Discussion of Dimitri Courant's "Climate Deliberation: Comparing Ireland's Citizens' Assembly and France's Citizens' Convention"

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MOTIVATION

Important phenomenon: "numerous countries have been setting up citizens' assemblies to deal with the ecological question: England, Scotland, Wales, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, Denmark, etc."

This Paper

Descriptive account of citizens' assemblies in Ireland and France on climate policy.

Ireland:

– Two weekends of deliberations, 99 random citizens.

– Assemblies were managed by the Secretariat (civil servants), the Expert Advisory Group (academics) and the Chair (appointed by the government).

– The EAG, the Chair and the secretariat prepared questions that the citizens voted by secret ballot.

– The assembly produced pro-climate but fairly vague recommendations.

– Parliament responded by establishing a committee that led to a "government action plan on climate change" in 2019.

This Paper

Descriptive account of citizens' assemblies in Ireland and France on climate policy.

France:

– Seven sessions, 150 random citizens.

– The assembly was managed by a Governance Committee (selected by the CESE, an independent government consultative assembly; it included activists and academics) and a Guarantor College (selected by the CESE and the legislature).

– Citizens were divided into five groups that specialized in different issues.

– The assembly approved 149 policy proposals.

– In 2021 the parliament enacted a bill including a watered-down version of many of the proposals.

MAIN TAKEAWAYS

Procedure differs across assemblies and may matter a lot. It clearly constrains deliberation and proposal power by the citizens.

"Meta-deliberation" may be as important as deliberation.

The nature of the issue and the political context may explain why a citizen assembly is initiated, and what happens to the assembly's recommendation.

CAUSAL STORY?

	Crisis and criticism	Institutional context	Activists' ideas and actions	Elites' interests and strategies
ICA	Economic and political crisis linked to subprimes; a socially conservative Constitution	Parliamentary system and compulsory referendum in order to amend the Constitution	Pilot project run by *We The Citizens* and lobbying of elected representatives; transfer	Legitimization, blame avoidance in relation to societal issues; delegation of subjects which were divisive to the governmental coalition
GDN	Gilets jaunes social movement[12]	Presidential system	Gilet jaunes demanded democratic reforms	Legitimization; occupation of media space; constitution of a "polite public"; European elections
C3	Gilets jaunes and climate marches	Presidential system	"Gilets citoyens" and DO lobbied to advance the idea of a deliberative system and take a position within it	Legitimization, notably on the democratic ecological levels; blame avoidance; municipal elections

Table 3.2. *Comparison of the processes by which the mini-publics came about*

Third column: interesting but no explicit evidence of these claims.

Theoretical Questions

– **What are the incentives of politicians** to organize citizens' assemblies?
  – There is some theory about referenda (e.g., Buisseret and Van Weelden 2024).
  – How do citizen assemblies differ from referenda from the point of view of politicians?
  – Important difference: the management of information that the citizens receive.

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– **How does the "blame avoidance" logic work?**
  – Intuition: government wants to implement policy X that is unpopular; but a citizen assembly will find it popular, so the government can "blame" the assembly.
  – But why would the assembly support a policy that is unpopular? And if the assembly's decision is non-binding, why would the public not find the government responsible for the policy?

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– **What are the incentives of activists** to demand a citizens assembly rather than directly lobby for their preferred policies?
  – Maybe they believe that it is easier/cheaper to convince the "minipublic" than the general public? Or they believe that the experts picked by the assembly's organizers will be aligned.

Theoretical Questions

– **What is the scope for manipulation of the outcome?**
  – The organizers control the agenda and the information flows of the assembly. How much power does that give them? It may depend on the complexity or the "dimensionality" of the issue.

– **Is there a tradeoff between manipulation and legitimacy?**
  – If politicians bias the design too much, the public may notice, and the gains from the legitimacy of the recommendation may be diluted.

Empirical Questions

– **Under what conditions do we see citizen assemblies?**
  – Are citizen assemblies more likely to emerge after political crises?
  – Are governments with weak support from the legislature more likely to initiate assemblies?
  – Are activists able to lobby for assemblies?
  – Does the issue matter? Hypothesis: governments more likely to call an assembly about issues that divide the base of the opposition party.

– **Do citizen assemblies produce systematically more stringent climate policies** than legislatures or international agreements?
  – Do they provide better distributional outcomes? Do they rely on more efficient policy instruments?

– **How does structure affect outcomes?**
  – Do design features of the assemblies predict systematic differences in outcomes?

Conclusion

Very interesting paper. It highlights the importance of the structure and the political context of the assemblies.

There seem to be lots of open questions in this area.

I'd like to see more work on this.