



DEMOCRACY INTERNATIONAL



**RESEARCH NOTE**

**The 2019 Grand Débat national in France:  
A participatory experiment with limited legitimacy**

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## Foreword

Democratic participation of citizens in political decision-making is each year scoring higher on national agendas. Alongside parliamentary democracy, examples of participatory democracy mechanisms such as citizens' assemblies, councils, budgets or panels are multiplying in Europe. In France, the Grand Débat National is one of latest national experimentations of participatory democracy. If it was by no means novel, what made the French Grand Débat National venture different was less that participatory democracy was still rather new in a country like France, but also that it was done to an (almost) unprecedented scale, to quell an enraged public, at record-speed and mobilized different tools for citizens' participation. This raises questions on the legitimacy of the venture: how inclusive and how deliberative was it? It is interesting that, while the Yellow Vests movement received considerable national and international media attention, the Grand Débat National received intense coverage in the French media, but only limited coverage outside of France. This research note aims to provide a non-French and non-academic audience with an independent account of the Grand Débat National: what was its scope and scale, how was it organised, who took part, what were the quality and deliberative features of the debates? The purpose for sharing this experience is to strengthen transnational knowledge of good and bad practices of citizens' participatory mechanisms for future initiatives.

By Camille Dobler



## Introduction

In October 2018, the outbreak of the social movement of the Yellow Vests opened a singular political moment in France. This grassroots movement, born unexpectedly in reaction to a new fuel tax, rapidly developed into a social and political crisis, supported by deep-rooted sentiments of political downgrading and economic injustice of part of the population. After two months of contestations, which polarised public opinion, a second phase was initiated by the French President E. Macron to “transform, with [citizens], angers into solutions”<sup>1</sup>. Announced 10 December 2018, formalised by the President in his letter to the French from 13 January and officially launched 15 January 2019, the Grand Débat National (GDN) was designed as a participatory democratic exercise whose immediate objective was to channel political emotions towards a discursive resolution of the crisis.

The principle of granting citizens a more active role in our democracies has a long history. In the last two decades, participatory democracy experimentations have multiplied across the globe. Apart from the Swiss citizens’ initiatives, famous European examples include the Irish Constitutional Convention (2012-2014), the Irish Citizens’ Assemblies (2016-2018, 2019-?) and the new Citizens Council and Citizens Assemblies of the German-speaking region of Belgium. Less mediated but much more common, neighbourhood councils and participatory budgets are set up in many municipalities, [who also engage more and more in citizens’ consultations on local issues](#). Barcelona is a very insightful example. Town-hall meetings, direct consultations of citizens and citizens’ assemblies are common practice throughout the Americas and the broader global south. At the European level too, important efforts have already been made to engage in more participatory democracy: notably with the European Citizens’ Initiative (2012), the Citizens’ Dialogues (2012), and the European Citizens’ Consultations (2018). The legitimacy of all those participatory democracy mechanisms relies on two criteria: the representativeness of those citizens taking part (input legitimacy) and the quality of deliberation (procedural legitimacy). On both, shortcomings often appear. Participants are often few and poorly representative of a national population. Additionally, the quality of discussions may typically leave something to be desired. Yet, the argumentative capacity of citizens, their ability to engage in high-level discussions on constitutional issues and to learn and engage rapidly on very complex and technical subjects are no longer a question, with considerable evidences gathered by researchers. Rather, it is the independence, transparency, methodological choices and commitment on outcomes made by those initiating participatory mechanisms that pre-determine the mixed performances of those democratic experiments.

How was the Grand Débat National organised? Who participated? Did it succeed to make the jump from citizens’ consultations to deliberation? Those are essential questions to understand the political significance and legitimacy of its outcomes. From the start, its democratic legitimacy was contested by the Yellow Vests, who launched their own debate called the Vrai Débat (the ‘Real Debate’). This encouraged the creation of a participatory research project – [l’Observatoire des Débats](#) – gathering independent actors from civil society and academia. The aim was to provide the GDN with a politically neutral and scientifically-sound ‘mirror’ of the debates. L’Observatoire des Débats gathered more than a hundred of observers reporting on a single observation grid and gathering quantitative data thanks to a questionnaire distributed to participants in local debates in all French regions. While the conclusions published by the French government build on aggregated heterogeneous reports from local debates and regional conferences, the qualitative and quantitative data collected by l’Observatoire are the only data available informing us about the sociology of the GDN public and the discursive processes through which proposals were formulated.

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<sup>1</sup> Macron, Emmanuel. ‘Lettre du Président de la République aux Français’, 13 January 2019

*This research note builds directly on their preliminary findings and the author's observations as part of this research project to provide non-French speakers with an independent and evidences-based account of the Grand Débat national<sup>2</sup>.*

## **Instruments for citizens' participation**

*The GDN multiplied parallel instruments of citizens' participation, increasing the chances for each citizen to find its most suitable mean of communication and civic participation. Notably, it rediscovered registers of grievances, continued the tradition of public debates, and developed further online participation with the use of civic technology. Online participation is easily accounted for, thanks to the e-mail address needed for registration on the GDN platform. For other vectors of participation, however, and with the exception of regional conferences, only estimations are possible. Governmental sources evaluated the total number of participants to 1,2 million of citizens: 506.333 participants at local debates, about 500.000 contributors to the online platform (for 2,8 millions visits), 160.000 contributors to the municipal registers of grievances and 27.000 letters and mails sent.*

## **'Cahiers de Doléances' – Registries of Grievances**

Registries of Grievances – known in France as the 'Cahiers de Doléances' – were an initiative by the Association of Rural Mayors of France (AMRF), which preceded the Grand Débat National decided by the French government<sup>3</sup>. Confronted with the strong mobilization of Yellow Vests in semi-urban and rural territories, some 10.000 municipalities decided to keep their door opened until 14 January 2019, the eve of the launch of the GDN, to gather citizens' grievances in public registries. The initiative was welcomed and encouraged by the Government and the Steering Committee of the Grand Débat National, and municipalities were invited to pursue the collection of grievances throughout the two months of the GDN. It was left to mayors whether to participate and/or to carry on with the Cahiers. Ultimately, half of French municipalities held such registries; which were filled in by estimated 160.000 contributors, and send to the Prefect of each region for transcription, compilation, analysis and archiving.

## **The GDN online platform**

The government called upon civic technology to design and run the online platform, which welcomed 2,8 million visitors for 647.324 registered and 506.333 distinct contributors (for a total of more than 1,8 million contributions). To contribute online, registration was mandatory and only a valid e-mail address and a postcode were required. Informative leaflets and questionnaires to facilitate discussions were available for organisers of debates to download. Upcoming public debates were advertised<sup>4</sup>. Interestingly, both the government with the GDN and the Yellow Vests with the Vrai Débat used the platform by the French start-up Cap Collectif, but under opposite modalities. The Vrai Débat allowed online participants to engage in discussions on proposals made by others within nine broader themes, notably by making it possible to formulate 'arguments' under each

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<sup>2</sup> Fourniau, Jean-Michel, [Synthèse des travaux de l'Observatoire des Débats. Note de travail n°1. 'Le "Grand Débat national": un exercice inédit, une audience modérée au profil socioéconomique opposé à celui des Gilets Jaunes'](#), 12 April 2019. Available online (in French only): <https://observdebats.hypotheses.org/467>

<sup>3</sup> The initiative was in direct reference to the Cahiers de Doléances from 1789 that gathered the views and criticisms of Frenchmen and women on the situation of the country a few months before the French Revolution.

<sup>4</sup> The platform is still accessible online: <https://granddebat.fr>



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proposal and to vote 'in favour' or 'against' them <sup>5</sup>. In comparison, participation to the online platform of the GDN was more constrained and followed the more classic technique of public opinion polling with closed questions questionnaires on four pre-determined themes. 70% of contributions to the GDN answer one or more of these questionnaires, others shared proposals by uploading them directly on the platform.

### **Local public debates**

Local debates – known as 'réunions d'initiative locale' – made up the core feature of the GDN and were held for two months between 15 January until 15 March 2019. Self-initiated by citizens, organisations, representative or authority, 9296 debates have been advertised on the platform, but it should be noted that organisers did not have to do so, and it is estimated that about 1000 debates have been advertised outside the GDN platform. Typically, some municipalities preferred to communicate on the debates they were organising directly on their municipal website. Organisers were encouraged to upload the reports of local debates directly on the GDN platform.

No official count was realised, and only estimations of the number of participants are possible. It is estimated that more or less 500.000 citizens participated in local debates. One municipality out of eight welcomed a debate, gathering in total 0,9% of the French population. The audience of the GDN appears moderate considering its important coverage in national media and the strong involvement of the French executive. Comparatively, the 2003 debates on the future of schools had gathered almost a million of citizens, despite a narrower scope and a smaller number of tools for participation.

### **'Neighbourhood' stands**

Travelling stands were organized according to a scheduled itinerary to gather short testimonies and opinions of citizens in post-offices and important train stations, with the assistance of the French national railway society (SNCF). About 5000 citizens were consulted through a tablet application.

### **Regional citizens' conferences**

The last two weekends of March 2019, 19+2 Regional Citizens' Conferences marked the conclusion of the GDN with 13 conferences organised in metropolitan France, five in the French over-sea territories and one national youth conference held in Paris. Two participatory workshops were organised in the Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon and Saint-Barthélemy and Saint-Martin over-sea territories. The 19 conferences were organised following a different setting from local debates, much closer to participatory workshops, and lasted for one day and a half. They were not public, nor live-streamed. Participants had been randomly selected and their number varied between 55 (Corsica) and 125 (Île de France) for Metropolitan France and 19 (Guadeloupe) and 29 (Guyane) for over-sea territories. In total, they gathered 1404 French citizens. Working in smaller groups of five to seven

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<sup>5</sup> For a research analysis of the socio-numerical characteristics of the Vrai Débat, see Pascal Marchand, Brigitte Sebbah, Julie Renard, Guillaume Cabanac, Laurent Thiong-Kay, Natasha Souillard and Lucie Loubère "[Vrai Débat: sortir du débat pour négocier](#)", Rapport scientifique préliminaire d'analyse du Vrai Débat par l'Observatoire des pratiques socio-numériques-LERASS, UMR-CNRS-Université de Toulouse, 27 mars 2019

on one of the four themes of the GDN, participants were invited to elaborate concrete policy proposals <sup>6</sup>. Initially, inputs from local debates were planned to inform the work of regional citizens' conferences but a very tight schedule made that impossible in practice.

### **Sociology and Representativity of the GDN Public**

*Participation and representativity are important validity criteria for any democratic process. With the exception of Regional Citizens Conferences, participation to the GDN and organisation of debates was open to all citizens and anonymous. No counting mechanism was set up for participants and reporting on discussions was left to the discretion of local organisers, who were encouraged to upload a report of discussions to the online platform, but not obliged to do so. To this day, this makes it difficult to know the exact audience of the GDN, the sociology of its public, its representativity and the inclusivity of its debates. This calls for caution when referring to the outcomes of the GDN.*

### **Geography of local debates: an urban audience <sup>7</sup>**

Tracing back the postcode of organisers of local debates declared on the online platform, a strong demographic effect in the organisation of debates is visible. First, despite differences in the regional density of debates (number of debates held in a region per inhabitants in this region), about 60% of French citizens had the opportunity to attend at least one local debate in their place of residence. In Metropolitan France, almost every citizen could attend a debate less than 20km away from their residency. The geographical coverage of the GDN was therefore satisfactory in comparison to similar exercises of citizens' consultations, and cannot in itself explain its relatively low attendance. Second, this demographic effect grows stronger when we look more closely at the municipal density of debates (number of debates held in a municipality per its number of inhabitants). The bigger the municipality, the more debates were held. While 54,4% of French municipalities count less than 500 inhabitants (18.240 municipalities), those make out only 10,7% of the municipalities that have organised local debates (402 of them organised only one debate and 75 at least two). This gives to the GDN a strong urban character: 221 of the 250 cities of more than 30.000 inhabitants have welcomed more than one local debate. In Paris alone, more than 350 debates were held in the space of two months, but a similar high concentration of debates can be found in all French cities of more than 30.000, with the notable exception of large urban areas home to disadvantaged neighbourhoods. This is reflected in the sociology of the GDN public and its representativity <sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> A synthesis of the work of the 19 Regional Citizens' Conference made by Missions Publiques and Res publica (external contractors mandated by the French government) is available online (in French only): <https://www.grand-debat.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/syntheses-regionales.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> This sub-section summarizes the preliminary findings by Pierre-Henri Bono and Martial Foucault "Grand débat national. Radioscopie des réunions locales", CEVIPOF, 4 avril 2019 as they are referred to in Jean-Michel Fourniau, Synthèse des travaux de l'Observatoire des Débats. Note de travail n°1. 'Le "Grand Débat national": un exercice inédit, une audience modérée au profil socioéconomique opposé à celui des Gilets Jaunes', 12 April 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Statistics from the *Observatoire des Débats*.



### **Sociology of the GDN public: the opposite of the Yellow Vests**

The questionnaires from the Observatoire des Débats are the only source of information on the profile of participants to local debates. The data collected depict a GDN public in sharp contrast with the Yellow Vests. Participants to the GDN were older than the average Frenchmen and women (57 years old), more likely to be men (55%) and for almost half of them retired (49%). Young professional adults between 30 and 40 years old only make up 14% of GDN participants, and very little belonged to a visible minority. 62,4% of participants declared holding a higher-education degree and ¾ declared to be home-owners. The same socio-economic characteristics apply to contributors to the GDN online platform<sup>9</sup>. In comparison, the Yellow Vests public was a decade younger, more feminine, more active and more likely to rent rather than to own their housing<sup>10</sup>. There is little doubt that the GDN gathered citizens with high social and symbolic capital. The over-representation of pensioners and higher-educated citizens is a common feature of many participatory mechanisms, and in this regard, the GDN did not break the pattern. This calls for particular caution when analyzing the contributions that came out of citizens' debates, as participants were poorly representative of the French population.

Regarding political attitudes, preliminary results from the sociodemographic questionnaire of the Observatoire des Débats indicate that participants to the GDN were more moderate in their egalitarian claims than Yellow Vests and were more trustful towards other citizens. They were also more likely to be satisfied of their living standards and less conservative in their views of public institutions such as schools. This strengthens the hypothesis that the GDN mostly mobilised parts of the population with political attitudes close to the ones of Macron's electorate. Yet, the GDN seems to have been successful in reaching out to citizens who are not actively involved in politics or civil society organisations. For a majority of participants, the GDN was the first time they were engaging in public meeting and discussions.

### **A national debate with limited procedural legitimacy**

*If the scope of the GDN was clear, with four thematic debates decided by the French government – 'Democracy and Citizenship', 'Fiscality and Public Spending', 'Ecological Transition' and 'Organisation of the State and Public Services' – its exact aim was not. Words like consultation, participation and deliberation were often used inter-changeably and no promises were made on its future outcomes. This lack of clarity and commitments on outcomes is likely to be the main cause for low attendance, despite media attention and the diversity of instruments for citizens' participation. Yet, the lack of political independence and the chosen discussion format might have had a stronger dissuasive effect.*

### **Independence of the GDN: the omnipresence of the Presidential majority**

The decision of the government not to rely on the expertise of the independent French National Commission for Public Debate (CNDP), the verticality of the GDN organisation process and the strong media presence of President Emmanuel Macron during the time of the debate quickly raised doubts on the independence of the

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<sup>9</sup> Hamza Bennani, Pauline Gandré et Benjamin Monnery, '[Les déterminants locaux de la participation numérique au grand débat national : une analyse économétrique](#)' in Revue économique, 2019/7, p. 486-507

<sup>10</sup> Collectif Enquête Gilets jaunes, Centre Émile Durkheim, CNRS Université de Bordeaux/Sciences Po Bordeaux '[Gilets jaunes : une enquête pionnière sur la « révolte des revenus modestes](#)', Le Monde, 11 décembre 2018

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GDN and its political neutrality. A guarantors' panel was set up to "ensure the impartiality and transparency" of the initiative <sup>11</sup> and to diffuse trust in the GDN. However, its recommendations, notably regarding the modalities of online participation, were not always followed by the steering 'Mission' of the GDN, under the authority of the French Prime Minister. In their concluding report, guarantors regretted the important personal involvement of the President of the Republic in the GDN <sup>12</sup> and its strong mediatisation during the two months of debates. The omnipresence of E. Macron is likely to have "polarized public attention", glossing-over the exchanges between citizens and to have fed a form of skepticism <sup>13</sup>. Before the guarantors, the National Commission for Public Debate (CNDP) had already warned about the strong distrust in the sincerity of the government in involving citizens, and stressed the need for the government to commit itself to answer to each proposal and expectation expressed <sup>14</sup>.

Additionally, research has found an important correlation between results from the first round of the 2017 French Presidential election and the density of local debates: 22% of municipalities where E. Macron won more than 30% of votes held local debates; while only 1,2% of those where he won less than 12% did. This stresses the important mobilisation of the presidential majority and La République en Marche (LRM) networks in regions. In particular, LRM members of parliament and their parliamentary collaborators have been very active in regions and in rural areas, organising 47,5% of all local debates. In comparison, 26,5% have been organised by citizens; 18,8% by associations, 1,3% by companies and 5,8% of organisers did not declare their status on the online platform. The 'last minute notice' nature of the GDN, the very short timeframe and the omnipresence of the presidential majority in its organisation and communication made it complicated for civil society to position itself, especially during the first four weeks. In the first month of the GDN, 56% of local debates had been organised by elected representatives. The political dimension of the GDN most likely is an important factor behind the low attendance of the GDN.

### **A top-down consultation rather than deliberation**

If the GDN offered a multiplicity of tools for citizens' expression, its deliberative quality is questionable considering the methodological choices made and restrictions put on those tools. The modalities of the Cap Collectif platform adopted by the government favored a classic technique of public opinion polling with closed-questions questionnaires. Such method has well-known limits and is poorly suited for deliberation. As a result, online participation to the GDN was exclusively consultative with the suggestion for an interactive feature allowing participants to comment on each other's proposals made by the guarantors not been followed-up on <sup>15</sup>. Regarding local debates, no strict instructions were given to organisers on how to organise them. If they were encouraged to make use of the closed-questions questionnaires and informative toolkit available on the online platform, they were free to pick one or more of the four themes, to engage in a Q&A with participants, to organise workshops in thematic tables, to hold a conference or leave the floor open to free testimonies. Similarly, the layout of the room could vary from an amphitheatre, a conference setting, group tables or a circle. Very few organisers used chart papers, blackboards and post-its, many used the

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<sup>11</sup>Their profiles can be consulted here: <https://granddebat.fr/pages/le-college-des-garants>

<sup>12</sup> In total, Emmanuel Macron participated in 16 local debates.

<sup>13</sup> [Rapport du Collège des Garants du Grand débat national](#), 9 avril 2019, p.12

<sup>14</sup> Commission nationale du débat publique CNDP, '[Mission d'accompagnement et de conseil pour le grand débat national](#)', 11 janvier 2019

<sup>15</sup> [Rapport du Collège des Garants du Grand débat national](#), 9 avril 2019, p.15



questionnaires from the GDN platform. In most cases, debates were held without accessories in conference rooms, with the organiser acting as moderator, passing the floor to participants for about two hours. In cases where the organiser was an elected representative, the discussion often favoured a Q&A format. While deliberation requires for all arguments to be presented, debated towards the creation of a consensus, the dynamic was closer to sharing of testimonies and opinions to the government, and listening of answers, characteristic of a classic citizens' consultation. Only workshops organised around thematic tables and small circular assembly allowed for deliberative exchanges to take place. Regarding themes for discussion, half of local debates officially dealt with the four themes, leaving participants free to express views on any of them. Only 32% of organisers chose to focus the discussion on only one theme: in such cases, the theme 'Democracy and Citizenship' was preferred (36%) and this theme was the most debated theme in local debates. However, it only comes third on the online platform and on the questionnaire of the Observatoire des Débats. Overall, French citizens participating in the GDN gave priority and, or would have preferred to discuss 'Fiscality and Public Spending', followed by 'Ecological Transition'. Those two themes are more directly related to the triggering event – a tax on car fuel to limit air pollution and non-renewable energy waste – of the Yellow Vests movement.

### **The exception of Regional Citizens' Conferences**

The Regional Citizens' Conferences were without doubt the most interesting setting of citizens' participation and the only vector of participation to be explicitly announced as deliberative. The recommendations of guarantors have been met for the most part to ensure that participants to the conferences could deliberate in thematic working groups of five to eight participants. After a first phase of brain-storming and individual testimonies, each group was invited to sketch a limited number of proposals as detailed as possible (how rather than what to solve). Work organisation was oriented to the production of a single proposal per table, before all proposals were briefly presented in plenary, but not debated. The final product of each conference thus consisted in a thematised collection of proposals and there is a need to distinguish the deliberative quality of exchanges within working groups and in plenary.

The deliberative feature of the Regional Citizens' Conferences was enriched by the richer political pluralism and social heterogeneity of their participants. The participants were chosen through a random roll-out of phone numbers (85% of mobile phone numbers and 15% of landline numbers) aiming at recreating a 'mini-France' in each region. This recruitment technique for mini-publics has become more common in politics in the last two decades (citizens' assemblies, citizens' juries, deliberative polls) because of higher guarantee of impartiality and the promise of better representation of population diversity. It was however the first time it had been used in France on a national scale. The company Harris Interactive was mandated to carry out the draw in Metropolitan France, in a timeframe of only three weeks. 800.000 phone numbers have been generated, and 300.000 citizens panelised based on five criteria: age, gender, socio-professional category, department of residency and size of the place of residency <sup>16</sup>. To complete the sample, 7% of participants

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<sup>16</sup> Res publica / Missions Publiques [Synthèse des Conférences Citoyennes Régionales du Grand Débat National](#), p.6

have been randomly selected after the draw based on their gender, age and socio-professional category to maximise the inclusivity and diversity of regional conferences. The final participation rate appears very weak: 0,49%. This low participation rate implies that motivation and availability of individuals contacted to take part in the conferences played an important role. Additionally, there is still a strong bias in favour of an urban population, with cities between 2000 and 20.000 inhabitants being under-represented amongst participants to the conferences. If the draw of participants overall managed to constitute a more representative sample of the French population, it only partially managed to adjust the over-representation of men and urban citizens observed in local debates.

## Lessons from the Grand Débat national

*The GDN has largely been presented as an important success by the French government. If the initiative to include citizens further into policy-making is to be welcome, in practice, the GDN was a case in point of the two main problems faced by participatory democracy – poor representativeness and limited deliberation – from which two main lessons can be drawn.*

### Participatory democracy needs time

The first is the issue largely stressed in this note of limited legitimacy because of important bias in representativeness and poor deliberation. If the GDN consisted of a unique exercise in its scope and geographical coverage, successfully multiplying tools for citizens' participation, shortcomings in the methodological choices made and poor representativeness of its public lessen the scientific validity of its outcomes and the legitimacy of the initiative itself. As such, the French experience of the GDN should not be oversold, especially now that discussions are about to start on a Conference for the Future of Europe<sup>17</sup>. One first important lesson to be learned is that participatory democracy requires time: both in its organisation (from the recruitment of participants to the regional conferences to discussions on how best design online platforms, how to moderate debates and what to include in questionnaires) and in its implementation. While the National Commission for Public Debate (CNDP) had advised four months minimum for the organisation of such nation-wide experiment, local debate organisers and notably civil society organisations were caught-off guard by the one-month timeline. It is clear that the rush further strengthened the political dimension of the GDN, which in turn had negative consequences on its inclusivity. Within the GDN framework, the regional citizens' conferences stand out as another example that citizens are capable of engaging in high-level discussions, on complex questions of constitutional or political reforms when they are provided with sufficient time to do so, even if one day and a half remained insufficient for plenary discussions. Top-down consultations rather than bottom-up deliberation, the GDN seemed however to have been a positive and engaging experience for the few who participated. 53% of participants to local debates and 80% of participants to regional conferences were satisfied of the debate they took part in<sup>18</sup>. As with other experiments of participatory democracy, the GDN seemed to have empowered participants, who for a majority of them, had never participated in public discussions before.

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<sup>17</sup> There appear to be some important similarities on how to engage citizens in the upcoming Conference on the Future of Europe, in the position of the European Commission ([contribution from 22 January 2020](#)) and the 2019 French Grand débat national.

<sup>18</sup> Statistics from the Observatoire des Débats.



### **Articulating participatory and representative democracies**

Second, the GDN is a case in point of the procedural hiatus in moving from citizens' proposals to political decision-making by elected representatives. From the start, an important bias was the vagueness of its aim. Was it to listen to citizens, or to associate them to political decisions? Was it to consult them or to empower them? While the official narrative around the GDN came closer to the latter, the choices made (or the absence of clear choices) tend towards the former. Notably, no clear political commitment was ever given, despite the strength of popular mobilisation and then political juncture. It is evident that it did not encourage citizens to take part in a participatory experiment. Many, from the start, saw in the GDN a smokescreen. To this day, the GDN did not have any political outcome. The 18.000 registries of grievances have been archived in each department without any transparent follow-up. Synthesis of debates and conferences have been published without further political announcements. The absence of outcomes to 2,8 million of contributions by 1,2 million contributors can only confirm public opinion in the belief that representative democracy is immune to the voices of citizens and strengthen the fear of political observers that participatory democracy experiments are likely to increase citizens' frustration.

Academic research has nicely theorized the challenges of combining the legitimacy derived from participatory assemblies to the legitimacy of elected institutions. They stress, however, that both are complementary to each other and failure to articulating them weakens democracy as a whole, damaging citizens' trust <sup>19</sup>. The GDN is a paradigmatic example of this failure to articulate the horizontal dynamic of participatory democracy with the vertical dynamic of representative democracy. Yet, successful examples, with (sometimes close to institutionalised) follow-up mechanism, exist. The Irish Constitutional Convention and the follow-up on six out of nine of its recommendations is a good example of shared political decision-making between a citizens' panel and elected representatives <sup>20</sup>. First, it calls for the recognition of informal practices of democratic participation and their 'institutionalisation', by giving them a clear mandate, and tools. Second, it supposes a political commitment to an adaptive and relational approach between citizens' assemblies/council/ agora and elected representatives <sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Rosanvallon, Pierre, *La Légitimité démocratique: impartialité, réflexivité, proximité*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2008

<sup>20</sup> On two of the six recommendations that were followed-on, there was also an articulation with direct democracy through the use of the referendum procedure.

<sup>21</sup> See Bibliothèque Publique d'information, Public Lecture 'Après le débat : Qui décide ?' with Loïc Blondiaux, Ilaria Casillo, Laurence Monnoyer-Smith, 20 February 2020

## Conclusion

The Grand Débat National hoped to be the answer to the crisis of confidence between citizens and their representatives and institutions in France. Yet, its biggest weaknesses were precisely its failure to establish a follow-up mechanism between the two and its negligence in the elaboration of citizens' participation. Participatory democracy requires time and political commitment from both citizens and their governments. Typically, poor transparency, independency, deliberative features and lack of political commitment discourage many citizens to give theirs. The GDN was a case in point: it cost the GDN input and procedural legitimacy, significantly weakening its political strength and the legitimacy of the proposals that had been formulated. As such, the French experience of the GDN should not be oversold.

In its recommendations to the government for the Grand Débat National, the National Commission for Public Debate had suggested, as a conclusion to the GDN, for a national citizens' consultation of randomly drawn citizens to meet several times at regular intervals. This suggestion was not completely forgotten, and the Citizens' Convention on Climate was announced after the end of the Grand Débat national in April 2019. If there is no legal requirement for the French government to follow-up on the proposals made by the 150 citizens who compose the Convention, there is nonetheless an official and clearly stated political commitment of the President to do so: either by referendum and/or ordinary legislative procedure and/or regulations. Thus, while the GDN fell short to go beyond a regulatory and vertical approach, there is hope that, this time, the government learns from its mistakes.



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