

Good Things Come in Threes ... Citizens' Assemblies Too!

By Thalsa-Thiziri Mekaouche

On a warm afternoon on June 20, 2025, I stood in the blazing sun surrounded by a crowd. I looked with curiosity to an extremely diverse group of people — women, men, young and old — who buzzed with energy. People's palpable excitement offered a striking contrast to the austere cement architecture of the Palace of Iéna, which hosts the [Economic, Social and Environmental Council \(ESEC\)](#), France's third constitutional chamber. Created in 1946 and reformed in 2021, the ESEC aims to widen democratic participation by convening mini-publics — civil society groups and experts assembled to debate and offer recommendations on various policy issues.

In May 2025, French President Emmanuel Macron tasked the ESEC to organize the country's third citizens' assembly in response to mounting public concern over violence by youths,¹ physical and mental abuse on children,² and the impact of social media on children's health and educational prospects.³ Later, former Prime Minister François Bayrou formulated a question for this assembly: How can we better structure the different moments of children's daily lives so that they are more conducive to their learning, development, and health?

A month later, I found myself queuing alongside 140 randomly selected citizens gathered outside the Palace of Iéna to get my badge as a researcher-observer. In this capacity, I attended the first two sessions of the third French citizens' assembly, which is set to deliver its final report in November 2025 after 21 days of deliberation spread across seven weekends. Once everyone had passed the security checks, ESEC staffers swiftly led the crowd to the palace's grandiose hemicycle for the opening ceremony. With an uplifting soundtrack in the background — which would remain the same across the assembly's duration for all plenary sessions — ESEC President Thierry Beaudet officially declared that "participatory democracy does not compete with representative democracy but enriches it." He further clarified that this citizens' assembly would only propose recommendations to the government, not legislate. He made this point early in the process to avoid excessive expectations among citizens. During

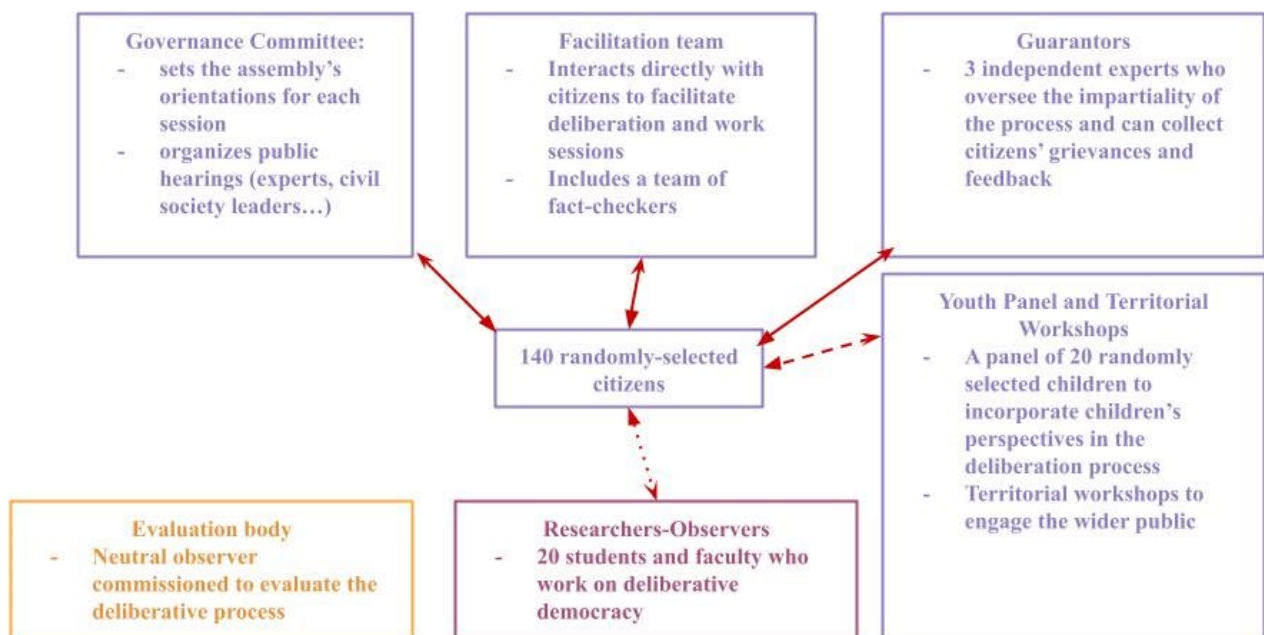
¹ "Enseignante Poignardée Dans Le Bas-Rhin : L'agresseur de 14 Ans Est Mort." Franceinfo, 29 Sept. 2025, www.franceinfo.fr/faits-divers/enseignante-poignardee-dans-le-bas-rhin-l-agresseur-de-14-ans-est-mort_7520896.html. Accessed 30 Sept. 2025.

² Guillaume Druhen. "La Violence Contre Les Enfants, En Chiffres | UNICEF France." UNICEF, 11 Oct. 2006, www.unicef.fr/article/la-violence-contre-les-enfants-en-chiffres/.

³ World Health Organization. "Teens, Screens and Mental Health." World Health Organization, World Health Organization, 25 Sept. 2024, www.who.int/europe/news/item/25-09-2024-teens--screens-and-mental-health.

France's earlier citizen's assembly in response to the Yellow Vests movement over the disproportionate burden of taxation, President Macron had promised that citizens' proposals would be taken up "without filter." When Macron failed to deliver on his promise, many felt betrayed. No false expectations this time round. Beaudet made clear that the assembly had a purely consultative role.

Supported by Yale's Institution for Social and Policy Studies (ISPS), I observed the first phase of this deliberative experiment, the "familiarization" stage during which citizens discover the complex inner workings of the assembly and get acquainted with the issue at hand. The second phase will allow citizens to deliberate on possible solutions while the third stage will consist of solidifying recommendations for the government. ISPS has long supported rigorous [academic research](#) on citizens' assemblies, hosting the [Governing X series](#), spearheaded by Professor Hélène Landemore. As a French student at Yale, I had the opportunity to meet citizens from all over my home country — including overseas territories — and to witness with awe how this "mini-France" came together in spite of deeply-entrenched socio-economic and cultural divides.



At this stage, any prediction on the assembly's final recommendations, or on the policy impact of these recommendations, would be premature. Since Macron dissolved the French National Assembly in July 2024, France has had three different prime ministers and at the time I am writing, does not have a government. With a paralyzed legislative process and civil society vowing to take to the streets, this citizens' assembly comes at a rocky moment in French history.

On the other hand, uncertainty opens up new opportunities for rethinking French institutions, with possible consequences for participatory democracy. The first citizens' assembly on climate change took place in the wake of the Yellow Vest Movement, which, among other social justice demands, advocated for citizen-initiated referenda (*referenda d'initiative citoyenne*). While the third citizens' assembly has a clearly delineated mandate, its members have not been insensitive to what it means to participate in a deliberative experiment at a time when French representative democracy undergoes a crisis. As one of the citizens said to me, "It may be that our work does not end anywhere ... But perhaps, it is quite the contrary, and we show how we can have a different democracy."

The question of children's flourishing does not appear so far removed from France's institutional crisis in that it compels citizens to imagine how we could educate future generations to make a better, healthier democracy.