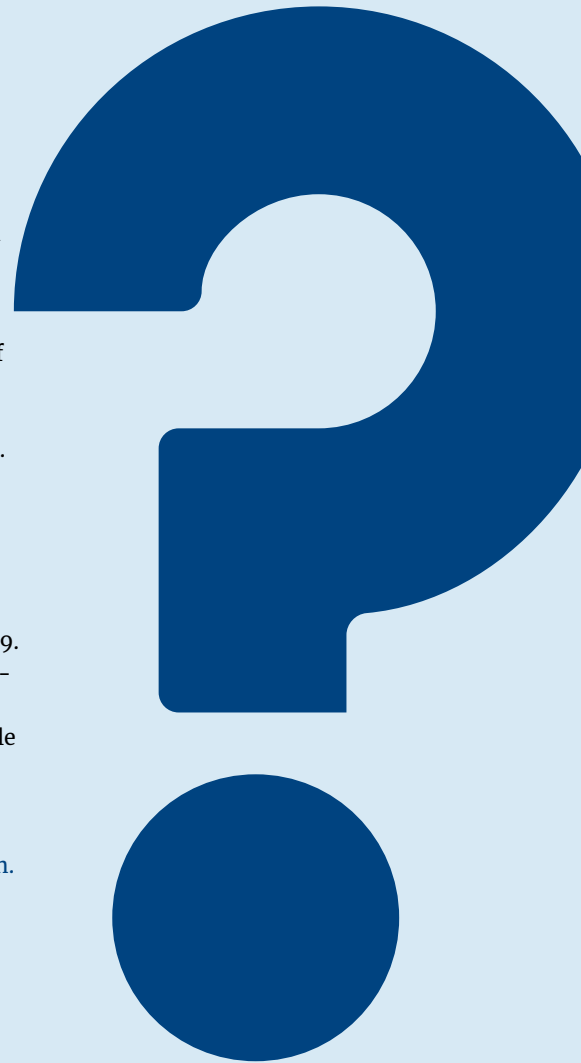
# Citizens' Convention on Climate— from protest to dialogue and beyond

The Yellow Vest Movement (Gilets jaunes) caused a stir in France at the end of 2018. Hundreds of thousands of protestors took to the streets week after week. They were protesting against speed limits on major roads, welfare cuts, the sharp rise in the price of diesel fuel, and a planned environmental tax.

In early 2019, President Macron reacted by initiating a national debate (Le Grand Débat). In a wide variety of formats, the people of France aired their concerns and opinions about the environment, taxation, the structure of the state, and democracy. Among the suggestions made was the creation of a citizens' convention consisting of randomly selected participants chosen by drawing lots.

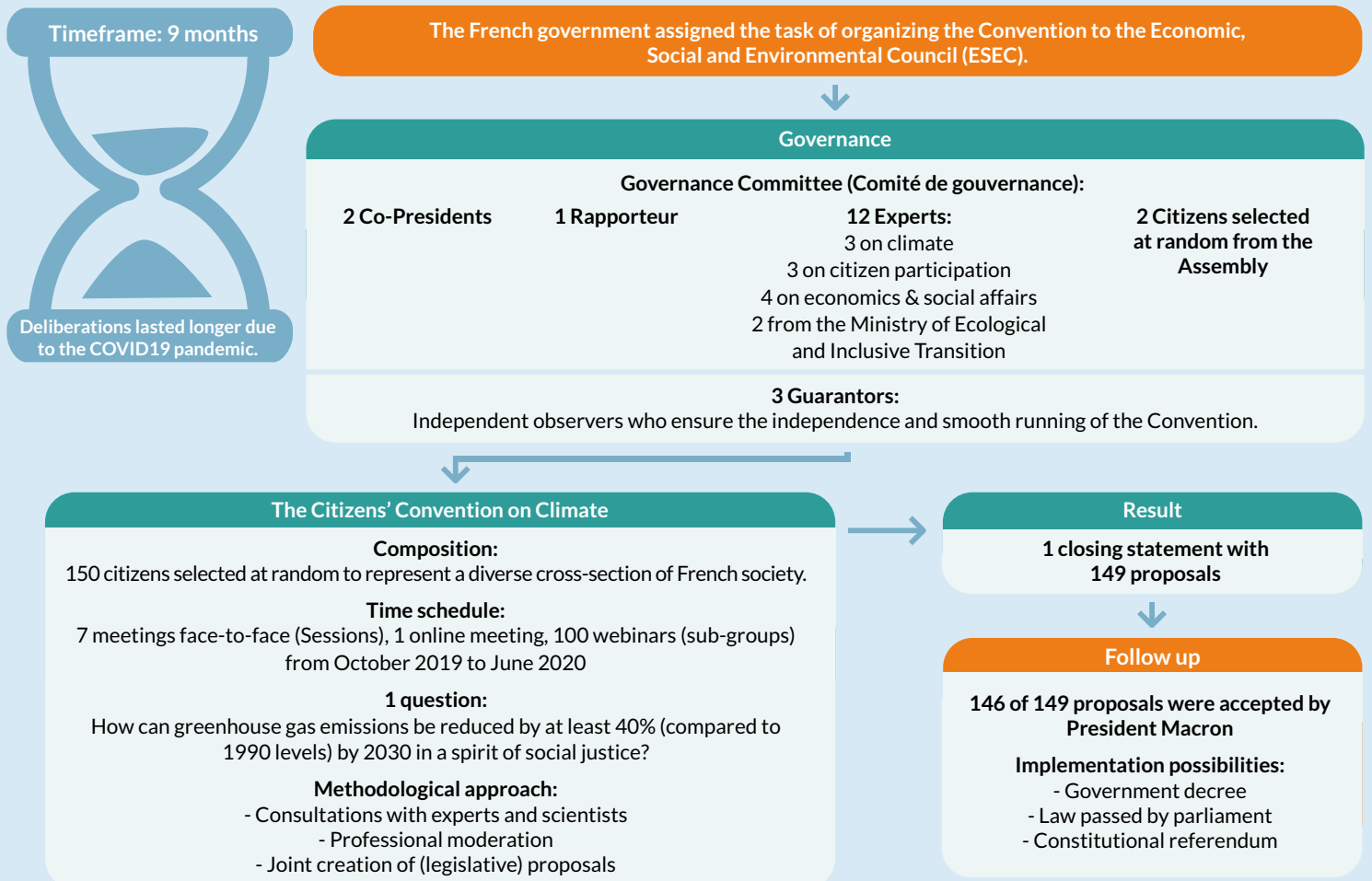
As a result of this suggestion, the Citizens' Convention on Climate was set up in April 2019. The Economic, Social and Environmental Council (Conseil économique, social et environnemental) was subsequently tasked with organizing the Convention. The government promised to respond publicly to the proposals made and to publish a provisional timetable for their implementation.

By taking this bold step, the French government has initiated a political experiment that will seek solutions for climate protection while testing a new form of citizen participation.



shortcut  
*How it works*

## French Citizens' Convention on Climate



shortcut  
**Facts and Figures**



**5,389,126 euros overall budget:** Participants received an expense allowance.

**5 topics:** Transport & mobility, consumption, housing, production and the workplace, nutrition.

**Aged 16 to 80:** High diversity of participants.

**1 closing statement,** accepted by 95 per cent of the 150 citizens.

**149 proposed measures.**

**More than 400 pages of reports and funding proposals** were submitted to the French government.

shortcut  
**Good to know**

## How was it done?

150 citizens were selected at random by drawing lots. To this end, the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council contacted around 70,000 citizens by telephone to set up a representative panel. The participants represented a cross-section of French society:

- 52% women,
- 6 age groups from diverse socio-economic categories,
- Representation of cities, suburbs and rural areas.



- » During a nine-month period, from October 2019 to June 2020, the citizens took part in weekend meetings—seven face-to-face plus one online—to exchange or gather information, discuss with experts and jointly formulate their proposals.
- » If they wished, citizens could meet experts from various fields and sections of society during the meetings.
- » In the last two meetings, the measures were summarised, discussed and voted on in a plenary session.
- » Work was continuous throughout the entire nine months: A permanent exchange for the modification and adaptation of proposals was possible via an online platform.
- » Recordings of the video conference meetings of the working groups are available to the public via the online platform.



**The proposed measures:** Not all the proposals broke new ground, but they all pursued the same ambitious objective: The reconciliation of ecological, social and economic perspectives to achieve a socially just ecological transformation. For example:

- Reduction of the current speed limit on motorways from 130km/h to 110km/h.
- Mandatory energy-oriented refurbishment of buildings.
- Integration of the fight against climate change into the French constitution.
- Implementation of a referendum on making 'crimes against the environment' (crime d'écocide) punishable under criminal law.

# The Citizens' Convention on Climate: Does it guarantee a diverse democracy?

The Citizens' Convention on Climate was a democratic and political innovation, but not a foregone conclusion. Some lessons learned:

**Less is more:** The Convention's task can be summed up in one sentence: "How can we reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 40% of their 1990 level by 2030 in a spirit of social justice?" Nine months later, the participants presented 149 proposals and measures. The Citizens' Convention proves that citizens can deliver concrete results that address an urgent contemporary issue.

**Expectation management right from the start:** President Emmanuel Macron had already committed himself to honoring the Convention's proposals "without a filter", by submitting them either to a referendum, a vote in Parliament or direct implementation. By doing so, he raised high expectations among the population. But it has emerged, that many of the proposals cannot be implemented as fully or as quickly as originally anticipated. Some participants have already made their frustration about this public.

**Broad public acceptance:** In order to gain public acceptance, the work of the Convention must not only be continuously explained and communicated, but also made accessible to a broad public. The success of such processes depends heavily on the publication of the results and communication of individual steps of the process.

Citizens' Assemblies on climate have been a popular subject of public debate since the inception of France's "Convention citoyenne pour le climat". However, care is needed: Short-term success must not be allowed to end in long-term disappointment when it comes to the handling of the results.



## shortcut **More on the subject**

### **Participative democracy and climate issues – not a one-off in Europe**

Citizens' Assemblies on climate issues are en vogue. In Ireland, a Citizens' Assembly on climate took place already in 2017. In 2019 and 2020, there were Citizens' Assemblies on Climate in Great Britain and many European cities. All of these climate assemblies have contributed to the fact that political discussions and democracy as a whole can be approached differently by the inclusion of randomly selected citizens.

### **Current developments**

The French President Emmanuel Macron has promised to hold a constitutional referendum. The Citizens' Convention format could become a permanent fixture of French democracy. There are currently plans for other Citizens' Assemblies (for example on the issue of vaccination in the coronavirus crisis). Macron would also like the Economic, Social and Environmental Council to become the "Chamber of Citizens' Assemblies".

However, the Citizens' Convention has also been a source of disappointment for numerous participants and the general public. The core problem was and is the difference between prior expectations and the actual handling of the results.

### **Authors:**

Dr Dominik Hierlemann  
dominik.hierlemann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de  
Phone +49(5241)81-81 537

Céline Diebold, Bonn  
celi.diebold@gmail.com

**Democracy and Participation in Europe** ([www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en](http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en))

### **Sources and literature**

**Convention citoyenne pour le climat**  
[www.conventioncitoyennepourleclimat.fr/](http://www.conventioncitoyennepourleclimat.fr/)

[www.missionspubliques.org/pf/citizens-assembly-on-climate/?lang=en](http://www.missionspubliques.org/pf/citizens-assembly-on-climate/?lang=en)

**Overview of the implementation of the proposals**  
[www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2021/02/10/climat-les-propositions-de-la-convention-citoyenne-ont-elles-ete-reprises-par-le-gouvernement\\_6069467\\_3244.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2021/02/10/climat-les-propositions-de-la-convention-citoyenne-ont-elles-ete-reprises-par-le-gouvernement_6069467_3244.html)



# The future of democracy



## Imprint

© February 2021 Bertelsmann Stiftung

Bertelsmann Stiftung | Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256 | 33311 Gütersloh | [www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de](http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de)

Responsible: Christina Tillmann, Dr Robert Vehrkamp, Dr Dominik Hierlemann, Anna Renkamp

Cover image: © Nicola - stock.adobe.com

The shortcut series presents and discusses interesting approaches, methods, and projects for solving democratic challenges in a condensed and illustrative format. The Bertelsmann Stiftung's Future of Democracy program publishes it at irregular intervals.

Supported (in part) by a grant from the Foundation Open Society Institute in cooperation with the OSIFE of the Open Society Foundations.

Supported (in part) by a grant from King Baudouin Foundation.