



Being everything for everybody all at once: Facework for trustworthiness of a citizens' assembly for the climate

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ABSTRACT

In the context of distrust and scepticism about the climate issue, researchers are exploring the potential of deliberative mini-publics, such as citizens' assemblies about climate change, to find new fora for just climate governance. However, while the literature suggests such arenas have potential to temper climate scepticism, it is less clear how specific design components of these innovations may relate to specific reasons for distrust. This paper operationalises the processes of facework, a concept denoting the translation between institutional and interpersonal trust, to capture how anticipation of distrust featured in the planning process of the Sweden's first national citizen's assembly on the climate, and how choices were made by the organisers to abate such distrust. To this end, we analyse interviews with researchers and science communicators prior to the event. Researchers employ strategies of legitimisation, signification, and domination in order to build a trustworthy citizens assembly and mitigate reasons for distrust. Our findings indicate how multiple purposes of the citizens' assembly, the anticipated heterogeneity of the assembly's audiences, and subsequent design choices led to trade-offs that potentially undermine each other or embed incoherence into the project. Our paper concludes with a reflection on the increasing likelihood of researchers finding themselves in such contexts and how they may navigate precariousness and avoid adverse effects.

1. Introduction

Climate researchers are typically highly trusted by the public (Cologna et al., 2024); however, they also often face distrust that hinders dissemination of scientific messaging (Gundersen et al., 2022) and contributes to obstruction of climate action (Ekberg et al., 2023). Though Sweden has been seen as a climate forerunner (Karlsson, 2021), increasing support for the nationalist-populist climate-sceptic political party (Sweden Democrats) and climate science denialism in the parliament has accompanied backsliding of climate policy (Hultman et al., 2019; Vowles et al., 2024). When defined as the denial of the scientific evidence of anthropogenic climate change (Rahmstorf, 2004) scepticism in Sweden surveys between 6 % (Oscarsson et al., 2021) and 10 % (Poortinga et al., 2019). For Sweden Democrats' voters, climate scepticism surveys at 18 % (Oscarsson et al., 2021).

Researchers adapt their communication practices in face of sceptical attitudes (Goodwin and Dahlstrom, 2014; Gundersen et al., 2022;

Cologna et al., 2024); however, these attitudes can also impact climate research (Lewandowsky et al., 2015; Sharman, 2015). A potential remedy to scepticism comes in the form of Citizens Assemblies on Climate Change (CA) functioning as a "trusted information proxy" (Warren and Gastil, 2015), thereby somewhat tempering distrust in the public (Setälä et al., 2023). We find it interesting that since CAs can be seen as a remedy for distrust in climate science, understanding how trustworthiness in a CA is built could relate to how organisers imagine such distrust during their planning. We hypothesise that besides following best practices, decisions made for the success of CAs may be informed by ideas about prospective distrusters. Indeed, where a CA may constitute a research activity, the abatement of anticipated distrust could be considered a form of impact on climate research design.

The objective of this paper is to explore how researchers' anticipations of distrust influence the design of their activities, through the empirical exploration of Sweden's first national Climate Citizens Assembly (CCA). The CCA was run in the spring 2024 by researchers from

Abbreviations: CA, Citizens Assemblies on Climate Change; CCA, Sweden's first National Climate Citizen Assembly; PG, Planning Group of the Assembly; CG, Consultation Group.

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the research programme FAIRTRANS. The assembly generated a set of climate policy recommendations after citizen deliberations on the basis of presented scientific evidence. Thus, we consider the CCA as a research-policy interface: both a research activity and a policy intervention. We are guided by two research questions:

- 1) How do the purposes of the CCA relate to researchers' anticipations of distrust?
- 2) How do researchers organise their activities in order to best appeal to anticipated distrusters?

To answer them, we interviewed researchers organising the CCA about the planning process of the CCA prior to the event. We analysed responses through *facework*, a process of building trustworthy institutional face (Kroeger, 2017). We see it as an apt analytical tool for the empirical context of a polarising issue such as climate change at the interface of policy and research in the form of a CCA organised by climate researchers.

2. Background

CCAs vary in design and impact (Lorenzoni et al., 2025), yet are valued in contexts of scepticism for overcoming perceived democratic deficits in climate governance (Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2019), anchor mitigation into the needs of polarised publics (Dryzek et al., 2019; Caluwaerts et al., 2023), and result in meta-consensus on divisive issues (Niemeyer and Dryzek, 2007). Participatory governance is motivated by the promise of better and more trustworthy decisions than traditional top-down models (Eastwood et al., 2017). Deliberative practices, in particular, are premised on the belief that such “processes will both increase the legitimacy of collective decisions and foster critical self-awareness” (Bäckstrand et al., 2010, p. 47).

Sweden's first CCA in Spring 2024 was organised by FAIRTRANS, an applied research programme centred on co-production with civil society for fair ways to meet Sweden's commitment to the Paris Agreement. The CCA convened 60 people, a representative sample in terms of education levels, geographic location, political sympathies, backgrounds, and climate concerns. There were nine meetings between March and May, comprising two in-person weekends at the initiation and culmination of the assembly and 5 three-hour long digital evenings between. Assembly members deliberated upon the question “how should emissions be reduced in Sweden?”. The response was structured as a statement and set of policy proposals. Information from 20 expert-witnesses, several of whom were requested by members, was provided in short lectures and a handbook. Each political party elected into the Swedish parliament in 2022 was invited to the assembly, with all but one sending a representative to receive the assembly's policy proposals.¹

Different actor-groups engaged with the construction of the CCA. The Planning Group (PG), consisting of researchers and science communicators primarily from FAIRTRANS, were the main decision-making body who organised the CCA. We only interviewed the PG, but other actor-groups were enlisted by the PG to support design decisions in the CCA. This included a Consultation Group (CG), a group of known public figures; Deliberation Facilitators, a company hired by FAIRTRANS to run the CCA; the Assembly Members, the 60 citizens recruited by a sortition company to participate in the CCA; expert-witnesses, who provided relevant knowledge to members (though did not feature heavily in the interviews). We provide information about the CCA here for context, but our study focus remains on the backstage decision-making processes by the PG. It is further of importance to emphasise the small role of the Swedish state, which primarily constituted a prospective observer.

¹ More information about the CCA can be found on the website: (<https://fairtrans.nu/medborgarrad-om-klimatet/>).

3. Theoretical connections between trust and facework

Trust is an anticipatory relationship of reliance upon others to deliver valued outcomes (de Fine Licht and Brülde, 2021). Epistemic trust, a reliance upon researchers to produce reliable scientific knowledge, has connections with other elite trust forms (Fairbrother, 2017; Huber et al., 2021), because academics are privileged with an epistemic authority over laypersons (Baghrmian and Caprioglio Panizza, 2022). There are distrusters who dismiss science about climate change (Capstick and Pidgeon, 2014), or mistrust processes of climate governance and scientific-knowledge production (Van Rensburg, 2015). Climate scepticism, a form of epistemic distrust, is associated with far-right political ideologies and attitude roots (Hornsey and Fielding, 2017), including anti-establishment distrust in Sweden (Jylhä and Hellmer, 2020; Jylhä et al., 2020).

Epistemic distrust is problematic where a researcher is misperceived as untrustworthy, reducing acceptance of reliable scientific information (Gundersen et al., 2022). A researcher's trustworthiness connects to perceived benevolence (commitment to societal good), openness (listening to public concerns), competence and integrity (Besley et al., 2021). While trust towards climate science is resilient, trustworthiness of researchers can waver by, for example, political advocacy (Cologna et al., 2024) or misinformation about bias (Samoilenko and Cook, 2023). Though deliberative participation may enhance environmental attitudes and *political* trust (Warren and Gastil, 2015; Setälä et al., 2023), it is unclear how it specifically relates to trust in researchers (Gundersen et al., 2022).

The hegemonic perception of boundaries between science and politics arguably preserves perceived scientific integrity of a value-free ideal (Gundersen et al., 2022) because politicisation reduces institutional trust in science (Clark et al., 2023). Increased participation in scientific knowledge-production can, however, increase the perception of trustworthy science for enhancing the interests of citizens (Gundersen et al., 2022). A CCA organised by researchers could thus be found both untrustworthy and trustworthy depending on what is signified: a boundary transgression or a process enhancing the voices of citizens.

The relationship between trust in science as an institution and interpersonal trust in researchers can be conceptualised as facework: “the translation of interpersonal trust into trust which pertains to an institutional system, based on the conduct of system representatives who, using their agency, are seen to draw on the systems rules and resources in devising behaviours able to signal trustworthiness” (Kroeger, 2017, p. 496). Applied to our empirical context, we theorise researchers drawing on the authority of science and democratic deliberation processes when designing a trustworthy CCA. Facework provides an apt way to conceptualise the PG's decisions and rationales. How researchers anticipate themselves and the CCA being perceived as untrustworthy and alleviate this is, we argue, a function of facework.

The exact mechanisms of facework are derived by Kroeger (2017) from Giddens (1984) dimensions of structure: legitimation, domination, and signification. Briefly, *legitimation* refers to norms and values which actors mirror in their practices. Normative integrity of systems enacted by representatives influences an external observer's perception of trustworthiness. Norms mentioned by Kroeger (2017) and relevant for our analysis include honesty, reciprocity, and procedural justice. We enrich this with scientific norms such as objectivity and the pursuit of (knowledge for) societal good (Gundersen et al., 2022; Cologna et al., 2024). *Domination* is defined as empowerment by the system (Giddens, 1984). On the one hand, the system (which here is science) is deemed trustworthy if power is seen to reside in systems; on the other hand, external observers are likely to trust the system if representatives (researchers) hold enough discretion necessary to carry out their practices. For climate science this may be the epistemic authority in academia or, for researchers, the provisioning of authority in mitigation policy (Karlsson and Gilek, 2020). Domination in our context also refers to instances where people are enlisted to construct the assembly at

different points of time. *Signification* refers to interpretive schemes at the disposal of representatives to facilitate consistent interpretations by audiences of intent. Representatives use symbolic repertoires available to reflect the norms of the system (Kroeger, 2017); a signification of honesty, for example, when disclosing research funding (Cologna et al., 2024). When interpreted consistently, an institution may be perceived as more trustworthy than one that diversifies meaning behind actions (Kroeger, 2017).

We operationalise domination as moments of reigning, relinquishing, or revoking authority; signification where decisions and actions gesture deeper intent; and legitimation where norms and values (of science and democracy) are asserted. These processes of facework rely upon a set of coherencies: situational coherence of the encounter, where typicality enables effective representation without ambiguous intent; representational coherence, denoting the similarities between interpersonal and institutional trustworthiness; and structural coherence, which indicates consistency between legitimation, signification, and domination (Kroeger, 2017). Yet, as different people have different ways of (dis)trusting climate researchers (Cologna et al., 2024) and as a CA can be many things (Lorenzoni et al., 2025), incoherencies may indeed emerge. The CCA's trustworthiness potentially relates to the (in)coherence of a research-policy interface, where researchers may be found transgressing boundaries towards heterogenous audiences, and where norms of science may be stretched by the political.

4. Materials and methods

This paper relies upon 12 interviews with most members of the PG, excluding one who is also an author of the present paper and one other member, conducted between November 2023 and January 2024 with written consent. The interview timing, by which the PG had not finalised many decisions, is motivated by our intent to explore whether anticipation of distrust was a factor of the planning process. The semi-structured interviews invited open reflection, used prompts, and encouraged elaboration to allow interviewees to discuss issues important to them (Adams, 2015) (see Appendix A for the interview guide). The interviewees were familiar with the interviewers because of the proximity during other research activities. Quotations are not attributed to individual research participants as the planning process was iterative and largely collective and, while the PG are named publicly, we do not disclose identities of research participants in this paper.

The interviews were transcribed, descriptively first-cycle coded (Saldaña, 2013), and subsequently tabulated whereupon facework was operationalised in second-cycle coding to identify connections between purposes, audiences, concerns, and alleviation of concerns. We used this process to remain close to the diversity of perspectives held by the PG, while also analysing choices in terms of trustworthiness. See Appendix B for the analytical outline and codebook.

Inter-coder reliability was secured through initiating analysis with a consensus coding of three transcriptions to address divergences of technique, at which point differences were corrected. A codebook was iteratively developed during first-cycle coding of the remaining transcripts. Such codes emerged as “funding”, “researchers”, “consultation group”, or “representation”, all of which were categorised as sources of legitimacy for the CCA. Alternatively, under the category of “anticipated outcomes” were included such codes as “impact public debate” or “FAIRTRANS objectives”. Statements were double-coded where the interviewee referred to multiple aspects of relevance to the study.

5. Facework for Sweden's first national citizens assembly on the climate

5.1. Analytical approach

We discovered that based upon the perceived purposes of the CCA, different forms of distrust were identified in relation to different

distrusting audiences or observers and concerns the PG had about the CCA. These forms of anticipated distrust were abated through facework for a more trustworthy CCA.

We start the analysis with the multiple purposes of the CCA. One interviewee summarised:

“I think the discussion of the purpose was going on for a long time, and the framing of the whole shebang. And yeah, is the purpose sort of scientific? Exploring what deliberation can give, actually, and how it works in a Swedish context. And what is sort of more a climate assembly as an arena for change, so to speak? Can it unlock things in the Swedish political context? Or in a... more activist approach if you want... as far as I read the email conversations now, people are not perhaps totally agreeing on this...”

We identified four purposes in the interviews: a research activity within FAIRTRANS; to influence climate policy making; to nuance the public discussion; and to enhance democracy.

We interpreted that after having considered prospective distrusters' interpretations (audiences & concerns) of the CCA's purpose(s) and its elements, organisers implemented different designs (domination, legitimation, signification) in order to mitigate sceptical receptions, which in turn informed how other purposes were considered. We capture only a snapshot of the iterative design process, modelled in Fig. 1, but acknowledge the dynamic nature that characterised the planning process. Since four purposes of the CCA are identified, facework can be modelled in four alternations. Our subsections below present these processes in detail.

Fig. 1. denotes how we interpret design decisions, placing emphasis on facework as deliberate choice. It is challenging to capture the extent to which these choices are reflexively informed through anticipated distrust or that they are inherent trustworthy features of the CCA. While the model favours the former, we have found elements of both but do not quantify the degree to which one takes primacy.

5.2. Purpose 1: experimental research activity

According to our interviews, the CCA was initiated as a research activity within FAIRTRANS, alongside its co-production activities with civil society organisations. In this case, the CCA was seen largely as an extension of ongoing research:

“To start with, it is an interesting complement to other things we do in FAIRTRANS. We do policy studies or policy related studies. That's one part... We have interactions with partner organisations and co-production... And this [CCA] was a natural complement to use a more deliberative approach.”

The purpose was further legitimated by the same orientation towards justice as the programme's:

“So by fairness or by justice, we could mean many things, but one conception or definition of justice is participatory or procedural kind of justice, and now we are experimenting with that in the framework of our programme, and I think we could draw legitimacy from that.”

Thus, the CCA was understood by interviewees to be aligned with the norms of the research programme: conducting participatory climate governance research focused on fairness.

Interviewees saw themselves as legitimate convenors of such activities:

“But we don't need any permission from anyone, of course; scientists do this... We thought this was interesting and important, both those things. So we did it.”

Partly sanctioned by trust in researchers for “educating the public”, such could be readily translated into trustworthiness for the CCA. Interviewees provided multiple reasons for legitimacy. For example:

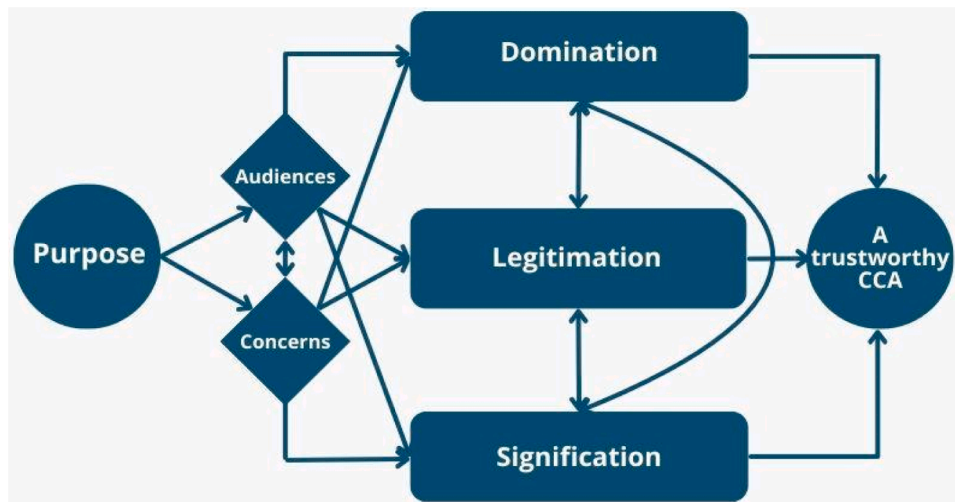


Fig. 1. An idealised model of facework during the designing processes of Sweden's first Citizens Assembly for the Climate. Source: the authors.

“Because there’s a high credibility within research, trusted by the public, ... and it’s also, of course, a part of the university mission, or like what a university is supposed to do, it’s also to involve, engage, and educate the public and this can be seen as such a process, too. ... I don’t see a lot of other actors in society that could create an equally trustworthy and credible citizens’ assembly than from the researchers.”

According to our interviews, the PG largely acknowledged both the high trust placed towards them and their responsibilities towards the public and thus felt that the convening of the CCA was a valuable and trustworthy task within the assignment of researchers.

Interviewees claimed that legitimacy was augmented by the CCA being publicly funded. However, as the application described more modest experiments, a national-level CA was seen by some as an unduly expansion: the public may consider neither funding nor an academic research programme as sufficient:

“So as researchers, we have some kind of legitimacy to do these kinds of experiments... But in the eyes of, you can say a general population or something, that might be sort of a weak sort of basis for, you know, this whole concept, for running a national assembly. “

Anticipating such potential distrust demonstrates conflicting perceptions of the CCA’s legitimacy in the PG.

Acknowledging that researchers are not universally trusted in Sweden, several interviewees suggested that the FAIRTRANS constellation may be distrusted particularly by anti-elite groups. For example:

“The purpose [of the CCA] is to complement our main strategy to work with the organised civil society, because they are seen as the elite. By people who have a lack of trust in institutions, they see the traditional Swedish civil society organisations as the elite. Trade unions, labour organisations, tenant’s organisations, the co-operatives and so on. ... And they have not big trust among the nationalist-populist people.”

The quotation encapsulates the concern that in the eyes of nationalist-populists, FAIRTRANS is a body of elites enacting climate governance and research. These distrusters, however, provided a function during planning:

“I always think of, sort of, the worst critics that we can imagine... And what would they sort of aim at? Where would the argument go?”

Here the anticipated distruster is brought into the design process for researcher-organisers to design away a potential target of attack. Arguably, the CCA has the potential to build the trustworthiness of

FAIRTRANS through the signification of the CCA as open to *the people* by enhancing citizen participation.

We found that when the CCA is seen as a research activity within FAIRTRANS, researchers consider themselves to be conducting publicly funded research (domination) in the ethos of FAIRTRANS norms (legitimation). While some societal groups may find FAIRTRANS problematic, the CCA may signify openness as a symbol of researchers’ trustworthiness. Insofar as the CCA is a research activity, a coherent situational entry point to science, the translations between interpersonal and institutional trust is symbiotic: the CCA is legitimised by the norms the researchers adhere to, and researchers are seen as trustworthy by the CCA as a democratic, participatory event.

5.3. Purpose 2: influence policymaking

Another purpose for the CCA pertains to its output in the form of policy recommendations for reducing Sweden’s emissions. “Influencing policymaking” brought further considerations for the trust judgments of CCA observers. Scientific authority for policy advocacy (domination enabled by science-to-policy interactions (Karlsson and Gilek, 2020)) was seen by some as a coherent set-up, particularly when the outputs were framed by the PG: producing policy recommendations is common practice in applied research fields.

However, perceived legitimacy to initiate a policy-oriented process was not ubiquitous. Hesitations were expressed by interviewees over researchers influencing policy-making. For example:

“I think the role of the researchers, should we get involved in something which is more like a policy process than the research process? ... Some researchers are more open to that kind of activist approach and others would be more reluctant.”

Reservations were based on concerns that this intent could signify political bias. As a result, it potentially conflicts with trustworthiness afforded by scientific norms, agency, and intention, placing the PG in a situation of incoherency.

It was reasoned that researchers’ engagement in a political context could be legitimated by partnering with a public authority. Interviewees described benefits and weaknesses of political mandate, including how such partnership could guarantee the policymaker audience as a recipient of policy recommendations, yet may signify partisan partiality. Experiences of other CAs across Europe were used by some interviewees to reason that the government could undermine the project or reduce the CCA members’ agency:

"I mean, there was some research that was strongly against the idea that we would collaborate with the government, knowing that the government is now led by conservative parties that are now, you know, they're ... rolling back climate policies and so on. And they felt there was a risk that the whole process would be kidnapped."

The ambivalence about political mandate reflects the importance of a lack of domination in planning the CCA in the democratic system. It indicated to us that researchers were sensitive to their precarious positions.

Regarding protecting members' agency, it was claimed by several interviewees that researchers should "let go of control". To do otherwise would undermine the process:

"I hope that we all agree that we need to let go of control. That is the strategy. We need to let go of the control. Otherwise, we don't follow the rules of our deliberative discussion and policy-making should be performed according to, sort of, the Habermasian ideal."

And:

"It's about a risk that we are trying to shape the outcome... So, the result of the [CCA] does not come from the participants. It's not their views. It's not their opinions that comes out of this process. It's ours as researchers. That is the risk. Our opinions and our knowledge and sort of what we want, could be blamed for doing that."

Domination arguably occurs within a CCA through provisioning an arena, whose outputs are produced by the CCA members. Delegating control was essential for the legitimization of deliberation as citizens engaging with (and researchers' disengaging from) normativity.

To be seen as protecting members from *untrustworthy researchers*, the PG prepared to step away from deliberations, to exercise impartiality and allow for members' suggestions of expert-witnesses. It was explained that otherwise:

"[t]here could be, you know, right-wing media attacking us, saying, well, "these left-wing-oriented researchers are organising this.""

By enlisting Deliberation Facilitators there was an opportunity to further refute such accusations of bias, that if anyone steered directions it was facilitators not researchers. In these ways, interviewees reasoned that the Deliberation Facilitators could increase the trustworthiness of the CCA both through their technical capacity of facilitation and by distancing researchers from the process.

The framing "left-wing-oriented researchers" suggests the PG anticipated distrust specifically from the right-wing. By inviting decision inputs from a Consultation Group (CG) of trusted public figures, they could alleviate these concerns:

"We are, after all, climate scientists. So, we have some bias towards that it's important with climate politics... But we have this consultation group to ensure that we have minimised bias by having different interests being invited..."

At time of conducting interviews, the CG had met and advised on messaging strategies. For example, as 'fairness' was a concept connoting left-wing interests, "competitiveness" gestured to right-wing observers. One interviewee described the CG as "devil's advocate", indicating the differences between the two groups.

Interviewees valued the CG for its diversity, which included representatives from both political-wings, sport communities, and from the Swedish Indigenous people. This is how the CG was described to us:

"If [a Swedish newspaper] wrote about this now. If they would contact the persons in the consultation group and ask them, "what's the value with [the CCA]?" Or "why are you involved?" I guess they would receive different answers. And I would interpret that as something positive. That would show that we have managed to compile a consultation group, a reference group, that is constituted by persons with different ideas."

While our primary interpretation of the CG's role in the CCA's architecture is the signification of diversity, we find domination through delegating decision inputs, and legitimation in value representation (in the democratic sense) of Sweden, necessary for a policy arena. The CG may thus reduce many forms of distrust in the CCA.

The CG, however, would act primarily as inter-elite representatives. One interviewee reflected:

"I don't think the majority of Swedes would recognize any one of [the members of the CG]."

An ambassadorship role through media recognition was articulated in an interview:

"So journalists can easily recognize the names, know that these represent both the right-wing of politics and the left-wing."

One interviewee motivated specifically the "political elite" to form the CG to allow the media to interact with them, reducing "the light on us", assuring political validity. Ambassadorship could further alleviate the concern of obscurity of the CCA. Should the CG leverage their political identities for securing inter-elite trust, however, then populist distrusters of elites may poorly interpret the CCA and undermine the objectives of the previous purpose.

When the CCA had policy ambitions, it was seen as less legitimate than a research process. Some interviewees remained confident in both contexts, while others expressed concerns about bias in the latter. By not seeking partnership with the government to secure political mandate and a recipient, structural incoherency persisted. Different components of the CCA were motivated to alleviate these issues. Researchers would distance themselves from the citizens and from the media, through enlisting alternate representatives into the process.

5.4. Purpose 3: nuance public discussions

According to one interviewee:

"deliberative mini-publics never create policy which is then implemented by governments or political elites. But I think it's also a narrow way to understand their impact. And the more indirect spill-over effects of mini-publics is far harder to research."

These "indirect spill-over effects" primarily constituted a third purpose of the CCA: nuancing public discussions about climate change. Here, the key observer of the CCA is the public at large.

To fulfil such a purpose, one interviewee explained, it would be important to disseminate the CCA to the public:

"the wonderful thing would be as if people were watching this process, you know, or following it, and saying, oh, wow, there's these diverse people, you know... how are they discussing these issues? Are they able to find common ground? ... to kind of spill over into other discussions in society."

We identified that member representativeness, quality of deliberation, and ownership of the CCA's content had to be secured and broadcast to generate such interest. It was anticipated by interviewees that the quality of these components is what would make the CCA interesting for the public.

A population sample was stratified by hiring an external sortition company who could convene members according to: education level, rural and urban location, political sympathy, background, and climate concern. Representativeness of the members was considered in anticipation of critique from the far-right. According to one interviewee:

"And [Sweden] Democrats will have faith in the process. We believe. They are reassured that, "okay, 10 of these people were actually people supporting our party". And 9 or 10 supporting [The Moderates]. So it is not a bunch of self-selected green leftists..."

Interviewees also reasoned, however, that this representativeness

would provide agency to the organisers themselves:

“And the national populist people, they say, usually that they are, ‘we represent the people’. And then we said, ‘well, actually, I don’t think you do that. You exploit people’s fears’ and so on. But if we do a real citizen assembly with a good sortition, then we can say that we represent the people.”

We considered the statement as a positioning of the project to counter representation claims of the nationalist-populist movement, which suggests that the CCA is meant not only to appeal to these groups, but also critique them.

The risk of obscurity was a significant concern - that the CCA will not be noticed at all. Interviewees shared such worries:

“I think the worst risk is that it’s not taken up at all by any actor. It’s totally ignored. So, we agree on that in the [PG] that this is the biggest risk. That no one, everyone is ignoring us.”

To reduce such risk, interviewees explained the importance of media engagement. As well as the CG ambassadorship, interviewees hoped that members would represent the CCA. Members would be seen owning their experiences and, by delegating the selection of spokespersons, the PG would have no control over the diversity of the spokespersons nor their stories. This could signify commitment towards provisioning agency to members (by proxy, Swedish citizens) at the expense of the PG’s own aspirations.

Using media to nuance public discussions revealed contradicting risks. Relying on members to liaise with the media increased the risk of obscurity should they not wish to do so. The PG was preparing for fall-back strategies should the CCA not be a “self-playing piano”. The opposite concern was inaccurate reporting or media sensationalising the CCA, which interviewees acknowledged they had no control over. Designing a website to describe the CCA’s motivation, design, and implementation was partially motivated by interviewees to mitigate misrepresentations.

A challenge with nuancing public debate lies in its measurement. A surrogate was to measure attitudes of members at culmination. However, the image of a citizen-led deliberation would be put at risk if the researchers drew...

“...too much on measuring opinions before and after. So, I think we should rather emphasise that this is what comes out of the process. We know that 20 % voted for the [Sweden Democrats] of the participants, still, this is what comes out of the process and not talk too much about what they thought in the beginning.”

And:

“We must not make too much of [changing opinions] because it might become normative saying that, oh, look here, we managed to change the opinions of these people and then we might be accused [of] manipulation.”

Multiple interviewees were concerned about placing emphasis on opinion-measuring, which could turn the enterprise into an “expensive course” or be seen as manipulative.

The risk of being seen as an opinion-changing endeavour was compounded by the temptation to be just that, which was characterised to us by one interviewee as “cheating”. Not only would FAIRTRANS have to not “cheat” but audiences should see them not cheating. Therefore, by relinquishing control to members, we found a new trust dynamic of researchers having to:

“somehow trust the process. We cannot control this process. So [the members] will take this up according to what they are interested in”.

Nevertheless, interviewees hoped for the emergence of constructive outputs, with the aim to not only improve the public debate about climate change but also to demonstrate to others in the public eye that *their* debates are often neither nuanced nor constructive.

5.5. Purpose 4: enhance democracy

A fourth intention found in interviews was “enhancing democracy”. Organisers were tasked with making the process meaningful without pre-determined results, to nurture perspectives of Swedish citizens in deliberations and to demonstrate to non-participants the inherent value of diversifying decision-making processes and enlarging participation.

One way the CCA would enhance democracy was through broadening the “diversity of values” in relation to climate change. One interviewee explained:

“So it’s more like Habermas ideal democracy when everyone has time to think and ask questions and listen to different experts. ... And one of the biggest things is that they’re not under the influence of lobbyists. So it’s a critique against both civil society, who are very much special interests, and a critique against representative democracy who are under power of lobbyists.”

An ideal of democratic deliberation seemed to imply protection of citizens from unscientific evidence, providing them with time and scientific expertise. Interviewees valued scientific reasoning that was, by contrast, seen as undervalued in relation to other interests in prevailing systems of representative democracy.

Democratic enhancement emerges from direct participation in novel formats to offer insights into issues affecting the public. Novelty relates to structure rather than intent: many actors were referred to by interviewees as already attempting to broaden participation in diverse ways. The structural novelty lacks legitimacy in Sweden, according to observers’ doubts expressed to interviewees and shared with us: the CCA was seen as unnecessary or disruptive to well-trusted institutions of representative democracy. Political scientists, members of the consultation group, and politicians displayed scepticism. One interviewee explained:

“two members of the parliament said, ‘well, we are the mini-public. Why do you need to set up another?’”

Another interviewee characterised the general scepticism as:

“I think sometimes people who are familiar with and committed to representative democracy and the institutions that have been built up over so many years in Sweden and the, you know, quite high levels of political engagement in Sweden can get the wrong idea.”

Interviewees explained that this scepticism resulted from a misunderstanding that CAs would replace rather than complement existing systems. Interviewees reported that during the meeting with the CG “half an hour” had been dedicated to refuting this misperception. Empirical research was referred to by interviewees for asserting potential of CAs in the Swedish context, which, arguably, constitutes a form of aspirational domination: interviewees saw that citizens could enhance Swedish representative democracy by being provided new forms of contained empowerment. A further legitimisation of this purpose lies in non-deliberative experimentations, which one interviewee suggested was “opening-up” decision-making processes beyond cost-benefit analysis.

The anticipated outcomes of the CCA diverged, suggesting that the PG saw the purpose as inherently meaningful. One interviewee described it as speculation on “futures of democracy”. Unknown outcomes were articulated as questions or shrugged off as “let’s see”. Interviewees’ emphasised the goodness of the process itself in a somewhat non-normative normativity. Here, the duty of the PG was to ensure that the time and commitment of the members were made “meaningful”. Were nothing of use produced but an idealised process of deliberative democracy, was, in itself, valuable.

Design components of the CCA were asserted by interviewees as key features of an enhanced democracy trialled within a democratic experiment. These were valued in relation to both expressed and anticipated critiques towards the CCA as a model of such enhancement. Along with

components elaborated upon in earlier purposes (such as member representativeness), trustworthiness was also seen in the sources of information and time provided for meaningful reasoning by members. Interviewees had different understandings of specific benefits of enhanced democracy, emphasising the perceived intrinsic value of deliberation that allowed for its outputs to be “failures” or, indeed, successes. We considered this a signification of the non-normative normativity of the process, whose trustworthiness may emerge over time as it becomes more familiar.

6. Discussion

We found that researchers anticipate multiple forms of distrust towards themselves and the contexts in which they are working. Table 1 summarises how the purposes of the CCA relate to anticipated distrusters, indicating potentially (un)trustworthy features of the CCA and opportunities for abatement of potential distrust. With distinct purposes, the analysis indicates the consideration of trade-offs between discussed purposes, i.e. their differing meanings and consequences. As the material shows, there were pragmatic choices regarding purposes and trade-offs, including acknowledgements of differing paths for the CCA.

In response to our research questions, we found that researchers anticipate different forms of distrust in relation to the different purposes of the CCA and abate such distrust in their planning through strategies of legitimation, domination, and signification (Table 1). Through the process of *legitimation*, the researchers assumed various norms. To present the CCA as an experimental research activity to the public, funders, and the research community, they appealed to ideals of justice and participation. When aiming to influence policy-making, they emphasised to the media and politicians their normative and political neutrality. The same neutrality was shown to the media (and through them the public) for the CCA to be able to nuance public discussions. Finally, to enhance democracy, the CCA needed to be communicated to elites as a complementary form of democratic innovation. Depending on the audience and the purpose, all these legitimation processes were supported through *signification*, portraying the CCA as a form of public participation, by recruiting a consultation group, and encouraging members to become the media “face” of the assembly. Regarding *domination*, researchers concentrated or distributed power in diverse

ways. On the one hand, they used their authority as researchers to engage with the public, while staying independent from government. On the other, they “let go of control” through outsourcing facilitation and public representation.

However, by sustaining multiple purposes the PG arguably embedded several incoherencies into the project. As Table 1 indicates, a research project that appeals to populists by enlarging citizen participation may not necessarily enhance trustworthiness when concurrently seeking contributions of elites for policymaking purposes; rather it could signify the very processes that may motivate populist distrust of climate research as elitist (Van Rensburg, 2015; Huber et al., 2021). That said, the CG could play a critical role for enhancing inter-elite trust. Another inconsistency is emphasising value-neutral legitimation and non-normative signification while also expressing an interest in improving public debate. The latter arguably changes the relationships between researchers and citizens to one less about listening to the people and more of a *less trustworthy* “bureaucratic exercise” for science dissemination (Gundersen et al., 2022: pg. 21). A third example is the political mandate of the CCA, for which interviewees acknowledged benefits and risks to trustworthiness through partnering with government. By maintaining the separation, researchers placed themselves within the context of a more political enterprise, securing situational incoherence while preserving structural coherence of non-biased intent.

As we see it, the risk of multiple purposes is that trustworthiness may be undermined. These risks are compounded depending on the anticipated audience and their reasons for distrust. Afterall, “there is not one monolithic public with one coherent level of trust or perceptions of trustworthiness” (Cologna et al., 2024, p. 7). This suggests that construction of “trusted information proxy” (Warren and Gastil, 2015) may have adverse effects where alternate intentions are signified. Since the translation of interpersonal to institutional trust relies upon coherence in structure and context (Kroeger, 2017), the risk is that the CCA may not benefit from its trustworthy organisers nor its trustworthy components. In essence, the observer may not be able to translate the interpersonal trust in surrounding actors to the CCA, nor vice versa.

There are ways to reduce this risk, however. To readers interested in deliberative mini-publics as an antidote to distrust (Gundersen et al., 2022) and in connection with enhancing perceptions of researchers’ trustworthiness (Besley et al., 2021), we show how the CCA could

Table 1
CCA purposes and strategies to create trustworthiness.

Purpose	Anticipated audiences	Anticipated reception	Legitimation	Signification	Domination
Experimental research activity	The public Funders Research community	Populist distrust of CCA and FAIRTRANS as an elite endeavour Doubt of CCA beyond academic context	Ideals of justice and participation in research programme	CCA enhancing public participation	The authority of researchers to engage with and educate the public
Influencing policy making	Media Policymakers Public	Being seen as biased Being seen as breaching the remit of research activity Being seen as steering the deliberation design and process	Assuming value and political neutrality	Enlisting the CG for other elites, but risking to alienate anti-elite observers	Scientific authority; staying independent from the government; “letting go of control” through hiring facilitators and enlisting the CG
Nuancing public discussions	Media The public	Critique from the right for being left Lack of representational diversity in the “media face” of the CCA Risk of obscurity Being seen as trying to change opinion rather than nuance debate	Assuming value and political neutrality	Citizens as the media “face” of the CCA	Hiring a firm to recruit a representative sample of citizens
Enhancing Democracy	Politicians Political Scientists Elites (surrogated by Consultation Group)	Undermining representative democracy Irrelevance	A form of many novel modes to enhance democratic decision making	Non-normative orientation in CA processes	The role of scientific expertise in idealised democracies; modelling citizen contained empowerment.

indeed be considered trustworthy. By specifically communicating process orientations of “genuine engagement” (Cologna et al., 2024: pg 8), researchers organising a CA may be seen as committed to societal good, open to citizens’ concerns, have strong integrity and non-bias in political settings, have great competence to deliver such activities and, where lacking technical competence, can recruit others with better capacity. The explorative orientation of the research purpose coupled with the democratic enhancement purpose may thus alleviate the precariousness of researchers sitting in more political contexts where biases may be perceived by their audiences.

Our findings indicate that when designing a democratic innovation which aims to be *everything for everybody all at once*, the interaction between various purposes and distrust abatements creates a complex web of trade-offs and incoherencies that may hinder audiences from seeing the project as trustworthy. We suggest the choice for organisers is either to reduce the number of purposes, to carefully manage communication to justify perceived incoherencies, or to emphasise in communication emergent properties of the CA.

7. Conclusion

We have explored how researchers attempted to reduce anticipated distrust during the construction of Sweden’s first national CCA on the basis of what they perceived to be its purposes and potential audiences. We show how reflexive anticipatory facework of signification, domination, and legitimation can act as the deliberate abatement of anticipated distrust and other audience-specific concerns in relation to diverse purposes of the CCA. However, we have also found that such choices may have untrustworthy elements for some audiences, preventing them from seeing a trustworthy CCA. This suggests that concerns about anticipated distrust from audiences is not only an influential factor when designing the CCA, but that it may potentially shape such activities in profound ways.

Given the increasing interest in CAs for climate governance and research (Lorenzoni et al., 2025), considerations of trust-building is pivotal. Understanding trust to be a normative expectation of reaching a commitment (de Fine Licht and Brülde, 2021), it is important to consider what norms and commitments are signified to (dis)trusters when designing such activities. To prevent incoherence that could undermine these project(s), we urge organisers to reconsider simultaneously appealing to heterogenous audiences for multiple purposes, and to consider whether these elements are reconcilable within designs. Without such consideration, we argue that facework for different audiences risks appearing manipulative, leading to adverse effects. In practice, this means taking account of facework as a deliberate strategy, rather than inherent to designing a CA, as we allude in Fig. 1. In this way, researchers can reflect upon their purposes in relation to their

(distrusting) audiences (Cologna et al., 2024), whether the design choices may fulfil or undermine their objectives and whether maintaining multiple purposes is, indeed, viable.

Overall, we suggest that in the context of a CA organised by researchers, trustworthiness is particularly precarious when researchers may be seen as output-oriented. Precariousness may be alleviated by emergent orientations to participation and research, signifying the researchers’ commitment to procedural and participatory justice (Besley et al., 2021). We consider that communicating this orientation may better secure coherency for researchers in these contexts, thereby enhancing translation of trust in researchers to their actions (Kroeger, 2017). We conclude with a word of encouragement for researchers to see incoherencies and ambiguities of their positions as convenors of democratic innovations not negatively, but as an increasingly constitutive condition of knowledge-action interfaces, central for deeply democratic climate governance.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Laila Mendy: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Tatiana Sokolova:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Fanny Möckel:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Methodology.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Interview Guide

- How did you get involved in the CCA?
- What, in your opinion, is the purpose of the CCA?
 - What is the purpose of it in the context of FAIRTRANS as a research programme?
 - What features of the CCA are especially conducive to achieving this purpose?
- I am quite interested in the question of legitimacy. What gives FAIRTRANS researchers the power/ legitimacy to call together and facilitate this CCA?
 - How do you see the role of FT researchers as organisers of the CCA in relation to Swedish climate governance?
- How do you/ have you experienced tensions in a researchers-led citizens assembly and how have you navigated them?
 - In particular, considering the role as an academic and a convenor of mini-publics?
- How do different stakeholders and public groups relate to climate change researchers in public discourse?
 - Are there concerns you have about the perceptions of the CCA?
 - Or of backlash or critique to the CCA? If so, why?
- The CCA will be supported by a Consultations group, can you elaborate on the purpose of this group?
 - When you select different actors for this group, what desirable qualities do you keep in mind?

- There are a number of ways of thinking about the future – carbon budgets, modelling, visions, what is the role of different ideas of the future in the CCA?
 - o Will they be drawn on, if yes, how?
- What experiences, practices, research etc. has the planning group relied upon for organisation and institutionalisation of the CCA?
- What different kinds of knowledge will be involved in the CCA (scientific models, facts, practical knowledge of the citizens, their experiences...)?

Appendix B. Analytical Process and Codebook

1. Interviews were transcribed;
2. each co-author was assigned three transcriptions to descriptively code in first-cycle coding;
3. first draft of codebook was collectively compiled;
4. remaining transcripts were split (most coded by two authors) and coded according to codebook;
5. codebook collectively finalized (copied in full below) and organized into categories collating code-types;
6. codes were tabulated by category according to codebook;

Code	Transcript	Context of code	Quote	Facework connection
Example	Transcript source	Surrounding codes or points made	The coded quotation	Processes of facework or other explanatory connection.

7. upon tabulation, codes were interpreted through facework in second cycle coding;
8. four purposes were identified, and all associated concerns, audiences and facework processes were extracted.

Codebook: (Example quotations removed)

Category	Code	Definition	Examples
Input Legitimacy (Sources)	Funding	Where the funding has been seen to give legitimacy to the CCA, where it pertains to publicly funded research, or where the CCA was mentioned in the application for funding	
	Selection process	Where the variables for selection of citizens of the CCA are seen as a source	
	Representation	Representing the identities and values and interests of public (I.E: being representative of the Swedish public) & different.sides of political.spectrum (in a variety of contexts - eg consultation group, selection process)	
	Consultation group	The legitimacy of the consultation group and its members, including their qualities, and its activities (including things about a chair)	
	Researchers	The legitimacy of the researchers, science, and their activities	
	Civil Society	Where Civil Society is mentioned in relation to being a source of legitimacy	
	Mandate (the lack of connection to state authority)	Where mandate is mentioned, in particular in relation to (lack of) government mandate	
Process Legitimacy	Pluralism within planning group	Plurality of planning group described as legitimacy providing	
	Transparent Communication	Transparent communication being described as contributing factor to a legitimate process	
	Process Legitimacy	Where the interviewee mentions the legitimacy of the internal CCA process	
Purpose and goals/ anticipated outcomes (positive)	Governance legitimacy	Where the interviewee describes the CCA as il/legitimate within the context of wider political structures	
	Perceived legitimacy	Whether the CCA will be perceived as legitimate by external actors	
	Output legitimacy	Where the results of the CCA are discussed as legitimate (political) products	
	(Research?) Experiment	Where the CCA is described as/ expected to be a research experiment	
	Impact Public Debate	Where the objective of the CCA is described as impacting public debate	
	Impact climate policy/ governance	Where the objective of the CCA is described as impacting policy making or governance	
	Overcome polarisation	Where the objective of the CCA is described as overcoming polarisation	
Knowledge	Democratic governance	Where the objective of the CCA is described as impacting democracy, or as a democratic experiment. Closed or open-ended framing	
	Fairtrans objectives	To complement, support, achieve Fairtrans tasks and objectives	
	Learning	That the members will learn about climate change (incl systems etc)	
	Citizens knowledge	The knowledge that citizens are assumed to have	
	Practice-Based knowledge	The different sources of practical knowledge that inform the CCA planning or come in to the CCA itself, including non-academic expertise, including planning group knowledge (excluding research)	
	Ignorance	Where citizens are seen to be ignorant	
	Academic knowledge	Academic expertise	
Risks	Systems thinking	The inclusion of systems thinking within the CCA	
	Values	Not directly related to knowledge, but values that citizens bring ot the process	
	Obscurity	The risk that CCA will go unnoticed	
	No take-up	The risk that CCA's results will not be taken up by the public, media, government etc.	
	Accusation of (political) bias	The risk of CCA being seen as politically biased/charged	
	Backlash/attacks	Any backlash/attacks from the media, politicians, public etc.	
	Failure of representation/ legitimacy	Risk of failure to represent a variety of voices or be seen as legitimate	
Risks	Lack of critical lens	Too positive lens on the CA process - critical perspective dismisses potential shortcomings	
	Failure of deliberative ideals	Where the CCA does not have a deliberative process. On the facilitations, and design of the process	
	Failure of methods	The choices of methods	

(continued on next page)

(continued)

Category	Code	Definition	Examples	
Tensions	Risk of undesirable proposals	That the citizens will go into a non desirable direction over the course of the CCA, or produce a set of undesirable proposals		
	Risk of delay	Described risk that the CCA process might be delayed		
	Tensions about scale and capacity	Tensions around the 'size' of the CCA, the breadth/ depth of its ambition		
	Tensions about Remit	Tensions around whether CCA should focus on climate policy in general or transport/mobility		
	Tensions about mandate	Tensions around the pros and cons on whether CCA should be researcher-owned or mandated by the government/agency		
CCA's architecture and qualities	Tensions about control	Where there are differences of opinion about who should be having control over ideas or not		
	Tensions about experts	Including the roles of the planning group as experts, or of expertise and academic knowledge		
	Deference	Where the interviewee defers to another member of the planning group and their authority/ knowledge		
	Output communication	Where it is described what is coming out of the process in contrast to what the citizens have experienced in the process		
	Capacity	The ability of FT to pull off the CCA: what it depends on etc.		
	Group dynamics	Internal conflicts, withdrawals and additions (not explicitly pertaining to the CCA itself); Reasons for withdrawing from planning group activities		
	Change of direction	Where changes of direction are mentioned in the process of planning for the CCA		
	Decision-making/governance structure of planning group	Approaches to decision-making and discussions in the planning group (e.g. deliberative); also in relation to timing		
	Roles of planning group members	How the interviewees make sense of their roles as planning group members		
	Ownership	Who owns the CCA process (researchers, citizens) and outputs?		
Norms and beliefs	Control over structure/processes	Where different groups, individuals, organizations are discussed in relation to controlling (aspects of) the process of designing the CCA, or the CCA itself.		
	Remit	Excluding the planning group. (Not about researcher-led VS mandate issues - see other code)		
	Scale	Where the content of the CCA is discussed, such as the breadth or narrowness etc.		
	Reasons for supporting	Scale is discussed (without tensions) Reasons for the members of the planning group to support (and participate) in organising the CCA		
	Citizens motivation	Anticipated citizens motivation to participate in CA		
	The role of citizen	Who the citizen is believed/constructed to be in the CA and what they are expected to do		
	'Boundary critique'	How the problems related to climate change and sustainability are defined		
	Deliberative ideals/deliberative method	Belief in deliberation as a solution to democratic deficit/climate policy deficit etc. Generally expressed normative ideas about deliberation and deliberative methods (in this case: CA)		
	Normative ideas about climate governance	Opinions about necessary climate ambitions and policies		
	Normative ideas about democracy	Opinions about what democracy means and how to improve it		
Emotions	Ideas about justice	Mentions of fairness/justice principles		
	Novelty	Where the CCA is described as new, novel in Sweden		
	Normative statements about roles of researchers	general, normative statements about what researchers should and can do		
	Politics	Where Swedish climate policies and politics are mentioned (in relation to the CCA)		
	"Positive Emotion X"	About the CCA, its potential impact on public, and its scientific contribution, external to CCA, internal to planning processes etc.		
	Negative Emotion _ Invivo	About the CCA, its potential impact on public, and its scientific contribution, external to CCA, internal to planning processes etc.		
	Neutral Emotion _ Invivo	About the CCA, its potential impact on public, and its scientific contribution, external to CCA, internal to planning processes etc.		
	Audiences	Media interest	Where the media is discussed as an audience/ stakeholder of the CCA	
		Decision makers interest	Where decision makers are interested in the outputs of the CCA, as receivers eg	
		The public perception	Where the non-participating citizen/ public's perception of or reception to the CCA is discussed	
Fairtrans/ Civil Soc Elites		Where the partners of Fairtrans are interested audiences of the CCA Where elites/class/societal hierarchies are discussed		

Data Availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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