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Can climate assemblies lead to more ambitious climate policy?

An evaluation of the ambition and policy impact of Scotland's Climate Assembly

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Abstract

As societies and governments around the world struggle to adequately address the climate crisis and its multiple challenges, there are growing calls for climate governance reforms. One idea is to involve citizens more in policymaking, and climate assemblies (CAs) seem a promising format for doing so. Here, a group of randomly selected lay participants deliberate on aspects of the climate crisis, resulting in recommendations for policymakers. However, it has become evident that the extent to which CAs lead to more ambitious climate policy is not certain.

This study contributes to closing this research gap by analysing Scotland's Climate Assembly (SCA). Through a systematic analysis of the level of ambition and policy impact of each recommendation, this study finds that while most of the SCA's recommendations were more ambitious than existing policy, these recommendations had no impact on Scottish climate policy decisions. Some of the possible reasons for this rather sobering result seem to be the sometimes poor quality of the recommendations and, most importantly, insufficient support from the commissioning body.

This finding is consistent with existing concerns about the lack of policy impact of CAs and related formats. However, this study argues that it would be wrong to conclude that CAs cannot lead to more ambitious climate policy. Rather, the results show that a more nuanced knowledge of the factors that hinder and promote the policy impact of CAs is needed to strategically influence them and thus realise the potential of CAs as a democratically valuable format in the fight against the climate crisis. This requires further, more differentiated analysis, as well as further experimentation and iterative practice.

Content

1 Introduction	1
2 Theoretical and empirical background	2
2.1 The idea of climate assemblies	2
2.2 The assumption of ambitious recommendations (RQ1)	4
2.3 The need for a better understanding of the policy impact (RQ2)	4
2.4. The current knowledge of factors influencing the potential policy impact (RQ3)	5
3 The case: Scotland's Climate Assembly	6
4 Methodology	7
4.1 Analytical approach	7
4.2 Methodological approach	11
5 Results	14
5.1 Ambition of the recommendations (RQ1)	14
5.2 Impact of the recommendations on national climate policy decisions (RQ2)	15
5.3 Explanatory factors and lessons (RQ3)	17
5.4 Exploratory findings on other impacts	23
6 Discussion	24
6.1 Key findings	24
6.2 Methodological discussion	29
7 Conclusion	31
References	33

List of figures

Figure 1 Simplified illustration of the study's methodology	14
Figure 2 Level of ambition of the SCA's recommendations	14
Figure 3 Existence of impact with <i>low</i> , <i>moderate</i> and <i>high uncertainty</i>	15
Figure 4 Number of <i>no uptake</i> and <i>anyways</i> within no impact with <i>low</i> and <i>moderate uncertainty</i>	16
Figure 5 Type of jurisdiction of the recommendations	19

List of tables

Table 1 Types of impact of a recommendation on collective decisions	8
Table 2 Types of congruence of collective decisions with a recommendation	11
Table 3 Anonymous role descriptions of the experts interviewed	12
Table 4 Anonymous role descriptions of the survey respondents	13
Table 5 Overview of explanatory factors and lessons	17

List of abbreviations

CA	Climate Assembly
CD	Collective Decision of the political community
R	Recommendation
RQ	Research question
SCA	Scotland's Climate Assembly
SG	Scottish Government
SNP	Scottish National Party
SP	Scottish Parliament
UK	United Kingdom

1 Introduction

The climate crisis can be seen as "the defining crisis of our time" (UN, 2020: 1), endangering the natural foundations of human life on the planet (Gupta et al., 2024: 1). It is arguably the greatest collective threat to humanity in history (Ibsen, 2023: 898) and therefore also requires collective action against it. But with little time left¹ and only one chance to get it right (Ibsen, 2023: 913), how do we do it?

There is no simple answer to this question. However, Stoddard et al. (2021: 679) argue that the radical changes that societies will either choose to make, or that the climate crisis will force upon them, will require better governance. A growing number of scholars echo this call (e.g. Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2019: 411; Gupta et al., 2024: 45; OECD, 2020: 24; Willis et al., 2022: 10), noting that the climate crisis, with its multiple causes and complex interactions, currently challenges any system of governance (e.g. Kevins & Robison, 2024: 20; Kübler et al., 2020: 112; Niemeyer, 2013: 431). As Smith puts it: "Climate governance is in a mess." (2024: 9)

To address this grievance, many democratic governments have in recent years increased their use of participatory and deliberative processes (OECD, 2020: 66; Wells et al., 2021: 1). There are high hopes, for example, that involving citizens in policymaking will increase the public support needed for climate policies (Heyen & Wicki, 2024: 785; Muradova et al., 2020: 1331).

One very prominent format for involvement are citizens' assemblies that address different aspects of the climate crisis (Jacquet & van der Does, 2020: 1; Wells et al., 2021: 3, 2021: 3). These climate assemblies (CAs) come in different forms (Smith, 2022: 2; Wells et al., 2021: 4), but have in common that an inclusive and representative subgroup of society comes together and, after a period of shared learning and facilitated deliberation, makes recommendations to policymakers (Kuntze & Fesenfeld, 2021: 3; Willis et al., 2022: 6).

For a variety of reasons, many researchers believe that CAs can lead to more ambitious and socially equitable climate policies (e.g. Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2019: 411–412; Ejsing et al., 2023: 1; Lage et al., 2023: 11; Stoddard et al., 2021: 676; Willis et al., 2022: 10). One reason for this is the assumption that these processes are less susceptible to the difficulties of representative democracy. Unlike professional politicians, CA members do not have to worry about approval ratings and (re)election (Lage et al., 2023: 10–11).

However, following initial enthusiasm (e.g. Niemeyer, 2013), it has become evident that the extent to which CAs can positively influence climate policymaking is uncertain (Boswell et al., 2023: 183; Ejsing et al., 2023: 11; Elstub & Khoban, 2023: 113; Jacobs, 2024: 513).

Given their increasing use and the questionable democratic value of participatory processes with no discernible impact (Progrebinschi & Ryan, 2018: 135–136), it is important to gain clarity on whether and how they can contribute to more effective climate governance (Ainscough & Willis, 2024: 829; Jacquet et al., 2023: 2; Thormann & Capstick, 2022: 2).

This thesis therefore seeks to assess whether climate assemblies can lead to more ambitious climate policy by conducting a case study of "Scotland's Climate Assembly" (SCA) (2020/21), which developed recommendations for the Scottish Government (SG) on how to "tackle the climate emergency in an effective and fair way" (SCA, 2021: 6–7).

This case study gains relevance by contributing to a wider research project. This project at Leuphana University Lüneburg aims to provide insights into the future design and integration

¹ 2024 was the hottest year on record and the first year 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels (ECMWF, 2024)

of CAs into policymaking by systematically analysing and comparing the level of ambition and policy impact of several European CAs.

Contributing to these aims, the thesis addresses three research questions (RQs):

RQ1 | To what extent were the recommendations of Scotland's Climate Assembly more (or less) ambitious in tackling the climate crisis than existing national climate policy?

RQ2 | What were the extent and types of impact of the recommendations of Scotland's Climate Assembly on national climate policy decisions?

RQ3 | What factors might explain the impact of the recommendations of Scotland's Climate Assembly on national climate policy decisions, and what lessons can be learned for future assemblies?

This study systematically analyses the ambition (RQ1) and policy impact (RQ2) for each of the SCA's recommendations. For the latter, a counterfactual approach is used, asking whether a policy decision would also have been made in the absence of the SCA and its recommendations. This analysis is conducted by triangulating data from expert interviews, an expert survey, and a congruence analysis of the recommendations in relation to existing policies before and after the SCA.

In addition to these systematic evaluations, the explanatory factors and lessons (RQ3) are researched in an exploratory manner, mainly based on the expert interviews. The same applies to additional findings on impacts other than the specific policy impact of each recommendation.

In the following, the theoretical and empirical background is presented, looking closely at CAs as a deliberative participation process, and the current state of research. Following the presentation of the SCA in Chapter 3, the methodological approach is presented in Chapter 4. Finally, the findings are presented in Chapter 5 and discussed in Chapter 6. The conclusion in Chapter 7 summarises the findings and outlines their wider implications for practice and research.

2 Theoretical and empirical background

2.1 The idea of climate assemblies

Although climate assemblies are intended to contribute to improving climate governance (Boswell et al., 2023: 182–183), the origins of this format lie in the idea of establishing more democratic approaches to policymaking by better involving citizens in decision-making.² Thus, the superordinate formats of CAs are not related to climate governance.

According to Boswell et al.'s (2023: 184) categorisation, CAs are a form of 'citizens' assemblies', which in turn are a form of 'deliberative mini-publics'. Deliberative mini-publics include participatory formats that start with a (quasi) random selection of lay-participants to create a diversity of perspectives and whose decision-making is based on deliberation, i.e. structured discussion among participants and with, for example, invited experts or witnesses (Elstub & Escobar, 2019: 26; Willis et al., 2022: 6). Citizens' assemblies are characterised by a particularly long period of deliberation, i.e. meetings spread over several weeks, and a relatively large number of participants, of around 100 to 200. If the issues addressed by these bodies are

² This understanding of the importance of citizen involvement is based on different theoretical strands, namely participatory democracy, deliberative democracy and collaborative governance (Galván Labrador & Zografos, 2023: 415–416). Despite their theoretical differences, they overlap in practice (Elstub & Escobar, 2019: 17) and are therefore not discussed further in this study.

primarily related to aspects of the climate crisis, they are called climate assemblies (Boswell et al., 2023: 184; Kuntze & Fesenfeld, 2021: 3).

CAs can be organised at different levels of governance, at different stages of the policy cycle, with different mandates and initiated by different bodies. In the past, CAs have mostly been organised as one-off processes linked to established policy bodies, with the aim of contributing policy proposals to mitigate the climate crisis (Ainscough & Willis, 2024: 832; Kuntze & Fesenfeld, 2021: 3; Smith, 2022: 2). Referring to Arnstein's (1969: 217) ladder of participation, this purely advisory function of CAs corresponds to a relatively low level of participation, with the final decision to adopt a policy remaining with the political actors (Bua, 2019: 286).

Whether CAs, citizens' assemblies or mini-publics, there are high hopes that they can make a valuable contribution to reforming governance. These hopes are based on three main assumptions and apply not only to climate policy but also to other policy issues. First, it is expected that these deliberative participation processes will make society's willingness to act more visible. At present, policymakers often tend to take more cautious decisions because they lack a clear picture of public opinion and willingness to support climate action. Deliberation is therefore intended to create a structured dialogue between the public and policymakers (Wells, 2022: 120).

Second, it is assumed that the resulting options for decisions are better informed, more inclusive and nuanced. This is because deliberative processes can better incorporate the perspectives of under-represented and unrepresented groups, such as marginalised groups or future generations; they can help to prioritise the common interest over individual interests (Boswell et al., 2023: 186; Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2019: 411–412; Niemeyer, 2013: 448); and they can help to promote long-term thinking (MacKenzie & Caluwaerts, 2021: 327–328). In addition, deliberation may create spaces that are less affected by the influence of external interest groups or by the expectations of particular constituencies (Kübler et al., 2020: 104) and instead allow for a critical evaluation of arguments (MacKenzie & Caluwaerts, 2021: 319; Suiter et al., 2022: 641). Thus, the processes hold the “potential for negotiating and developing post-carbon imaginaries across social divides” (Stoddard et al., 2021: 676).

Third, it is expected that the capacity of policymakers to act is strengthened through these processes (Willis et al., 2022: 10). Involving citizens in shaping policy decisions may increase society's trust in political decision-making, as well as its' climate awareness, and foster greater legitimacy for climate policy (Ainscough & Willis, 2024: 831; Kuntze & Fesenfeld, 2021: 8; Smith, 2023: 3), creating a social mandate for climate action (Howarth et al., 2020: 1108, 1112; MacKenzie & Caluwaerts, 2021: 327–328).

This argument leads to the general expectation that these deliberative forms of participation can mitigate some of the shortcomings of conventional democracies (Cervellini et al., 2024: 750; Ejsing et al., 2023: 1; Geißel & Michels, 2023: 285). It is therefore hoped that they will have a positive impact on democracy if, for example, they succeed in breaking political deadlocks on controversial and complex policy issues such as the climate crisis (Boswell et al., 2023: 186; Newig et al., 2019: 326; Smith, 2023: 3), thereby creating momentum for action (Wells et al., 2021: 18).

Advocates of CAs therefore expect that their proposals are more ambitious than existing policies and that they can impact climate policy decisions and thus contribute to more ambitious climate policies (e.g. Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2019: 411–412; Ejsing et al., 2023: 1; Lage et

al., 2023: 11; Stoddard et al., 2021: 676; Willis et al., 2022: 10). However, a closer look at current research suggests that more research is needed to verify these expectations.

2.2 The assumption of ambitious recommendations (RQ1)

To date, the literature either offers only general, non-contextual statements regarding high ambition (e.g. Mellier & Wilson, 2020: 2; Smith, 2023: 5–6) or derives it from individual, particularly ambitious recommendations (e.g. Willis, 2020: 90). An exception is the study by Lage et al. (2023). This study compared the recommendations of several national CAs in Europe, including Scotland's Climate Assembly, with the policies of the respective countries' national energy and climate plans. It found that the CAs have a significantly higher proportion of regulatory and socio-ecological sufficiency policies (Lage et al., 2023: 8–9), which can be considered more ambitious than current policy trends.

In contrast to the general narrative of high ambition, Andrews et al. (2022: 117, 120) conclude for the SCA that its recommendations are more in line with previous government policy, rather than initiating radical change. However, it appears that this finding is not based on a comparison of the recommendations with existing policy, but only with the government's self-assessment in its response (see Andrews et al., 2022: 113).

2.3 The need for a better understanding of the policy impact (RQ2)

The potential impacts of CAs and their related formats are manifold. In addition to policy impact, for example, scholars are interested in how CAs can change the knowledge, attitudes and agency of their participants, as well as of the wider public or specific institutions and societal actors (Demski & Capstick, 2022: 5; Smith, 2024: 71–72). Other, more systemic impacts are also conceivable, such as changes in the way governance functions, which can have a positive impact on democratic performance (Beauvais & Warren, 2019: 908; Demski & Capstick, 2022: 5).

There are different ways of conceptualising these different types of impact and how they can unfold (e.g. Demski & Capstick, 2022; Michels & Binnema, 2019; Thormann & Capstick, 2022). In terms of policy impact, there is a growing number of frameworks that categorise different policy impacts and are intended to serve as a basis for impact assessments (e.g. Goodin & Dryzek, 2006; Jacquet & van der Does, 2021; Minsart & Jacquet, 2023).

The impact assessments conducted so far tend to show limited, mostly indirect policy impacts of CAs and their related formats, for example in terms of influencing the political agenda (Bua, 2017: 175) or creating momentum for climate action (Wells et al., 2021: 1). There are also concerns that CAs are organised for symbolic reasons only, rather than genuinely giving participants a voice (Curato et al., 2021: 107; Wells, 2022: 123). For example, that commissioning bodies 'cherry-pick' recommendations, i.e. only adopt them if they fit the already existing preferences of key political and administrative actors (Font et al., 2018: 631–632; Smith, 2009: 93). However, there is some exceptional evidence of more direct policy impact on policy decisions (e.g. Vrydagh & Caluwaerts, 2023: 133)

Most of the studies are case-specific analyses with different understandings of impact and a strong focus on the local level³ (Progrebinschi & Ryan, 2018: 137). Larger comparative studies often do not differentiate between different forms of participation (e.g. Font et al., 2018). As a result, it is difficult to draw general conclusions and gain an overview from these studies (Jacquet & van der Does, 2021: 470–471; Minsart & Jacquet, 2023: 285–286).

³ The macro level also appears to be particularly important from a climate policy perspective, given its greater potential to influence far-reaching policies (Boswell et al., 2023: 189; Smith, 2024: 37).

Thus, a need for further systematic studies focusing on the policy impact of CAs exists. Gaining more scientific insights into CA's policy impact is important not only for effective climate policies, but also to avoid negative consequences such as frustration or mistrust resulting from unfulfilled expectations due to exaggerated narratives or instrumentalised processes (Escobar & Henderson, 2024: 66; Lewis et al., 2023: 6).

This case study analysis of the extent and types of policy impact of the SCA and the overarching research project intends to fill this gap. Andrews et al. (2022) have already conducted a policy impact assessment for the SCA, which suggests a low level of policy impact (2022: 115). Their analysis, conducted shortly after the government's response to the SCA, focuses primarily on assessing the government's statements in that response (see Andrews et al., 2022: 113). This study therefore aims to provide a more in-depth re-examination, taking into account a longer time lag, going beyond document analysis and distinguishing between more types of policy impact or lack thereof.

2.4. The current knowledge of factors influencing the potential policy impact (RQ3)

Given that the evidence so far suggests that the policy impact of climate assemblies tends to be limited, there is a clear need to investigate the reasons for this (Minsart & Jacquet, 2023: 290; Smith, 2019: 577). As Lewis et al. (2023: 4) demonstrate in their study, the political reality in which CAs are held and in which their recommendations must be embedded, is, above all, one thing: messy. The conditions that may hinder or facilitate policy impact are therefore diverse, interconnected and difficult to grasp. The following explanatory factors, broadly categorised as process design factors, contextual factors and recommendation-related factors, are therefore only examples to illustrate the wide range of these conditions.

Regarding the internal design of the respective deliberative participation process, scholars suggest, for example, that a scope appropriate to the purpose (Elstub et al., 2021: 1; Rovers & Dejaeghere, 2022: 6; Smith, 2024: 82–83), a strong political mandate (Ejsing et al., 2023: 11–12), an overall high quality of the process (Font et al., 2018: 630–631; Wells et al., 2021: 18) with high procedural legitimacy (Bua, 2017: 167) and a well-defined follow-up process (Rovers & Dejaeghere, 2022: 9; Smith, 2024: 82–83) may be beneficial for policy impact.

However, Boswell et al. (2023) also point to integrative design features as potentially important factors. According to them, the connection of the process to political actors and institutions is crucial. For example, they suggest that it matters how formal and codified the connections are and who commissions the process (2023: 195). Findings from other studies suggest the importance of an embeddedness in the political system (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2016: 23; Michels & Binnema, 2019: 765), a direct link to decision makers (Curato & Böker, 2016: 185–186), how involved the commissioner is (Carrick, 2022: 2) and how routinised and institutionalised the processes are (Michels & Binnema, 2019: 763–765; Progrebinschi & Ryan, 2018: 149). In addition, many researchers also consider a strong connection to other actors, such as civil society and the media, to be instrumental in achieving impact (Boswell et al., 2023: 195; Michels & Binnema, 2019: 765–766; Thormann & Capstick, 2022: 2).

Identified contextual factors include the degree of deliberative capacity already present in the system (Curato & Böker, 2016: 185–186), political changes through the electoral cycle (Cooper & Smith, 2012: 28), politicians' attitudes towards the outcome of citizens' assemblies or deliberative formats in general (Niessen, 2023: 333; Pálsdóttir et al., 2023: 16), and politicians' institutional commitment (Geißel & Heß, 2018: 261–262). Bua et al. (2017: 171) distinguish here

between structural and contingent contextual factors, the latter being process- and system-independent factors such as the economic situation.

Few studies have examined recommendation-related factors to date. However, in their large-N analysis of the fate of proposals from local participatory processes in Spain, Font et al. (2018: 631) found a causal link between the uptake of recommendations and the cost of implementation, as well as the extent to which the recommendation challenges existing policies. Furthermore, Progrebinschi & Ryan (2018: 150) found that the type of policy addressed by the recommendation could be influential, in their case whether or not it addressed redistributive issues.

Despite this range of already known potential influencing factors and the growing number of studies, further research on explanatory factors and their links is needed as “the integration into climate policy of assemblies’ proposals remains a ‘black box’” (Galván Labrador & Zografos, 2023: 424). This study therefore analyses potential factors that might explain the impact of the SCA, but also lessons that can be learnt for future assemblies. Changing these factors does not guarantee impact, but it does increase the chances of impact (Smith, 2024: 82), which will ultimately determine the extent to which CAs can contribute to more ambitious climate policies.

3 The case: Scotland’s Climate Assembly

Scotland’s Climate Assembly took place between November 2020 and March 2021. 106 members spent seven weekends considering how Scotland can meet its emission reduction targets and mitigate the effects of the climate crisis (Andrews et al., 2022: 7; SCA, 2021: 95). The SCA was adopted by parliament but commissioned by government and had therefore a “hybrid governmental-parliamentary connection” (Boswell et al., 2023: 190) to the existing political system.

A number of bodies were involved in setting up and running the SCA. The organisational heart of the assembly was the secretariat, staffed mainly by seconded civil servants, but acting independently from the Scottish Government (SG, 2020a: 3). They were the link to the sponsor team within the SG’s Domestic Climate Change Division and co-ordinated the work of the other bodies (Carrick, 2022: 9), including, for example, the Stewarding Group and the Evidence Group. While the main purpose of the Evidence Group was to design and deliver educational sessions for assembly members (SCA, 2021: 122), the Stewarding Group provided comprehensive support to the assembly, offering advice and guidance on all aspects throughout the process (SCA, 2021: 98).

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the SCA meetings were exclusively online (SCA, 2021: 96). After some educational sessions, the assembly members split into three separate thematic working groups for three weekends to gain more specific input and draft initial recommendations. On the last two weekends, these groups dissolved again, and members formed mixed groups to learn about, deliberate and finalise the recommendations made in the other groups (SCA, 2021: 7, 135). The resulting 16 goals and 81 recommendations were laid as a report before the Scottish Parliament (SP) (SCA, 2021: 2).

Following this handover, the secretariat took various steps to disseminate and raise awareness for the recommendations. In parallel, the legally required SG’s response was compiled under the leadership of the Sponsor Team and published in December 2021 (SG, 2020a: 8, 2021b: 2).

To give assembly members the opportunity to react to the 162-page long response, an additional eighth weekend was then convened in early February 2022 (SCA, 2022a, 2022e).⁴

In addition, it is important to consider the political context of the case, especially for the impact analysis, as the conditions here can enable or explain different impact paths (Demski & Capstick, 2022: 10–11). As one of the four nations of the UK, Scotland is bound by UK climate change legislation. However, Scotland also has its own climate change legislation that allows it to adapt the overarching UK legislation to its regional context (Hölscher, 2018: 16) As a result, the Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Act 2009, as amended in 2019, provides the central basis for Scotland's climate change policy. However, the SG is still bound by the division of powers between the UK Government and its nations and can therefore only act through devolved powers (Hölscher, 2018: 3; SP, n.d.).

The UK used to be a leader in climate action, (Li, 2018: 8), but this has been increasingly undermined since the UK left the EU (Horton, 2024). Initially, it appeared that the SG would continue to adhere to relatively ambitious carbon reduction targets independently of the UK (Kruchem, 2021; SG, 2020b). However, this has changed dramatically, with the UK Committee on Climate Change repeatedly warning that meeting these targets is no longer credible (CCC, 2022, 2024: 10). In 2024, the Scottish coalition government even collapsed, largely due to the withdrawal of these targets (Kirka, 2024: 3).

4 Methodology

4.1 Analytical approach

The concepts and variables relevant to the research questions are briefly introduced below.⁵ The analytical approach for assessing the policy impact of the SCA (RQ2) is also presented here. A simplified illustration of the entire methodology can be found at the end of Chapter 4.2 (Figure 1).

Ambition of the recommendations (RQ1)

To answer RQ1, the **level of ambition** compared to previously existing policies is determined for each recommendation. This unit of analysis also applies to the impact analysis (RQ2), allowing for systematic analysis and comparability with other cases within the research project. High-level and abstract statements, such as the 16 goals of the SCA, are therefore not included.

The level of ambition is determined by looking at the most recent policy that has not (yet) been influenced by the publication of the assembly's recommendations. On a three-point scale, a recommendation is ranked as *more ambitious*, *less ambitious* or *neither more nor less ambitious* than existing policies. The threshold for a recommendation to be classified as *more ambitious* is relatively low. If any aspect of the recommendation proposes something supportive of climate change mitigation/adaptation that was not previously part of the policy, it is rated as *more ambitious*. A recommendation is *less ambitious* if exactly the opposite happens, for example, if existing targets are watered down. A recommendation is *neither more nor less ambitious* if existing policies and the recommendation are at the same level of ambition, or if no classification is possible. For the SCA, the latter is often the case when the degree of concretisation differs greatly between specific existing policies and a recommendation that remains rather vague in its proposal.

⁴ See SCA, 2022d for the SCA's response statement.

⁵ These definitions can be found in full in the codebook (Appendix A).

Ambition is not assessed from a climate science perspective, i.e. this variable does not measure the extent to which a recommendation is more or less effective in addressing an effect of the climate crisis than previous policies. Ambition is primarily measured in relation to existing policies, on the basis of “the more and the faster, the better”.

Impact of the recommendations on national climate policy decisions (RQ2)

For the purposes of the analysis, **impact** is defined as a change in the collective decisions (CDs) of the SG triggered by a recommendation of the SCA. As collective decisions are defined here in a rather broad sense, decisions made by the SG in both formal and informal ways are analysed, for example through legally binding resolutions (formal) or more abstract statements of intent (informal).

Although collective decisions are the result of interactions between relevant political actors, the changes in individual attitudes required to achieve them are not counted as impacts. This is because these position changes can be considered as ‘intermediate’, where it is not possible to say whether they actually result in a change in the collective decisions.

With this understanding of impact, this analysis refers only to impacts in the decision-making stage of the policy cycle (Howlett & Ramesh, 2007: 162). Impacts in other stages, such as agenda-setting or implementation, are not systematically assessed. However, they are included where there are indications of such impacts.

This study distinguishes between seven types of impact and two types of no impact (Table 1). As these types of impact can occur simultaneously, they are coded as individual dummy variables. For example, with the SCA, it is often the case that one part of the recommendation is already part of existing policy (impact type: *anyways*), while the other part introduces a new aspect which is then ignored by the government and therefore not incorporated into policy (impact type: *no uptake*). If only one of the two types were coded, a very different picture would emerge depending on whether the recommendation had no impact, as in this example, because it was rejected by the government, or because it added no new value. When recommendations consist of several ideas, it is therefore useful to be able to show the different ways in which they can (not) influence collective decisions.

Table 1 | Types of impact of a recommendation on collective decisions

Existence of impact	Type of impact	Definition
No Impact	No uptake	The recommendation had no impact because it was not taken up in a collective decision, because it was ignored and/or rejected.
	Anyways	The recommendation had no impact, because the same collective decision would have been taken without it or, or a decision on what the recommendation called for was already in place or planned.
Impact	Fortifying impact	The recommendation reassured relevant political actors in their existing positions and/or created a momentum for the further development of existing plans leading to a change in the collective decision.
	Enriching impact	The recommendation added substantial aspects to the existing or planned collective decision.
	Shifting impact	The recommendation caused a collective change in the positions of the relevant political actors, leading

		to a change in the direction of a collective decision in line with the recommendation.
	Innovating impact	The recommendation led to the adoption of a new idea that had not been seriously considered in policymaking before.
	Inhibiting impact	The recommendation led the relevant political actors to abandon their previously planned collective decision.
	Political impact	The recommendation made a collective decision possible where previously conflicting positions of the relevant political actors had prevented a decision.
	Contributing impact	The recommendation was one of a number of factors that together caused a collective decision being taken. It is not possible to isolate the effect of the recommendation from the effect of the set of factors.

To assess impact, previous studies often simply count the overlap of a recommendation and a subsequent policy as an impact of the recommendation (Jacquet & van der Does, 2021: 477–479). This does not do justice to the high complexity of policymaking (Bua, 2019: 289; Minsart & Jacquet, 2023: 285–286; Richardson et al., 2019: 268). For example, a policy that is congruent with a recommendation may be adopted not because of the recommendation but because of pre-existing policy preferences or the influence of other stakeholders (Vrydagh & Caluwaerts, 2023: 118–119). To minimise the risk of these false causal inferences, this analysis therefore starts with the assumption that the recommendation had no impact, i.e. there is no relationship between the recommendation and the subsequent collective decision.

The analysis then continues by applying a **counterfactual approach**, asking for each potential impact: "Would the collective decision have been taken at this time and/or in this form without the CA?". This question attempts to introduce a counterfactual world into the analysis by considering what collective decisions would have been taken in the absence of the assembly. It tries to determine whether the CA and its recommendations were a necessary condition (Goertz & Levy, 2007: 15) for the change in collective decisions.

To provide a transparent way of dealing with the uncertainty in this impact assessment, the **level of uncertainty** is categorised using a three-point scale of *low*, *moderate*, and *high uncertainty*. Only if the necessary condition can be demonstrated with *low* or *moderate uncertainty* can an impact be identified.⁶

The categorisation is based on different levels of validity and reliability⁷ of evidence on the necessary condition combined with the presence or absence of novelty, uptake and change. Novelty refers to the introduction of new aspects compared to existing collective decisions; uptake refers to the overlap between the recommendation and the subsequent decisions; and change reflects the change in decisions before and after the CA.

⁶ An exception is the *contributing* impact. This is characterised by both *low* and *high uncertainty*. *Low uncertainty* about the existence of a collective impact through the set of factors and *high uncertainty* about the isolated impact of the recommendation.

⁷Validity refers to the degree to which a piece of evidence matches the impact definition of this study. Reliability refers to the trustworthiness of the evidence and its source.

For an impact to be categorised as *low uncertainty*, there must be novelty, uptake and change, and valid confirmation from a reliable expert that the recommendation was the 'decisive factor' in the collective decision (necessary condition). If the validity or reliability of an expert confirmation is slightly limited, this is coded as *moderate uncertainty*. The same applies if there is novelty, uptake and change, and several consistent pieces of evidence of limited validity/reliability, for example if the new policy has almost identical wording to the recommendation, was easy to implement and the government cites the recommendation as the decisive impact.

When cases are classified in the highest uncertainty category because there is insufficient valid and/or reliable evidence or contradictory evidence, it is not possible to distinguish between an impact and no impact of the recommendation. However, to provide a clear overview, where the highly uncertain evidence gives some indication for certain impact categories, these are still reported but with a *high uncertainty* label.

This understanding that impacts are only present if they can be demonstrated with *low* and *moderate uncertainty* sets a high threshold for coding an impact. In this study, the level of uncertainty is categorised for all impact classifications, i.e. for the recommendations and the SCA on collective decisions as well as the exploratory findings on other impacts of the SCA.

To collect data for the impact assessment, this study relies on three different methods.⁸ The resulting data triangulation is also suggested by Vrydagh's (2022) sequential impact approach, which inspired the analytical approach of this study.⁹

In **interviews** and a **survey**, the experts are asked detailed questions about possible causal links between the recommendation and the subsequent collective decision as well as the counterfactual. A document-based **congruence analysis** examines for each recommendation the extent to which the collective decisions either literally or conceptually overlap with it before (CD,T0) and after (CD,T2) the CA (Vrydagh, 2022: 68). This mainly clarifies the absence or presence of novelty, uptake and change.

This study distinguishes between six different types of congruence (Table 2). In the case of the SCA, for the period before the CA (T0), the last identified collective decision that has not (yet) been influenced by the publication of the assembly's recommendations is sought. For the period after the CA (T2), the search for collective decisions starts from the publication date and extends to the present day. However, special attention is paid to decisions taken shortly after the CA process ended, as it is assumed that the probability of an impact and the certainty of its traceability decreases with time (Demski & Capstick, 2022: 11).

In determining congruence, the focus is mainly on collective decisions. However, to capture as many nuances as possible, individual positions of relevant political actors are also included to a certain extent. This is the case, for example, with the congruence type *conflicting positions*, i.e. where political actors have different positions on the recommendation and therefore no single collective decision is evident. As this situation is common in political reality (Vrydagh & Caluwaerts, 2023: 122), it is important to be able to methodologically capture it.

⁸ See Chapter 4.2 for more details on how the methods were applied in the case study.

⁹ See Pfeffer et al. (2025) for more details on the analytical approach.

Table 2 | Types of congruence of collective decisions with a recommendation

Type of congruence	Definition
A: congruent	The recommendation and collective decisions overlap completely at time t (T0/T2).
a: partially congruent	The recommendation and the collective decisions at time t (T0/T2) overlap partially, but not completely. This concerns the level of concretisation (a a) and/or the overlap of subsets (a b) and/or the level of ambition (a c).
x: congruent in goal only	The recommendation and collective decisions overlap in their objective, but not in their implementation strategy, at time t (T0/T2).
B: not congruent	The recommendation and the collective decisions do not overlap at time t (T0/T2). The positions (T1 vs. T0/T2) are strongly divergent, contradictory and/or negative.
C: conflicting positions	Regarding the recommendation, there are conflicting positions between the relevant political actors at time t (T0/T2).
∅: absence of idea/no stance	At time t (T0/T1), there are no positions at all on the recommendation from relevant political actors. Relevant political actors consciously or unconsciously refrain from taking a position.

Explanatory factors and lessons (RQ3)

The variable **jurisdiction** is part of the analysis to answer RQ3. It captures the extent to which a recommendation falls within the jurisdiction of the SG, as there are general and case-specific indications from the literature that a potential lack of jurisdiction could weaken the impact of a CA (Andrews et al., 2022: 118; Vrydagh, 2022: 78).

This study distinguishes between four types of jurisdictions. The recommendation may be either partly (type: *mixed*) or fully *inside* or *outside* the jurisdiction, or it may be *promoting*, i.e. it calls on the SG to promote the recommendation at another political level. However, the classification of the recommendations into the categories is mainly based on the information provided in the government's response to the SCA; only in a few cases further information was obtained through additional document analysis for classification.

4.2 Methodological approach

The general methodological steps for the case study¹⁰ are described below.¹¹

Data collection

To obtain reliable results, a mixed methods approach (Schreier & Odag, 2010: 267) was used. The included document analysis, expert interviews and survey provide data to answer all research questions.

The **document analysis** referred to policy documents that are related in time or content to the recommendations. These include policy strategy papers or legally binding regulations that relate to the specific content of the recommendations, as well as documents from the broader political agenda. In the Scottish case, the latter includes, for example, the Power-Sharing Agreement between the governing parties, which was concluded about two months after the

¹⁰ The choice of the SCA as a case was determined by the embeddedness of the study within the research project.

¹¹See Appendix B for additional methodological and case specifics.

assembly's report (SG, 2021a). In addition, government or third-party websites related to the recommendations were used for the analysis.¹²

The document analysis focused mainly on analysing the policies mentioned in the SG's response to the SCA and their development to date. This approach assumes that if there had been an impact at the time, it would have been related to these policies. To minimise the resulting filtering effect and to capture additional impacts that may have occurred after the SG's response, two measures were taken. First, an open-ended question on the overall impact of the SCA and one on the impact of specific recommendations were included in the interviews. Second, all recommendations were included in the additional survey, not just those that stood out in the document analysis.

Semi-structured expert interviews (Hug et al., 2020: 132) were used as a second key method. An expert is defined as a person who has some special knowledge related to the state of research (Berger-Grabner, 2022: 152; Helfferich, 2022: 877), which is why the interviewees in this work must have expertise in the post-assembly process. This includes, first and foremost, politicians and civil servants who received the recommendations and worked on the collective decisions that were subsequently taken, but also people who were involved in the organisation or scientific support of the assembly. Ideally, their comprehensive insights into the process can significantly improve the robustness of the results, for example by revealing more subtle mechanisms of impact (Vrydagh, 2022: 83).

After sending a total of 53 interview requests and 93 reminders¹³, interviews were conducted with six experts. These six experts were members of the SCA's secretariat (1), the supporting bodies (4) and the academic monitoring team (1) (Table 3).¹⁴ This number of interviews was determined by the number of interviewees available.

Table 3 | Anonymous role descriptions of the experts interviewed

ID	Anonymised role description
I1	Anonymous
I2	Scottish Green Party Representative to Stewarding Group
I3	Anonymous
I4	Member of the secretariat
I5	Member of the Scottish Parliament until the 2021 election and member of the Stewarding Group until early 2021.
I6	Political scientist, member of Stewarding Group

The structure of the interviews and the choice of appropriate question types were based on the recommendations of Berger-Grabner (2022: 151–152) and Hug et al. (2020: 133–135). Since the experts' answers might be biased because they might have personal or institutional incentives to present the CA and its impact in a more positive light (Demski & Capstick, 2022: 11–12), the mechanisms of impact and information on the necessary condition were asked for in as much detail as possible.¹⁵

¹² See Appendix C for an overview of all documents and websites included in the analysis.

¹³ See Appendix D for more information on the requests to experts and their responses.

¹⁴ A full overview of the participants in the interviews and surveys and of the written responses is given in Appendix E.

¹⁵ See Appendix F for a prototype interview guide, which was used to translate the research questions into concrete interview questions (Kaiser, 2021: 64).

The interviews took place between May and July 2024 and were conducted via video call to capture as many nuances of the conversation as possible. The length of the interviews were between 30 and 53 minutes.¹⁶

At the beginning of the study, it was assumed that the target group for the interviews would be difficult to reach. To increase reach (Pickel & Pickel, 2018: 99), an **online survey** was added to the mixed methods approach as a less time-consuming and more flexible option. A total of 38 survey invitations were sent to those who had originally been invited for an interview. Two of the people contacted took part in the survey (Table 4).

Table 4 | Anonymous role descriptions of the survey respondents

ID	Anonymised role description
S1	Member of the Evidence Group
S2	Member of the Evidence Group

The survey was designed with a filter structure (Pickel & Pickel, 2018: 99) so that respondents could choose which areas and subsequent questions they could comment on, based on their expertise. In general, the survey was structured to ask about the ambition and impact of each recommendation and the reasons for this.^{17,18}

All data from the interviews and survey, as well as information from supplementary email correspondence (hereafter: written responses), were processed in anonymised form only. Survey respondents and interviewees were informed of the content and purpose of the study and how their data would be processed. They all gave their informed consent to participate.

Data analysis

Based on the analytical approach, the data from the interviews, the survey, the document analysis and the written responses were compiled in a matrix.^{19,20} To answer RQ1 and RQ2, a **quantitative analysis** was carried out by calculating the frequencies of the relevant values.

The coding process was carried out by a single coder. Although there was no complete second coding process in the strict sense (Mayring, 2015: 124), the iterative nature of the mixed methods approach meant that previously coded content was repeatedly reassessed, which improved intra-coder reliability. To increase intercoder reliability, difficult cases were discussed in the research group.²¹

To answer RQ3, a **summarising content analysis** with inductive category formation according to Mayring and Fenzl (2022) was carried out with relevant statements from the interviews and written responses.²² Due to the large amount of data, a strict application was not used. The category system was developed inductively on the basis of the material to be analysed, to ensure that the material was represented close to the subject (Mayring, 2015: 86). However, the

¹⁶ See Appendix G for summaries of the interviews, reduced mainly to the answers to the research questions.
¹⁷ In addition, the survey included questions on “stringency” and “transformativeness”, which are important categories for the research project but are not relevant to this study.
¹⁸ Due to its complex filter structure, the survey is not included in the appendix. However, the raw data can be found in Appendix H.
¹⁹ See Appendix I for the matrix.
²⁰ The statements from the interviews and written responses that are relevant to the analysis of RQ1 and RQ2 and to the exploratory findings on other impacts are also presented in Appendices J and K.
²¹ A subsequent review of this analysis by another coder is also planned, which is why the data set has already been prepared accordingly in the matrix.
²² See Appendix L for the RQ3 analysis results table.

themes were formed deductively using the research questions and the interview guide (Mayring & Fenzl, 2022: 701).

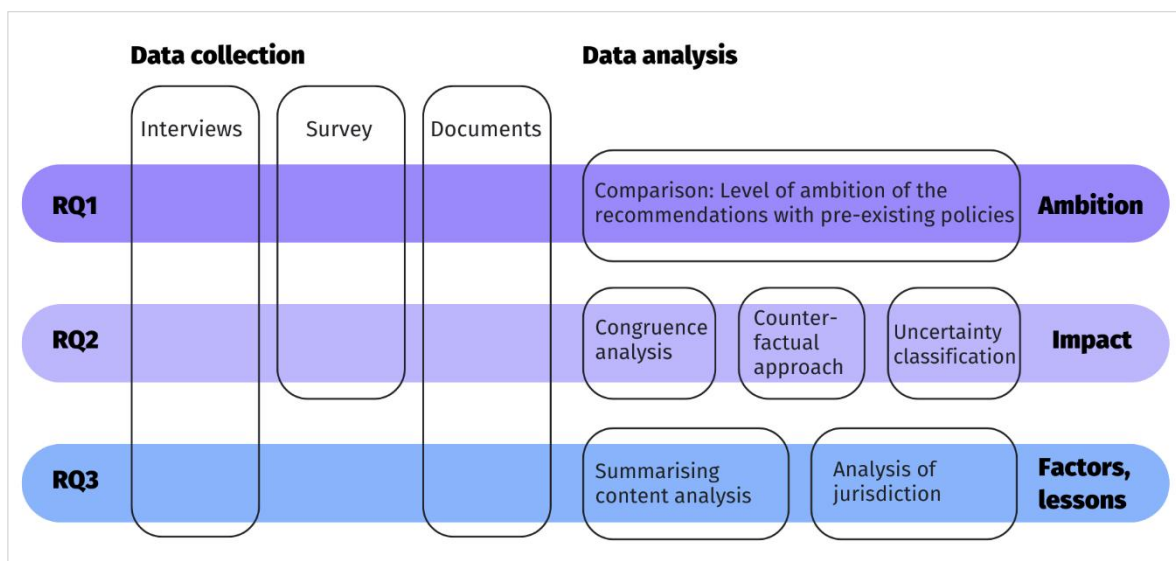


Figure 1 | Simplified illustration of the study's methodology

5 Results

5.1 Ambition of the recommendations (RQ1)

With 64 recommendations, or 79 per cent, the vast majority of recommendations can be considered *more ambitious* in tackling climate change than national climate policies in place before the publication of the assembly's report (Figure 2). The remaining 17 recommendations, or 21 per cent, are *neither more nor less ambitious* than pre-existing policies. Accordingly, no recommendation is *less ambitious*.

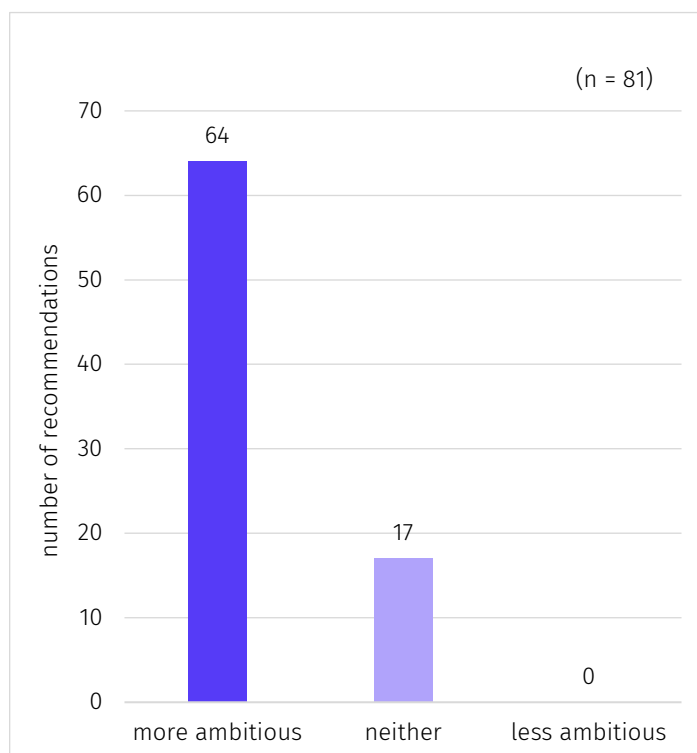


Figure 2 | Level of ambition of the SCA's recommendations

Recommendations classified as *more ambitious* were more ambitious to very different degrees. 55 per cent of the *more ambitious* recommendations were partly congruent with existing policies. It can therefore be said that they were sometimes more, sometimes less, but overall linked to the existing status quo.

However, there were also recommendations that would have required radical action and were therefore highly ambitious. Some very ambitious recommendations were, for example, to update building regulations to make the Passivhaus standard or a Scottish equivalent mandatory for all new domestic (R7) and non-domestic (R9) buildings, or to change the way

economic success is measured by including sustainability, wellbeing and happiness alongside profit (R81).

The fact that the recommendations are more ambitious than the government's previous climate policy is also confirmed by the experts' overall impressions of the level of ambition (I1, I3, I4, I5, I6).^{23,24} For example, I2 concludes that "... the climate assembly's vision was much more creative and imaginative and adventurous and fairer than the Scottish Government's policy ...".

5.2 Impact of the recommendations on national climate policy decisions (RQ2)

Impact of recommendations on collective decisions taken after the SCA

No impacts on collective decisions taken after the SCA were found for any of the 81 recommendations (Figure 3). For 62 recommendations, or 77 per cent, it can be said with *low* and *moderate uncertainty* that they had no impact. For the remaining 19 recommendations, or 23 per cent, the impact categorisation was classified as *high uncertainty*.²⁵ Therefore, it is not possible to distinguish between impact and no impact for these recommendations.

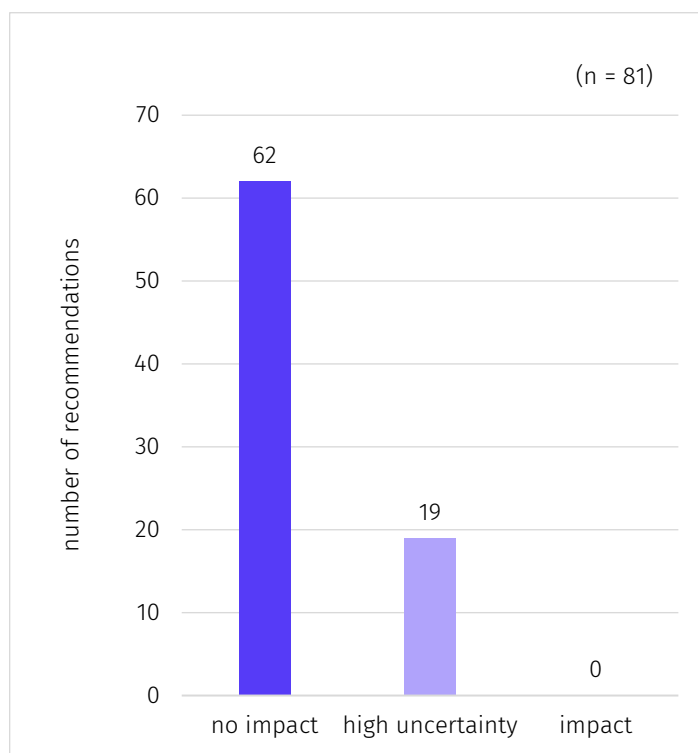


Figure 3 | Existence of impact with *low*, *moderate* and *high uncertainty*

As shown in Figure 4, of the 62 recommendations classified as having no impact, 30 recommendations, i.e. almost half, were not taken up in the collective decisions (impact type: *no uptake*). 10 recommendations, or 16 per cent, had no impact because exactly the same decision would have been taken without the SCA (impact type: *anyways*). In 22 cases, or 35 per cent, both types of no impact apply. This could be the case, for example, where parts of the recommendations were rejected and at the same time other parts were already part of the collective decision before the SCA.

This overall lack of impact is also supported by the assessment of several experts (I1, I2, I3), with I6 stating that even if some progress

has been made in some policy areas, there is no single collective decision that can be clearly attributed to the causal impact of a specific recommendation, and I2 saying "I can't think of a single one of the recommendations that have come through into being policy or law in Scotland that wasn't already kind of in the works before the climate assembly."

²³ It should be noted that the SCA's also provided an overarching 'Statement of Ambition' (SCA 2021, 8-10), which certainly plays a role in this general impression of the experts but was excluded from the analysis due to its guiding character.

²⁴ When referring to the sources analysed, the following abbreviations are used: DX = Document No. X, WX = Website No. X, WRX = Written Response No. X, IX = Interviewee No. X, SX = Survey No. X. These identifiers can be used to find the source in the corresponding overview tables (Appendices C and E). They are not included in the list of references.

²⁵ See Chapter 6.2 for the general reasons for the *high uncertainty* classification.

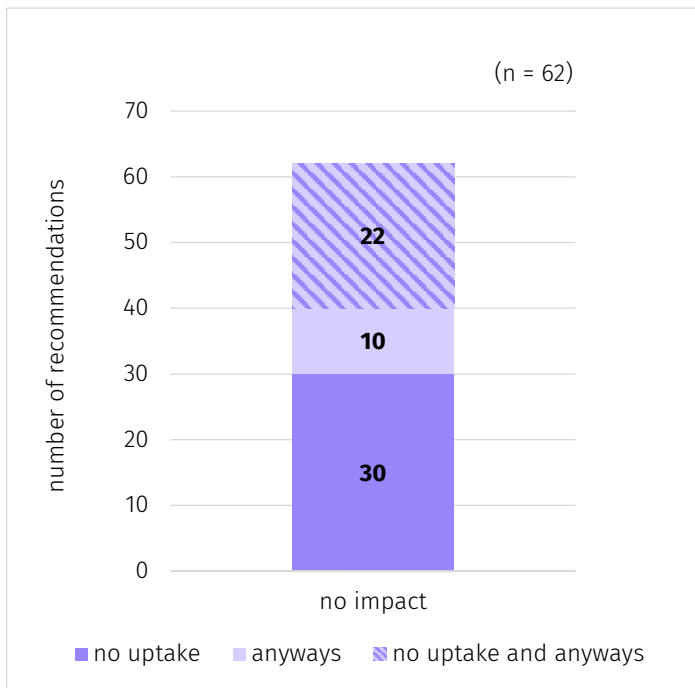


Figure 4 | Number of *no uptake* and *anyways* within no impact with *low and moderate uncertainty*

At the same time, however, the expert assessments provided the main indication of impacts. The resulting *high uncertainty* cases cover a wide range in terms of the possible probability of an impact occurring. However, it is important to note that for the vast majority of these 19 recommendations, the possible probability of an impact appears to be rather low.

An example of such a *high uncertainty* case is recommendation 6 (R6). Here the SCA recommends that the SG supports the establishment of a network of ‘resource libraries’ where people can borrow high quality tools and equipment (SCA, 2021: 15). According to the SG, in response to the

recommendation, a new initiative began work in January 2022 to realise the SG's new goal of increasing the number of resource libraries to over 100 by 2025 (D1: 22, W12).

Together with the congruence analysis, the SG's statements provide indications of an *enriching* and/or *fortifying* impact. This is because ‘reuse and repair hubs’ were already part of the 2016 Circular Economy Strategy for Scotland (D6). These are not identical to resource libraries, but they are aimed at the same idea. It may therefore be that the resource libraries have further developed the idea of reuse and repair hubs (*enriching*), or that the SCA has also led to an increase in priority (*fortifying*), in addition to the substantial development of the idea.

Regardless of how this decision was reached, it is questionable whether the recommendation was really the decisive factor. This is because ‘Circular Communities Scotland’ was already working with other stakeholders on a policy proposal at the end of 2020 (W14), suggesting a *contributing* impact or *anyways* (no impact). In addition, according to I2, the inclusion of a new network of sharing libraries in the Circular Economy Bill was planned before the assembly. As a result, no definitive categorisation of the type of impact can be made.

Impact of the assembly on collective decisions taken after the SCA

Leaving the unit of analysis of the recommendations and looking at the impact of the SCA as a whole on the collective decisions, two policy decisions appear to have been influenced.²⁶ These are the Power Sharing Agreement between the then Scottish National Party (SNP)-led government and the Scottish Green Party Parliamentary Group (D12) and the Heat in Buildings Strategy (D16).

The SG itself emphasises this reflection in the outlook section of its response (D1: 159), but the main reason for considering this impact are statements made by I2. Regarding the Power Sharing Agreement, I2 believes that the SCA had an impact in the sense that it slightly

²⁶ See Appendix K for a full list.

influenced parts of both parties' manifestos, and it gave more power to some of the issues raised by the Green Party in the negotiations:

“... having the climate assembly recommended it as well helped to reinforce the argument that ‘okay, it's not just the Greens saying this, it's not just the environmental lobby saying we need to do that. The climate assembly that you set up has come along and said, this is what people want to see' ...” (I2)

I2 reinforces this impression by saying: „I don't think that agreement would have actually been made if it wasn't for the climate assembly.” In the end, however, it is not possible to say to what extent the SCA had an impact on the negotiations and the content of the agreement, as I2 notes that many processes were running in parallel, and many decisions were already on the table.

The resulting *moderate uncertainty* classification also applies to the impact on the Heat in Buildings Strategy, which was published in October 2021. When asked about a specific issue in the Power Sharing Agreement that has been influenced by the SCA, I2 names this strategy. However, the content of the Heat in Buildings Strategy specifically mentioned by I2, namely the phasing out of fossil fuel boilers in homes, could not be clearly attributed to a SCA's recommendation, suggesting a more general impact.

5.3 Explanatory factors and lessons (RQ3)

The fact that the analysis was unable to identify with certainty a policy impact from any of the recommendations raises the question of how this lack of impact occurred and what lessons can be learned for future assemblies.

In response, several explanatory factors and lessons could be identified (Table 5), which were derived almost exclusively from the expert interviews. As a result, the following explanatory factors and lessons do not provide a conclusive explanation, but merely one way of looking at the SCA process.

Table 5 | Overview of explanatory factors and lessons

Factor	Explanation
Recommendations without added value	Some recommendations call for aspects that were already covered by existing or planned policies and therefore could not have had an impact from the outset.
Lack of jurisdictional authority	Some recommendations fall outside the scope of the SG's power to decide implementation independently.
Low external pressure	Limited support from other actors meant that there was little external pressure on the SG to act on the recommendations.
Problems of integration	Mismatch of recommendations with legislative proposals and policies already planned for the parliamentary term.
Restrained receptiveness	Reluctance of the SG to adopt recommendations, partly because the initiating body (SP) was not the same as the commissioning body (SG).
Specificity and number of recommendations	The vague nature and large number of recommendations made it difficult to hold the SG to account.
Lesson	Explanation
Importance of stakeholder involvement	From the outset and throughout the process, stakeholder involvement is an important part of the CA design.
Importance of the follow-up process	High importance of a well-designed follow-up process.

Need for an advocate	Without an influential voice to champion the recommendations, they quickly disappear from the political agenda.
Usefulness of response guidelines and guidance	It might be useful to specify in advance how a government should respond.

Factor: Recommendations without added value

One reason given by I1, I5 and I6 for the lack of impact is that some recommendations called for aspects that were already covered by existing or planned policies and therefore could not have had an impact from the outset. I1 and I6 attribute the existence of these recommendations without added value to a lack of concrete information for SCA members on existing or planned policies. I6 explains: “Because of that, they do suggest things that the government are already doing, and how can the government respond to that other than to say we’ve already doing this?”

Although perhaps insufficient, there was some information included in the educational sessions for SCA members. According to I4, in the second part of the sessions, academic experts and advocacy organisations presented innovative policies to address climate-related challenges. This part also included some information on existing policies to explain why the innovative proposal might be a good idea. Due to lack of time and capacity, existing policies were not presented in more detail (I4, I6). Difficulties in getting people involved in policy development to engage in the assembly process were also a reason (I6).

An idea to compensate for this lack of knowledge on the part of the members is introduced by I6. For them, one of the great lessons of the SCA was that there should be a process of policy translation. In I6’s view, this could be done through a dialogue, with civil servants pointing out what is already being done and CA members pointing out where they think it does not go far enough or how they think it should be implemented. "So, it would be more of a policy conversation ..." (I6).

The SCA organisers had already tried to support members to take the recommendations to a deeper level. One weekend was therefore devoted solely to reviewing the recommendations with the help of experts (I6). Nevertheless, I6 estimates that about half of the recommendations still correspond to existing or planned policies and therefore concludes that this dialogue is particularly relevant after the recommendations have been formulated.

Factor: Lack of jurisdictional authority

Another factor influencing the impact is the lack of jurisdictional authority of the SG and SP, which is mentioned by many experts (I1, I2, I4, I5, WR11). The Scottish sub-national government can only use its devolved powers to implement the recommendations (I1, I5, WR11) or must work together with the UK Government (I2). However, the latter is seen as “challenging” by I2 for a variety of political reasons.

This impression of the experts can be supported by the result of the analysis of the variable jurisdiction. As shown in Figure 5, 17 recommendations are categorised as *outside* and 19 as *mixed*. This indicates that, in total, 44 per cent of the recommendations fall outside the scope of the SG’s power to decide implementation independently.

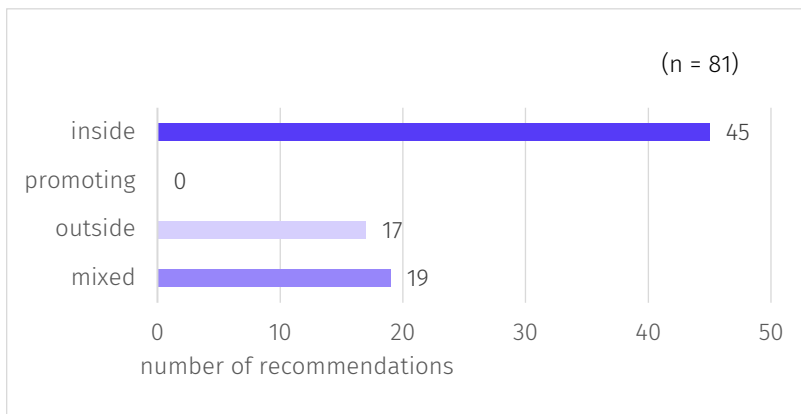


Figure 5 | Type of jurisdiction of the recommendations

However, I4 and I5 stress that, despite the reserved powers, the SG could have done more. I4 argues that the SG may have used the UK government as a scapegoat, since the SG itself has “lobbying power” and is therefore not separate from decision-making at UK level. I1 and I3 also mention the SNP’s own intentions in this

context. For I1, it is not surprising that the lack of devolved powers is often cited as a reason for refusing a recommendation, given that the SNP’s “main priority” is independence for Scotland. They therefore use the lack of powers as an argument for independence. Taken together, it is not entirely clear to what extent the lack of jurisdictional authority was more of a convenient excuse to avoid responsibility or a real constraint on taking up recommendations.²⁷

Factor: Low external pressure

Another factor that emerged from the statements of several experts is that the SCA was not strongly supported by other actors and, accordingly, there was little external pressure on the SG to act on the recommendations. Here, the experts explicitly refer to the media, the wider public and environmental organisations (I1, I2, I3, I6).

I2 believes that environmental organisations found the recommendations insufficiently detailed and radical, which limited their support. In contrast, I3 attributes the limited media and public attention to the fact that the SCA took place exclusively online. This format reduced engagement within the private spaces and communities of SCA members, limiting its “potential to spread in communities and spread horizontally” through the participants. Additionally, I3 notes that an online-only assembly is much less appealing to the media compared to an in-person event.

The resulting low media presence in turn reinforced the low public awareness (I1, I3). I6 notes in this regard that the SCA has failed to capture the public imagination. “... it [the SCA] means nothing to anyone. It wasn't a civic institution that entered the public imagination, and the country lived the process with them and knew what was coming out. It was nothing like that.” I6 puts this down to the fact that connecting with the wider public was not part of the assembly's design. On this basis, I1 recommends that citizens' assemblies in general should think more about their communication strategy and how to raise public awareness.

Factor: Problems of integration

Various details mentioned by the experts can be summarised as difficulties arising from the need to integrate the recommendations into the existing parliamentary system. In particular, I2 emphasises the need for the recommendations to be linked in some way to legislative proposals and policies already planned for the parliamentary term in order to be debated, and points to a certain mismatch in the Scottish case.

²⁷ An example to illustrate this is R60. See Appendix I for more details.

"If one of the recommendations related to planning and there wasn't a planning bill during that parliamentary term, it's hard to see how that would get into being legislation. Because you can only vote on a certain amount of things in each parliamentary session. It's all got to fit into the timetable ..."

Factor: Restrained receptiveness

Another explanatory factor is the reluctance of the commissioning body to adopt recommendations. Like the problems of integration, this factor emerged from interpreting different expert statements.

For example, I2 and I6 indicate that the initiating body and the commissioning body were not the same. "It was the Scottish Parliament, that legislated the assembly in the Climate Act, after an amendment by the Greens ..." (I6) Why this might have affected the impact is described by I6 as follows: "It's always going to be hard to say to someone 'hey, and by the way, here's a new institution you need to listen to and the policy, you're making, that's all up to be scrutinised and changed by this group.' That's hard to take when that wasn't your idea."

I6 explains that this lack of institutional ownership also applied to the Directorate for Energy and Climate Change, which was responsible for the SCA: "They were made to deal with this. This was not their idea." According to I6, this is why there was a group of civil servants in the directorate who wanted nothing to do with the SCA.

I1 and I2 see another problem in the fact that, due to the broad scope of the mandate of the SCA, the recommendations cut across many different directorates. As a result, implementation depended heavily on the commitment of each minister responsible for the respective directorate (I2). However, I1 explains that apart from the Minister for Environment and Climate and the associated Directorate, no other minister or directorate had expected to respond to the recommendations, but suddenly had to. I1 believes that their resulting unpreparedness affected the quality of the reception.

While it is not entirely clear from the experts' statements how these aspects affected the impact, they add to the overall picture that the process of compiling the response and working with the recommendations was quite diffuse (I2) and non-transparent (I6) and may provide some indication as to why it was difficult to hold the SG accountable.

Factor: Specificity and number of recommendations

The following final influencing factor is not primarily based on expert opinions. Rather, observations made during the analysis of recommendations, supported by statements from one expert, suggest that the specificity and number of recommendations may have influenced impact.

With 81 recommendations, the SCA came up with a large number of recommendations, leading I1 to describe it as "quite a long shopping list". I1 attributes this to the broad scope of the agreement, meaning that the question "How should Scotland change to tackle the climate emergency in an effective and fair way?" (SCA, 2021: 6) almost automatically led to a large number of recommendations.

However, when looking at the content of the recommendations, it is fair to say that there are sometimes clear overlaps between one or more recommendations. This does not mean that they are identical, but the overlaps indicate a certain potential for streamlining. For example, when there is a recommendation (R65) suggesting the introduction of a 4-day working week as standard (SCA 2021, 39) and one (R43) suggesting raising public awareness of the climate benefits of localised living and a 4-day working week (SCA 2021: 29). This observation of

overlaps coincides with I1's opinion that members were not encouraged enough to define and prioritise recommendations

In addition, it appears that the recommendations are often unspecific. For example, they often lack a timeframe for actions to be taken or goals to be achieved. I1 shares this impression and cites the lack of information for assembly members on existing or planned policies as a reason for these non-specific recommendations, in addition to the lack of refinement.

In a few cases, a greater level of detail would have been required to understand what the SCA was recommending in the first place, and in around a third of the recommendations, a higher level of detail or direct references would have helped to better understand the differences between the recommendation and existing policies. For example, R59 states that "Government should publish clear guidelines about their expectations for flexible working conditions and ensure that businesses are meeting these for staff when making procurement decisions and issuing contracts" (SCA 2021: 37). However, guidelines already existed for this very purpose, including flexible working requirements as a voluntary criterion. It might therefore have been helpful to refer to the existing guidelines to better understand what the SCA would like to see improved. For example, the SCA may have wanted the SG to make the requirements mandatory or more ambitious. However, with the existing wording, the SG could easily ignore this assumption by referring to the existing guidelines.

Sometimes the resulting uncertainties could be resolved by the supporting statements included in the report for each recommendation (see SCA, 2021: 46–89), as these provide contextual information such as timeframes or certain thresholds. However, there are also cases where the supporting statement shows that the SCA members were aware of the existing policy, but did not refer to it in the recommendation itself. For example, in R81, the SCA calls for the introduction of a framework for measuring success that is not solely based on profit but also includes other aspects such as sustainability (SCA 2021: 44). Scotland has such a framework in the form of the National Performance Framework, although it is less ambitious than the recommendation suggests (D1: 156, W75). This framework is also referred to in the supporting statement (SCA 2021: 89), but the question arises as to why the recommendation does not directly propose, for example, an extension or tightening of the existing framework, rather than remaining at a general formulation level. This would not only help to make the recommendation clearer, but is also a relevant question as it is unclear to what extent the supporting statements were taken into account by the SG, given that the supporting statements in the report are in a different chapter from the recommendations.

Overall, the non-specific and numerous recommendations make it much more difficult not only to assess their impact but also, as I1 notes, to hold the government to account afterwards.

Lesson: Importance of stakeholder involvement

In addition to these factors, there were a number of lessons for future assemblies that were identified by the experts. Some were mentioned in the context of explaining the limited impact, and some were mentioned as "innovative elements and good practices" (I1) that the SCA already had.

One of the key lessons learned, according to I6, is the importance of involving key stakeholders from all relevant sectors in organising an assembly. In I6's view, this cooperation is important from the very beginning and sets the stage for the final process of making the link to policy. The importance that I6 attaches to this involvement could be explained by the 'indirect ways' of impact through the networks and positions of the actors involved in the CA process that they mention (see Chapter 5.4).

Stakeholder involvement was part of the SCA's design (I3, I4, I6). For example, before the actual setting-up of the assembly began, there were already formal and informal meetings that brought together key stakeholders (I6). In addition, the Stewarding Group, which accompanied the whole process, was very large and diverse and sought to include a wide range of interests and actors (I3). Furthermore, following the publication of the report, a series of sectoral and industry events were organised to present the recommendations to stakeholders (2022c, I4).

Lesson: Importance of the follow-up process

The experts are positive about the importance given to the follow-up process in the Scottish case, and some statements indicate that they would like to see it given even greater importance. I4 notes that this would also need to be reflected in an increase in the financial resources allocated to the background work of the organisational team.

Furthermore, the experts identify several elements of the follow-up process which they consider to have been beneficial insofar as these elements helped to hold the government to account and to disseminate recommendations among relevant actors.

I1 and I6 highlight the work of the SCA's secretariat and the fact that it continued to work for a year after the main period of the assembly. During this time, they monitored what was happening with the recommendations and tried to increase the pressure in civil society, but also among politicians and civil servants, to implement the recommendations.

For example, the secretariat organised events within the government administration during and after the assembly. During the assembly, these events aimed to provide information on the progress of the assembly, while the events following the publication of the report aimed to raise awareness of the existence of the recommendations in different parts of the civil service (I4). I4 points out that it is quite difficult to place issues in directorates; simply publishing a report does not guarantee attention. The secretariat therefore tried to promote the recommendations, discuss what they mean for civil servants and how they can work with them (I4).

Of particular note are also nine meetings in which SCA members, supported by the Evidence Group, engaged in dialogue with a total of all cabinet secretariats and eleven ministers (SCA, 2022b). I4 mentions these ministerial meetings as a positive element, believing that bringing politicians together publicly with assembly members increased their accountability for the recommendations. This meant that politicians could not avoid responsibility by claiming that they were unaware of the recommendations (I4).

The final aspect mentioned by several experts was that the organisers "... enabled support for assembly members to respond to the official government response for greater accountability" (WR11). This was done by calling an extra eighth weekend, which was not originally planned (I6). Members received an assessment from the Evidence Group and were able to ask questions for the two ministers who were present (SCA, 2022e). This resulted in a statement of response in which members shared their general dissatisfaction with the government's response (see SCA, 2022d).

Lesson: The need for an advocate

In I2's view, initially there was a lot of excitement in the SG about receiving the recommendations, but then there was a shift, and the focus was more on the narrative that the assembly was a finished job, done well, and the recommendations were somewhat left out. The secretariat tried to counter this (I1), but when it was dissolved there was no one left to hold the government to account (I6): "... there was nobody really there to play the role of

holding the feet to the fire with government and policymakers on all this” (I2). According to I2, this meant that the report as a document was quickly lost in politics.

I2 therefore suggests that there should be an advocate for CAs and their recommendations. Given the need for an influential voice, I2 suggest that this would ideally be someone from within the government itself, such as a Minister for Climate Change. Their role would then be to champion the recommendations in the political arena. For example, by reporting regularly to Parliament on the status of implementation of the recommendations and proposing further steps (I2).

Other experts recommend other actors for this task, for example I4 suggests assembly members or civil servants. However, when it comes to the latter, they express concern: “I suppose then you’re getting into the territory of you’re just funding a bunch of activists to knock the government. That would maybe be hard to justify.”

Lesson: The usefulness of response guidelines and guidance

One aspect of the SCA that I5 cites as positive was the legal obligation to respond under the Climate Change Act 2019, as they felt this helped the government take the recommendations seriously. This was partly because the response enabled government accountability through public access (I5).

However, the compilation of this response was perceived as non-transparent (I6), and I1 notes some uncertainty among civil servants about how the response should be put together. I1 attributes this to their inexperience in responding to assembly reports, resulting in a lengthy response that was “not written in such a way that it was like an idea of just easy to follow what they had done” (I1). However, the extent of this uncertainty is questionable. I3 is of the opinion that the assembly report is simply an advisory report, a format very familiar to the SG and civil service. I1 also states that the nature of the response is certainly partly due to an attempt “to cover up perhaps some of the lack of impact that was there” (I1).

Irrespective of this uncertainty, the experts identify some ideas for improvement, which can be summarised as a lesson that guidance for the government and the civil service on how to deal with the recommendations would be useful. I4 points out that it might be worth considering specifying in advance how the government must respond, for example with a certain level of justification or detail.

In addition, I2 believes that it would be desirable to be able to better track whether CA recommendations have been implemented or not, e.g. by explicitly stating which recommendation a policy/legislation complies with when it is implemented. In the Scottish case, such explicit statements are rare. One explanation for this might be that the SG did not perceive any electoral advantage in giving prominence to the SCA (I6). Although better tracking of the SG’s progress in implementing recommendations, in a condensed, easily understandable and regularly updated form, was also a key issue raised by the SCA members themselves (SP, 2022a: 12, 2022b: 13).

5.4 Exploratory findings on other impacts

In addition to the policy impact addressed in this study, the expert interviews also provided information on other potential impacts of the SCA. A selection is presented below, excluding impacts with high uncertainty.²⁸ For example, despite the low policy impact cited by many experts, I1, I5 and WR11 state that the SCA and its recommendations were taken seriously by the SG. WR11 specifies this as follows: „The recommendations were seriously considered by

²⁸ See Appendix K for a full list.

policy teams with a clear expectation lead by the First Minister that they be considered on their merits and not just whether they aligned with existing government policy.”

Fittingly, I2 credits the SCA with having an impact on the wider political debate by “getting climate into the discussion” and making politicians more aware that citizens really want them to act on climate change issues. I1 goes further to say that the SCA has had an impact on the parliamentary debate and agenda by influencing the work of committees and the inquiries they conduct.

In line with this, WR2 points out that the SP’s Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee took evidence from the assembly on two occasions.²⁹ According to WR2, this fed into the Committee’s general information gathering at this relatively early stage of the parliamentary session. However, as there was no direct output from these meetings, in the form of a committee report or letter (WR2), this impact can be seen as more conceptual in the sense that the SCA may have been able to influence the knowledge and/or attitudes of committee members.

A more concrete impact mentioned by experts is the assembly’s impact on the formation of the Institutionalising Participatory and Deliberative Democracy Working Group in the civil service (WR4, WR5, W44). The aim was to consider how Scotland could better integrate participatory and deliberative democracy processes into the democratic system and, more specifically, according to I4, to identify quality criteria for Scotland’s engagement with deliberative democracy.

I6 suggests that there was a clear understanding that deliberative democracy needed more attention. As far as I6 is aware, the SCA did not make any recommendations about the formation of this group but made it clear that they wanted deliberation to go beyond this one assembly. This naturally raised the question of how these deliberative processes could be given more space. I6 believes this led to the formation of the working group. This statement is complemented by I4, who explains that after the SCA process they saw the need to create an “institutional knowledge pot” in order to be better prepared than during the SCA.

In addition, I6 believes that the SCA has had an indirect impact through the networks and positions of the actors involved in the assembly process. As an example, I6 cites the members of the Stewarding Group, who came from a variety of sectors. I6 thinks that the valuable mechanism here is that the members have been involved in the SCA and are now able to cascade knowledge about the SCA and its implications through their “complex and large networks”. I6 adds that they know that “recommendations from the assembly have been used by organisations to lobby government to move forward in certain areas”. However, it remains rather unclear how pronounced I6’s assumptions are.

6 Discussion

6.1 Key findings

None of the SCA’s recommendations were *less ambitious* in tackling the climate crisis than existing national climate policies; in fact, the vast majority (79 per cent) can be considered as *more ambitious*.

However, this study could not identify any impact of the recommendations on national climate policy decisions, as not a single impact of any recommendation could be identified with *low* or *moderate uncertainty*. Of the 81 recommendations, there were 19 recommendations where

²⁹ These meetings took place on 28 September 2021 and 1 March 2022 (see SP, 2021, 2022b)

it was not possible to say whether an impact existed or not. In most cases, the possibility of an impact could not be ruled out with certainty, rather than the impact being suspected but not confirmed due to insufficient evidence.

Looking at the impacts of the SCA - as opposed to individual recommendations - two policy decisions appear to have been influenced in a very general way. In addition, there are some indications of further impacts of the SCA that go beyond the impact definition used in this research.

In response to the question of how this absence of policy impact could have occurred, six possible explanatory factors could be formulated. These consist of: a high proportion of recommendations without added value; a lack of jurisdictional authority on the part of the SG to decide independently on the uptake of recommendations; low external pressure due to limited support and awareness of other actors; problems caused by the need to integrate recommendations into the existing parliamentary system; a restrained receptiveness on the part of government and administration for the recommendations; and, finally, the existence of non-specific and generally numerous recommendations.

In addition, four lessons were identified that could be of value to future assemblies. These are the importance of stakeholder involvement; the high importance of a well-designed follow-up process; the need for an advocate to champion the assembly and its recommendations; and the usefulness of pre-defined guidelines for the government to respond to the recommendations and supporting guidance on how to work with them.

These key findings are discussed below.

Ambitious recommendations (RQ1)

This study found a high proportion of *more ambitious* recommendations. Thus, the evidence from the Scottish case supports the often-stated assumption made by CA advocates that CA recommendations are more ambitious than existing policies (eg. Mellier & Wilson, 2020: 2; Smith, 2023: 5–6).

Interestingly, the overall higher level of ambition was often only apparent after the in-depth analysis of this study. This was because, in most cases, there was no indication of less or more ambition in the recommendations. Very few recommendations contained clear language, specific proposals, target dates or a reference to or demarcation from existing policies. This could also explain why Andrews et al. (2022: 117; see 2022: 120) came to a less positive conclusion.

The SCA does not stand out for its extremely radical measures but rather tends to build on existing policies. It is fair to ask whether the recommendations go far enough to trigger the radical changes needed in the face of the climate crisis (Smith, 2024: 135). Probably not. Especially if one recalls the broad understanding of ambition in this study, which led to a rather low threshold for recommendations to be considered *more ambitious*. However, the overall higher level of ambition cannot be downplayed, as the recommendations as a whole can still be interpreted as a step forward compared to the ambition of existing policies in Scotland.

This difference from existing policies suggests that deliberative participation formats such as CAs can be valuable for exchanges on issues such as the climate crisis, which require thinking that prioritises the common good and long-term solutions (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2019: 411–412; MacKenzie & Caluwaerts, 2021: 327–328). Regardless of how ideal the conditions are that CAs can create for being truly deliberative and democratic, it seems reasonable to conclude that

these conditions are better than those currently available elsewhere in conventional democracies.

Without questioning the importance of further improvements and critical discussions about the format of CAs, it is important to recognise that the SCA has certainly worked in terms of its climate effectiveness, up to the point where the recommendations were transferred to the 'outside world'. This finding supports Böker & Elstub's (2015: 130) conclusion that, contrary to some critics, lay citizens can make meaningful contributions to policymaking, even on complex and controversial issues.

No impact of the recommendations on national climate policy decisions (RQ2)

It cannot be overlooked that the results of this study show that the recommendations of the SCA could not have had any political impact once they left the "protected space" (Boswell et al., 2023: 183) of the assembly. This finding supports earlier research that the direct policy impact of previous processes has been rather limited (e.g. Font & Smith, 2013: 3; Wells et al., 2021: 18).

Added to this is the impression of large-scale 'retrofitting'. It appears that policymakers and civil servants have looked at the recommendations, identified which policies already exist or are planned that fit the recommendations, and allocated them accordingly, rather than deriving new policies from them.

There are two reasons for this impression. The first is that the SG's response presents existing or, as this analysis has shown, not new but often already planned policies, in a very positive and enthusiastic way, suggesting progress where there is none. Second, there were a high proportion of recommendations that were not taken up yet also rarely explicitly rejected by the SG. It appears that the SCA has been used by the SG to praise its previous work and to sell already planned policies as progress.

Scholars disagree on whether this practice is a conscious choice by decision-makers or whether they are simply victims of their own individual, institutional and contextual constraints (see Vrydagh, 2023: 77–78). While it is beyond the scope of this study to say whether this was the government's conscious intention in this case, the resulting impression is consistent with other concerns that processes may have been manipulated through retrofitting or cherry-picking of recommendations (e.g. Elstub & Khoban, 2023: 117–118; Font et al., 2018: 631–632; Pateman, 2012: 9).

In addition to this lack of impact of the recommendations on national climate policy decisions, this study was able to identify a number of other impacts. Nevertheless, the overall balance of the SCA seems rather sobering. However, as Richardson et al. (2019: 271) point out, it would be wrong to draw general conclusions about the (lack of) impact of CAs or deliberative participation processes in general from a single case study. Instead, as Blatter & Blume (2008: 315) argue, it should be seen as one more piece of evidence for further discourse.

In this discourse on the effectiveness of deliberative participation formats such as CAs., however, the result indicates at least an ambivalent character, i.e. CAs do not necessarily have to be beneficial for the climate and democracies (Curato & Böker, 2016: 174; Elstub & Khoban, 2023: 121–122). The high expectations of a positive impact of CAs on climate policy outlined at the beginning of this thesis (see Chapter 2) therefore appear to be over-optimistic (Geißel & Michels, 2023: 288).

If one considers that these processes do not take place in isolation, but as part of the existing political systems, with all their problems (Böker & Elstub, 2015: 139), one might also conclude:

"Under these conditions, perhaps we should be surprised that assemblies have any impact at all!" (Smith, 2024: 82) It therefore seems useful to adjust expectations of CAs somewhat in line with their current potential for impact, rather than overstating them as a panacea (Ejsing et al., 2023: 16–17).

Nevertheless, creating better contextual conditions for the theoretically possible positive climate impact seems equally important (Willis et al., 2022: 10–11). As long as CAs continue to be promoted alongside the expectation of a direct impact on decision-making (Lewis et al., 2023: 1), they should be able to fulfil this expectation to some degree to maintain their democratic legitimacy (Progrebinschi & Ryan, 2018: 149). As Fernández-Martínez et al. (2023: 233) aptly summarise, the impact of recommendations "is not the only form of impact that can result from participation, but it is an important one".

Potential explanations & lessons (RQ3)

As noted above, the study identified six potential explanatory factors and four lessons regarding the lack of impact. These are exploratory findings that leave considerable room for interpretation. In particular, the fact that possible causal links between the factor and the policy impact, could not be specified for all factors indicates the need for more nuanced analyses in the future. Nevertheless, the findings show that analysing cases where there was no or limited policy impact can be just as valuable as studying 'successful' cases in identifying how to create better conditions for impact to develop (Parry & Ercan, 2023: 133–134; Spada & Ryan, 2017: 773).

All explanatory factors and lessons are in some way consistent with previous research (e.g. Boswell et al., 2023: 195; Michels & Binnema, 2019: 765–766; Niessen, 2023: 333; Pálsdóttir et al., 2023: 16). While the lessons point to some important integrative process design factors, the explanatory factors can be assigned to different but, all three categories of factors: process design factors, contextual factors and recommendation-related factors. This finding again highlights the wide range of possible factors and their interrelationships.

What is striking about the SCA are the experts' concerns about the quality of the recommendations. Some recommendations called for aspects already covered by existing or planned policies, some lacked specificity, and some were outside the jurisdictional authority of the SG.

While it is debatable whether a CA should only make recommendations on issues within the competence of the commissioning body (see Pfeffer, 2024: 849–850), it is quite reasonable to assume that recommendations without new aspects and/or that are too vague in nature do not provide valuable guidance to policymakers (Font & Smith, 2013: 12; Michels & Binnema, 2019: 765; Wells et al., 2021: 11) and are therefore not taken up. It can also be assumed that the presumed retrofitting has been facilitated because a rather vague recommendation can be more easily linked to existing or planned policies.

Taken together with the large number of recommendations about which scholars disagree as to whether or not this hinders impact (see Smith, 2024: 62), these shortcomings in the quality of the recommendations may indicate that the scope of the SCA was too broad. A narrower scope might have allowed the recommendations to be examined in greater depth (Pfeffer, 2024: 848–849), as more time would have been available to work on them (Elstub et al., 2021: 4), thereby resulting in greater specification and refinement. This might have reduced the number of non-valuable recommendations left at the end, e.g. by highlighting overlaps in content and with existing policies. The resulting reduction in the total number of

recommendations could also have helped to hold the government accountable (Elstub et al., 2021: 13).

However, Pfeffer (2024: 848–849) notes that a narrower scope may also have potential downsides. Consequently, it is not possible to say categorically whether a scope is too broad or too narrow. Rather, it seems more useful to consider whether the scope fits the purpose and the political context, and how potential downsides can be managed through conscious design choices (Pfeffer, 2024: 854; Wells et al., 2021: 17). For example, Rovers & Dejaeghere (2022: 10) suggest that involving legal experts and civil servants in the final formulation of recommendations could facilitate their translation into policy. This corresponds to I6's idea of a 'policy conversation' (see Chapter 5.3), which could have helped the SCA refine the recommendations despite its broad scope.

Irrespective of what exactly caused the reduced quality of the recommendations, it can be argued that it certainly had an inhibiting effect on the policy impact. Still, despite the justified criticism, not all recommendations were 'deficient'. Much more decisive seems to have been the restrained receptiveness of government and administration to the recommendations.

It can be assumed that there was not enough support for the SCA within the commissioning body. Of course, this cannot be generalised. Bodies are not homogeneous, particularly coalition governments (Font & Smith, 2013: 14), such as the SG was at the time of the SCA. Overall, however, the will of the SG and the civil service to act on the recommendations simply does not seem to have been strong enough for the SCA to have a policy impact.

This assumption is based partly on indications from the experts about the restrained receptiveness and partly on the impression of a discrepancy between the lack of impact and the impression that conditions considered potentially beneficial to impact were certainly met in the Scottish case. These include, for example, stakeholder involvement from the outset (Smith, 2024: 103) or a robust follow-up process (Rovers & Dejaeghere, 2022: 9; Smith, 2024: 82–83).

One possible explanation for the lack of support could be that initiation and commissioning were not in the same hands, as the SCA was commissioned by the government but initiated by parliament through an amendment to the climate legislation tabled by the Green Party. Although the Green Party was also part of the government, it may have felt too much like parliament dictating to the government and civil service. If this were the case, the power struggles between the SG and the SP would point into a similar direction to Niessen's (2023: 333) finding that power considerations influence decision-makers' attitudes towards an assembly.

Other explanatory factors mentioned in the literature appear to be secondary, for example, scepticism about citizen input (Pálsdóttir et al., 2023: 16), given a certain emphasis in Scotland on further institutionalising participatory governance, as noted by Escobar (2022: 149). It remains unclear from this study exactly how the supposed lack of support came about, leaving an interesting question for further research. Regardless, the explanatory factor of restrained receptiveness supports earlier findings that support from political and administrative actors is a key condition for impact (e.g. Font et al., 2018: 631; Geißel & Michels, 2023: 294–295; Michels & Binnema, 2019: 766).

That the reason for the limited receptiveness could be that the initiating and commissioning bodies were not the same, is consistent with previous findings that the way in which a CA is embedded in the political system influences the attitudes of political and administrative actors towards a CA and its recommendations (e.g. Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2016: 23; Michels &

Binnema, 2019: 765). This suggests that further consideration should be given to analysing the different ways in which political and administrative actors engage with CAs in different contexts and how this can be used strategically to achieve greater policy impact, for example, by modifying the design of the CA (see Pfeffer & Newig, 2025: 3).

This study can already propose two ideas on how to better deal with the situation where a government commissions a CA that it does not fully support. First, the public and media attention often cited as important (e.g. Boswell et al., 2023: 195) was lacking in the case of the SCA. Although this may not always be equally relevant (Pfeffer & Newig, 2025: 8), external pressure from these actors seems particularly relevant in cases where support within the commissioning body is as low as in the Scottish case. In these cases, particular attention should be paid to a good external communication strategy (Rovers & Dejaeghere, 2022: 12; Smith, 2024: 116–117).

Second, this study underlines the usefulness of response guidelines and guidance. In the case of the SCA, there was a legal obligation to respond, which was positively highlighted by the experts. However, it seems beneficial to clarify in more detail what should happen with the resulting recommendations (Boswell et al., 2023: 195; Elstub & Khoban, 2023: 122) and to think about this in the longer term, e.g. through a pre-agreed long-term monitoring of the recommendations afterwards (Rovers & Dejaeghere, 2022: 10). This could assist in holding decision-makers accountable (Pfeffer & Newig, 2025: 8) and make it clearer in advance which actors in politics and administration will be involved in working with the recommendations. Together with more guidance for these actors, it might be possible to reduce their unpreparedness, as was partly the case with the SCA. This seems helpful, as it can be assumed that political and administrative actors will be more supportive if they feel comfortable with the process (Rovers & Dejaeghere, 2022: 10) and are better informed (Pálsdóttir et al., 2023: 16).

6.2 Methodological discussion

Data collection

The fact that experts with relevant insights were largely unavailable is probably the main limitation of this study. While only two people participated in the survey, at least six experts were interviewed. However, none of these experts were politicians and civil servants who received and worked with the recommendations³⁰ and who would potentially have had the most relevant insights into the post-assembly process. Although the interviewees and survey respondents can also be considered as experts, they cannot replace the omission of the other two groups.

In terms of data quality, this meant that all expert statements about the existence of an impact at the level of recommendations had to be classified with a high degree of uncertainty due to limited reliability. This was not only due to the role of the experts, but also to the uncertainties expressed by the experts themselves.

It can be concluded that there is a certain possibility that if there was a policy impact of the recommendations, it could not be captured. However, based on the full data, it can be assumed that this is not very likely, and that the extent of any impact would have been minimal.

On the positive side, the experts reached did not necessarily have an incentive to paint a rosy picture of the SCA, unlike, for example, members of the commissioning government. This study therefore did not have the problem of attributing too much impact based on expert

³⁰ It was possible to talk to politicians and civil servants, but they were not directly involved in the decision-making process or left before the follow-up phase began.

perspectives, a common difficulty highlighted by Demski & Chapstick (2022: 15–16), among others.

In terms of the survey, the original intention of adding it to the data collection to reach more experts worked. However, when the data from all three methods were triangulated, the statements about impact in the survey often contradicted the lack of impact identified in the document analysis or through the interviews. In addition, the comments on these impact statements suggested that participants were trying to indicate an impact that did not fit the study's concept of impact. These difficulties do not mean that a survey cannot be used to complement the document-based congruence approach, but they do support Vrydagh's (2022: 81) view that dialogue-oriented interviews should remain the preferred method for this.

Data analysis

The use of the counterfactual approach to impact assessment, and a rigorous examination of the evidence through the level of uncertainty classification, suggests that this study avoided the common pitfall of others that rely solely on the conventional congruence approach. These studies establish causal relationships based on congruence between a recommendation and the policy subsequently adopted, where only correlations exist (Jacquet & van der Does, 2021: 477–479; Richardson et al., 2019: 271; Vrydagh, 2022: 68). Therefore, the applied analytical approach can be seen as a valuable contribution to Geißel & Michels' (2023: 294) suggestion to further improve impact assessments, including conceptualising impact, specifying variables and causal relationships, and developing common operationalisations for assessment.

There were, however, some difficulties in the impact analysis. These arose mainly from the heavy reliance on textual comparison, which resulted from the lack of expert data due to the poor availability of experts mentioned above. Among others, difficulties arose to distinguish between the two types of no impact, *no uptake* and *anyways*. For example, pre- and post-assembly measures may have been wrongly classified as (*partially*) *congruent*. This was because measures existed before and/or after on the subject of the recommendation, and it was not clear whether the SCA was unaware of the existing or planned measures (*anyways*) or whether the SCA wanted something different (*no uptake*). This uncertainty may have led to an increase in the use of the *anyways* & *no uptake* categorisation and would probably have been reduced by the originally intended triangulation of data through interviews and survey. However, as this categorisation did not affect the result regarding the (non-)existence of impacts, this difficulty does not appear to be a major concern.

This problem may have been particularly pronounced in the Scottish case because the SCA's recommendations often resembled rather general demands, while the SG's report responded with a large number of more concrete measures and programmes. This observation is consistent with the difficulties that Andrews et al. (2022: 15) had in their assessment, leading them to conclude that "... comparing recommended to existing or planned action is open to interpretation."

This limitation again highlights the importance of a mixed methods approach (Escobar & Thompson, 2019: 501) and subsequent review of the analysis to increase intercoder reliability (Vrydagh, 2022: 83).

7 Conclusion

This thesis started from the observation that although CAs have been increasingly used in recent years and have many supporters in academia and practice, the extent to which CAs lead to more ambitious climate policies is uncertain.

The case study of Scotland's Climate Assembly contributes to closing this research gap by providing a systematic analysis of the level of ambition (RQ1) and the impact on national climate policy decisions taken after the SCA (RQ2) for each recommendation.

The results show that, although the SCA does not propose extremely radical measures, the vast majority (79 per cent) of the recommendations can be considered more ambitious in tackling the climate crisis than existing national climate policies. The remaining 21 per cent are neither more nor less ambitious. Accordingly, no recommendation is less ambitious.

However, once the recommendations left the 'protected space' of the CA, this study could not identify any impact of the recommendations on national climate policy decisions taken after the SCA. This finding is consistent with the overall impression that the SG was engaged in a large-scale retrofitting exercise. Examination of the government's response suggests that policymakers and civil servants looked at the recommendations, identified which policies already existed or were planned that fit the subject of the recommendations, and allocated them accordingly, rather than deriving new policies from the recommendations.

These results contribute to previous impact assessments, which also show limited, mostly indirect, policy impacts. When considered as a means to improve climate governance, the limited policy impact of CAs raises concerns about their climate effectiveness and democratic legitimacy. However, this study argues that it would be wrong to conclude that because the SCA's recommendations did not lead to more ambitious climate policies, CAs in general cannot do so. Instead, the SCA's ambitious recommendations demonstrate that CAs and related formats can enable lay citizens to engage in deliberation on complex issues such as the climate crisis, allowing them to make meaningful contributions to policymaking. Thus, it seems appropriate to continue to see CAs as a promising format, although one that does not take place in isolation, but rather in the midst of existing messy political systems.

This highlights the need to explore how the theoretically possible positive climate impacts of CAs can be better realised within these systems. The findings on potential explanatory factors and lessons regarding the lack of impact of the SCA (RQ3) show that there are numerous conditions that can facilitate or hinder policy impact.

In the case of the SCA, some shortcomings in the quality of the recommendations stand out. They may have inhibited the policy impact, as it is reasonable to assume that recommendations without new aspects and/or that are too vague do not provide valuable guidance to policymakers. One possible reason for these shortcomings is that there was not enough time to specify and refine the recommendations, potentially due to the broad scope of the assembly.

However, a much more important reason for the lack of policy impact seems to have been the insufficient support from the commissioning body, which led to a reluctance to adopt recommendations. One possible explanation could be that initiation and commissioning were not in the same hands, as the SCA was commissioned by the government but initiated by the parliament. Accordingly, the case of the SCA lends weight to earlier findings showing that support from political and administrative actors is a key condition for impact, and that the way in which a CA is embedded in the political system influences the attitudes of these actors towards a CA and its recommendations.

Further research should therefore focus on analysing this embeddedness and, especially, the link between CAs and commissioning bodies. It seems promising to analyse the different ways in which political and administrative actors engage with CAs in different contexts. Of particular importance is how these and other facilitating and hindering factors can be used strategically to achieve greater policy impact. This study can already highlight the importance of a robust and well-resourced follow-up process, and the usefulness of response guidelines and guidance for the commissioning body.

However, further research and practice should bear in mind that it will take more than a few influential CAs to reform climate governance to the extent that it can accommodate the far-reaching transformations needed in the face of the climate crisis. So, the focus should not be solely on increasing the impact of CAs, but also on increasing the impact of citizen participation to ensure that decisions are made in an inclusive and socially just manner. Improving the climate effectiveness of CAs remains one of many important tasks in this endeavour.

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