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## A review of National Citizens' Climate Assemblies: learning from deliberative events

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### ABSTRACT

Citizen's Climate Assemblies (CCA) have been hailed by academics and non-academics as initiatives to improve the legitimacy and efficacy of climate policy governance. Yet it is only recently that such normative claims have been explored empirically. This article reviews the rapidly emerging literature on citizens' assemblies – and specifically national citizens' climate assemblies (NCCAs) – and related deliberative events. It critically reflects upon the emerging themes in the literature and assesses their significance for understanding climate policy and governance. It reveals that advocates of assemblies originally claimed that they would: (1) provide an opportunity to improve the input of evidence into policymaking; (2) raise the political awareness of climate action among citizens and elites; and (3) improve the quality of policymaking. However, a much more nuanced picture of their actual role is beginning to appear. It indicates that each assembly is in fact unique in character, shaped by how it combines design features and the contextual conditions in which they operate. This further affects their impact. Views on NCCAs vary significantly: whilst some politicians are dismissive of their contribution, environmental NGOs have generally been the most supportive; the reception among publics has varied greatly; business and industry have only recently begun to discuss their relevance. Although the recommendations of NCCAs are variously implemented, acknowledgement of their wider and deeper impacts is also emerging, alongside proposals for more systematic assessments of their long-term effects. We reflect on future prospects for NCCAs in relation to political institutions, policy processes and wider society.

### Key policy insights

- Advocates of national citizens' climate assemblies (NCCAs) maintain that they would improve the quality and legitimacy of policymaking.
- NCCAs have only been held in Europe.
- How evidence is formatted and communicated can provide opportunities for challenging the status-quo and facilitating value-based deliberations.
- Disagreements are evident among societal actors on the roles and purposes of NCCAs.


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## 1. Introduction

In the past two decades, innovations in democratic decision-making have flourished across the world, indicating a desire for change to formalized processes of political representation (Curato et al., 2021; OECD, 2020). One such innovation has been the use of deliberative mini publics (DMPs), characterized by randomly selected representative samples of the population, invited to consider and discuss specific issues in dedicated and facilitated spaces over a defined time period (Curato et al., 2021). An OECD database (2023) lists 682 DMPs between 2000 and 2023, encompassing a wide variety of formats (e.g. citizens' juries, dialogues, assemblies, councils, observatories, planning cells, deliberative polls) and scales (ranging from local to national), and addressing various topics including climate change.

Citizens' assemblies (CAs) are a type of DMP. Citizens' climate assemblies (CCAs) are specific forms of citizens' assemblies whose focus is climate change and related issues. These have been strongly advocated by democratic theorists on the grounds that they could enhance democratic decision-making, by providing more considered discussion about complex issues such as climate change and a more publicly representative input to policymaking (e.g. Willis et al., 2022). CCAs held at national level are often referred to as National Citizens' Climate Assemblies (NCCAs).

NCCAs typically bring together ca. 100–150 individuals (usually citizens, although the Austrian NCCA also included residents without Austrian citizenship) selected by sortition, sometimes accompanied by some form of stratification according to key characteristics. These collectives, through facilitated and careful consideration of specific issues related to climate change (e.g. Boswell et al., 2023; Willis et al., 2022), offer options for addressing them via recommendations. Ireland's Citizens' Assembly 2016–2018 was the first national-level CA to address climate change (Anon, 2018; Farrell et al., 2019). Subsequently, NCCAs have been held across Europe: Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Spain, Sweden, UK (as well as in Scotland and Jersey). In Finland, a citizens' climate jury was undertaken; although methodologically and structurally different from other NCCAs, it is often considered as a national assembly (see Supplemental Material). An NCCA will be undertaken in 2025 in The Netherlands. Australia saw a failed attempt to hold an NCCA before the 2010 elections (Boswell et al., 2013). The concept has also been extended to international levels: core members of the Global Climate Citizens' Assembly agreed on a declaration issued at the beginning of COP26 in 2021 (Caney, 2022).

Although advocates of NCCAs hail them as initiatives that improve the legitimacy and efficacy of climate policy governance, only recently have such normative claims been explored empirically, resulting in an extensive academic and practitioner-led literature. Crucially, this literature has not been reviewed yet.

This paper directly addresses this gap by reviewing the literature on NCCAs. Whilst this review does not set out to provide a detailed analysis of each NCCA, its aim is to provide a synthesis to cast new light on what is known about NCCAs, their theoretical foundations, how they have been undertaken, and directions for future work.

We searched the Web of Science (supplemented by Google Scholar) for articles and materials on NCCAs published between 1 January 2013 and 09 December 2024, using the terms 'national and assembl\*' and citizen\* and climat\*'. This resulted in 22 academic publications specifically referring to NCCAs. Expanding the search terms to 'assembl\*' and citizen\* and climat\*' identified three others drawing upon NCCAs. These are included in this review, supported and complemented by additional articles, reports and existing publications around climate assemblies, citizens' assemblies and DMPs. This paper draws upon a range of published literature and grey literature and documentary sources where relevant (inspired by the approach set out in Boswell et al., 2023). As a corpus, these resources provide a deeper and contextualized overview of NCCAs. All sources reviewed are listed in the bibliography. Section 2 is organized according to the main themes emerging from the review. It presents the main findings, by theme, of this review. Section 2.1 reviews the theoretical and normative bases of NCCAs; Section 2.2 explores the experience and challenges of NCCA implementation; Section 2.3 considers the impact of NCCAs. Finally, Section 3 provides a discussion of the findings, followed by concluding remarks.

## 2. Results

### 2.1. Why undertake an NCCA?

The publications reviewed refer most frequently to two main reasons for undertaking NCCAs: (a) current democratic processes are not effectively addressing climate change; therefore, other alternatives should be sought

and implemented; (b) decision-making is improved by implementing recommendations produced by deliberative NCCAs. These arguments are inter-related; we consider each in turn.

Advocates of democratic theory argue that democracy should be conceptualized and recognized as much broader than a limited input by citizens to decision-making via the expression of their preferences through voting at elections or in referenda. How people's preferences are formed and their views on the management of resources for the common good are key to legitimate decision-making. This perspective argues that deliberation-based reforms to democratic systems enabling a more direct input to decision-making by publics are necessary for such democratic development. CCAs are often proposed on the grounds that they provide a mechanism or means for citizens to 'be placed at the core of' (Cherry et al., 2021, p. 4) democratic decision-making processes to input to policy development. It is maintained that deliberative events such as CCAs may be potentially transformative (Willis et al., 2022) by creating new institutions, processes, laws (Duvic-Paoli, 2022), perhaps by being formally embedded in the democratic system (King & Wilson, 2023, outline some of the associated challenges) which in turn can underpin and enable more meaningful climate action (Howarth et al., 2020; Willis, 2020 e.g. as part of a new social contract on climate change). Advocates also claim that CCAs can provide fresh opportunities to discuss complex issues and the creative and imaginative ways of addressing them, through the collective insight of those taking part.

Proponents have argued that CCAs, through citizen deliberation, can enable the production of more ambitious proposals than would otherwise emerge from existing governance systems, thereby spurring new and more robust forms of climate action. The premise is that democratic decision-making processes may be open to or willing to consider inputs from citizens from these events (Farrell & Field, 2022). For instance, as a result of Scotland's recent Climate Assembly, the Scottish Government (SG) indicated that they gained 'a key insight into the measures which the Scottish public expect from Government for a just transition to net zero emissions by 2045' (SG, 2022, p. 3).

Overall, most publications reviewed in this paper provide a description of climate assemblies, their rationales and oftentimes a summary of the theoretical foundations of the assemblies. Several papers outline their purported normative contribution/s and how these may be achieved. However, the deployment of NCCAs in Europe has also spurred in-depth study and scrutiny of their organising principles and defining characteristics, processes, outputs and impact. We turn to these themes in the next two sections.

## **2.2. Challenges in implementing NCCAs**

### **2.2.1. Rationale, commissioning and framing**

The academic publications within this review reveal that the specific focus of the CCAs, and by whom this is decided, have profound implications for the issues which are (not) discussed (Elstub et al., 2021b; Shaw et al., 2021; Willis et al., 2022). Climate assemblies often frame climate change as a scientific or technical issue, requiring solutions involving expertise and technology. Such a framing can reduce or prevent other insights and perspectives from being considered, including the meaning of climate change in everyday lives, as well as personal and emotional responses to it (Cherry et al., 2021; also critique by Stoddard et al., 2021). Mellier and Wilson (2020) comment on the lack of discussion of systemic changes that may be required for effective climate action. Cherry et al.'s (2021) study of UK CCAs (national and local) also found that the recommendations that could have more visible and tangible impacts on people's lives are those that typically receive more support from Assembly Members (AMs). Yet, they argue, policy makers give such issues less attention, which potentially also reduces the discussion of these among publics.

Since 2020, some of the literature has been more attentive to the agenda and scope of climate assemblies, building on existing work largely focussing on the agency of AMs. For instance, in relation to the UK NCCA (CA-UK), Elstub et al. (2021a) found that how, and by whom, an assembly's agenda is set influences the design of the assembly, the quality of deliberation, the time required and allocated, and the relevance of its recommendations. They argue that whilst there are trade-offs to be made between the breadth and depth of climate assemblies, a two-step approach to agenda setting (firstly, broad remit set by commissioning body, secondly specific assembly remit set by AMs) could enable the assembly to remain relevant to both policy makers and AMs. This reflects the frequent distinction found in the literature between top-down and bottom-up

approaches to citizen assemblies (Cherry et al., 2021) although this may imply an over-simplification as assemblies may combine diverse features (Pfeffer, 2024). It is argued that bottom-up approaches for CAs often entail more frequent input to the structure and format of the assembly by its AMs and/or publics, to enable a more creative and flexible approach to the deliberation, enabling members to bring their own ideas and ways of doing (Cherry et al., 2021). It has been suggested that more open agendas may be also indicative of assemblies aiming at challenging existing practices (e.g. Pfeffer, 2024). Top-down approaches are often more expert and elite-led; it has been argued that this can result in more workable policy-relevant suggestions and recommendations but may restrict citizens' inputs to the process. Both were combined in the French Citizens' Convention for Climate (CCC); its members had sufficient independence to select foci of their discussions, although steering bodies also framed their deliberations (Giraudet et al., 2022). It has also been found that the expertise, format and context of communications during the assemblies has an influence on the uptake of proposals by AMs, indicating that who is invited to contribute at assemblies and their presentation styles affect the nature of deliberations including the recommendations (Muradova et al., 2020; van Beek et al., 2024). Evidence presented at NCCAs seldom includes system-challenging frames, as an analysis of evidence provided at the national German and UK climate assemblies (CA-UK), and the 2021 online Global CA, found (Zeitfogel et al., 2024). To move away from the fact-focussed national CAs, Perlaviciute (2024) proposed, based on her analysis of the CA-UK and the Dutch Citizen Assembly on Energy (DCAE)<sup>1</sup>, a shift towards more explicit recognition and adoption of a values-based approach in the deliberations and production of recommendations. This, she argues, would enable the opportunity to elicit societal values and incorporate these into decision-making through dialogue with a variety of actors including politicians. Schmid et al. (2024), in their analysis of two NCCAs (Austria and CA-UK) and one national assembly on food (Switzerland) through an environmental justice lens, conclude that this has been overshadowed in CAs and can be facilitated by recognising and giving space to participants' experiences and knowledges.

### 2.2.2. Funding

The literature documents the often very wide disparity between the cost of undertaking an NCCA (Boswell et al., 2023; Elstub et al., 2021a) and the funding allocated (thousands to millions of euros, see Supplemental Material); budgets may have a bearing on the scope and format of the assemblies (e.g. Elstub et al., 2021a, p. 83). Funding for NCCAs is often provided by governments, although other models also occur (e.g. via organizations or research institutions). Whilst some argue that the value of CCAs in terms of supporting the policy process via citizen engagement is worth the investment, others maintain that limited funding can constrain CCAs and risk recreating existing power dynamics (Roberts et al., 2020).

### 2.2.3. Representation

All extant NCCAs in Europe selected AMs through a process of sortition. Statistically, this approach enables everyone in the target population to have an equal chance of being selected, resulting in a group broadly representative of the population according to the characteristics used in the selection process.

In practice, the degree of representativeness achieved may be affected by methodological issues, for example, the accuracy of the representation of the population, potential sampling error, non-response (Courant, 2022; Doyle & Walsh, 2022). These may in turn also impact the nature of the deliberation. Work on CAs has shown that self-selection biases in terms of those who agree to participate in CAs may result in higher agreement among assembly AMs than would occur through voting, as the latter may give the opportunity to more dissenting views to express their opinions (Swiss study by El-Wakil & Strebel, 2022).

A limitation of sortition is that some minorities may be disproportionately affected by the issues discussed at an assembly, and that membership defined on the basis of a nationally-representative sample may not enable minorities to participate or express their views. To address the under-representation of particular groups and individuals with intersecting characteristics from such groups, different strategies (e.g. quotas) and over-

<sup>1</sup>The DCAE was held in 2023 – see <https://epgroningen.nl/do-people-feel-that-citizen-energy-councils-can-play-a-meaningful-role-in-the-energy-transition/>. It is not to be confused with the forthcoming 2025 Dutch National Citizens' Council on Climate (i.e. NCCA): <https://www.burgerberaadklimaat.nl/overhetburgerberaadklimaat/default.aspx>

sampling have been proposed, including modifying existing institutional designs for specific groups such as engagement strategies for immigrants or native populations (Peixoto and Spada, nd; Blome & Hartlapp, 2023). Some NCCAs have taken these considerations into account. For example, representation of young voices via the Scottish Children’s Parliament fed into the Scottish Climate Assembly. However, DMPs that include the views and voices of children and young people are still scarce (Harris, 2021; for a local example, see Wilson et al., 2024).

#### **2.2.4. Inclusion**

CAs are advocated as opportunities to achieve more inclusive and unconstrained deliberation, especially for those who would not normally have a direct voice in decision-making. It is also recognized that there are racial and gender dynamics that can affect deliberation, that even trained and professional facilitation may not be able to fully overcome (Willis et al., 2022). The few studies of deliberation conducted through a gendered lens (e.g. Field, 2022, on Irish assemblies 2011–2020) have indicated that attempts made at improving women’s representation in CA – based on the Irish experience – are occurring. However, there are still debates on how this is conceptualized (e.g. women’s issues and women’s interests) and about intersectionality and representation at deliberative events. For example, in the context of DMPs, there have been calls for more gendered forms of analysis and for greater attention to inclusivity (Blome & Hartlapp, 2023). The literature points to further work to understand the suitability of deliberative events for discussions on equity and fairness in relation to climate action.

Some of the debates in the literature have also expanded to consider how the quality of the deliberations in NCCAs and their impact on decision-making may be affected by assembly composition. The deliberative democracy literature includes rare examples of ‘mixed-member deliberative forums’ (MMDF) (Harris et al., 2023, p. 156) where membership of the deliberative forums comprises citizens and elected officials. Some academics more loosely refer to composite membership assemblies as mixed assemblies (Flinders et al., 2016). Harris et al. (2023) have identified only four such events established officially (Ireland’s Constitutional Convention 2012–2014, UK Democracy Matters 2015, Brussel’s Deliberative Committees 2019, the ‘Turku debates’ citizens panels in Finland 2020) and two as academic experiments (Korsholm MMDFs in Finland 2016 and 2018). For example, the 100 members of the Convention on the Constitution in Ireland (2012–2014) – which pre-dated Ireland’s Citizens’ Assembly – were constituted by a chair, 33 politicians (29 members of parliament and four representatives of Northern Ireland political parties), and 66 randomly selected citizens. Risks of MMDFs include the potential influence of elites in the quality and dynamics of deliberations, and on parity of esteem between citizen AMs and elected officials, although evidence of these is mixed. A variety of strategies and measures can be implemented to mitigate these. On the other hand, the benefits of MMDFs include more visible recommendations, higher trust in the processes amongst other politicians, more favourable views of politicians by AMs after working with them in an assembly, and more diverse contributions to the deliberations (Harris et al., 2023).

Overall, the review of the published literature indicates that all assemblies are informed by theoretical principles of deliberation and the normative underpinning of fostering climate action and improving democratic decision-making. Yet despite this, it also shows that assemblies are shaped by the institutions and actors that support and/or constitute them, as well as by the national realities within which they are situated. Each assembly is unique, from its inception to its design, framing, format and implementation. This in turn has implications for its impacts.

### **2.3. The impact of NCCAs**

#### **2.3.1. On participants**

Recent research has focussed on the short and longer-term impacts of participating in NCCAs, given the purported value of deliberation to those who participate in such events, and the potential wider societal impact of participants (e.g. UK and French national assemblies).

Some research has found that taking part in NCCAs does indeed provide AMs with:

- Effective opportunities for information acquisition, discussion and exchange of ideas, more nuanced consideration of interlinked challenges, constructive conversations about potential options (solutions, policy, etc.) (e.g. Andrews et al., 2022; Elstub et al., 2021a).
- Space and time for more reflective consideration of scientific and technical expertise, even reducing the influence of vested interests (Willis et al., 2022).
- Enjoyable and constructive experience for AMs who often express the desire for such opportunities to be available to other citizens also (Cherry et al., 2021).

Longitudinal research has found that taking part in the CA-UK had significant impacts on its AMs who indicated they were more concerned about climate change, that their views on climate-related issues had been affected by participating in the CA, that they had made changes to some of their behaviours, and that they supported the more frequent use of CAs (Elstub et al., 2023a). However, AMs were also less confident that their recommendations would affect policy and were less positive (than during the assembly) about their influence on parliamentary proceedings. A focus group on the topic of climate change with members of Ireland's Citizens' Assembly (after its conclusion) indicated that participants felt more of such events should take place, complemented by government leadership and ensuring output legitimacy (by including the CA's recommendations into government policy) (Devaney et al., 2020b).

Other studies have been more critical of the leaning towards consensus in CAs for producing recommendations; some researchers have argued for more opportunities for considering and communicating disagreement and alternatives (Duvic-Paoli, 2022; Ejsing et al., 2023; Machin, 2023). Such scholars maintain that allowing discussion stemming from disagreement is necessary to encourage political debate in democratic societies and for the consideration of alternatives, to prevent options from being closed down. Ejsing et al. (2023) argue that national climate assemblies are not a silver bullet as they focus on state politics as mechanisms of change; for more transformative change these could be combined with CAs at multiple sites and scales, over time.

Jacquet's (2017) work suggests that individuals are reticent to take part in DMPs when they do not see a link between the events and policymaking. Boullianne et al. (2018) demonstrated how discussion among citizens through various sessions of a local deliberative event in Canada over time reduced their enthusiasm for specific options, thus aligning their views more closely to those of the general population. A small-scale experimental design DMP (on regional planning in Finland) (Kulha et al., 2021) showed that deliberation can enhance participants' consideration of future generations and their wellbeing. Although it found a positive yet limited disposition for current participants to make some changes today for the benefit of future generations, overall the process enabled greater consideration of inter-generational justice in decision-making.

### ***2.3.2. On elite actors and institutions***

The corpus of publications included some that explored elite actors' views of CAs. Overall, such studies indicated that politicians perceive their expertise to have been challenged by such processes, and their roles and /or authority undermined; in some cases, they argue that CAs do not have the required legitimacy in decision-making processes.

For example, a study by Niessen (2019), drawing upon the regional example of the Citizen Climate Parliament (CCP) in the Belgian Province of Luxemburg, found politicians and other stakeholders were supportive of assemblies as consultative bodies; yet they felt challenged by the redistribution of power implied by this new form of decision-making. A study examining politicians' views on public engagement with policy, based on interviews with senior national ministers in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA (Hendriks & Lees-Marshment, 2019), found ambivalence: on the one hand they value public input to inform decisions, test advice, connect them to publics; on the other, they find such processes antagonistic (falling short of opportunities for constructive exchange). Another study in Finland, drawing upon an elite survey (of politicians, party officials, public official and representative of interest groups) responses in 2018 (i.e. before the climate citizens' jury was undertaken), found that elite views on deliberative fora were very different to those of citizens: elites indicated trust in these, only marginally, if they were to provide advice to politicians on which issues to prioritize, or provide a public statement (Koskimaa & Rapeli, 2020). The study also

found elites would not support a deliberative forum that imposed politicians vote in a specific manner on particular issues and that ‘elite’s trust towards citizens’ deliberative capacity decreases as the power of the deliberative body increases’ (Koskimaa & Rapeli, 2020, p. 644). Similarly, elites interviewed in Finland in 2018 maintained that the importance of citizen engagement through participatory mechanisms should not imperil existing representative institutions (Koskimaa et al., 2024). In addition to such concerns, other work drawing on interviews about CAs with elites and civil society representatives across European countries (Averchenkova & Ghilan, 2023) found reservations about the potential uncertainty in the ambition of CAs, the effect on other participatory processes, and potential discreditation of the assemblies due to mismanagement of the process or diverse expectations.

On occasions, DMPs can present politicians with an opportunity to take actions informed by citizens’ views, and sometimes even affect publics’ willingness to accept interventions that may have been deemed controversial (Willis et al., 2022). In fact, recommendations from deliberative events can be more radical than expected (e.g. Mulvad & Popp-Madsen, 2021 in relation to Ireland’s Citizens’ Assembly), such as calls for more permanent assemblies or follow-up events enabling further deliberation (NCCAs in some European countries have indeed called for such elements to be considered). However, this is not necessarily a given from such deliberations, as explored in section 2.3.3 below.

More recently, Smith (2024) has argued that attention should also focus on the wider repercussions of CAs on other institutions and their perspectives on climate change and citizen engagement. He provides three examples. Firstly, the CA-UK has instrumental, conceptual and capacity impact on the UK Climate Change Committee (UKCCC), whose Sixth Carbon Budget was shaped by the CA-UK’s recommendations. The UKCCC also commissioned a climate assembly to inform its work on decarbonization in the home (Ainscough & Willis, 2024). Secondly, the establishment of a permanent (rather than temporary) Joint Parliamentary Committee on Climate Action by the Irish parliament, following the presentation of the recommendations by Ireland’s Citizens’ Assembly, as a new institution, to continue this work. We note it has, however, recently been disbanded.<sup>2</sup> Thirdly, the elevation of the Danish Climate Assembly to the status of a social partner, which requires it to be consulted when its interests may be affected by policy development. The implication is that any policy related to the recommendations of the assembly will need to be considered, although this is still to be tested in practice.

### 2.3.3. On publics

Some research aims to understand whether CCAs have any influence on publics’ views about the assemblies themselves and/or the issues discussed. It has been argued, for example, that public engagement with the work of CAs may contribute to increased support for them and the topics they cover (e.g. Stasiak et al., 2021).

However, the findings are mixed. In the case of the CA-UK, research has shown that individuals informed of NCCA processes possess a higher trust in these and perceive them as important contributions to policymaking (Elstub et al., 2021a). This may be affected by external concurrent events. For example, Elstub et al. (2021a) show variable public awareness of the CA-UK although media coverage was quite high and positive. Similarly, media coverage of the French Citizens’ Convention for the Climate (Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat (CCC)) was widespread, including several TV productions. AMs were also allowed to engage with the media as they wished (Giraudet et al., 2022). However, a survey of CCC AMs and publics (Fabre et al., 2021) points to a somewhat less harmonious situation: whilst French publics supported all but one of the CCC’s recommendations, overall they had low awareness of the CCC, felt the CCC was not representative of publics (although selection of AMs was by sortition), were doubtful about the CCC’s AMs to deliberate effectively, and were sceptical about the government’s uptake of the recommendations (see also Giraudet et al., 2022). Through time, however, awareness of the CCC’s work did increase somewhat over the course of its deliberations, which seems to suggest that the effects of such events – including public engagement – may be cultivated and emerge over much longer time-scales (which we return to in the section below). Some CCC AMs became quite well known and stood for political office, and a subset of AMs set up a non-profit organization to monitor the impact of the French CCC (known as *Les 150*).

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<sup>2</sup><https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/committees/33/environment-and-climate-action/>



Media coverage of Ireland's Citizens' Assembly has also been shown to vary over time, and on climate reporting after the event (McGovern & Thorne, 2021). A survey of Irish citizens in early 2020 (potentially more likely to be aware of deliberative processes given the national experience) showed that those who are dissatisfied with the current system are more likely to support most types of political reform. Those who were already politically engaged were more likely to support and take part in reformed systems and favour deliberative approaches. The findings also indicate that participation in CAs may be correlated with capacity to participate (more education, higher political interest, etc.) and with dissatisfaction (perceived corruption and financial deterioration). Support for CAs (but not willingness to participate) was also found to be related to gender and ideology (women and left-wing respondents generally being more supportive) (Walsh & Elkind, 2021). This finding aligns with a Pew Research Center survey (2021) which revealed that half to two-thirds of respondents in four nations, who felt their political system needed reform, were also more favourable towards citizens assemblies; in France and the UK, those leaning towards the ideological left were more likely to say that creating citizens assemblies is very important. Party ideological leaning also seems to play an important role where dissent on local assemblies is manifest: a recent survey experiment in the UK found that respondents supported the assemblies sponsored by the party aligned with their political views when there was disagreement among the main council parties on whether to implement the assembly. This would seem to suggest that individuals' views may be affected where partisan dissent about assemblies is manifest. This in turn may affect the opportunities for building consensus in DMPs (if this is one of their objectives) (Kevins & Robinson, 2024). Other work has explored support for deliberation in general. A survey of 15 Western European countries found that deliberative CAs are most supported by less educated individuals, who express anti-elite sentiments and have a low sense of political competency – however, this is contingent upon expectations of a favourable outcome (i.e. reflecting their own preference about the policy issue debated) from the assembly (Pilet et al., 2023). Another study found that individuals with stronger populist attitudes support direct democracy more than those who do not express such attitudes (Mohrenberg et al., 2021). Other work has suggested that trust among publics in policies or other actions stemming from the CA deliberations may increase, as CAs have gone through processes of evidence scrutiny and discussion (Pow et al., 2020). Surveys with participants at a CCA in Gelderland (a province of The Netherlands) found a reduction in high populist attitudes among those who had taken part, although there was no evidence this was due to the quality of the deliberations (Jacobs, 2024).

Emerging findings, however, indicate that publics are often more interested in particular policy outcomes than the nature of deliberative processes. For example, Pilet et al. (2023) found that support for climate assemblies is dependent on a favourable outcome and that those least likely to take part in an assembly (i.e. individuals on lower incomes, less politically active) are more supportive of assemblies. The picture continues to be hazy: in contrast to the arguments made by deliberative democracy theorists, a mixed methods study in Finland (Koskimaa et al., 2024) indicated that politicians and public officials were doubtful about publics' ability to navigate the complexity of the participatory decision-making and favoured retaining their control over such processes as enshrined in representative democracies. More innovatively, CCAs have been trialled as educational tools for their methods (co-creation of participatory methods) and their impact (fostering civic and political engagement among students and opportunities to enact change in their communities) in secondary schools (Cebrián et al., 2024). Gradually other disciplines are also engaging with CAs (e.g. business studies, Pek, 2023).

#### **2.3.4. On policy-making**

Whilst democratic theorists have advocated for CAs as innovations in democratic decision-making, it has been argued that for them to be meaningful they need to have a clear influence on policy outcomes (e.g. HoL E&CC, 2022; also Van Dijk & Lefevere, 2023, an online study in Belgium).

Yet many CCAs are perceived by politicians and public administrators as merely advisory bodies largely (Willis et al., 2022), especially where there are no formal or previously agreed mechanisms for attending to or incorporating their recommendations into policymaking (with an impact on its influence on policy, Elstub et al., 2021a). Thus, some CCAs may only make modest contributions to innovation in climate politics and policymaking, where existing institutions are minimally challenged in their authority (Sandover et al., 2021). On the

other hand, the effects of the NCCAs may only be felt over long timescales, suggesting these factors should be considered for assessing impact (Torney, 2021). More recently, an analysis of the content of climate mitigation recommendations by ten NCCAs (and one CA held at the EU level) shows that many (39%) focus on reducing overall levels of consumption and production (which is a higher proportion than in national energy and climate plans). Yet these areas barely feature in actual policymaking, which raises questions about why the outcomes of deliberative events and policymaking diverge (Lage et al., 2023). Elstub and Carrick (2023b, p. 155) find from their research on the CA-UK, that assemblies' impact is circuitous and dependent on action by a variety of actors operating in different spheres: 'MPs and policymakers are more likely to act on recommendations from a citizens' assembly if the public is aware of the process but media reporting depends on action by policy-makers'. Elstub and Carrick (2023b) argue for greater accountability for the (non) uptake of assemblies' recommendations.

Blome and Hartlapp's (2023, p. 493) analysis of four deliberative events – including French and German NCCAs – indicates that '... while political support was important to the set-up of all four cases, our findings clearly show that this does not mean that governments want to share power with ordinary people'. Although the NCCAs they analysed were based on a political mandate, this was not a guarantee of uptake of the recommendations that they produced. The authors conclude that a rethinking and reworking of institutional design are required, supported by leaders and champions willing to challenge existing structures, to couple DMPs with legislative institutions (also Hendriks, 2016).

Where processes and structures enable CCAs and their outputs to be integrated into policymaking, the impact can nevertheless be substantial. It has been claimed that the existence and work of an all-parliamentary committee that responded to the recommendations by Ireland's Citizens' Assembly, largely endorsing and elaborating on these, was crucial in shaping the Irish government's 2019 Climate Action Plan (Devaney et al., 2020a). Part of the success of Ireland's Citizens' Assembly's climate recommendations was its support from social movements (including Extinction Rebellion) and wider society (Mulvad & Popp-Madsen, 2021). In other cases, the implementation of recommendations has been more limited (see KNOCA, 2024) which may be indicative of doubt about the value of DMPs among national policymakers, as for example in the UK (Ainscough & Willis, 2024)

Similar issues have been encountered at local levels. It is argued that by providing elected representatives a mandate for action, CAs create an opportunity for strong climate action to take place, e.g. investment by Oxford City Council following its assembly (Bryant & Stone, 2020). However, they may also perform a more perfunctory advisory role, with limited influence on climate action, perhaps even supporting existing processes and structures. For example, other work indicates that Oxford's CA was more consultative (discussion of pre-set topics) and provided the council a mandate for introducing actions that were already planned (Wells et al., 2021; see also Wells, 2022). This suggests that DMPs driven by political elites (public administrators and political representatives) in a top-down fashion risk being politically instrumentalized. Research on CAs elsewhere has highlighted similar issues. Oross et al.'s (2021) examination of what motivates actors to implement a CA suggests that the Citizens' Assembly in Budapest (Hungary) in 2020 was enacted for instrumental use and ideological consistency. Local politicians were the key drivers of the assembly, with some civil society input, to realize their election pledges of achieving local economic and sustainability aims.

To overcome such constraints, alternative formats are being trialled: e.g. the Brussels citizens' assembly – that ran in parallel to the parliament – promoted by the Agora movement party (Junius, 2023). Others have argued that for DMPs to be effective, they should be embedded in policy processes so that their use becomes routine (Ainscough & Willis, 2024). For instance, the 'Permanent Citizens' Dialogue' was created as an institutionalized deliberative process within regional government in the German-speaking Community of Belgium (Ostbelgien): it is permanent, has close links with parliament and with a permanent Citizens' Council whose role is in part to implement recurrent Citizens' Assemblies (Niessen & Reuchamps, 2022). Whilst this may be supplementing the electoral model and aiming to restore citizen trust and faith in existing democratic institutions, it has been critiqued as providing a legitimization of existing political leaders and a way of rescuing the traditional electoral model (Macq & Jacquet, 2023). Another option is to use DMPs as tools within organizations to explore and generate evidence to inform policymaking. A recent trial shows that this

may be possible, although it may limit the opportunities for more fundamental political and institutional reform (Ainscough & Willis, 2024).

### **2.3.5. On democratic theory and methods**

Boswell et al. (2023, p. 194) conclude from their analysis of the design of six climate assemblies, that the empirical experimentation in climate assemblies is '... running substantially ahead of theoretical discussion of DMPs' – a view that is generally supported by the present review. In particular, they find that the variation among NCCAs in how they connect to political institutions, civil society and existing debates challenges the view of assemblies as standardized events (a) feeding into governance processes and (b) having the opportunities and structures to do so. This finding highlights once again the uniqueness of each assembly within its contextual reality.

There is also a growing debate in the literature on the legitimacy of representative groups to propose recommendations for policy, considering methodological limitations in DMP participant selection and uptake, and democratic principles (section above). Rountree et al. (2022) refer to literature that cautions against a blind deference towards promoting the incorporation of DMP recommendations without some form of wider public deliberation. They also refer to other processes by which DMPs may bear influence on policymaking e.g. consulting with publics for items to be considered by voters in referendums; mobilising public debate on issues; 'market testing' policy proposals. A few studies have started to explore how the effects of taking part in a DMP may extend to wider publics/citizenry and whether the reports from DMPs may affect wider publics' deliberative capacity (Suiter et al., 2020 – see also Hendriks & Wagenaar, 2023). Methodological innovations for coupling DMPs with wider public input are being trialled. For example, the combination of producing, refining and deliberating proposals on energy transitions via deliberative mini-publics and larger-scale publics (maxi publics) in a sub region of The Netherlands (Itten & Mouter, 2022).

CAs are one way to further public participation and engagement. However, other approaches may be more appropriate e.g. participatory budgeting, collaborative governance (Chilvers et al., 2023) and could be used in combination, drawing upon the known strengths of assemblies as DMPs (e.g. Boswell et al., 2023; DMP in Vancouver, Beauvais & Warren, 2019). It has been proposed that democratic innovations may be applicable in the Global South in discussions around adaptation strategies (Galende-Sánchez & Sorman, 2021). However, caution has been expressed about DMPs' cultural appropriateness (e.g. Japan; Kainuma et al., 2024) and effectiveness (e.g. on participatory budgeting in South America; Buele et al., 2020; Legard & Goldfrank, 2021). However, more recently the value of CAs in some Brazilian cities to re-engage participation and re-invigorate democratic institutions has been observed, as well as their pragmatic approaches to impacting policymaking (Cervellini et al., 2024). Publics' involvement with climate change may be much more diverse and inter-related than dominant perspectives and narratives on participation may suggest (e.g. UK public participation with energy, Chilvers et al., 2021, 2023) which may provide other insights on bottom-up contributions to the governance of climate change.

## **3. Discussion**

This review has found that much of the academic literature manifests strong normative support for the notion that CAs are necessary to innovate democratic systems and improve decision-making through more direct public input, especially on complex topics such as climate change which require urgent attention. More recently such perspectives have been challenged, especially in light of the empirical experience of climate assemblies (mainly nationally and locally) and opportunities for examining their (arguably limited) impacts. There is, for example, widespread recognition that each CA is unique and context-specific. Although CAs are often considered to be representative of public views, it is recognized that these vary: participants contribute their existing perspectives and values, informed by information and deliberation, shaped by the assemblies' design and format, which bears upon the outcomes (Thorman & Capstick, 2022; Torney, 2021). This review has, however, found few papers that explain when and why NCCAs adopt the empirical form that they do.

Whilst some caution should be exercised on the generalizability of any findings from CAs (Courant, 2021). This review points to five main findings. Firstly, the flourishing of so many NCCAs is an acknowledgement of the inability of current democratic systems to address climate change effectively. Whilst the limited impact of NCCAs in terms of policy impact has laid bare the constraints of current governance systems in integrating deliberative approaches (Kübler et al., 2022), they have also raised the profile of public involvement. Indeed, a recent UK Government review on delivering net zero (Skidmore, 2022) refers to the CA-UK and urges government to learn from this and how publics' perspectives could be better understood and integrated into decision-making. Whilst some of the literature indicates that there is resistance towards NCCA formats that would supersede existing democratic structures, others have argued strongly that without reform of current systems enabling significant, direct, and considered public input, the climate crisis is unlikely to find meaningful resolution. Yet evaluations show that many of NCCAs' recommendations are not implemented (KNOCA, 2024). This begs the question of why this is the case, bringing to the fore the complexities and challenges of interactions existing between policymaking structures and democratic innovations, which Boswell et al. (2023) and others highlight. However, as mentioned earlier, others have cautioned against treating NCCAs as panaceas. Climate assembly events may hence need to grow in number and become more connected and durable, at a variety of scales. This, in turn, could instil, foster and promote greater deliberation and critical reflection amongst more diverse publics, within specific national contexts, to open up opportunities for thorough political discussion of diverging opinions, as well as for more creative change.

Secondly, there has been an emergence of more critical (self)reflection among academics and practitioners on the impact of such assemblies. As Courant (2021) argued, after an exuberant phase of experimentation now is an opportune moment to take stock and reflect on lessons learned from what has (not) been achieved thus far. Checklists have been devised to assist with the evaluation of assemblies, e.g. the Impact Evaluation Framework (Demski et al., 2024). It has been extensively acknowledged that NCCAs are often lengthy and resource-intensive processes and require careful and considered facilitation; on the other hand, the legacies of such events can be significant, with many unexpected, deeper, indirect and longer-term effects on participants, society and even broader policymaking (e.g. Torney, 2021).

Thirdly, once regarded as innovative NCCAs have themselves paved the way for new innovations: it is significant that CAs and CCAs are flourishing most actively at local levels (for example, Brussels and Milan now have permanent citizens' climate assemblies; XR, 2023; the London borough of Newham was the first UK council to create a permanent CA; Brown, 2022), feeding into informal processes (Ejlsing et al., 2023) and larger scales of decision-making (e.g. the London Just Transition, LSDC, 2023, p. 14).

Fourthly, the literatures specifically on NCCAs as well as on DMPs more broadly are challenging and stretching theoretical understandings, as democratic theorists review and respond to them (e.g. Lewis et al., 2023). For example, on internal and external champions that continue work after participating in DMPs, the extent to which they represent certain groups and their legitimacy for doing so. This review also points to concerns about inclusivity beyond national representativeness, such as the voices of those disproportionately affected (e.g. communities experiencing severe coastal change). Indeed, there have been calls for climate assemblies on adaptation (UKCCC, 2023). In addition, technological innovations (digital tools and platforms) allow diversifying options for undertaking of DMPs. However, this review also points to some scepticism among politicians and other elites about DMPs, especially related to calls for a reform of existing democratic systems, by shifting current decision-making power structures and processes.

Finally, this review also points to a limited understanding of: how and why NCCAs emerged almost exclusively in Europe, with Ireland's Citizens' Assembly paving the way; why they have flourished in such a short time period; and what were the conditions that led to their implementation (Oross et al., 2021; Wells et al., 2021) during a time of major change (COVID19 and public calls for faster climate action).

## 4. Conclusions

The literature reviewed above conveys palpable excitement about CCAs. NCCAs are perceived to have value: they are a growing focus of research from multiple perspectives, and many lessons are being drawn and

compiled by practitioners and academics alike. Trialling and testing are ongoing. Increasingly the literature points to the tensions emerging, especially when NCCAs fail to meet expectations.

The case for NCCAs resides in the notion that active, representative, citizen deliberation and participation are key to improving societal action on complex issues in national contemporary politics. If fully implemented, their recommendations would significantly re-shape policy, fostering greater public acceptance for change as well as advocating for a re-arranging of existing institutions and power structures.

Yet this review reveals that if the primary analytical focus is on the direct implementation of their recommendations, most NCCAs fall short of this ambition. Reasons for this shortfall include that: assemblies have not been given the political mandate to enable a full embedding of their advice; rightly or wrongly they are perceived as, at best, consultative (e.g. Koskimaa & Rapeli, 2020) and, at worst, co-opted events (see for instance, the lack of clarity and commitment on implementation of NCCA recommendations – e.g. Giraudet et al., 2022; changes in the post-recommendation context hinder their translation into policymaking).

More recently, as the number of empirical analyses of how assemblies actually function has grown, the tone of the debate has changed, becoming more reflective and critical. More probing questions are now being asked of the assemblies, coupled with a genuine acknowledgement of their diversity. Although they are often based on a common set of key design principles, no one size fits all: the contexts and purposes for undertaking NCCAs differ greatly, and consequently impact of the events themselves and their outcomes vary significantly. There have been issues around inclusivity in CCAs and representation (the perspectives of the disengaged in society are often not part of their deliberations) and questions have emerged on leadership (for instance by governments who institute CCAs as part of the revision of existing laws). In short, publics' engagement with assemblies has been varied, and politicians are not yet fully persuaded of how they could or should contribute to policymaking. NCCAs remain an overwhelmingly European phenomenon – although a few national citizens' assemblies (NCA) on other topics<sup>3</sup> have been held in South America and Asia. This suggests that NCAs are more feasible in some systems of government than others (although we note the tensions emerging from Brazilian and Japanese undertakings considered above). There is scope to examine the topic of feasibility in more detail in relation to the body of knowledge now rapidly emerging around NCCAs in the context of DMPs.

As with any other participatory event, setting out clearly the conditions and purposes of any assembly, and the commitment to follow through what is agreed at the outset, are paramount to ensure trust and participation. The literature has shown that the design and functioning of assemblies affects their influence in a variety of ways. This points to the importance of impact evaluation: although notoriously challenging to undertake due to the messiness of evidencing impact and the resource requirements, we support calls for assessments of format, process, outcomes and impacts of assemblies – over shorter and longer periods of time. Frameworks available are being applied (e.g. Fernández-Martínez and Bates (2023) on the Spanish NCCA). This may become increasingly important as notable shifts occur in the political landscape where responsibility for climate action is challenged in courts. Finally, NCCAs originally started as a project to overcome policy inertia on climate action and democratic disaffection. Advocates should be careful not to oversell their impacts, in case it accentuates societal disappointment in and disengagement from current forms of climate action.

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<sup>3</sup>See list of national assemblies: <https://www.buergerrat.de/en/citizens-assemblies/citizens-assemblies-worldwide/>

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