

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rethinking Climate Assemblies Within Complex Democratic Systems: Coupling and Pathways of Influence Beyond Policy Uptake

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Climate citizens' assemblies are often evaluated primarily in terms of whether their recommendations are adopted as policy. While such evaluations are important, they risk narrowing the democratic significance of the assemblies. This article argues for a shift in our evaluative thinking about climate assemblies. Building on scholarship on deliberative systems and bringing it into dialogue with complex systems theory and transformation research, the article develops a conceptual framework for understanding how climate assemblies may shape democratic change beyond immediate policy uptake. Rather than treating assemblies as interventions in policy processes, the article approaches them as sites of democratic capacity-building embedded in wider political and social systems. The article demonstrates the value of this perspective through illustrative cases of climate assemblies from Denmark and France, highlighting how assemblies operate through multiple pathways of influence—including policy, institutional, civic, discursive, and cultural routes—that unfold across different temporal horizons. By situating climate assemblies within the wider literature on system transformation, the article argues that their most significant contributions may lie less in immediate legislative impact than in their capacity to cultivate new democratic norms, institutional learning, and develop infrastructures of participation required for long-term climate governance.

Keywords: Climate assemblies; systems thinking; complexity; coupling; deliberative mini-publics

Introduction

Over the past decade, climate assemblies have proliferated across Europe and elsewhere as one of the most promising innovations in democratic climate governance. From national assemblies in places like France, the United Kingdom, and Denmark to a rapidly growing landscape of municipal and regional experiments, deliberative mini-publics have become emblematic of the search for new forms of democratic legitimacy and citizen participation in the face of accelerating ecological crisis. The popularity of these democratic innovations reflects two growing realizations: first, that existing political institutions have been incapable of responding adequately to the urgency of climate change; and second, that citizens must be more directly involved in shaping the futures of climate transition (Dryzek & Niemeyer 2019; Smith 2024; Willis, Curato & Smith 2022; Yuille & Willis 2025).

Despite this growing enthusiasm, climate assemblies are often interpreted through a narrow instrumental lens. In both policy debates and parts of the scholarly literature, climate assemblies are frequently evaluated according to whether their recommendations lead to tangible policy outcomes (Lorenzoni et al. 2025; Skaržauskienė

et al. 2025). When recommendations are not immediately adopted into law, assemblies are portrayed as failures. Such binary assessments—success or failure, adoption, or inaction—risk overlooking the broader social and political effects of deliberative processes. Climate assemblies generate impacts that transcend the boundaries of the political mandates and policy issues to which they arose. They may reshape social relations, cultivate institutional practices, and open up new political imaginaries by initiating spaces of citizen engagement and modes of public reasoning where citizens get to experience their collective agency in the context of systemic crises (Ejsing, Veng & Papazu 2023; Demski et al. 2024; Mellier & Capstick 2024; Wilson & Mellier 2023).

Focusing primarily on short-term policy uptake downplays the slower and more diffuse temporalities through which assemblies influence democratic systems. It portrays them as discrete interventions in a static apparatus of government rather than as dynamic components of evolving social and democratic systems. This instrumental narrowing of their purpose reflects a broader tendency within climate governance that might be called an 'accelerationist impulse': The belief that democratic institutions must be rationalized and streamlined so that they can deliver faster, more efficient climate action (Ejsing et al. 2024). While such concerns

about urgency are understandable, a focus on speed and policy output risks reproducing technocratic logics that citizens' assemblies were originally intended to challenge (Machin 2023). By seeking to accelerate climate transformation at all costs, it threatens to stifle the slower, more relational forms of democratic renewal that are required to support such transformation.

This article seeks to broaden the discussion of the political significance of climate assemblies by developing a conceptual framework for thinking about how assemblies shape democratic change beyond immediate policy uptake. It builds on deliberative systems scholarship (Curato & Böker 2016; Owen & Smith 2015; Parkinson & Mansbridge 2012) and brings it into dialogue with research on complex adaptive systems (Boulton, Allen & Bowman 2015; Folke et al. 2010; Meadows 2008) and societal transformation (Bentz, O'Brien & Scoville-Simonds 2022; Feola 2015; Fazey et al. 2018; Hammond 2021; Patterson et al. 2017). Drawing on concepts such as feedback, emergence, and adaptive learning from complexity and transformation research, the article argues that climate assemblies can be seen as sites of democratic capacity-building that improve the competencies of societies to deliberate, adapt, and respond to environmental disruptions. Rather than viewing them solely as isolated interventions into a sequence of policy design, they become dynamic spaces of learning within evolving socio-ecological systems (Curato & Böker 2016; Ejsing, Veng & Papazu 2023; Owen & Smith 2015; Mellier & Capstick 2024; Wilson & Mellier 2023).

Bringing complexity-informed perspectives into dialogue with deliberative systems scholarship highlights how the democratic effects of climate assemblies may unfold through nonlinear dynamics, feedback processes, and cumulative learning over time. From this perspective, climate assemblies are not only moments of public consultation but also nodes within wider democratic ecologies (Asenbaum 2022b; Bussu et al. 2025; Mendonça, Ercan & Asenbaum 2022; Mendonça et al. 2024; Pickering 2019). This follows in line with recent work in sustainability science and polycentric climate governance that views transformative system change not as a linear process that can be engineered from above, but rather as a distributed and experimental process that emerges from below through learning, interaction, and adaptation (Jordan et al. 2015; Jordan et al. 2018; Kronsell & Mukhtar-Landgren 2018; Ostrom 2010). Climate assemblies are better understood, I argue, as part of this evolving landscape of experimentation. They should be seen as democratic experiments within larger social and political systems, which might contribute to 'second-order learnings': changes not only in what systems do, but in how they organize themselves to do so.

Importantly, this article does not claim to introduce a wholly new systemic perspective on climate assemblies. Rather, it builds on existing deliberative systems and deliberative ecologies scholarship while bringing it into closer dialogue with complexity-oriented research on transformation and adaptive governance. Its contribution is primarily conceptual and heuristic: it proposes a framework for interpreting how climate assemblies may

generate multiple pathways of influence that unfold across different temporal horizons. The empirical discussions that follow draw on illustrative cases from the secondary literature, such as a small-scale process on sustainable transport in a Danish municipality and a large, centrally commissioned national climate assembly process in France. These cases are used heuristically to clarify different patterns of interaction between assemblies and wider democratic systems rather than to provide a systematic comparative analysis.

The article is divided into five parts. The following section traces how climate assemblies have come to be understood mostly as policy instruments and situates this instrumental view in a broader trend within climate governance. Section 'Climate Assemblies from a Complex Systems Perspective' then introduces concepts from complex systems thinking, including social tipping points, as analytical tools for interpreting the broader dynamics through which deliberative processes may influence democratic systems. Section 'Different Temporalities and Pathways of Influence: Experiences from Denmark and France' illustrates the framework through selected examples of climate assemblies that demonstrate different temporalities and pathways of influence. Section 'The Future of Climate Assemblies in Complex Democratic Systems' concludes by discussing the implications of this perspective for the design and evaluation of future climate assemblies.

From Policy Instruments to a Systems Perspective

The recent turn to citizens' assemblies in climate governance emerges out of a broader participatory development within deliberative theory and democratic practices. Since the late 1990s, democratic innovations such as citizens' juries, consensus conferences, and participatory budgeting have been promoted as a potential solution to the legitimacy crisis of existing representative institutions. These diverse deliberative formats were meant to bring lay voices into decision-making processes, rebuild institutional trust, and improve the quality of public reasoning (Dryzek 2002; Fung 2007; Fung & Wright 2001; Goodin 2008; Sintomer, Herzberg & Röcke 2008; Smith 2009).

When translated into climate governance, however, citizens' assemblies are often seen as policy instruments that can help accelerate climate action and overcome political gridlock (Lorenzoni et al. 2025; Wells, Howarth & BrandCorrea 2021; Willis, Curato & Smith 2022). Consequently, governments have increasingly turned to them, not in order to expand and deepen citizen participation, but to de-polarize contentious debates, build consensus, and generate popular legitimacy for climate policies (Sandover, Moseley & DevineWright 2021; Wells, Howarth & BrandCorrea 2021). From this perspective, their value lies, primarily, in their ability to promote and legitimize legislative change. This reflects an instrumental understanding of climate assemblies that relies on a linear input-output model of impact where deliberation is reduced to an extra step in the policy process: Convene

an assembly, generate recommendations, and await policy uptake. When policy uptake occurs, the process is deemed a success, and when it does not, it is a failure. This kind of framing treats climate assemblies as bounded policy-consulting events rather than ongoing democratic processes embedded within larger political and social systems.

Recent reflections from practitioners in the field underscore this point. Claire Mellier and Rich Wilson from the ISWE Foundation have argued that existing theories of change on citizens' assemblies have been too linear and state-centric, focusing too narrowly on how assembly recommendations are turned into policy, and not enough on the longer, systemic pathways through which assemblies might also exert influence (Wilson & Mellier 2023). Based on their experiences as facilitators, climate assemblies produce impacts of many different kinds—cultural, institutional, and affective—that include changing mindsets, building institutional learning, and promoting deliberative norms into public life. Instead of one-off events, therefore, climate assemblies should be seen as experiments in building new democratic infrastructures, which means that their worth lies as much in the learnings and new relationships that they forge, as in the immediate uptake of their policy proposals.

This *systemic* understanding of the effects of climate assemblies aligns with recent critical work within the literature on democratic innovations, which calls for shifting attention away from short-term outcomes and toward more comprehensive notions of political influence (Demski et al. 2024; Ejsing, Veng & Papazu 2023; Lafont 2019; Machin 2023; Mellier & Capstick 2024). Building on theories of radical democracy and contrasting experiences with climate assemblies in France and Denmark, Ejsing, Veng & Papazu (2023) argue that the transformative power of assemblies might lie more in their relational and systemic effects rather than in their formal political mandates. Instead of viewing assemblies only through

their relationship with the formal political system, they propose a vision of climate assemblies that emphasizes both 'vertical' pathways of influence, where suggestions feed into government agendas, and 'horizontal' pathways, where assemblies influence social movements, NGOs, and local experiments, and where deliberative practices diffuse outwards, inspiring new experiments and cultural shifts (Ejsing, Veng & Papazu 2023). This perspective resonates with a tradition of deliberative systems scholarship, which has long emphasized that the democratic significance of mini-publics cannot be understood in isolation from the wider constellation of institutions, publics, and discursive arenas within which they operate (Parkinson & Mansbridge 2012; Owen & Smith 2015; Curato & Böker 2016).

The convergence of these practical and scholarly insights points to the need for a larger re-conceptualization of climate assemblies: Rather than viewing them merely as instruments of accelerated climate action, they should be seen as nodes of democratic learning and adaptation within evolving social and political systems (**Table 1**). This distinction must be understood as heuristic rather than categorical. In practice, most climate assemblies combine elements of both instrumental and systemic orientations.

Reframing assemblies as drivers of systems change rather than policy instruments has important methodological implications. It suggests that impact assessments must extend beyond tracing the short-term policy outcomes to include indirect, relational, and temporal dimensions: How do climate assemblies influence the expectations and practices of bureaucracies? How do they alter the narrative frames of media and civil society? How do participants carry on after the formal process ends? Such questions shift focus away from immediate outputs and toward system-altering potentials. These dynamics unfold, however, within political environments structured by competing interests, power asymmetries, and institutional inertia, meaning their broader systemic effects are always contingent and politically contested.

Table 1: Comparison of 'Instrumental' and 'Systemic' Perspectives on Climate Assemblies.

Dimension	Instrumental perspective	Systemic perspective
Primary purpose	To generate recommendations that inform or accelerate climate policy	To build democratic capacities and feedbacks that support long-term societal transformations
Theory of change	Linear, output-oriented: deliberation leads to recommendations that (may) lead to policy change	Nonlinear, recursive: deliberation reshapes relationships, norms, and institutions over time
Temporal horizon	Short-term; assessed through immediate policy uptake and implementation	Long-term; assessed through cumulative civic, institutional, and cultural change
View of political system	A fixed governance structure needing better citizen input	A complex adaptive system capable of learning and reorganization
Role of citizens	Advisors to decision-makers	Co-creators of democracy and agents of change
Design priorities	Clarity of remit, representativity, policy relevance, and expert integration	Iteration, reflexivity, inclusion, and linkages across sites and scale
Main risks	Symbolic participation; frustration when policy uptake is limited	Diffusion of effects; impacts harder to measure and attribute
Normative orientation	Democratic efficiency: making democracy work better	Democratic transformation: making democracy more adaptive and inclusive

Climate Assemblies from a Complex Systems Perspective

If we take seriously the idea that climate assemblies are not isolated devices, but nodes in wider political and democratic ecosystems, a systems-oriented approach becomes indispensable for assessing their impacts. Complex systems theory directs our thinking away from simple and linear causality toward feedbacks, thresholds, and emergence, where small inputs can sometimes produce disproportionate or cascading effects (Boulton, Allen & Bowman 2015; Folke et al. 2010; Meadows 2008). Within sustainability science, such nonlinear dynamics are sometimes described by the metaphor of social tipping points, which suggests that social and political systems, like ecosystems, may undergo large changes once certain self-reinforcing feedbacks are triggered (Lenton et al. 2022; Milkoreit et al. 2018; Otto et al. 2020; Tàbara et al. 2018; Winkelmann et al. 2022).

The tipping metaphor is a useful entry point for thinking about nonlinearity in democratic systems, but social tipping-point models also carry assumptions—discrete thresholds and self-reinforcing feedback that becomes difficult to reverse once triggered—that only loosely describe deliberative interventions, where change is rarely irreversible and where ‘thresholds’ are contested and negotiated rather than measured (see also Milkoreit 2023). Most climate assemblies are unlikely to function as tipping ‘interventions’ in the straightforward sense suggested by Otto et al. (2020) and others. Their effects are usually more contingent and distributed than threshold models imply. Rather than triggering predictable outcomes, most climate assemblies operate through gradual, recursive cycles that alter how political institutions learn and how democratic legitimacy is produced. Such effects propagate over time, sometimes imperceptible in the short term, but important for enabling future transformation. In this sense, assemblies tend to act more as catalysts than levers, as they decrease the system’s resistance to change by creating new dispositions, relations, and interpretive frameworks.

Recent empirical work points to some of these nonlinear effects. While national climate assemblies in Denmark and the UK had modest direct influence on policy, they have led to local and regional authorities experimenting with new forms of citizen participation and democratic ownership (Lewis et al. 2023; Boswell, Dean & Smith 2023). Moreover, participants in climate assemblies report shifts in political efficacy and trust that persist after the assemblies end—shifts that may be individually small but collectively contribute to civic learning (Boulianne, Chen & Kahane 2020; Elstub et al. 2021; Grönlund, Setälä & Herne 2010; Theuwis, Van Ham & Jacobs 2025). Such diffuse effects resemble what complexity theorists call ‘adaptive cycles’: repeated cycles of experimentation, feedback, and reorganization that gradually transform the system’s structure (Sundstrom & Allen 2019; Walker et al. 2004).

A systems perspective reframes the impacts of climate assemblies not as a question of linear transmission, but of networked transformation. Scholarship on deliberative systems has long emphasized that the democratic

significance of mini-publics emerges from their interaction with wider constellations of institutions, publics, and discursive arenas (Asenbaum 2022a; Asenbaum 2025; Bussu et al. 2025; Curato & Böker 2016; Elstub, Ercan & Mendonça 2019; Owen and Smith 2015; Parkinson & Mansbridge 2012). On this view, every assembly exists as a node in a distributed ecology of democratic governance, which includes NGOs, media, bureaucracies, and publics that amplify, dampen, or redirect deliberative energies. While deliberative systems theory has primarily focused on mapping the institutional and discursive relationships between these arenas, complexity-informed perspectives highlight the temporal dynamics through which such interactions generate cumulative and sometimes nonlinear political effects.

Climate assemblies can enable new positive feedbacks—such as increased public deliberation and normalization of citizen participation—but might also face negative feedbacks in cases where political resistance or institutional inertia limit their influence. Understanding these dynamics requires tracing out the loops through which assemblies shape and are shaped by their systemic contexts. Therefore, approaching climate assemblies from a systems perspective encourages scholars to move beyond measuring assemblies in isolation and instead examine their intersecting trajectories of influence within the system. How do climate assemblies interact with existing governance structures, media landscapes, and civic landscapes? How might they reshape the feedback architecture of democracy—its capacity to sense, learn, and adapt in a time of climate turbulence?

Finally, a system transformation perspective re-politicizes deliberation. If climate assemblies are embedded in complex political and social systems, their effects are always more than procedural, because they interact with and are mediated by already existing power struggles, discourses, and material infrastructures (Asenbaum 2022b; Curato, Hammond & Min 2019; Machin 2023). If not addressed, climate assemblies risk solidifying existing inequalities rather than democratizing them, for example, by repeating systemic exclusions of marginalized voices (Ballangé 2025; Elstub & Khoban 2023; Gherghina, Mokre, & Mișcoiu 2021; Gherghina, Mokre & Mișcoiu 2025; Mendonça, Ercan & Asenbaum 2022). Recognizing this is important to guard against the technocratic temptation to treat climate assemblies simply as instruments of accelerated climate action. Instead, they must be approached as emergent sites of collective contestation and learning, whose outcomes cannot be predicted in advance, and where multiple temporalities and trajectories of change intersect.

Different Temporalities and Pathways of Influence: Experiences from Denmark and France

Sometimes citizens’ assemblies do lead to concrete and swift political changes. An often-cited example in Denmark is the 2019 Copenhagen Citizens’ Assembly on Mobility in its Medieval City, which influenced concrete regulatory changes in municipal politics, leading to the

planned removal of six hundred parking spots in the inner city (WeDoDemocracy 2019). But even in these ‘success stories’, the pathways of influence are often more complex than a simple chain from policy recommendations to take-up suggests. The outcomes of the Copenhagen assembly indicated high levels of citizen support for removing parking spaces, which provided local politicians with the license to move forward on what had previously been a technocratic domain dominated by city planners and administrators. These short-term effects, however, also rested on longer-term shifts in the political landscape. Copenhagen had already been moving toward more sustainable urban planning for years, and the assembly coincided with a broader willingness among municipal actors to experiment with participatory democracy. As a result, the deliberative feedbacks between the assemblies and political decision-making were direct and immediate. In other words, what allows assemblies to have immediate political effects is not only their deliberative quality or immediate outcomes, but also their alignment with existing political opportunity structures.

The short-term impact of the Copenhagen assembly was further enabled by its limited scope. Assemblies with narrowly defined remits—such as ‘should inner-city parking spaces be removed to promote more sustainable forms of transport?’—allow for immediate translation into policy, because the debated issues are specific, timelines short, and channels for implementation clear (Elstub et al. 2021; Pfeffer 2024). However, most climate-related assemblies are dealing with much broader remits—‘how can our society achieve net-zero emissions?’ or ‘how do we ensure a sustainable future?’—that encompass multiple policy domains and longer time horizons. These open-ended questions mirror the complexity of the climate crisis, but also make policy uptake and implementation less straightforward. Therefore, evaluating both types of assemblies in the same manner, looking narrowly at policy adoption, risks overlooking their democratic potentials. It is also somewhat unsurprising, therefore, that most high-profile national climate assemblies to date have struggled with translating their recommendations into immediate policy change, even if they have sometimes generated notable public engagement and international attention (Ejsing, Veng & Papazu 2023; Elstub et al. 2021; Galván Labrador & Zografos 2024; Lorenzoni et al. 2025). From a purely instrumental perspective, they could be seen as failures. But from a systems perspective, their transformative potentials might lie elsewhere, or further down the road.

The French *Citizen Convention on Climate* (2019–2020), for example, which was commissioned by President Macron, produced 149 detailed policy proposals aimed at realizing France’s climate commitments. Although many of the most demanding proposals were eventually diluted or dismissed during policy adoption, the process mobilized new publics around the legitimacy of citizen deliberation, provided space for critiquing the climate-political status quo, and made deliberative democracy a topic in French politics (Averchenkova, Koeh & Smith 2025; Garric

2025; Saujot et al. 2020). One documented instance of this discursive pathway is the French government’s own framing of its national climate bill from 2021, *Loi Climat et Résilience*, which it explicitly presented as ‘a law conceived in an unprecedented way, by citizens, for citizens’ that directly descended from the climate assembly (French Government 2021). Similarly, despite limited immediate policy uptake, the national Danish *Citizens Assembly on Climate* (2020–2022) fostered democratic system-learning and inspired local-level experiments with climate assemblies, which have since proliferated across the country (Ejsing, Veng & Papazu 2023). An early instance of this civic pathway could be traced to Aarhus, Denmark’s second-largest municipality, which launched the country’s first local climate assembly in 2022, following the institutional legitimacy established by the national assembly and relying on similar deliberative designs carried out by The Danish Board of Technology, which facilitated both processes.

These processes exemplify ‘second-order’ impacts that unfold through social learning and norm diffusion rather than legislative adoption. Citizens’ assemblies change how people imagine their own role in collective decision-making, how political institutions and the public perceive citizens, and how legitimacy is constructed within climate governance (Boswell, Dean & Smith 2023; Elstub et al. 2025; Galván Labrador and Zografos 2024; Garry et al. 2022; Lorenzoni et al. 2025; Niessen 2023; Sandover, Moseley & DevineWright 2021). Such impacts spread through recursive feedback loops of learning and adaptation: assembly participants become climate advocates, administrations change their participatory mechanisms, and future assemblies learn important lessons from previous iterations.

Over time, these interactions have the potential to transform the feedback architecture of the democratic system and render it more responsive to ecological challenges. In both France and Denmark, assemblies catalyzed new networks of democratic experimentation. Municipalities launched local mini-publics, NGOs developed new facilitation models, and public officials have begun discussing new ways of involving citizens in climate planning. These outcomes indicate the presence of slower, system-altering effects of deliberative practices. Together, they illustrate how the outcomes of climate assemblies operate across multiple temporal and systemic pathways for influence (**Table 2**). **Table 2** offers a heuristic framework for tracing these different types of influence.

These intersecting pathways of influence also suggest that the effects of climate assemblies need not always be linear or predictable. Some routes of influence might reinforce one another—public visibility can open space for institutional learning—while others may dampen their momentum if political resistance or media backlash occurs. From a systems perspective, what matters is not only the immediate output of deliberations, but the climate assemblies interact with and become institutionalized within the architecture of democratic systems (Boswell, Dean & Smith 2023; Bussu et al. 2022; Courant 2022;

Table 2: Pathways of Influence for Climate Assemblies.

Pathway	Mechanism of influence	Temporal horizon	Feedback	Typical indicators
Policy	Translation of recommendations into legislation	Short-term	Direct, fast feedback signals between deliberation and decision-making	Concrete policy outputs; adoption of assembly proposals
Discursive	Reframing public narratives and media discourses	Medium-term	Amplifying feedbacks through agenda-setting	Shifts in framing of climate debates
Institutional	Embedding of deliberative practices within political and bureaucratic systems	Long-term	Recursive feedbacks through organizational learning	Creation of participatory mechanisms and institutions
Civic	Expansion of democratic learnings beyond participants	Long-term	Distributed feedbacks across social movements and local initiatives	Increased civic engagement; new participatory initiatives
Cultural	Transformation of democratic norms and imaginaries	Very long-term	Slow, cumulative feedbacks shifting collective identities	Normalization of deliberation; deeper democratic resilience

Table 3: Comparison between Strongly and Weakly Coupled Citizens' Assemblies.

Dimension	Strongly coupled	Weakly coupled
Institutional linkage	Formally mandated; integrated into policy processes	Loosely linked; often convened by civil society or hybrid actors with limited formal mandates
Remit and scope	Narrow and specific questions (e.g., single policy question)	Broad and open-ended questions (e.g., climate transition)
Feedback loops	Tight, short feedback loop with decision-makers	Loose, long feedbacks across civic, cultural, and institutional arenas
Temporal horizon	Immediate to short-term (months to a few years)	Medium to long term (years to decades)
Mechanism of influence	Direct uptake; policy acceleration; instrumental legitimacy	Norm diffusion; civic learning; institutional adaptation
Influence pathways	Linear, vertical	Nonlinear, horizontal
Evaluation metrics	Policy adoption rates; legislative change; procedural efficiency	Cultural resonance; institutional learning; diffusion of deliberative practices
Systemic function	Policy catalyst within existing governance institutions	Learning nodes within the wider democratic system
Risks or limitations	Co-optation; symbolic consultation; limited long-term change	Political marginalization; low visibility; difficulties demonstrating tangible impacts

Curato & Böker 2016; Dryzek 2016; Mellier & Capstick 2024; Owen & Smith 2015; Parkinson & Mansbridge 2012). Drawing on this view, climate assemblies can be heuristically categorized by their mode of coupling with the formal political system, ranging from 'strongly' to 'weakly' coupled assemblies (**Table 3**).

Climate assemblies that are 'strongly coupled' with existing formal political systems are more likely to deliver discrete outputs and tangible outcomes in the short term. Strong coupling generates fast, legible feedback that can translate deliberative outputs directly into legislative or administrative action, but also narrows what counts as a legitimate outcome to what the mandating institution is prepared to act on. Weakly coupled assemblies, on the other hand, operate more diffusely, influencing narratives, institutions, and norms over extended timescales. Weak

coupling tends to foreclose immediate policy translation, but in doing so it protects the experimental, open-ended character of deliberation from premature closure by administrative priorities—similar to what Demski et al. (2025) describe in terms of assemblies 'opening up' or 'closing down'. Both dynamics are, however, relevant components of democratic transformations. The first provide punctuated moments of acceleration; the second build the relational and cognitive infrastructures that sustain systemic change.

This use of the coupling concepts extends Hendriks' (2016) account of 'designed coupling', which examines how institutional design can deliberately link a single mini-public to a single formal site, such as a legislative committee, and shows that such linkage depends as much on relationship-building between actors as on

formal design. The coupling this article traces operates at a different scale. Rather than a designed link between an assembly and a formal institution, it describes an emergent and shifting relationship between an assembly and the wider set of institutions, publics, and civic actors that make up its surrounding political system, closer to what Boswell, Hendriks & Ercan (2016) examine under the heading of transmission, which traces how deliberative outputs move through this wider system, who receives them, and whether they are acted upon. But coupling, as it is used here, describes something prior to transmission, namely the structural relationship that determines which transmission channels are available to an assembly at all, and how much interpretive latitude those channels leave open. A strongly coupled assembly, in Hendriks' sense, has a small number of well-defined, often deliberately designed channels, while a weakly coupled assembly transmits through a much larger and less predictable set of channels—media uptake, NGO adoption, participant advocacy, imitation by other public bodies—which is precisely why its effects are harder to trace with transmission-mapping methods alone, and why they require a longer observation window.

This distinction between strongly and weakly coupled assemblies relies, of course, on ideal types. In practice, hybrid models are the norm, and coupling is often better understood as an evolving property of a complex democratic system than as a fixed design feature. What drives movement along this continuum is not only the design of the assembly itself, but also shifts in the surrounding institutional environments. For example, assemblies initially launched as weakly coupled experiments—organized by civil society or research institutions—may lead to later institutionalizations as public authorities start to recognize their legitimacy. Conversely, strongly coupled assemblies can drift toward weaker coupling once their formal mandates expire and the deliberative learnings are carried forward by civil society actors rather than the institutions that convened them.

Recognizing these plural temporalities can help researchers and practitioners move beyond the unhelpful binary assessments of success or failure. Even when climate assemblies do not trigger immediate systemic change, they can still alter its future responsiveness to change. Climate assemblies, when done well, thicken the democratic fabric that allows societies to act under conditions of uncertainty. The challenge, therefore, is not necessarily to make every individual climate assembly a lever of immediate policy change (although that can be important too), but also to design them to become learning nodes within an evolving democratic system.

The Future of Climate Assemblies in Complex Democratic Systems

A complex systems perspective invites us to rethink the democratic impact of climate assemblies. Traditional evaluation measures, such as quantifiable outputs and policy adoption rates, rely on a linear model of causality: Deliberation produces recommendations and policymakers enact them. Change in complex

social and political systems, however, seldom works so smoothly. By contrast, system trajectories are shaped by feedbacks, institutional path-dependencies, and cultural resonances that unfold across interdependent scales and unpredictable temporal horizons (Cairney 2012; Cairney, Heikkilä & Wood 2019; Kok, Loeber & Grin 2021). Large structural changes within complex systems are often less about design and control and more about interaction, feedback, and learning (Chandler 2014; Duit & Galaz 2008; Folke et al. 2005; May 2022). From this perspective, climate assemblies may be viewed as investments in larger democratic infrastructures, which help build institutional capabilities, generate social trust, and cultivate new norms. Some of their most significant effects are, in other words, relational: they create new conversations between citizens, experts, and policymakers, and expand public expectations for inclusion and accountability.

These insights resonate with Lafont's (2019) critique of isolated deliberative mini-publics in her book *Democracy without Shortcuts*. Here, Lafont argues that mini-publics cannot legitimately replace the other processes of democratic will-formation, but may contribute to them only when they remain closely connected to the public sphere and embedded within existing democratic structures. Climate assemblies have democratic value, in other words, not as stand-alone decision-making bodies, but insofar as they are integrated into ongoing institutional rhythms in ways that enhance transparency, public uptake, and opportunities for widespread citizen deliberation. Rather than bypassing the slow and demanding work of democratic politics, they should help orient existing institutions toward greater openness, reflexivity, and shared responsibility for collective futures.

Moreover, in complex adaptive systems, even small interventions that modify existing feedback structures can sometimes create disproportionate effects, as suggested by the concept of 'social tipping points' (Lenton 2020; Milkoreit et al. 2018; Otto et al. 2020; Winkelmann et al. 2022). Climate assemblies work through multiple recursive feedback processes to affect climate politics: they produce deliberative outputs—recommendations, shared narratives, and new social imaginaries—that circulate through political institutions, media ecosystems, and civic networks, feeding back into norms of legitimacy and participation. Some of these feedbacks are fast and visible (policy reforms, regulatory change), while others are slower and more dispersed (shifts in trust, perceptions, or collective imagination).

Understanding climate assemblies as feedback *amplifiers* can help us understand why their immediate impacts often appear limited or diffuse. Just as new ecological feedbacks take time to propagate through ecosystems, the effects of deliberation reverberate unevenly across political and social networks. The French and Danish assemblies illustrate this: although their proposals were only partially implemented, both created lasting institutional and cultural ripples. What may seem like inaction in the short-term can still represent a gradual embedding of participatory norms and deliberative practices. When assemblies are sustained, networked, and

institutionally connected, they can function as catalysts within democratic systems, amplifying learning and adaptation across levels of governance. They complement representative structures, link administrative and civic spheres, and create political spaces where diverse groups of citizens and policymakers jointly navigate uncertainty. In this role, assemblies contribute to dynamics associated with broader social tipping processes: they may not bring transformation here and now, but they can still help cultivate its enabling conditions.

This change in perspective has several practical implications for the design, embedding, and study of future climate assemblies. If assemblies are to realize their broader systemic effects, they must become more than isolated democratic experiments and evolve into durable infrastructures of democratic participation (Boswell, Dean & Smith 2023; Curato & Böker 2016; Ejsing, Veng & Papazu 2023; Wilson & Mellier 2023). Realizing this potential depends on addressing several interrelated challenges, which include but are not limited to (1) institutional integration, (2) civic engagement, (3) inclusion of marginalized voices, and (4) system-oriented impact evaluations.

The first challenge relates to how climate assemblies are linked with formal political processes. Many climate assemblies are initiated as ad hoc initiatives or experiments, with poorly defined channels for how their suggestions will inform policy-making or public administration (Brandt et al. 2024; Courant 2022). Without stronger institutional linkages, their influence on policy often dissipates after the assembly has ended. The next generation of climate assemblies, therefore, will need tighter accountability and follow-up architectures—systems determining who receives recommendations, how feedback is sent, and when new rounds of deliberation can be initiated. This might entail more demanding political mandates, recurring or permanent assemblies, or procedures that oblige governments to publicly justify non-adoption. On the other hand, as suggested by the reflections above, the institutional integration cannot be so strong that excessive formalization risks ‘closing down’ deliberation within climate assemblies and undermining their experimental character (Demski et al. 2025).

A second challenge is to extend the public influence and civic connectivity of deliberative practices (Elstub et al. 2025). So far, climate assemblies have been able to engage small cohorts of citizens, statistically representative but still limited in number. As Lafont (2019) and Ejsing, Veng & Papazu (2023) point out, the legitimacy of deliberative mini-publics ultimately depends on their resonance with the broader population, who have not themselves taken part. Future climate assemblies, therefore, will have to develop better strategies for wider engagement, which involve thinking about how to communicate the findings of assemblies and how to situate the work of climate assemblies within the broader landscape of climate organizations and movements. This also entails proliferating and multiplying the number of climate assemblies taking place at local and regional levels, so

that more citizens become exposed to them (Ejsing, Veng & Papazu 2023; Lewis et al. 2023; Moseley et al. 2025).

A third challenge concerns inclusion and diversity. Climate assemblies strive to be demographically representative, but in practice they often entail their own exclusions (Asenbaum et al. 2024; Ballangé 2025; Elstub & Khoban 2023; Gherghina, Mokre & Mișcoiu 2021; Gherghina, Mokre & Mișcoiu 2025; Jacquet 2017). Time pressures, language barriers, and different levels of political confidence can disproportionately affect the participation of more marginalized groups. Moreover, the framing of climate-related questions may privilege certain types of expertise or academic knowledge, which forecloses others. Therefore, future climate assemblies will have to experiment with new methods of inclusion, such as translation and facilitation support, differentiated stipends, partnerships with relevant advocacy groups to help with outreach, and even over-sampling of marginalized viewpoints. This inclusion is not just a matter of justice, but also of ensuring epistemic diversity so that different lived experiences, especially those of marginalized communities most affected by ecological crises, inform collective decisions.

Finally, a key challenge for researchers and practitioners alike is to find suitable methods for evaluating the long-term, systemic effects of deliberative processes. While there is growing evidence that participation in assemblies has transformative impacts on individuals, less is known about the way these effects cascade through bureaucratic institutions, public discourses, and civic networks over the long term. Evaluating climate assemblies strictly on short-term policy adoption obscures the slower, relational effects described at length in this article. A more systems-oriented research approach would have to employ longitudinal, comparative, and mixed-method approaches able to track feedback loops and emergent properties across scales. Emerging approaches within deliberative systems research—including process tracing and network-based mapping of deliberative interactions—offer promising starting points for this type of analysis (Boswell, Hendricks & Ercan 2016; Ercan et al. 2022; Ercan, Hendricks & Boswell 2017). To do this work might also involve inter-disciplinary collaborations between political scientists, sociologists, and sustainability scholars to map the complex feedback architecture through which democratic learning unfolds.

Addressing these gaps is essential if climate assemblies are to evolve from experimental interventions into more durable infrastructures of democratic participation. This evolution not only requires design innovation, but also a deeper cultural and epistemic reorientation: from viewing deliberation as a consultation mechanism to recognizing it as part of an ongoing process of collective sense-making. In this light, climate assemblies are not simply policy instruments, but evolving infrastructures of democratic adaptation, spaces where societies rehearse the skills of reasoning, empathy, and coordination needed to navigate complexity. On this view, their democratic value lies less in the immediate decisions they produce than in the capacities they cultivate: the ability to learn collectively,

act amid uncertainty, and sustain solidarity in the face of climate turbulence.

Conclusion

Climate assemblies have emerged as one of the most promising democratic innovations today. However, as argued in this article, their transformative potential might not lie in their immediate influence on climate policy, but rather in their capacity to act as catalysts within wider social and political systems. When seen through a complex systems lens, climate assemblies appear not as isolated events, but as nodes of democratic learning, trust, and adaptation. They can help reshape the feedback architecture of democratic governance and alter how societies sense problems, deliberate about futures, and act collectively under conditions of uncertainty.

Recognizing assemblies as contributors to broader democratic system dynamics rather than instrumental tools invites a shift in both research and practice. It calls for evaluative frameworks attuned to multiple temporalities and feedbacks, for institutional designs that embed deliberation within ongoing political rhythms, and for a democratic culture that values collective experimentation as much as technocratic efficiency. To achieve these broader democratic effects, the next generation of climate assemblies will have to focus as much on building durable civic and institutional capacities as on delivering immediate policy results. Ultimately, the democratic challenge of the climate crisis is not only to decide what must change, but also to transform how societies make collective decisions. Climate assemblies, when sustained and connected, offer one way of cultivating this capacity—a means of nurturing democratic reflexivity in turbulent times.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare

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