

Results and insights of the April 2022 Academic Citizens' Assembly

This report summarizes the process, results, and insights of the Academic Citizens' Assembly held at EPFL and online on Saturday 02.04.2022: academiccitizensassembly.ch

The Academic Citizens' Assembly

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

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A draft of this report was sent on 12.04.2022 to all participants for comments and suggestions; numerous suggestions were received and integrated in the final report. Thanks to all participants who contributed.

1. Context and goals

The second **Academic Citizens' Assembly** (ACA) took place on Saturday 02.04.2022 at EPFL and online, on the topic of “Climate action, the way forward: Building a societal consensus for 1.5°C”, with two distinct goals:

- Propose climate actions supported by a large majority (>75%) of participants
- Test the process and tools for a future universal assembly, scaling to include the whole population

Since the 1980s, citizens' assemblies have been successfully conducted dozens of times in many countries, almost always leading to recommendations of high quality. Most assemblies had between 20 and 150 participants, and the main challenge was acting on the result by the government, parliament, or popular referendum. To overcome this issue, the Academic Citizens' Assembly is specifically designed to scale to hundreds of thousands of participants, building on the Swiss tradition of participatory direct democracy.

ACA 2022 was open to academia, arts, administrations, civil society, and companies, and entirely based on academic principles: evidence-based, lobby-free, no ideology. Differently from many assemblies, interest groups do not get a special platform during the preparation phase, which is limited to science-based information.

Citizens' assemblies ensure representativity by a process called, “stratified sortition”, where participants are randomly selected to maintain a representative proportion of all subgroups considered significant, such as age, gender, education, and sometimes nationality, income, size of city, political views or other. In contrast, the ACA is designed to be representative by full inclusion. ACA 2022, being small scale, was not representative in this sense, as participants were self-selected from the mostly academic and climate communities we could reach.

The main partners of ACA 2022 were EPFL and Business School Lausanne (BSL), additional support was provided by CLIMACT, E4S, and EPFL Sustainability.

2. Structure, process, and tools

The 2022 ACA was a one-day assembly, 9-17h, simultaneously in person at EPFL and online. The opening and closing plenary sessions were hybrid EPFL+online; group deliberation and proposal writing was in fixed groups, voting was individual and anonymous. Each group was entirely in-person or online.

A short “Introduction to Climate Action”, preparatory material summarizing most relevant scientific knowledge was shared with participants, presented and discussed in an online workshop 8 days earlier on 25.03.2022. The document and video recording were shared with participants who missed this workshop.

The physical infrastructure was a 218-seat amphitheater at EPFL and several breakout rooms; online groups used Zoom breakout rooms. Coffee and lunch were provided in the restaurant located in the same building.

The opening and closing plenaries lasted around 40 min each, between which were three group sessions of 90 min each. Each group selected a facilitator and an observer; these roles typically changed every session.

The whole process was designed to converge, with best-voted results of one session being the input for the next one, from which each group could choose what they wished to work on, with the purpose to go in depth on the most promising proposals.

In addition to the preparatory material and workshop, all participants received a participants' guide prior to the ACA. Each group had access to an online group folder, containing a group discussion document (notes and formulation of proposals), a “Convergence Document” (results of previous votes to better focus group work in each session), and an observer sheet (to capture group dynamics, inclusion, and nature of deliberation).

Access to proposal voting software (pol.is) and final quadratic voting software (qv.geek.sg) was provided in a “Tools” section on the ACA website.

3. Participation - surveys, statistics, observers

ACA 2022 had a total of **70 participants in 8 groups**: 53 people in 6 groups of 8 or 9 were present in person, and 17 people in two groups of 8 and 9 were online.

Based on the **opening survey** (67 responses), participants were 52% female, 48% male; broadly representative in terms of age (except: no children, and age 25-49 overrepresented with 57%); highly educated (10% bachelor, 60% masters degree, 30% PhD); 92% Swiss residents and 65% residents for >10 years, 60% Swiss citizens. Only 18% had in-depth knowledge or had participated in citizens' assemblies; 45% "had an idea", and 28% never heard of them before the ACA. To enable Swiss-wide participation without translation, ACA 2022 was held in English; this obviously affected the self-selection of participants, those present generally had a high English proficiency, with 34% at C2 and 28% at C1 levels.

Proposal writing and voting statistics - total **216 proposals** submitted, **11'971 votes** cast:

- Session 1: 83 proposals submitted, 4254 votes cast
- Session 2: 68 proposals submitted, 4096 votes cast
- Session 3: 65 proposals submitted, 3621 votes cast

The **closing survey** shows high inclusion and respect:

(59 responses, range (lowest to highest vote) 0-10, "mode" is most common reply, in-person participants slightly overrepresented with 80%)

- 97% participated in all three sessions
- Overall organization: average 7.20, with 29% voting "7" and "8" each
- "Was the goal of the ACA clear to you?": range 4-10, average 6.73, mode 7
- "Was the process of the ACA clear to you?", range 3-10, average 6.56, mode 8
- Group size (8-9 people) was generally considered optimal; yet for a short assembly, 5-6 might be better
- "Did the voting work well?", range 5-10, average 7.05, mode 8
- "Could you express yourself, and were you heard?", range 7-10, average 8.69, mode 10
- "Were you treated with respect?", range 9-10, average 9.85, mode 10
- "Did you learn about climate action, during preparation and the ACA itself?", range 5-10, average 6.64, mode 8
- "Did you develop an appreciation / empathy for different perspectives?", range 5-10, average 6.90, mode 8
- "How would you rate the quality or proposals developed by your group?", range 4-10, average 6.53, modes 6, 7
- Most people reposted feeling well / great, collaborative, relaxed, stimulated, listened to, tired
- 91% are willing to be contacted for clarification, 44% are willing to help organize the next edition

An analysis of all 24 **observers' sheets** (8 groups, 3 sessions, total 24 sessions) indicates good quality of discussions:

- The atmosphere was relaxed 63%, mixed 37%, tense 0%
- Soft power prevailed 96% (71% rather, 25% clearly), only 4% of time hard power prevailed
- Symmetry of the discussions during the session (participants treated each other as equals): 80% (38% very symmetric, 42% symmetric)
- Participants were open to change positions 96% of the time
- Participants provided justifications for their claims: mostly 88%, about half the time 12%
- Reciprocal discussions during the session: mostly 58%, about half 13%, no justification 29%
- Facilitators provided active facilitation 96% of the time
- Polarization occurred about 25% of the time, evenly split between 2 and 3 polarized sub-groups

4. Voting results

In light of the ACA 2022 goals, session and final voting results are listed, slightly edited for clarity, typos corrected.

Focus: Transport+Urban Planning-Agriculture+Food-Education+Engagement-Buildings-Investments

Session 1: # of proposals >75% accepted and >50 people voted: **23**, top proposals (grouped and shortened):

1. Reallocate climate-harmful transport subsidies towards clean and affordable transportation
2. Encourage biking and walking by replacing car lanes with bike and pedestrian spaces trees + Improve bike culture/skills/behaviors
3. Concept of city in 15'. Everything reachable within 15' + Encourage sust. urban planning (services, living & work are concentrated)
4. Promote good food production practices, Reduction of pesticides and fertilizers, education of farmers in alternatives
5. Encourage through education to grow local gardens
6. Food labeling system for carbon emissions of food + Carbon tax on imported food
7. A quota in mainstream media (some minutes per day, advertising space) to raise awareness on climate change and on solutions
8. Engage young adults into an "Environmental service" (like civil service)

Worth mentioning, slightly below the 75% threshold:

9. Replace housing heating in Switzerland within 5 years (73%)
10. Fund the production of cultural life (or events) that promote a sustainable lifestyle (73%)

Session 2: # of proposals >75% accepted and >40 people voted: **21**, top proposals (grouped and shortened):

11. Cultural change: Citizen assemblies with random selection for bottom-up solutions and build consensus for local policies for sust.
12. Include young people in decision-making on environmental issues, consult schools to pass binding resolutions
13. We need to create a new paradigm shifting from a material growth economy to a social service based economy
14. National day for sustainable policy, organize discussion events around the country and create working groups for local policy
15. Promote culture and arts to change paradigm from consumption society to sustainable one; different media (movie, books, theater)
16. Training: Mandatory training for public employees on sustainability issues, mentorship, consider sufficiency
17. Change public investment rules to make sustainability criteria the most important
18. Filling the gaps in public transport (shuttle from stations to factories) + Increase frequency and service coverage to rural / suburban
19. Distance work: coworking spaces available in residence proximity, local communities enable it through re-zoning

Worth mentioning, slightly below the 75% threshold:

20. Advertisement: Banning commercial products ads in public space and use spaces for free cultural events (71%)

Session 3: # of proposals >75% accepted and >50 people voted: **21**, top proposals (grouped and shortened):

21. Raising awareness: Every Swiss resident (CH, permit B, C) participates in a Citizens Assembly organized by municipality
22. Climate Change Citizens assembly event for younger generations regionally/nationally
23. invest in more comprehensive climate change & planetary boundaries education in schools + Involve youth in syllabus generation
24. Implement a 4-day working week and dedicate the 5th one for sustainability projects (environmental and social)
25. Enforce that any project supported by public funds is based on sustainability criteria
26. Legally impose that Swiss banks and insurance companies gradually move their investments to carbon-free + add to SNB mandate
27. Adopt Paris/NL model of expanding bike lanes and replacing car lanes with bike lanes
28. Link subsidies to good farming practices (biodiversity and carbon footprint) + shift from large-scale to micro-farming
29. Reduce meat consumption in schools by introducing progressively more vegan options, until 100% vegan, bio, regional, seasonal
30. Adapt food-type consumption to anticipated future conditions (much less meat, select climate-resistant crops)

Final quadratic voting (participants allocate 100 points each, per proposal 1 vote "costs" 1 point, 2 votes: 4 points, 3 votes: 9 points etc.. Most participants allocated 2-4 votes per proposal they supported, over 5 votes were extremely rare, details in the Annex):

31. Enforce that any project supported by public funds is based on sustainability criteria (guided by experts), 163 votes
32. Link subsidies with good farming practices (biodiversity and carbon footprint), 139 votes
33. Make part of the Swiss National Bank mandate to decarbonize their portfolios (in addition to financial security), 126 votes
34. Legally impose that swiss banks (especially BNS) gradually move their investments to carbon-free alternatives, 120 votes
35. Every Swiss resident (CH, permit B, C) participates in a Citizens Assembly organized by municipality (1 day off/year), 114 votes
36. Add sustainability as an obligatory subject to the school curriculum (primary, secondary schools), 111 votes.
37. Banks must follow certain (inter)national env. sustainability standards before placing investments, 102 votes
38. Adapt food-type consumption to anticipated future conditions (much less meat, select climate-resistant crops), 99 votes
39. Increase investment into schools for more comprehensive education in climate change & planetary boundaries, 95 votes
40. Incentivize (e.g. label or taxation) companies to decarbonize their business operations, 91 votes

5. Discussion - insights and learnings

What can we conclude about the effectiveness of the ACA 2022?

Based on this analysis, especially clarity of goals and process, inclusion and respect, as well as multiple quality-of-discussion observers' indicators, the pertinence of proposals, and the functioning of a complex tool setup, with limited time and a small team, we conclude that the proposed process and voting tools worked well.

With every element of this process and tools scalable, we can reasonably expect the whole ACA to be scalable to city- or country-wide size with minor adaptations. Deployment and distribution of the polling and quadratic voting software on a local server would allow faster report generation, improve stability of links, and the possibility of customization such as character limit (140 in the standard version we used) or number of votes per person. The organizers would be more effective if process and technical roles (voting, participation, audiovisual) were completely separated; this was only partially the case here. The schedule should ensure sufficient time to read, understand, and vote on each proposal. Step-by-step instructions indicating timing and which tools to use will save time, especially in the first session.

The convergence process, to produce a short list of proposals reflecting all the highly voted ideas, may require more time and manual input; it cannot be completely automated. For future assemblies, we recommend one of two possible options:

1. Similar statements could be grouped by an independent panel, clearly documenting what was grouped. Such grouping would save time and reduce possible confusion.
2. If grouping of similar proposals cannot be done in a legitimate way, more (partially overlapping) proposals could be included, perhaps 30, as long as each selected proposal got at least 75% of the vote. This process would produce longer convergence documents, but would provide a broader and more legitimate basis for the following session.

This issue of eliminating highly-voted proposals happened after session 1, in this case related to food, and again after session 2. This led several participants to request a correction, which was briefly discussed in an unplanned mini-plenary lasting about 10 minutes. It was a self-correcting process, requesting the inclusion in session 3 of deliberation of both food (discussed at length in session 1) and bank regulation (not previously discussed). Concerned that even slightly modifying the process mid-assembly was dangerous, we collectively decided to remain focused on previously accepted proposals. Yet two groups “disobeyed”, proposing bank regulation, which was widely accepted by voting participants. As a result, proposals 33-34-37, while democratically robust, did not follow the convergence process. We believe that adapting the convergence process as above will solve the issue.

This is a very interesting case of democratic and academic legitimacy diverging, the first being strongly felt by participants and fully respected, the second being limited by groups diverging from the agreed process. As organizers, we recommend de-emphasizing proposals 33-34-37 in the communication of results.

Regarding the topic selection, a narrower topic than “Swiss climate action” (which touches absolutely all aspects of society) would have helped participants focus and avoid that groups start somewhere almost by accident and have difficulties getting beyond the initial sub-topic. In session 1, several groups almost entirely focused on mobility, inspired by the FOEN charts showing highest emissions in this sector, neglecting areas they later felt should have been included. With a narrower topic, preparation would be simplified and could be made more specific. Additionally, any essential subtopic that must be included should be explicitly part of the “mandate” of working groups, with adequate preparation, especially for issues which are important but mostly ignored by the general public. An overview of existing solutions at communal, cantonal, and federal levels should be included.

This is a clear recommendation for future assemblies, and will avoid the need for later “corrections”.

Somewhat counterintuitive for a multilingual society like Switzerland, the use of English outside academia surprised a few actual and potential participants. This is obviously a matter of (a potentially big) budget, but unless we want to run separate assemblies in German, French, and Italian (where people only vote on proposals in one language), simultaneous translation for all proposals is required, together with a multilingual proposal management in the voting software and simultaneous translation of plenary sessions. One of the 8 groups held discussions in French, translating proposals before submission. Naturally, this is less of a problem at the city, communal or cantonal level, where a one-language assembly would be perfectly adequate in most cases.

Finally, a number of participants did not use the “license” to get into a truly creative mindset, including both out-of-the-box thinking, being disruptive, or ambitious. It is important to promote such thinking, given the scale and urgency of change. We wish to highlight the challenge of finding a balance between general proposals, unusually popular, and very specific ones, where some people might not fully understand (leading to less votes, even for excellent but specific proposals). Both challenges can be addressed through better preparation before, and restating expectations at the beginning of the assembly.

Overall, the level of engagement and energy in the room was very high, until the end of a long day, most participants having a feeling of accomplishment and motivation to support this democratic process, as captured in the closing survey, feedback emails, and numerous discussions.

6. Next steps

To build on the momentum and learnings of the ACA 2022, we propose the following next steps:

- Share this report with participants, academia, public administrations, journalists, social media
- Statistical analysis of voting, survey, and observer data
- Outreach to cities, communes, cantons to adapt a future assembly to their context and language
- Integration in scientific research as a way to better engage citizens
- K3 Kongress zu Klimakommunikation 14-15.09.2022 in Zurich: conduct a mini-assembly as workshop
- Exchange experience with other deliberative democracy initiatives

7. Supplementary material

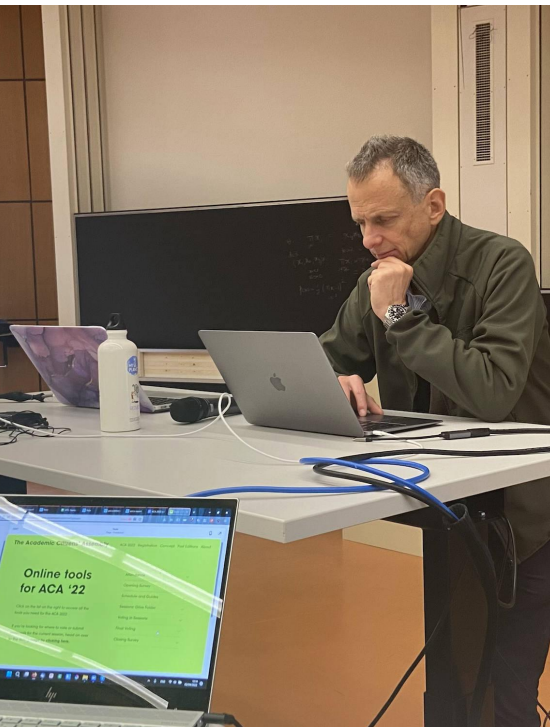
All statements and detailed results of all votes are available in the [Annex](#).

Participants received the [Introduction to Climate Action](#), and the [Participants' Guide](#).

Please [contact us](#) for any additional data.

8. Photos and impressions





Academic Citizens' Assembly – 02.04.2022

