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The Climate Assembly as a ‘Mini-Austria’. Socio-Demographics, Political Interest, and Attitudes Towards Climate Change

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## Abstract

The answer to low satisfaction with democracy in general and to climate change in particular is increasingly found in citizens' assemblies. Following in the footsteps of Germany, the UK and France, among others, a climate assembly was held in Austria in 2022. Randomly selected citizens developed proposals on how Austria could become climate neutral by 2040. The article analyses the composition of the assembly and thus the question of how far the selection of participants lived up to the claim of a 'mini-Austria'. The findings: 1. A curtailed selection process led to a pool of participants that was too small and excluded parts of the population. 2. The participants largely corresponded to the population in terms of socio-demographic characteristics. 3. However, their attitudes towards climate change as well as at least in part towards politics more general were not considered in the selection process and were not representative.

## Keywords

citizens' assembly, climate assembly, climate crisis, democracy, participation

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## Introduction

The ongoing and multiple political crisis mode entails dwindling public trust in state institutions and, at the same time, increased pressure for quick solutions (Brezzi et al., 2021). The climate crisis in particular holds great social explosives in terms of ecological transformation with a short time horizon and reveals itself as a particularly “wicked social problem” (Grundmann, 2016). Liberal democracies are subsequently ‘confronted with developments that threaten to undermine not only their ability to steer but also their ability to represent’ (Kübler et al., 2020: 39). Due to a “double alienation” (Schäfer & Zürn, 2021: 10), which manifests itself in politically selective responsiveness and decreasing legitimacy of institutions, democracy loses its radiance and promotes authoritarian populists. Finally, a widening gap between the electorate and the resident population, especially in Austria, is evidence of the increasing exclusivity of the political system (Mokre & Ehs, 2021). The diagnosis of a worldwide ‘crisis of democracy’ has become inflationary.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, a broad academic and civil society debate has developed in recent years on how democracy could be reformed to increase citizen participation, representation, and responsiveness. Socially polarizing yes/no referendums such as Brexit have raised the question of whether previous calls for more direct democracy would do justice to the existing political complexity. One possible response to the stated crisis of democracy can be found in the ‘deliberative turn’ (Goodin, 2008) with democratic innovations that attempt to remedy the shortcomings of representativeness, thus strengthening responsiveness and repairing democracy (Newton & Geissel, 2012). Foremost among these are citizen assemblies<sup>2</sup>, which reflect the population (mini publics), attempting to increasingly involve citizens in political decision-making and thereby responding to the call for more and socially balanced participation.

Mini publics are not designed as an alternative but complementary to representative democracy (Fung, 2006). Their advantage is seen not least in their ability to focus on long-term solutions rather than traditional institutions of representative democracy that calculate the next election (Fischer, 2017; Smith, 2021; Sandover et al., 2021). In relation to the climate crisis, Howarth et al. (2020) argue that a ‘social mandate’ for ambitious climate policies could be

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<sup>1</sup> See instead of many the titles of V-Dem’s annual Democracy Reports (2022: Autocratization changing nature? 2021: Autocratization Turns Viral, 2020: Autocratization Surges. Resistance Grows, 2019: Democracy Facing Global Challenges) as well as the literature (some of it popular): Zieblatt & Levitsky (2018), Mounk (2018), Applebaum (2020).

<sup>2</sup> On the typology, see Elstub (2014).

achieved in this way. Thus, mini publics could prove to be powerful responses to the crisis of democracy, in that the deliberative experience helps to promote democratic values (such as a culture of good conversation and active listening) and increases trust values in traditional democratic institutions (Grönlund et al., 2010).

This working paper is about the Austrian Climate Citizens’ Assembly (hereinafter: Climate Assembly), which was conducted in the first half of 2022. It was Austria’s first national citizens’ assembly but joined a long list of climate assemblies organised in the last couple of years, most prominently in the United Kingdom, France, Ireland, Spain, as well as in neighbouring Germany and Hungary. Its establishment by the Ministry of Climate Protection goes back to a parliamentary resolution of March 26, 2021.<sup>3</sup> In it, the Austrian National Assembly requested the federal government to implement a variety of measures based on the ‘popular petition on climate’, including the ‘establishment of a citizens’ climate assembly as a participatory process to discuss and develop concrete proposals for the climate protection measures necessary to achieve the goal of climate neutrality in 2040’ (authors’ translation).<sup>4</sup> The resolution was approved by parliamentarians from both governing parties (Peoples’ Party, Greens) and the liberal NEOS; the Social Democrats and the Freedom Party did not support it for different reasons. The Climate Assembly finally met on six weekends between January and June 2022, alternately in Vienna and in Salzburg. The results were handed over to the ministers Leonore Gewessler (Greens) and Martin Kocher (independent, nominated by the Peoples’ Party) on July 4, 2022.<sup>5</sup>

The guiding research question of this paper is: To what extent did the recruitment of participants of the Climate Assembly meet mini-public requirements according to conceptional criteria as set up by the OECD (2021) and in comparison with other climate assemblies? Methodologically, the answer to the questions is based on a literature review of original documents such as the documentation of the selection process by Statistics Austria, expert interviews, a panel survey of participants, and an online panel population survey.

The article is structured as follows. The first section offers a review of the literature on deliberative democracy and citizens’ assemblies. The second presents the methodology and the

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<sup>3</sup> See resolution of the National Assembly of 26 March 2021 concerning measures in connection with the climate referendum (160/E XXVII. GP).

<sup>4</sup> In 2020, the ‘popular petition on climate’ was signed by 380,590 people, i.e. 5.96 % of the eligible voters. As it had thus passed the hurdle of 100,000 signatures, it had to be dealt with by the National Assembly.

<sup>5</sup> A list of 93 recommendations were handed over, see Klimarat der Bürgerinnen und Bürger (2022).

data we analysed. The following section presents our analysis of the composition of the Austrian Climate Assembly. Then, findings are presented followed by a discussion about missing characteristics of the selection process and a conclusion.

### **The Composition of Mini Publics**

Democracies guarantee their citizens the regular selection of their political representatives through general, free, and fair elections. In addition, citizens have a variety of other opportunities to participate. These range from institutionalized forms of participation such as referendums to non-institutionalized forms such as demonstrations (Barnes & Kaase, 1979). Active participation in the political events of an ‘embedded democracy’ (Merkel 2016) significantly determines the quality of democracy in a country. It is therefore not surprising that many political science publications deal with the characteristics or attitudes associated with willingness to participate in politics. A seminal study was that of Verba & Nie (1972), which concluded that sociodemographic and economic factors are related to willingness to participate in politics: Men, older people, and people with a higher level of formal education and better financial security are more politically active.

The differences in willingness to engage in politics have since been confirmed in many studies (Teorell et al., 2007; Verba et al., 1995; Burns et al., 2001). For Austria, Zandonella & Hacker (2016) used the example of the 2013 general elections to show that unemployment is primarily related to non-participation. Using the 2020 Vienna election as an example, Ehs & Zandonella (2021) demonstrated that socio-economic resources determine people’s experiences with the political system and ultimately their trust in democracy and in the effectiveness of participation. Social inequality translates into political inequality because it discourages already disadvantaged populations from participating. This, in turn, has consequences for political responsiveness (Elsässer 2018) and, according to Schäfer & Zürn (2021), represents a major reason for ‘democratic regression’ and the declining legitimacy of political institutions.

In the literature and now also in political practice, mini publics are often seen as a measure at the procedural level to achieve representativeness of the participants based on the lottery procedure, thus more responsiveness in political decision-making and ultimately more legitimacy, especially in socially controversial issues such as the climate crisis (Pow 2021). According to Curato et al. (2021: 4), the main characteristics of mini publics are ‘carefully designed forums where a representative subset of the wider population come together to engage in open, inclusive, informed, and consequential discussion on one or more issues.’

According to Courant (2022), the representativeness of participants is a key legitimizing factor of mini-publics and is therefore always in view of scientific evaluation (Farrell & Stone 2020). Mini publics are, in fact, the only extension of the participation catalogue to date that structurally responds to the sociodemographic skew of participation. Moreover, through the decelerating deliberation and moderation process, they guarantee a non-populist participation instrument that is intended to counteract targeted disinformation, as is seen as necessary not least in the climate crisis (Kuntze & Fesenfeld 2021).

The POLITICIZE dataset (Paulis et al. 2021) contains information on 105 mini publics held in European countries from 2000 to 2020 and illustrates that of the 56 held at the national level, 43 applied specific criteria (such as gender, age, formal education, region, income class, migration background, etc.) to the selection of participants. According to the ideal democratic principle – and best practice of climate assemblies (Smith 2021) – participants of mini-publics are persons who correspond to their respective political unit (municipality, region, nation state) not only according to socio-demographic criteria but also according to political and thematic attitudes. By means of qualified random selection (sortition), they represent the population as a mini populus. Engelstad argued as early as 1989 that democratic equality and distributive justice are “(t)he strongest normative argument in favor of sortition” (Engelstad 1989: 25). Since then, the literature on the sortition as a selection procedure has been almost impossible to survey (instead of many: Stone, 2011; 2016), but the equality and equity argument has always remained in focus. However, the more characteristics must be considered and the smaller the targeted number of participants, the more difficult it becomes to achieve actual representativeness. Consequently, the goal is primarily ‘broad representation’ as defined by the OECD (2021), i.e., that everyone affected by the topic to be discussed has an equal chance of being selected and, even if not drawn, is represented in the mini public according to sociodemographic characteristics and political and thematic attitudes (Ehs 2019).

However, scientific studies examining the outcomes of mini public selection processes show that the goal of representativeness is rarely achieved due to citizens’ different willingness to deliberate: While older studies had indicated that mini public participants are often older (Fishkin & Luskin 2005) and, in particular, more formally educated than the average population (Fishkin & Luskin 2005; French & Laver 2009; Fournier et al. 2011), more recent studies show that women and young citizens are more in favour of deliberation than the average population and therefore easier to recruit (Talukder & Pilet 2021; Harris 2021). In addition, studies have reported that participants differ within their attitudes towards politics more generally, because they tend

to be more politically interested (Hansen & Andersen 2004; Merkle 1996), have a greater political knowledge (Luskin et al. 2002) or because they do not represent the variety of public opinion on the given issue (Farrell et al. 2023, 58). Having these challenges of the composition of a mini public in mind, we now turn to the Austrian Climate Assembly and the material and methods we used to examine its members.

## Data and Methods

The present analysis of the Austrian Climate Assembly with regard to the participants is based on the study of relevant original documents (especially the minutes of the Environment Committee of the National Assembly, the parliamentary resolution, the methodological report of Statistics Austria including annex), expert interviews with parliamentarians and persons responsible for the process (especially Dieter Beisteiner, Lukas Hammer, Barbara Ruhsmann) and additional expert interviews with specialists in statistics, sortition and deliberative democracy approached by the evaluation team (in particular Martin Bauer, Marcin Gerwin, Jamie Gregory, Diarmuid Torney), a panel survey of participants and a population survey. The quantitative survey of participants took place via written questionnaire at three time points in the field. A high response rate of approximately 90 percent of those present was achieved at all three survey time points (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Overview Participant Survey**

Wave	Weekend of Climate Assembly (WCA)	Date	Participants present	Questionnaires completed
Wave 1	WCA 1	01/15/22	82	76 (93 %)
Wave 2	WCA 4	04/23/22	72	64 (89 %)
Wave 3	WCA 6	06/11/22	75	70 (93 %)

The population survey was conducted by *Gallup* as an online panel study. The respondents come from the panel pool of around 65,000 people and are representative of the web-active resident population in Austria, following the Climate Assembly's guidelines, with an age of at least 16 years and a main residence in Austria of at least five years. Fieldwork for the first wave took place after the first WCA in the period from January 24 to February 7, 2022, and a total of 2,000 people were interviewed.<sup>6</sup> Fieldwork for the second wave took place from June 13 to June 27, 2022, and

<sup>6</sup> The sample was based on quotas according to age, sex, federal state ("Bundesland"), and formal education.



of those re-invited to participate from Wave 1, 1,673 also participated in the second survey. 266 individuals were invited to participate for the first time to provide the guaranteed 1,500 individuals and a structurally identical sample in the second wave. Only data from the first wave are included in this study.

The climate assemblies from the United Kingdom (Elstub et al. 2021), France (Giraudet et al. 2022), Ireland (Devaney et al. 2020), Germany (Bürgerrat Klima 2021)<sup>7</sup> and, above all, their learning outcomes, as provided in several workshop sessions by KNOCA (Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies), were used as comparative studies. Since Austria set up a climate assembly later than other countries, numerous empirical values were already available at the time of organization, against which the Climate Assembly can be measured. According to the international standards set out in the OECD Recommendation on Open Government (2022) and the OECD publication on Good Practice Principles (2020), inclusivity and representativeness are among the core principles for good deliberative processes. It should be noted, however, that with a population of seven million people and less than 100 participants in a mini public, it is not possible to achieve exact representativeness. The standard for analysis is therefore ‘broad representativeness’, emphasizing the recognition factor: Everyone who looks at the participants of the Austrian Climate Assembly should see ‘someone like me’.

## **Analysis**

The following section gives an overview of the selection as well as the composition of the Austrian Climate Assembly, also in comparative perspective.

### *Selection criterion*

The Austrian Climate Assembly was selected by Statistics Austria based on the key points essentially specified in the resolution proposal, according to which the Climate Assembly was to be composed of

at least 100 people who have had their main residence in Austria for at least five years, are at least 16 years old and represent a cross-section of society in terms of gender, age, level of education, income, and place of residence [...] This ensures that the participants are selected in a way that is representative for the population as a whole.

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<sup>7</sup> These examples were chosen because, on the one hand, they were accessible to us in original language and, on the other hand, they had already been completed and analysed at the time the Austrian Climate Assembly was organised.

Political attitudes and attitudes towards climate change were not intended as a selection criterion in the resolution proposal. The design of the characteristics was made by the Statistics Austria in consultation with the Federal Ministry for Climate Action. In its methodological report, the Statistics Austria defines the total Austrian resident population as the total population aged 16 to 84, excluding persons with a foreign place of birth and a duration of residence in Austria of less than five years. The seven socio-demographic characteristics were age (five categories), gender (two categories), highest educational level (four categories), NUTS-1 region (three categories), place of birth (three categories), level of urbanisation (three categories) and household income (five categories) (Statistics Austria, 2022a). The number of desired participants was defined as ‘maximum 100’ (Statistics Austria, 2022b, p. 10) and thus represented a deviation from the resolution proposal, which envisaged ‘at least 100’.

Potential participants were contacted in two steps: Within the first step, 1.003 people were contacted by letter in September 2021. These people were drawn in a proportional stratified random sample from the population register (*Zentrales Melderegister*). People with a low educational background were contacted more often to address their lower willingness to participate. In a second step, further 1.000 people were contacted in October 2021. Again, a random sample was used, but the replies of the first contacting were already considered. Groups with a low willingness to participate were assigned higher drawing probability (Statistics Austria, 2022a, p. 5-6).

Statistic Austria thus chose a recruitment method that differed considerably from selection in other states. The selection process usually takes place as follows: First, the initial contact is made through personal visits (for example Ireland) or through telephone conversations (for example France, Germany). Second, against this background a pool of willing participants is available. A random selection was then made from this pool of potential participants.

In Table 2 these steps are represented by the number of initial contacts and invitations. Austria did not use the initial contact by telephone, letter, or in-person to create a pool of potential participants. Instead, the qualitative random sampling took already place at the beginning of the fieldwork based on data from the population register. The lack of personal initial contacts (especially through telephone or door-to-door information) means that the personal approach, which is so important for democratic participation, was not perceived (Ehs & Zandonella 2021). Furthermore, due to the small number of individuals contacted at the beginning of fieldwork, only a small number of completed questionnaires could be obtained. As

a result, in contrast to all other countries, in Austria the target number of 100 participants was only slightly exceeded already in the recruitment phase - and ultimately could not be reached.

The letters of agreement were returned by 128 people. On 19 November 2021, Statistics Austria handed over the names of 100 selected participants for the Climate Assembly to the Federal Ministry for Climate Action. A short time later, the first weekend from 27/28 November 2021 was cancelled due the pandemic and a new one was planned for 14/15 January 2022. However, up to the first date, 30 persons had dropped out and were replaced from the reserved pool of 28 persons. The target number of “at least 100 people” set in the parliamentary resolution could not be reached due to the shortened selection procedure with an insufficient number of willing participants. On the day before the first Climate Assembly weekend, there were only commitments from 98 participants.<sup>8</sup>

According to Statistics Austria, the reasons for non-participation were of private or professional nature as well as the stricter pandemic regulations (Statistik Austria, 2022a, p. 9). Thus, not all individuals included in the parliamentary resolution had the same chance to become participant in the Climate Assembly, which contradicts fundamental requirements for the representativeness of mini publics. This is because the preferred face-to-face meetings at the Climate Assembly were not allowed for individuals who did not want to be vaccinated against COVID19: Due to the corona rules, about 13 % of the Austrian population was excluded from participation in the Climate Assembly (Eberl et al., 2022). Due to the 2Gplus-regulation, which was applied at the first meeting in January 2022, only vaccinated and/or recovered individuals who also presented a negative PCR test were admitted. Those who were neither vaccinated nor recovered could not participate in the entire Climate Assembly.

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<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Statistics Austria was not commissioned to collect the actual socio-demographic composition after the first appointment. The analysis of representativeness must therefore refer to the 98 commitments. The reduction in the number of participants during the Climate Assembly has changed the composition as reported by Statistics Austria in January 2022. No conclusive assessment can be made about the representativeness of those participants who made recommendations to the federal government in July 2022.

**Table 2. Recruitment of Climate Assembly participants in comparison**

	<b>Austria (2022)</b>	<b>Germany (2021)</b>	<b>United Kingdom (2020)</b>	<b>France (2019-2021)</b>	<b>Ireland (2016)</b>
Population in thousands	8.916,86	83.129,29	67.081,00	67.379,91	4.985,67
Selection process	Non primary pooling, but 50 % random sample incl. overrepresentation of people with low educational background and 50 % in a second step as random sample considering existing distribution.	First random generation of telephone numbers (mobile and landline), based on the telephone calls the invitation was sent by post or email.	First random generation of 30,000 household addresses from the Royal Mail's Postcode, of which 80 % were true random sample and 20 % from deprived areas. A computer-generated random selection was made from 1,748 responses: 105 PCPs were drawn strictly representatively, 5 PCPs by oversampling, such as PCPs from Northern Ireland and those who indicated they were not (very) concerned about climate change.	Random sample based on 300,000 automatically generated telephone numbers (85 % mobile, 15 % landline), of which 96,500 were called. In addition, explicit recruitment, and overrepresentation of residents of overseas departments (6 PCPs) as well as 2 PCPs of extreme poverty and 2 farmers.	Random sample in 15 districts and based on this personal invitation through home visits at every 16th door (cold calling door-to-door).
Initial contact and invitations	- / 2.003	14.000 / 2.000	30.000 / 1.748	96.500 / 11.400	Not known
Expression of interest	145 respectively 128	592	1.725	4.100	Not known
Expression of interest exceeded target number by a factor of	1,45 respectively 1,28	3,7	15,68	27,3	Not known

# The Climate Assembly as a 'Mini-Austria'

Selection criterion: socio-demographic characteristics	Yes (age, gender, education, region, place of birth, level of urbanisation, household income)	Yes (age, Origin by federal state, education, gender, size of place of residence, migration background)	Yes (age, gender, education, ethnos, place of residence)	Yes (age, gender, education, place of residence, level of urbanisation, occupation)	Yes (age, gender, social class, place of residence)
Selection criterion: Attitude toward climate change	No	Yes (importance of climate protection queried)	Yes	No	No (multi-topic event)
Exclusion criterion	No	No	Yes (certain political positions)	No	Yes (members of interest groups, media representatives and mandataries of the Senate and Parliament)
Number of participants at the beginning / target number	82 / 100	160 / 160	108 / 110	149 / 150	99 / 99
Type of event	presence	Due to the pandemic only online.	presence, during the pandemic online	presence, during the pandemic online	presence

Note: PCPs=participants.

Source: Population data from the World Bank (World Bank, 2022). Austria (Statistics Austria, 2022a); Germany (Citizens' Assembly Climate, 2021); UK (Elstub et al., 2021); France (Fourniau et al., 2020); Ireland (Devaney et al., 2020).

This rule meant not only that around 13 % were excluded, but also that participants who had already confirmed had to be uninvited or withdrew their acceptance themselves. This was because the conditions of participation had changed. During the time of recruiting (September/October 2021) 3G had count, which would have allowed unvaccinated people to participate if they had at least done a PCR test before each session. However, the first appointment, scheduled for the end of November 2021 was cancelled due to the lockdown and implementational of stricter regulations.

### **Socio-demographic characteristics**

The participants of the Climate Assembly were broadly representative in relation to gender, education, household income and place of residence (see table 3). The difference to the relevant comparison group of the population was a maximum of 5 percentage points. This maximum value for the household income is based on the underrepresentation of the richest, which is not unusual in an international comparison. Larger differences over 5 percentage points were found by age, place of birth and place of residence.

Regarding the age of the participants, the Austrian Climate Assembly failed in achieving broad representativeness: On the one hand there were large imbalances in some age groups, and on the other hand individuals over 84 years were excluded from the citizens' lottery. The youngest (16-20 years) and the middle age group (45-59 years) were overrepresented, the second youngest age group (30-44 years) was underrepresented. Research shows that the second youngest age group can only be reached to a below-average extent due to the 'rush hour of life' (job, care obligations, etc., Bittman & Rice, 2000). This means for recruitment that this group needs special attention.

Furthermore, Statistics Austria arbitrarily excluded persons over the age of 84 from the citizens' lottery. This led to the occurrence that the population was reduced by about 200.000 persons living in Austria. According to Statistics Austria, this was due to the elaborate logistic of the Climate Assembly (travelling to Vienna or Salzburg six times a year). As a result, it can be assumed that the willingness to participate in this group would be very low, which in turn would increase the necessary sample and thus make it more expensive. In the end, the age limit of 84 years was undercut by another five years. The oldest participant in the Climate Assembly was 79 years old. The Austrian Climate Assembly was thus the first and hence far the only one to introduce an upper age limit globally. Overrepresentation of younger cohorts may be appropriate for the issue of climate change, but it is neither in line with the mandate from the

resolution nor with international standards for mini-publics. Overrepresentation is a political decision that must be argued and made transparent to the public.

Persons born in Austria were overrepresented compared to persons born in non-EU countries. Persons living in rural areas were overrepresented compared to those living in smaller towns or suburbs and densely populated areas (cities). The challenge of creating effective democratic innovation begins with the recruitment of participants. The lack of representation was recognized by the participants themselves, as the participatory observation of the Austrian Climate Assembly shows. “Where are the hijabs?” and “The circle of participants must be more diverse. There are only people with knowledge on the subject here” (Unit: 27032022-0900).

In addition to the lack of institutionalization this would also have an impact on the political follow-through. In the survey (wave 3), as many as 41% stated that they had minimal- to no confidence that politics would make efforts to implement the recommendations. This in turn can have an impact on the propensity to participate in future mini publics. If mini publics such as the Climate Assembly are perceived as ‘symbolic policy instruments’ (Boussaguet, 2016) that only represent a rhetorical change without concrete effects, people are reluctant to participate because they do not want to waste their time. In addition to the socio-demographic and economic factors that have been known since Verba & Nie (1972) to influence willingness to participate in politics, there are now other reasons which Jacquet (2017), Miscoiu & Gherghina (2021) and most recently Sultanishvili (2023) raised to explain the unwillingness to participate in mini-publics, such as: doubts about the effectiveness of mini-publics, lack of inclusiveness, mismatch of demands or even “façade deliberation”, i.e. the perception of deliberation just as a process of re-legitimation of state institutions.

**Table 3: Composition of the Climate Assembly**

	participants	population	difference
<b>Gender</b>			
male	51	49	+2
female	49	51	- 2
<b>Age</b>			
16-29 years	29	20	+9
30-44 years	14	24	-10
45-59 years	36	28	+8
60-74 years	17	20	-3
75-84 years	4	8	-4
<b>Formal educational</b>			
Max. compulsory education/unknown	26	25	+1
Vocational training, intermediate vocational education	43	45	-2
Secondary school certificate	14	15	-1
Higher education	17	15	+2
<b>Place of residence</b>			
East (Bgl., Lower Austria, V)	44	44	+/-0
South (Car., St.)	17	21	-4
West (Upper Austria, Sbg., T, Vbg.)	39	36	+3
<b>Place of Birth</b>			
Austria	89	80	+9
EU (except AT)	6	8	-2
Non-EU	5	11	-6
<b>Level of urbanisation</b>			
High (cities)	27	31	-4
Medium (small towns/suburbs)	28	31	-3
Low (rural areas)	46	38	+8
<b>Equalized household income</b>			
1. quintile (lowest)	19	17	+2
2. quintile	17	19	-2
3. quintile	22	20	+2
4. quintile	22	22	+/-0
5. quintile (highest)	18	23	-5

*Note: The population corresponds to all persons with Austrian citizenship or a minimum period of residence of five years in Austria aged 16 to 84.*

*Source: Statistics Austria (2022, p. 12-18).*



### **Attitudes towards climate change**

Attitudes on climate change were not used as a selection criterion. Upon request of the Ministry for Climate Action, Statistics Austria did include questions on attitudes towards climate change in their survey. The results, however, had information purposes only and were not considered for the final selection. Even though political positions are frequently neglected in international selection processes, this decision increases the risk of self-selection (see Table 2 that compares the selection procedure of international climate assemblies). As with other direct democratic instruments, we see self-selection processes in MPs as mentioned by Paulis et al. (2021) in cases where intense scouting procedures are absent (Liesenberg & Strothmann, 2022).

Table 4 shows the comparison between attitudes on climate change among the participants of the citizens’ assembly and the Austrian population. It does not come as a surprise that the participants declared themselves in favour of stronger climate protection measures to a larger extent. At the beginning of the assembly, 96 % of the participants were “very” or “rather worried” about climate change. Among the general population only 77 % raised concerns. While almost all participants agreed that humans are responsible for climate change, again only 77 % in the mass survey could agree to the same statement. Similar discrepancies are shown with respect to the necessity that individuals need to restrict their behavior in order to protect the climate, Austria as a small country can’t contribute much to climate protection and the evaluation if the topic is exaggerated in the public debate. The differences are between 13 and 26 percentage points and are statistically significant.

Looking at the results, it appears problematic that attitudes towards climate change were not used as a selection criterion and we conclude that self-selection has occurred. In addition, self-section might have been intensified by the invitation letter. The invitation letter informed citizens that their task will be to develop measures for climate protection. Thus, it appears plausible that citizens who are not worried about climate change, were less likely to follow the invitation. Instead of asking attitudinal questions for information purposes only, it would have been advisable to include the results in the selection process as well. Due to self-selection, only when attitudes towards climate change are considered – as they were in the Scottish case or in the UK case which was declared as a role model for the Austrian one by the ministry – citizens with more diverse attitudes would have been part of the assembly. The decision not to include questions of attitudes resulted in somewhat homogenous discussions. In wave 2 of our

participants survey, more than half of the respondents said that only a few other participants hold different views than their own.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 4: Comparison: Attitudes towards climate change**

	Participants	Population	Difference	P-value
Binary variables (% agreement)				
Worried about climate change	96 %	77 %	+19 %P	0.000***
Knowledge about climate change	35 %	36 %	- 1 %P	0.664
Humans responsible for climate change	99 %	82 %	+17 %P	0.000***
Climate protection without restrictions	23 %	36 %	-13 %P	0.011***
Austria is irrelevant in climate protection	19 %	36 %	-17 %P	0.001***
Austrian's government does a good job in climate protection	23 %	32 %	- 9 %P	0.959
Topic climate change is exaggerated in public debate	6 %	32 %	-26 %P	0.000***

Notes: Percentages show the share of respondents that report agreement with each survey item<sup>10</sup>.

Source: own survey (Survey Assembly Members, Wave 1 and Mass Survey, Wave 1).

However, the results also show that not only experts or knowledgeable citizens followed the invitation to take part in the Climate Assembly. We do not find any difference between the self-reported state of knowledge among the participants and the population. Finally, the participants were not more supportive of the Austrian government. 23 percent of the participants showed agreed with the statement that the Austrian government is on a good track in tackling climate protection. Among the population this statement found 32% of support.

### Attitudes towards politics and political behavior

Attitudes towards politics and political behavior were not used as selection criteria. Table 5 compares the participants of the citizens' assembly with the general public with respect to these

<sup>9</sup> Question, 'How many of the other members did you feel had different views compared to your own?' (Answer categories and result: 0 % nobody, 55 % some, 22 % around half, 9 % most of them, 11 % I don't know, 3 % no answer).

<sup>10</sup> Agreement means sum of "very worried/rather worried" (item: worried about climate change), "know a great deal/a lot" (item: knowledge about climate change), and "fully agree/rather agree" answer categories (all other items). Legend: 96 % of the participants state that they are very or rather worried about climate change. The column Difference shows the differences between the columns Participants and Population. The column P-value shows the results of one-tailed binomial tests. The test reports whether the share of the participants deviates significantly from the share of the population (\*\*\*p<0.01, \*\*p<0.05, \*p<0.1). %P=percentage points. Valid values only.

characteristics. The data show that the participants have a greater interest in politics than the general public: 93 % of the participants state that they are very or rather interested in Austrian politics. Among the respondents in our mass survey, ‘only’ 82 % show (great) interest in politics. The difference is statistically different.

**Table 5: Comparison: attitudes towards politics and political behavior**

	Participants	Population	Difference	P-value
<i>Binary variables (% agreement / applicable)</i>				
Political interest	93 %	82 %	+11 %p	0.005***
Internal political efficacy	57 %	52 %	+ 5 %p	0.210
External political efficacy	50 %	31 %	+19 %p	0.000***
Referenda/petition	63 %	56 %	+ 7 %p	0.136
Political posting	38 %	31 %	+ 7 %p	0.131
Contacting a politician	29 %	21 %	+ 8 %p	0.069*
Working in a political party/group	20 %	10 %	+10 %p	0.005***
Participating in a demonstration	12 %	16 %	- 4 %p	0.846
Wearing a political sticker	11 %	8 %	+ 3 %p	0.249
Participating in a citizens’ assembly	7 %	8 %	- 1 %p	0.744
<i>Continuous variable (mean values)</i>				
Left-right position	3.9 points	5.0 points	-1.1 points	0.000***
Democratic deficit	3.0 points	3.3 points	-0.3 points	0.099*

Notes: Binary variables: percentages show the share of respondents that report approval of each survey item or that report to have used the relevant participatory activity in the past twelve months. Approval means sum of “very interested/rather interested” (item: political interest), “fully agree/somewhat agree” (items: internal/external efficacy, recoded). Legend: 93 % of the participants state that they are very or rather interested in politics. 63 % of the participants report that they signed a petition in the past twelve months. Mean values are shown for the continuous variables. Legend: On average, participants position themselves on 3.9 point on an eleven-point left-right scale, where 0 means “very much to the left” and 10 means “very much to the right”. The column Difference shows the differences between the columns Participants and Population. The column P-value shows the results of one-tailed binomial tests (binary variables) and one-tailed t-tests (continuous variables). The tests report whether the share of the participants deviates significantly from the share of the population (\*\*\*p<0.01, \*\*p<0.05, \*p<0.1). %P=percentage points. Valid values only.

Source: Survey Assembly Members, Wave 1 and Mass Survey (Wave 1).

Next to a general interest in politics, we examined respondents' feelings of political efficacy. The theoretical concept of political efficacy differentiates between internal and external efficacy. While internal efficacy asks whether respondents perceive politics as easy to understand, external efficacy relates to the question whether respondents believe that they can influence governments. Quite interestingly, the data shows no significant difference concerning internal (5 percentage points) but concerning external efficacy (19 percentage points). Participants reveal much higher levels of external efficacy and therefore the attitude that their actions have the power to affect political behavior. It does not come as a surprise that external efficacy and the willingness to participate in a time-consuming direct democratic instrument such as a citizens' assembly are associated.

Furthermore, we included a list of seven participatory activities in our surveys. Respondents were asked to report whether they had used each of these participatory activities during the past twelve months. For example, 63 % of the participants and 56 % of the respondents in our mass survey reported that they had signed a referendum or a petition. Overall, we see a higher usage of participatory activities among the participants in five of the seven items. However, only the difference with respect to contacting a politician and working in a political group are statistically significant. Again, these are the two items that require direct contact with politicians and show that in general the participants have less fear of contact with the political sphere.

Turning to the ideological standpoints of the participants and the general public, Table 5 reports respondents' average left-right position on a 11-point scale.<sup>11</sup> Participants, on average, locate themselves somewhat to the left of the scale, while the general public is, on average, located in the middle. The difference of 1.1 points on the 11-point scale is statistically significant and thus, participants rate themselves more to the left. This result is in line with the finding that participants advocated for stronger climate protection measures compared to the general public.

Finally, we see a somewhat lower level of perceived democratic deficit among participants compared to the general public that is weakly statistically significant. The difference, however, is rather small. Summing up our results, we conclude that the participants of the

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<sup>11</sup> Participants were asked about their partisan affiliation. However, 38 % of the participants refused to answer this question and we thus do not use this incomplete data to make conclusions.

climate assembly were not representative with respect to their attitudes on climate change, political interest and – to a lesser extent – political participation.

## Conclusion

In Austria, the Citizens’ Climate Assembly marked the first state-organised nationwide mini public.<sup>12</sup> So far, mini publics on a smaller scale (measured by the number of participants and the duration of deliberations) had been tried and tested at the municipal and regional level, the longest in Vorarlberg, Austria’s most-western state.<sup>13</sup> Last but not least, the insufficient institutionalisation of the Austrian Climate Assembly – it was basically based on the good will of federal minister Gewessler, especially since parliamentary motions for resolutions are not legally binding – meant that its legitimacy must be fed from other sources, such as impartiality, quality of results of the deliberation and, above all, representativeness of the participants (Courant 2021). For this reason, representativeness was the focus of our investigation.

As could be shown, the members of the Austrian Climate Assembly were largely representative in terms of sociodemographic characteristics. There were major deviations in the criteria of age, country of birth and place of residence. In the area of attitudes toward climate change and political attitudes and activities, on the other hand, representativeness was not achieved in many cases, which was basically because, contrary to the experience gained in the meantime by other climate assemblies, these characteristics were not used as selection criteria. In principle, a shortened selection process must be criticised, which in part also in terms of skills (citing attitude questions on climate change without taking the results into account) did not correspond to international good practice and explicitly ran counter to some of the key points of the parliamentary motion for a resolution. Furthermore, the handling of the holding of a citizens’ assembly as a face-to-face event in times of pandemic must be judged as deficient. Particularly in view of the polarizing issue of compulsory vaccination against COVID-19 in Austria, the ministry in charge should not have insisted on compulsory attendance for highly exclusionary measures that excluded hundreds of thousands of people as possible participants.

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<sup>12</sup> Previously, there were nationwide citizens’ assemblies initiated and financed by civil society, but they lacked political connectivity, such as the Future Assembly for Democracy in 2021: <https://zukunftsrat.at/die-ergebnisse/>.

<sup>13</sup> Vorarlberg ‘Bürgerräte’ have been held since 2006 and have been enshrined in the state constitution since 2013 (Article 1 (4) of the Vorarlberg state constitution formulates as a state objective, ‘The state is committed to direct democracy in the form of referendum petitions, referendums and popular consultations and also promotes other forms of participatory democracy’).

The first citizens' assembly on climate thus held numerous learning outcomes for future nationwide citizens' assemblies in Austria. If – as Howarth et al. (2020) argue – a 'social mandate' for an ambitious climate policy can be achieved with citizens' assemblies and, moreover, scientific evidence shows that climate citizens' assemblies in Ireland, France and the United Kingdom actually influenced the subsequent legislative process on climate policy (Duvic-Paoli 2022), they prove to be an effective instrument in the fight against the (consequences of the) climate crisis. Their further improvement based on continuous evaluation thus represents an important prerequisite for the success of the implementation of democratic innovations.

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