

Cross-views: The nuts and bolts of citizen participation

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The 13th issue of *Action publique. Recherche et pratiques* looks at the theme of citizen participation, which is increasingly central to public action. The interview between Typhanie Scognamiglio, head of the Interministerial Centre for Citizen Participation (CIPC) and Marion Carrel, a sociologist, presents the different meanings, methodologies and contemporary results of the citizen participation approach. The other two papers in the issue look at the possibilities of applying citizen participation to the various stages of the budgetary process in public organizations, and at autonomous public organizations dedicated to public participation, analyzed in the Canadian context.

<https://www.cairn.info/revue-action-publique-recherche-et-pratiques-2022-1.htm>

“Cross-views” (“Regards croisés”) is a section based on an organised dialogue between a person from the academic world and someone from the public administration on a subject of common interest. The dialogue takes the form of a video interview published on the IGPDE YouTube channel. This interview is also transcribed and edited in the form of an article published in this magazine.

The nuts and bolts of citizen participation

Typhanie Scognamiglio and Marion Carrel¹



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Watch a video of this interview on the Action publique. Recherche et pratiques website:

<https://www.economie.gouv.fr/igpde-editions-publications/regards-croises>

¹ This interview was conducted by Edoardo Ferlazzo, Head of Department, Comparative Public Management, IGPDE Research Office. It was recorded on April 22, 2022.

Broadly speaking, what are the aims of citizen participation?

Marion Carrel: The aims of participation are many and varied. Sometimes it can serve particularly ambitious goals such as strengthening democracy, which ties in with the idea that the representative system that has been in place since the late 18th century is somewhat elitist. To take one example, there are currently no manual workers in the National Assembly and non-manual workers make up just 4.6% of members. Yet together, these two groups account for half of France's working-age population. In this case, the aim is to bring more voices and perspectives into the debate and to empower the least qualified members of society.

On a separate but equally ambitious note, participation can prove helpful in managing and strengthening public policy-making. Here, the idea is to involve citizens – with their expertise as public-service users and their lived experience more generally – in assessing policy and suggesting ways to improve its design and implementation.

Of course, participation can also be exploited for more ethically dubious aims, such as lending or restoring credibility to politicians or rubber-stamping decisions made behind closed doors. In cases like these, participation is exploited as a way to ease pressure on decision-makers – to give the green light to controversial decisions that are already set in stone. Here, the aim of public debate is to bypass conflict and strengthen the image or legitimacy of the people making the decisions.

Participation can also be used for communication purposes. This is not necessarily a bad thing. But pursuing participation with the sole aim of better communicating with citizens reduces the whole thing to a top-down exercise. It also overlooks the transformative potential of participation in terms of making democratic processes more direct (sharing debate and decision-making power with citizens) and more inclusive (ensuring this power is shared more equally among the population).

On top of this, participation can serve community-focused objectives. You see this a lot in urban policy, where participation is merely about building community integration and cohesion. In other words, the idea is to help citizens express themselves as eloquently, and possesses the same mastery of language, as government bodies, policy-makers and elected representatives. Here, the emphasis is on activities and programmes focused

on civic education and community-building. Again, this is not necessarily a bad thing. But this kind of reductive approach also neglects the two aims I mentioned earlier.

Those arguing in favour of citizen participation might also be seeking to exercise authority, or even have authoritarian aims in mind. Take the example of how referendums can be exploited: there is arguably something populist or authoritarian about seeking the consent of citizens to, say, erode the rule of law.

In sum, participation can serve all kinds of aims and objectives. But if these are not discussed and made absolutely clear, the message can get obscured. This is precisely the criticism often levelled at participatory processes: the ultimate aim is not always evident.

Typhanie Scognamiglio: As Mrs Carrel mentioned, the aims of participation are to strengthen democracy and to create spaces where citizens can contribute to public policy-making and, in some cases, decision-making. Participation is also about making public policy more relevant and effective. This also ties in with the question of legitimacy: when you involve people in shaping a policy or arriving at a decision, it is seen as more legitimate because it reflects more diverse perspectives.

Our work at the DITP encompasses some aspects of participation. I should make clear exactly what I am talking about here, since “participation” covers a vast array of methods, aims, objectives, scopes, scales and more. Specifically, we work on participatory exercises related to proposed reforms, bills and action plans. This is not an exhaustive list, but it gives a flavour of the aims of the exercises we support.

In 2021, we contributed to France's national debate ahead of the Conference on the Future of Europe, which saw citizens set out their aspirations for the European Union in 2035. Although this is a topic that calls for immediate decisions and action, it was very much a forward-looking exercise. Participatory approaches can also be used to address controversial issues that polarise opinion. By allowing an exchange of views to take place, decision-makers can build a more structured picture and understand where the points of agreement and disagreement lie.

Of course, participation is more than just a tool to guide decision-making. Citizens can also be consulted on aspects of public policy implementation, such as how to allocate financial support more effectively and efficiently. But there is an important distinction between user consultation and citizen participation. They are not the same thing. A participatory exercise brings in citizens who might not necessarily have a direct

interest in the subject. Then, for instance, you can ask them how a given public policy could best be implemented. Citizens can also be involved in public policy evaluation. In this kind of exercise, the idea is to evaluate the stated aims of a policy at the design stage, and then to determine whether the policy has delivered the intended benefits for its target audience.

How does citizen participation differ from other concepts such as deliberation?

Marion Carrel: The distinction between participation and deliberation is crucial. The concept of deliberation is tied to Habermas and his theory of the public sphere: it is about bringing people together in public to debate, to exchange opinions and arguments, to arrive at an informed view and, perhaps, to make the right decision on this basis. Whereas, strictly speaking, participation has to do with sharing decision-making power with citizens, including aspects of direct democracy. In this case, power is shared through votes, referendums, randomly selected assemblies or groups, and so on. These two approaches – participation and deliberation – can coexist in participatory processes. By extension, the term “participation” is typically used to describe processes where decision-making power is not really shared – processes that are more akin to deliberation. The term itself has become far too broad in meaning.

It is also important to remember that both approaches can be used in conjunction. Participatory processes with a voting component, such as participatory budgeting and referendums, should preferably include a period of deliberation – when competing arguments are set out in the public sphere and a democratic exchange of views takes place – before the representatives make their decision. Conversely, building a decision-making component into a deliberation exercise – i.e. actively setting out to make a decision and involving citizens in this decision if possible – can prove quite beneficial.

A prime example is the Citizens’ Assembly process that led to the legalisation of abortion in Ireland. Over the course of several months, a group of 99 citizens spent their weekends considering the issues and hearing input from experts. In the end, they proposed amending the Constitution to make abortion legal. Unlike what happened with the Citizens’ Climate Convention in France, the proposed amendment was then put to the

population in a referendum, receiving the support of 66% of voters. Personally, I find this kind of interplay between debate and decision-making especially valuable.

Typhanie Scognamiglio: It is true that there are differences between the two approaches. But there are also differences in terms of the initial undertakings and the point at which citizens are brought into the process. For instance, if the aim is to involve citizens in assessing or examining an issue, or in pinpointing the problem that needs fixing, then this kind of work happens long before a decision is made. And the undertakings will differ markedly compared with, say, a participatory exercise three months before a bill comes before parliament. It all hinges on how the exercise is framed. In other words, the undertakings depend on the purpose and timing of the consultation process, and on whether a decision will be made at the end of it. This is not always the case: some consultation exercises are run by public bodies or administrations and are not necessarily tied to a political decision.

Our job is to help the project sponsor select an approach that best fits the aims and purpose of the exercise and determine the most appropriate undertakings. If the consultation takes place two years ahead of a decision, there is no point promising participants they will see immediate results, because that would be untrue. But if it happens just before a decision, it is much easier to make clear and explicit undertakings.

How do you go about choosing one participatory method over another?

Marion Carrel: We have seen a whole host of new tools and methods emerge in the past two decades. There is no one-size-fits-all method for a given objective. Rather, it is a question of considering the various options to see what benefits they offer. Some approaches, such as citizens’ assemblies, participatory workshops and discussion groups, revolve around debate and deliberation. Others, like referendums and participatory budgeting, are more focused on voting and direct democracy. On top of this, there are methods geared towards considering new questions or looking at social concerns from new angles. In working-class neighbourhoods, discussion groups are a good example of this kind of approach to evaluating a particular problem or issue. In this case, the idea is to use communication techniques and formats that are accessible to all,

such as art, film and drama – and more generally images and the spoken word as opposed to the written word.

Public bodies and non-profit organisations have a wide range of options open to them, and professionals with experience in running these kinds of exercises are readily available. As for which method is the best fit for a particular aim or objective, the question remains open. Imagine you want to tie the process to a decision, and you want the participatory exercise to have an impact on, say, environmental concerns in the short, medium and long terms. In this case, you would need to make sure that, at the very least, the people behind the initiative reply relatively quickly to the proposals and explain exactly what has been done with them before any change of direction happens. The answer lies not necessarily in the method itself but in how you frame the exercise. Both aspects need to be considered together. This has been the direction of travel in thinking and practice over the past 20 years.

Typhanie Scognamiglio: I absolutely agree that proper framing will lead to the right method. That is why we do not rank or categorise methods and tools. When we are asked to design a process, we take the project sponsor’s objectives as our starting point. If the aim is to foster broad debate and capture a wide range of opinions, we might opt for an online consultation or other, similar tools that serve this particular objective. Conversely, the sponsor might prefer a hybrid approach, with a chance for people to make their views known followed by a period of deliberation. Or they may simply want to focus on deliberation. In this case, the priority is to design a process that lets citizens form a collective opinion based on their unprompted views and observations.

In practice, we rarely design a process using a single method. We tend to adopt hybrid approaches on the basis that each method has its advantages and disadvantages. In the end, covering all the stated aims is an exercise in taking the best features of each method and making them work together.

How can people on the margins of society be included in participatory processes?

Marion Carrel: Involving these groups in debate and decision-making is one of the main aims of participatory democracy. It is not an easy task.

There is a lot of work to do on this front. These people will only get involved if the messaging and communication are right, if they understand the purpose of taking part, and if they feel their contribution will make a difference. Format and participant selection require careful consideration. One way to create a mini-assembly or a more representative group is to select participants at random. But the people who are selected actually have to turn up. Random selection can involve a lot of subsequent support work. Ultimately, we are all capable of serving the general interest, regardless of education or wealth. This principle that we are all equal goes back to the very origins of Athenian democracy.

Another option is to work with non-profit organisations and social workers – the volunteers and professionals who are embedded in the community – to bring excluded people into participatory processes. But this is not as simple as it sounds because, often, participatory approaches tend to prioritise direct engagement with ordinary citizens. Working with non-profit organisations is not always the obvious choice. I see this as a major challenge for the years ahead. Using diverse formats is another key consideration: the exercise needs to be as inclusive as possible, with a strong focus on the spoken word and on explaining the meaning of words and the substance of the issues. When you work with communities in extreme hardship as I do, you have to modulate your language. It is always challenging for people from different backgrounds to talk to one another and reach a mutual understanding. There are, however, some proven methods and moderation techniques inspired by popular education and bottom-up strategies. One approach involves putting people facing discrimination or hardship, or who harbour deep mistrust towards public institutions, into small groups of like-minded peers, so they can build their knowledge together before engaging in the debate.

Typhanie Scognamiglio: Reaching and engaging those on the margins of society – in all their diversity – is a challenge almost as old as citizen participation itself. Our job is to find ways of bringing people into the fold. First and foremost, the mandate given to citizens must be clear. To check whether this is the case, ask yourself what would persuade you to attend a 9pm meeting to discuss a topic in which, on the face of it, you have no direct interest? To make it worth the effort, you would need to know why you have been asked to attend, what purpose your contribution will serve, how much time you will need to give, what undertakings the project sponsor has made, what guarantees there are in terms of consultation, and

so on. Together, these details form the “mandate” given to citizens involved in the participatory exercise. A clear mandate is one of the key drivers of participation.

The accompanying media campaign is equally important for bringing excluded people on board, as are grassroots efforts to reach out to these sections of society, through prefectures, local authorities, non-profits and other organisations embedded in the community.

Consistency is another way to increase engagement. If people see participation as a series of isolated exercises, with no overarching framework or vision of public policy-making, then they will be less inclined to take part. It takes time and perseverance to earn citizens’ trust.

Do I have an off-the-shelf solution for reaching these sections of society? No. It is more a question of combining best practices. For example, random selection ensures that the full diversity of viewpoints is heard in a debate. It is better at achieving this aim than, say, a call for volunteers, which is more likely to attract only those who have an interest in the topic or have already formed an opinion. But it is not a perfect solution because it only reaches a handful of people.

The challenge is to design a participatory model that achieves two aims. First, the output needs to be robust enough to inform public policy-making or decision-making, which takes time. And second, it needs to give everyone an opportunity to contribute. Right now, there is no ideal model.

Marion Carrel: When engaging with excluded people, it is also important to talk about topics that are relevant to them and their lives, and to use personal narrative. In France, the dominant view of citizenship and public debate calls for people to leave their differences at the door and directly adopt a general-interest view. Yet people on the margins of society – those whose voices are largely unheard in public debate and political representation – prefer to talk about their everyday experiences and concerns focusing on concrete subjects. This is an important and complex challenge to overcome when the aim is to build a collective viewpoint. One option is to pay people for taking part, based on the principle that they are devoting several days of their life to discussing a general-interest topic, and that the professionals in the room are being paid for their time. Paying participants validates their contribution and rewards them for giving their time to a collective cause.

Typhanie Scognamiglio: Paying participants is indeed a way to increase engagement. I

remember once when someone said: “I’m here for the money.” She made that clear from the outset. The amount could be based on what jurors receive, which is €80 a day. The same person told me: “I earn more coming here than at work, so that’s why I’m here.” Interestingly, at the end of the workshop, she approached me and said: “I’m glad I came because I enjoyed the experience. It was really interesting.”

Marion Carrel: Moderation techniques that use personal narratives – based on or inspired by real life – can really help participants discuss and debate opposing stances and viewpoints. The idea is to work through conflict, but not necessarily to reach consensus, because conflict is part of democracy. If a participatory exercise results in democratic conflict, then it could arguably be considered a success because it has brought this conflict into the public sphere, where it can be debated. This is an interesting assessment criterion that should not be overlooked. Participation is not always about reaching consensus. The aim is to move from a situation where people experience violence, injustice and stigma, to one in which citizens have a space to openly and democratically debate and challenge other groups or institutions – a space to ask how and why these things can happen in democracy. Ultimately, democratic conflict can be a tool for mutual understanding and awareness, and not just for the people affected by these issues. For public officials, elected representatives, managers and professionals, participatory processes are a chance to hear from and talk to people with very different lived experiences, and to step back and look again at their own beliefs and practices.

How can participation inform decision-making?

Marion Carrel: Political scientists and sociologists have been grappling with the link between participation and decision-making for many decades. In France, we still have a long way to go on strengthening this link. In recent years, we have seen a growing appetite for more participation in the work of government and public policy-making at all levels. The creation of the CIPC exemplifies this trend. But the nature of the relationship between participation and decision-making is still unclear. There seems to be tendency to use participatory exercises as a way to gain public acceptance for controversial decisions, as we have seen recently with the Yellow Vests movement, the Great National Debate and the Citizens’ Climate

Convention. The Great National Debate offered very little scope for deliberation, since there was no organised public exchange of arguments. The whole initiative revolved strongly around the President, who led and guided the debates. As for the Citizens'Climate Convention, there was real hope that the views expressed would translate into concrete decisions. The President even famously promised that the proposals would be put to parliament or to a referendum with "no filter". But this promise was not kept. In the end, the most ambitious proposals on social justice and reducing greenhouse gas emissions were shelved. Looking at how the process was organised and how the President's tone changed over time, it is clear that managing the link between deliberation and decision-making is a difficult task.

Locally, in all the exercises I have observed, little thought or structured effort has gone into the link between participatory processes and follow-up action. A kind of inertia seems to have set in. Even having decision-makers respond to the proposals or put them to a vote, such as by following a citizens'assembly with a referendum, is yet to become standard practice.

Typhanie Scognamiglio: To follow up on what Mrs Carrel said about building referendums into participatory processes, what happened in Ireland is an interesting case in point. The Citizens'Assembly process asked a simple "yes" or "no" question. By comparison, the Citizens'Climate Convention in France lacked this kind of closed question.

When citizens ask what purpose the exercise will serve, it is essential to give a clear answer. One way we can provide this answer is by measuring the impact of participatory processes at different levels. Two years ago, we began interviewing citizens who had taken part in these exercises, as well as project sponsors and representatives of public bodies, to find out whether the process had had a noticeable impact from their perspective. From this, we concluded that we needed to qualify what we meant by "impact" before we could measure it.

Do we measure impact solely in terms of the decision? Does it concern whether and how the decision changed? What about the stated intentions at the outset – did they change, and should this be considered an impact? Was the decision enriched by the exercise? I have heard criticism from some quarters that merely enriching the decision is not enough. Is the transformative effect of citizen participation on a government or public body an impact we should be measuring?

If the exercise changed how a public policy was framed or how it approached a particular issue, should this be considered a sufficient impact or not? If so, how can it be measured? What about the effect of the exercise on the citizens who took part? Was it a transformative experience? Should we measure that too? The "impact" of a participatory process is a fluid concept.

We believe an impact assessment matrix would really help. The impact on the decision is one of the assessment criteria. But there are others, too. We are trying to devise an objective way of measuring the impact of a participatory process, taking all of its effects into account.

We have published the results of this work at participation-citoyenne.gouv.fr, although I should be clear that the site is by no means complete. We are trialling it right now, and we intend to expand it in the future.

The platform lists all voluntary consultation exercises initiated by central government. It includes relevant background information for each process such as its format and framing. For example, there is a section on the undertakings made by the project sponsor, and a section explaining the purpose of the consultation and how it works. In a separate section, citizens can see the results of different exercises. It is important to keep a record of these processes and their outcomes, since they could prove useful for future consultations on related topics. Last but not least, there is a section outlining what happened after each of these processes. This is the beating heart of the platform, because it tells citizens what impact the exercise had at the various levels I listed earlier. Was concrete action taken following the process? Did it lead to another consultation exercise? Did the entity that organised it change as a result? Have the results been published or otherwise shared? And so on.

To take one example, we believe that when we assess the impact of a participatory process, we should look at what the sponsor has done to publicise the views expressed by participants. Are the results locked away in an internal report or has the organiser made an effort to share them more widely? Publishing or distributing the results leads to greater impact because anyone outside the organising entity can read them – politicians, non-profits, local organisations and more.

Considering the exercise's impact on the decision raises other questions. Once time, effort and resources have been devoted to properly formulating the views of citizens, should they be

incorporated “as is” into the decision? In other words, should the participants’ proposals be reproduced in the decision – or even in a piece of legislation – with no filter?

If so, then building the legitimacy of the results is crucial. On top of this, there are questions around the relationship between the results of a citizen participation exercise and the work performed or the results produced by experts, official bodies and government offices. It is important to bear in mind that decision-making is a collective endeavour. With any direct democracy exercise, you therefore have to consider how these various contributions complement and balance one another. The idea is not simply to replace one system with another.

Marion Carrel: We need to reflect on the widely held opinion that participation is some sort of duty or imperative. This kind of top-down imposition shifts the full burden of responsibility onto citizens, onto local people, who are held accountable for the success or failure of a participatory process. People are expected to turn up and share their opinions on all sorts of topics, but no one ever takes the time and effort to challenge the knowledge and expertise of public bodies, professionals or teachers. The risk, and you see this a lot in real life, is that by accepting participation as a duty, you fail to scrutinise how a university or other institution functions, to properly debate prevailing public-service or economic models, and so on. Democracy needs experts. But we also need our experts to learn from and be challenged by other experts. To paraphrase the famous words of American philosopher John Dewey, the expert shoemaker knows how to repair the shoe, but only the person wearing it knows where it pinches. In other words, everyone has expertise worth listening to. This is not just a question of method. If we want to avoid reducing participation to an exercise that shapes submissive citizens who know how to directly adopt a general-interest view, we need political will. The “participation-as-duty” model will do nothing to bridge the democratic divide. In fact, this divide will only get wider as misunderstandings and stereotypes become further entrenched. Having your expertise challenged is no walk in the park. It can be painful. As a professional, it is difficult to hear people tell you that things are not working for them. The answer implies departments and managers embracing participation and being open to organisational change. If you take the view that participation is not a duty imposed from on high, but is instead about empowering citizens and strengthening democracy then, logically, you have to accept that expertise in all its forms is worth listening to – in other words, that participatory

processes can and should question institutions and established practice, improving them in a way that better reflects reality.

Where does citizen participation stand today?

Marion Carrel: To answer this question, we need to remember that participatory processes had their origins in civil society movements and non-profit organisations in the 1960s and 1970s. They emerged primarily from working-class neighbourhoods, where people demanded a greater say in the management of public facilities, public services and so on. This call for participation brought about change. But in the 1980s and 1990s we saw a role reversal whereby citizens were “invited” to participate by institutions – and this trend has accelerated in recent times. This institutionalisation process can be seen in the way that local authorities, as well as various levels of central government, incorporate participation into their working methods. Interestingly, this process is now gathering pace as we see participatory methods become embedded in the highest levels of government. But at the same time, citizens are also increasingly calling for their voices to be heard. It remains to be seen whether these two trends will converge. In many cases, people are demanding a greater say precisely because they are suspicious of institution-led participation. They prefer to self-organise, run experimental citizen-led processes and work together to develop new ways of living, especially on environmental issues.

The top-down, institution-led approach to participation carries two major risks. First, there is the risk of reducing participation to a technical and methodological exercise – of designing and implementing processes without considering the end goal. To be frank, now that participatory democracy is an industry in itself, there is nothing stopping an institution from commissioning a consultant to run a fake participatory process where the aim, as we discussed earlier, is to rubber-stamp decisions made behind closed doors. Second, there is a risk in public bodies having a monopoly over citizen participation. Where does the non-profit sector, and civil society more generally, fit into the picture? We should be wary of a situation whereby the people who make the decisions also hold all the power to design and implement participatory processes. In the end, institution-led participation should not dampen the public’s enthusiasm for other, citizen-led forms of engagement.

What role does the Interministerial Centre for Citizen Participation play?

Typhanie Scognamiglio: At its June 2019 meeting, the Interministerial Committee on Government Transformation decided to create a new entity to drive citizen participation at central government level. How did we go about this? How did we design our service proposition and what were our priorities?

Our first priority was to improve how participatory processes were run, such as by ensuring more time was given to the framing stage, by clarifying the aims and objectives, by implementing best practices, and so on.

Our second priority was to build public-sector expertise in citizen participation. When you are engaging with citizens, there is no room for ad-libbing. You cannot just open a venue or deploy a tool and hope for the best. You have to take the whole matter seriously. It requires a lot of framing and methodology work. In the end, methodology is quite important.

It is important for officials to understand and appreciate the aims and objectives of citizen participation, and to recognise bias and know how to avoid it. Reviewing past participatory exercises also allows us to avoid repeating the same mistakes.

Learning how to use the tools and methods, and knowing how to design participatory processes, is equally important. A network of citizen participation officers was created in September 2021 to spearhead the work of building public-sector expertise. Every government department now has a contact person responsible for expanding citizen participation. These individuals can come to us for support, for example if they want to train officials in their department, need help selecting consultation topics, and so on.

We also make them aware of the need to uphold what we call the “duty of follow-up”, which is the undertaking made by the project sponsor, and by the public body more generally, to report back to citizens on the impact of a consultation process. In practice, this means that the public body has to publish details of the action taken following the exercise, perhaps six months or a year down the line.

This approach allows us to build public-sector expertise in a more holistic manner, rather than project-by-project.

Our third priority has to do with transparency and the duty of follow-up I just mentioned. The goal here is to learn lessons from this impact-related work. Our role is less about preaching or imparting information and more about moving beyond the kind of binary thinking that considers a participatory exercise as either a complete failure or a resounding success.

We want to objectively measure an exercise’s impact and learn lessons to drive continuous improvement. As well as using our platform, we also engage with citizens to find out what information they would need to form a view as to the impact of a consultation process.

What does the future hold for citizen participation?

Marion Carrel: Beneath this drive for greater participation lies a fundamental question for the future of democracy. This question has to do with competing time scales: leaders are in office for only a short period, need to get things done quickly and always have their eye on the next election, while issues like climate change play out over long periods and involve complex decisions. More generally, the future of participation lies in one of two scenarios. The first scenario, which we risk heading towards on the current trajectory, would see participatory exercises used as a way to dampen and control social movements, and as a tool for conflict resolution. What happened in the Great National Debate is a case in point: the National Public Debates Commission, an independent body tasked with ensuring the quality of public debate, was side-lined. The scenario taking shape right now is one of limited participation, and of efforts to manage or suppress social movements and self-organisation by citizens. Some of my colleagues describe this vision of participation as “monarchical”.

The second, more ambitious scenario involves a democratic system in which participatory processes are designed and managed such that they make a genuine contribution to the general interest. Getting to that point means reforming every aspect of our democracy, starting with how we fund and encourage grassroots activities, especially in working-class neighbourhoods. I strongly support the idea of setting up a citizens’ assembly to look again at our democratic institutions and to draw up a new Constitution. We need to think about how to inject new life into representative democracy, to consider

questions around proportional representation, the imperative mandate, electronic voting, and many other aspects besides. Our representative model should better reflect the diversity of the population. And it should be genuinely democratic.

Typhanie Scognamiglio: I think the push for participation is gathering momentum, and not just here in France. Three weeks ago, the Scottish Government published its Participation Framework, which aims to institutionalise citizen participation. The Parliament of the French Community in Brussels is also trialling the deliberative committee model. These are just two examples in a very long list. Things are changing at every level. In France, we have our first-ever minister for citizen participation. We also have the new CIPC. In 2021 alone, citizens were consulted on the future of Europe, on housing, on discrimination, on the future of the valleys decimated by Storm Alex in the Alpes-Maritimes *département*, and on other issues.

The Great National Debate and the Citizens' Climate Convention received extensive media coverage, but a lot of things happened in 2021. I absolutely see this trend as something positive.

But I am not naive. We need to make participatory processes more robust. And we need to make sure the output of these exercises – the material they produce – is robust enough to be incorporated into public policies and decisions unfiltered. There are other challenges too, such as improving how we use the results of these processes, and the point we touched on earlier about bringing excluded sections of society into the fold. Because if we want these exercises to produce something meaningful, we have to make sure everyone has a chance to take part. We are at a pivotal point right now. There is still work to do on raising public awareness of participation and bringing people around to the idea that it is a positive. But the next step – the practical side of things – is just as important. This is not to contradict what I said earlier. It is important that we work on both fronts: acclimatising people to the idea of participation, fleshing out its aims and objectives, and so on, while also considering the nuts and bolts: how it happens in practice and how we scale it up. The stakes and ambitions are high, so how do we design participatory processes that live up to expectations? That is precisely the challenge facing us right now. For me, asking these questions and finding the answers is fascinating work.