

ENGAGING SOCIETY FOR SUSTAINABILITY

The essential role of participative and deliberative democracy

An article of the Swiss Association of MBAs



SASCHA NICK
Author

Do we need more democracy?

Our multiple crises, especially of biodiversity, climate, social inclusion, health, and ultimately purpose, all of them created (and still being made worse) by human action, show that our collective governance is failing to solve the problems, even failing to stop digging the hole we're in.

There is little confidence in the "system" - yet limited understanding that its properties "emerge", i.e. are the result of our collective interactions, our mental models, implicit goals (power, economic growth, consumption - pick your favorite), power relations, information flows, and structural elements such as stocks, flows, buffers, delays, feedback loops, etc. Each of these elements could be a more or less powerful leverage point for system change, given effective governance.

Democracy is just a governance tool, and based on the above, it is failing to deliver results, even in highly democratic societies like Switzerland. Why? Let's take a moment to think about it.

Let me provide food for thought: which elements of democracy are linked to system structure, such as checks and balances designed for stability? Which are linked to mental models or worldviews, ranging from a culture of consensus, all the way to how people think of a good society, or the role of markets or companies in such a society? Often essential elements are not discussed at all, as obvious to all, i.e. most people see fundamental choices as immutable, instead of a collective choice.



There are also much more basic reasons democracy is failing to make “better” decisions, i.e. decisions that would start solving the crises: rising complexity of issues, more distractions drowning out important information, and the associated culture of (over-)simplifying every problem to tweet-size soundbites. There is also polarization in society where adopting a group position becomes a shortcut for actual thinking, and to a large and growing extent misinformation and fake news.

Designing a “better” democracy

Science provides a robust analysis of almost all major issues of society, mostly well-structured and perfectly clear to anyone willing to take the time and make the effort to understand. Especially on climate, biodiversity, systems science, wellbeing and human needs, and major planetary processes, we know more than enough to act effectively today. In some cases, this knowledge has been available for over 50 years - please remember “Silent Spring” (1962), or “Limits to Growth” (1972). What is lacking is effective decision-making.

So we started looking for inspiration about decision-making processes which have proven effective with complex, divisive issues. Citizens’ assemblies, conducted dozens of times since the 1980s in many countries and on many topics, have almost always delivered high-quality decisions, and a real change in the way participants think about complex issues. A typical citizens’ assembly involves around 100 people, and consists of a learning phase and deliberation, where

participants together formulate proposals and finally vote anonymously, producing collective recommendations.

The main challenge of citizens’ assemblies is getting the recommendations accepted by the broader society, which has not been involved in this process. So we looked for ways to make an assembly scale to engage the whole population.

As we define it on our website, the **Academic Citizens’ Assembly** (ACA) is a model of a citizens’ assembly built on academic principles (evidence-based, lobby-free, no ideology), open to the whole society and, using a novel process and tools, scalable to potentially include millions of participants.

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This deliberative and participative approach builds on the Swiss tradition of direct democracy, and aims to bridge the gap between high-quality deliberation and decision-making of past citizens' assemblies, and the legitimacy of direct democracy.

The first prototype, online in June 2021, used a manual proposal sharing and voting process; the second ACA in April 2022 deployed the fully scalable process and tools for the first time. The results are detailed on the [ACA 2022 webpage](#) and in the [ACA 2022 report](#).

Recommendations of the ACA 2022

On Saturday, April 2nd 2022, we conducted an assembly on "Climate action, the way forward - Building a societal consensus for 1.5°C". Here are my favorite recommendations with significant climate impact (the [ACA 2022 report](#) lists all 40):

Transport + Urban Planning:

1. Concept of 15' city: everything reachable within 15' + Encourage sust. urban planning: services, living & work are concentrated.
2. Encourage biking/walking by replacing car lanes with bike/pedestrian spaces and trees + Improve bike culture/skills/behaviors.
3. Reallocate climate-harmful transport subsidies towards clean and affordable transportation.

Agriculture + Food:

4. Adapt food-type consumption to anticipated future conditions: much less meat, select climate-resistant crops.
5. Link subsidies to good farming practices (biodiversity and carbon footprint) + Carbon tax on imported food.
6. Reduce meat consumption in schools by introducing progressively more vegan options, until 100% vegan, bio, regional, seasonal.

Education + Engagement:

7. Every Swiss resident (CH, permit B, C) participates in a Citizens Assembly organized by municipality (1 day off/year).
8. A quota in mainstream media (some minutes per day, advertising space) to raise awareness on climate change and on solutions.

9. Promote culture and arts to change paradigm from consumption society to sustainable one; different media (movie, books, theater).

Buildings:

10. Replace housing heating in Switzerland within 5 years.



What will happen next?

The next mini-ACA ([WS II/4: "Academic Citizens' Assembly zum Ausprobieren"](#)) will be part of the [K3 Kongress zu Klimakommunikation](#) on 14.09.2022 in Zurich.

For the ACA 2023, we are looking for organizations and their suitable pressing issues - if you'd like to discuss or have suggestions, please let us know ([ACA > contact](#)).

About the Author

Sascha NICK is the initiator of the Academic Citizens' Assembly, professor of sustainability at Business School Lausanne, researcher in societal transitions at EPFL, and founder of CO2-monitor AG.

email: sascha.nick@epfl.ch