

Academic Citizens' Assembly 2022: a way for better decision-making on complex and divisive issues? Interview with Sascha Nick, Researcher in societal transitions

The Academic Citizens' Assembly [ACA 2022](#) [Registration](#) [Concept](#) [Past Editions](#) [Contact](#)

21st century democratic decision-making for the Swiss societal transition.

Join us for the next edition on Saturday 02.04.2022

Imagined by EPFL and BSL

Posted on March 15, 2022

CATEGORY:

[News](#)

OTHER NEWS & ARTICLES:

[← PREV: Décarbonation par les grands gérants de portefeuilles. Quelle stratégie privilégier: exclusion ou engagement ? Décryptage avec Eric Jondeau](#)

This article is related to Sascha Nick's presentation "Academic Citizens' Assembly: reinventing direct democracy for today's challenges", Episode 2 of our CLIMACT Seminar Series. Watch [Episode 2](#).

[Register](#) for the upcoming "Academic Citizens' Assembly 2022" taking place on April 2nd.

What is a citizen assembly? What is the origin of the concept and the immediate and long-term overall objectives?

A citizens' assembly (CA) is a process where a representative group of citizens come together to deliberate, learn, write proposals, and vote to select a set of recommendations on important issues for society. The first assemblies, initially called citizens' committees, panels, juries, or deliberative polls started in the 1980s, and gained wide prominence in the 2000s. Dozens of CA have been organized since, for example in France, Germany, Poland, UK, US, Canada, Ireland, Denmark, Netherlands, Belgium, and Switzerland.

Representativity is typically ensured by a selection process called sortition, which randomly selects participants while ensuring the appropriate balance by sex, age, education, and sometimes other factors like nationality, income, ethnicity, political views, place of residence, etc. Typically, a CA includes around 100 participants.

The objective of any CA is better decision-making on complex and divisive issues. "Better" decision-making means that a fully inclusive group of well-informed people, free of the influence of lobbies and fake news, engaged and knowing their voices count, reach politically legitimate decisions.

" We will look for climate actions with broad acceptance, supported by 75% of participants, which could be implemented immediately. "



Sascha Nick – Researcher in societal transitions at the Laboratory of Environmental and Urban Economics | EPFL

While the recommendations of CAs are systematically of high quality, the main challenge has been integrating the results in the political process via parliament, initiatives or referendum. This is because the voters or politicians making decisions weren't part of the CA and haven't learned and debated in the same way.

On April 2nd 2022, you are organizing an Academic Citizens' Assembly. How does it differ from the classic concept and who should participate?

The Academic Citizens' Assembly (ACA 2022) on April 2nd is a small-scale version of a future universal CA, which would ensure representativity by full inclusion of all residents over 14 years old, of a city, canton, or country.

To include potentially millions of people, we redesigned the process of idea convergence and appropriate IT tools. In a small assembly, all participants vote on all proposals. At this scale, hundreds of thousands of votes per person would be needed, which is an impossible task. Therefore, proposals are shown to random subgroups and the expanding is based on positive votes.

Only the best-accepted proposals are shown to a high number of participants. And only the final vote on the output of the ACA involves all participants, using a process called "Quadratic Voting". It allows people to support proposals they really care about in a stronger way, but limits the ability of a small number of passionate supporters to hijack the whole group. This full final vote ensures democratic legitimacy.

The April 2022 ACA will be smaller, but will use the same scalable processes and tools that would be used in a country-wide assembly.

ACA 2022 is open to all people interested in Swiss climate action and policy. It is academic by its guiding principles: evidence-based, lobby-free, no ideology. We encourage anyone from academia, arts, administrations, civil society, and companies to participate. It will take place simultaneously at EPFL and online. Since people from all over Switzerland will join, it will be held in English.

What specific topics will you discuss and what concrete outcomes do you expect?

Our topic is "Climate action, the way forward – Building a societal consensus for 1.5°C". More specifically, we will look for climate actions with broad acceptance, supported by 75% of participants, which could be implemented immediately.

Actions with lower support will be discussed again next year, as will new ideas. Over time, opinions change, and deliberation in CAs is especially effective in getting the collective opinion to evolve. Following the referendum on the CO₂ law held in June 2021, which split the country in two, there has been little progress in Swiss climate policy. ACA offers a pragmatic way forward.

We aim for two results: a set of broadly supported recommendations to share with public administrations, policymakers, and the media, as well as validation for the ACA process and tools to use in future full-scale assemblies in cities, on climate action and other important municipal issues.

What is the added value of citizens' assemblies? How does it complement the Swiss democratic system?

Switzerland is the ideal country to deploy CAs, given its tradition of direct democracy. However, as issues get more complex and harder for non-experts to grasp, the voters become susceptible to misinformation or fake news, and urgent problems like climate change and biodiversity loss are not being properly addressed.

Open deliberation based on verifiable information leads to both much deeper understanding of issues and better engagement of participants, as proven in dozens of successful CAs.

By making assemblies universally inclusive, the ACA will bring this improved understanding and engagement to the broader Swiss population, and ultimately help Switzerland to better address climate change, biodiversity loss and other important society issues.

The Academic Citizens' Assembly could make direct democracy more effective and better complement federal and cantonal parliaments, as well as communal action, as the ACA recommendations may be more consistent and easier to implement than today's initiatives.

Sascha Nick is Researcher in societal transitions at the Laboratory of Environmental and Urban Economics at the EPFL. More about the upcoming Academic Citizens' Assembly 2022. Register [here](#).

More about CLIMACT :