

Climate change and social justice: French citizens put forward their suggestions

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In response to the demand for participatory democracy expressed by the “Yellow Jackets”, the French president instigated a gathering of 150 citizens with a mandate to propose solutions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The initiative came to an end in June 2020 with the presentation of 146 proposals. Although the method is viewed as a success, its results regarding climate change are more mixed and will have to be judged by their capacity to generate policies, at national and subnational level. The initial project to fit these suggestions into a social justice approach has however not been fulfilled.

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Description

How can we achieve a 40% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 in a spirit of social justice? This question, which was put to 150 randomly selected French citizens for the “Citizens’ Convention on Climate”, is in fact a response to three key cross-cutting challenges facing French society: i) the concerns expressed during the “Yellow Jackets” crisis (November 2019–March 2020), which erupted following the government’s decision to levy a carbon tax that would have put the onus of the ecological transition on the working and middle classes; ii) the new focus on public opinion following the “Great Debate” (a widespread consultation of citizens organised by the government from 15 January to 15 March 2019 in response to the “Yellow Jackets” crisis); iii) concerns raised by the risks and uncertainties of climate change. The social justice objective was expressed in the following initial intention: “Our proposals will aim to promote a circular, social and inclusive economy. The results of the Convention must allow all individuals to get involved to the extent of their capacities”.

The 150 participants met seven times in Paris for three days, from October 2019 to June 2020. The project included a Governance Committee comprising three independent members of the government, three guarantors to check the independence of participants, observers from academic research, and “fact-checkers” from universities to provide answers to participants’ questions. A platform received contributions from the general public.

Each session included hearings and exchanges of views. The final report, presented to the French President on 21 June 2020, further developed 146 proposals.

46 proposals concern **food**. They centre on a renegotiation of the *Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement* (CETA) and an introduction of agro-ecological criteria in the next reform of the Common Agricultural Policy. They call for a ban on advertisements for high-fat food and the promotion of short food supply chains and organic food. Three proposals take a social approach in suggesting the use of vouchers for local canteens and food vouchers to enable low-income families to buy organic and local produce.

Proposals on **transport** place an emphasis on using clean cars and bicycles, car-sharing, low-energy mobility plans, reduced air transport, and more rail and river freight instead of road freight. These transport-related proposals feature more social measures (7 proposals out of 43): mobility bonuses and allowances for large families, young people and low-income households.

In addition to an extension of teleworking, the **work-production**-related proposals focus on an increase in renewable energy sources (21 proposals, none of which take a social approach).

In the **housing** area, the priority is thermal renovation, along with spatial planning to protect natural areas. Of the 21 proposals in this domain, two concern financial aid for housing renovations for the poorest households and rural areas.

The report also covers **consumer education** (11 proposals with no specific social criteria) and ends with four proposals to **modify the Constitution** to include the preservation of biodiversity, the environment, and the fight against climate change.

As soon as the report was published, the Council for Ecological Defence enacted the principle of thermal renovation for buildings, measures to tackle land degradation, and the creation of two new regional parks. A Bill planned in late October 2020 should include measures on the development of the rail sector and an energy renovation plan for schools and care homes for the elderly. The French President declared that he would like to see the fight against climate change written into the Constitution "as soon as possible" in a process of constitutional revision by referendum.

Outlook and commentary

The existence and operation of this convention show that tools to develop participatory democracy are both feasible and worthwhile. Most associations, trade unions and political parties that expressed any doubts at the start of the citizens' conference have ultimately praised its committed approach. The 150 randomly selected citizens proved themselves capable of working together on technical and political subjects to agree on the final production of a report covering a very broad set of recommendations. This successful

experiment could be repeated on other themes.

While the initial mandate clearly indicated that the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions should be achieved "in a spirit of social justice", this instruction appears to have been gradually put aside. In the end, only 8% of the proposals apply this social approach in a relatively standard way, mostly with the suggestion that low-income families should be compensated for additional costs generated by the ecological transition through bonus payments. The fact that the Citizens' Convention did not address the way in which the ecological transition will be financed means that the question of whether inequalities should be best dealt with through direct or indirect taxes was not discussed. In addition, very few of the experts who assisted the citizens in their work came from a social policy background. We nevertheless suppose that these citizens proposing measures to improve the quality of life and survival of the entire French population considered that their suggestions would necessarily improve the lives of its poorest members.

Although taken as a whole the proposals constitute a solid ecological programme, individually they do not feature any real innovations. Apart from its novel form, the real success of this initiative will not lie in the application of any single measure, but rather in its overall capacity to sow the seeds of future national and subnational policies before the end of the five-year presidential term.

Further reading

Final report, "[Les propositions de la convention citoyenne pour le climat](#)" [Proposals in the citizens' convention on climate], corrected version dated 20 July 2020, 231 p.

All of the work produced by the convention is available at: <https://www.conventioncitoyennepourleclimat.fr/>

ESPN Flash Report 2019/18, "[What changes has the Yellow Jacket movement triggered in French social protection and tax systems?](#)", European Social Policy Network (ESPN), Brussels: European Commission.

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