



# Is Macron's Grand Débat a Democratic Dawn for France?

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In January 2019, President Emmanuel Macron launched a Grand Débat, or Great Debate, across France. The two-month process quickly assumed herculean proportions, generating nearly 2 million online contributions, 10,000 local meetings, 16,000 complaint books, and a series of citizen assemblies.<sup>1</sup> Representing one of Europe's most significant exercises in democratic consultation, it seems to have got Macron's presidency back on track. However, despite [Macron's April 25 announcement](#) of the conclusions and next steps, it is still not clear whether the Grand Débat will lead to permanent democratic reforms. Most reforms will require parliamentary approval, patience, trust, and acceptance of the inevitable trade-offs.

## UNFULFILLED CAMPAIGN PROMISES ON DEMOCRACY

Ironically, as a presidential candidate in 2017, Macron undertook a mass door-to-door survey—the [Grande Marche](#)—that uncovered the very problems that triggered the yellow vests' protests in late 2018. Many

protesters had, in fact, voted for Macron because he seemed to offer new approaches to France's problems. He promised to help those voters struggling to make ends meet and facing increased transportation, health, and energy costs. He also promised to take a more bottom-up approach to governance.

Once in office, however, Macron's progressive reform measures—such as incrementally removing an unfair property tax—were quickly offset by other policy changes perceived to benefit the rich, such as a flat tax rate on capital earnings and a narrowing of the wealth tax. And the president's brash, [condescending comments](#) to those struggling to find work caused widespread anger. Macron's perceived position on the political spectrum (from 0 to 10, left to right) [moved to the right](#) from 5.2 to 6.2 between March 2017 and February 2019.

In addition, despite his liberal credentials and grassroots campaign, he did not do away with centralistic and technocratic practices. An early piece of legislation that toughened ethical rules for candidates and elected



officials was as far as Macron's renewal went in improving governance standards. Very early on, Macron's aim to rapidly implement reforms and improve France's European and international standing led to a top-down decisionmaking style and took precedence over democratic innovation and decentralization.

For example, the government reduced the speed limit on roads from 90 to 80 kilometers per hour without any public consultation, angering many citizens, especially in rural communities, and [sowing the seeds](#) for the yellow vest protests. The protests were largely triggered by the government's announcement of a fuel tax increase. And they escalated until, under pressure, Macron put the tax increase and other controversial reforms on hold and offered [10 billion euros in concessions](#). But perhaps the more dramatic move was his launching of the Grand Débat around four topics: energy transition, taxation and public spending, democracy and citizenship, and the state and public services.

## THE GRAND GESTURE

A largely improvised initiative, the Grand Débat got off to a bumpy start. It was supposed to be supervised by the Commission of National Public Debate (CNDP), an independent body that controls how citizens are engaged in the policymaking process, typically on large infrastructure projects. However, the CNDP refused because of disagreements with the government over the commission director's salary and the proposed debate topics. The government therefore took the reins, casting suspicion on the process's independence.

Nevertheless, people soon had numerous channels to make their voices heard:

- Town hall and local meetings initiated by mayors, charities, trade unions, or individual citizens
- Complaint books (or *cabiers de doléance*, literally translated as “register of grievances”) available in town halls
- Mobile desks (or *stands de proximité*) in train stations and post offices, where people can talk and submit contributions to public agents
- Individual online suggestions submitted on the [Débat's website](#)
- Randomly selected citizen assemblies in each of the thirteen French regions and five overseas territories, and another bringing together young people
- Four national stakeholder conferences in Paris

A [webpage](#) available on the Débat's website provided guides for those wishing to organize debates. All discussions had to respect six fundamental values: transparency, pluralism, inclusion, equality, neutrality, and respect. The [Grand Débat's charter](#) listed organizers' and participants' rights and responsibilities. Five independent guarantors—chosen by the government and parliament for their expertise as political scientists and third sector or societal leaders—oversaw the debates. The French National Library worked to digitize 400,000 pages of lodged complaints. Public opinion institutes will help sort the huge volume of data.

## FLAWED IMPLEMENTATION

Most political scientists and journalists say the Grand Débat was a success in terms of public involvement and being responsive to an apparent widespread popular aspiration to participate in decisionmaking. Many politicians have suggested that it be done annually.

However, the process suffered from several major shortcomings. First, it did not capture a wide array

of viewpoints. In mid-March, SciencesPo's political research center, CEVIPOF, published the [outcomes of a survey](#) on the debate's sociological and geographical reach. The survey showed that 65 percent of participants were highly educated and 75 percent were home owners. More than two-thirds were above fifty years old, with only 5 percent age twenty-five and under. Finally, most town hall meetings took place in large, urban centers.

Second, the debate's methodology was not rigorous. The sheer quantity of activity and meetings was impressive, but the quality less so. In most cases, the meetings had an open mic forum, sometimes preceded by small table discussions. Conclusions were rarely reached and documented, with participants endorsing them via signature or proposing amendments.

To support small town mayors, the government hired professional moderators, but there were not nearly enough of them, making it impossible to guarantee that every discussion took place in accordance with the six fundamental values. The independent guarantors are positive about the way the process played out overall, but they only participated in fifty meetings out of thousands.

The government was aware of these limitations and saw the citizen assemblies as a necessary complement. The hope was that nineteen groups of randomly selected citizens—reflecting social diversity and discussing exactly the same issues in parallel—would help identify a coherent set of common priorities and address the generational gap. The assemblies were a step up from the spontaneous meetings and individual contributions and focused on generating concrete, single policy proposals. However, the rushed organization of the assemblies, their limited duration, and the large scope of matters covered leaves one skeptical about their long-term impact. According to [media reports](#), turnout varied across regions and young people were, once again, underrepresented.

[Specialists of deliberative democracy](#) warn that, for such forums to be successful, precise questions must be asked, adequate time must be afforded to make an informed and detailed opinion, and assurances must be given on the way conclusions feed into an institutional process. The Grand Débat failed to meet any of these three conditions. Rather than a carefully planned and systematically structured exercise in deliberative democracy, it was a smart but largely improvised response to a specific and unstable political situation.

## A BOOST FOR MACRON OR DEMOCRACY?

One of the most direct effects of the Grand Débat has been Macron's rebound in opinion polls. Although his approval rating is not back to where it was a year ago (around 40 percent), it has risen from around 20 percent in December 2018 to around 25–30 percent. In a highly fragmented political landscape, this seems like a solid electoral basis. Macron's En Marche party currently tops EU elections polls, along with Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National (RN) party.

Still, as Macron [admitted](#) in November 2018, he has failed to address the disconnect between citizens and the political elite. People give him credit for organizing the Grand Débat, but most are skeptical about its outcomes. According to the [French Institute of Public Opinion](#) (IFOP), only 38 percent of French voters think the government will take their comments and demands into account. There is an enormous confidence gap between En Marche members on the one end of the spectrum and RN and Unbowed France party members on the other.

Many people believe Macron had a hidden political agenda behind the Grand Débat. By throwing himself into spectacular hours-long, live-streamed [sessions with French mayors](#), the president impressed and reassured



many that France has an able captain at its helm, but the rather tutorial-style meetings also worked against him, reinforcing the widespread dislike of his top-down leadership approach. The government's stewardship of the whole process seemed to run counter to the idea of handing power back to the people. Macron's political opponents accused him of using the Grand Débat as a campaign platform for the May 2019 EU elections.

This is why the outcomes of the process matter a lot. Enacting socioeconomic and environmental reforms will likely be difficult—due to vested interests and fiscal constraints—but democratic reforms should, in theory, not cost as much and benefit everyone. Nevertheless, the [announcement](#) Macron made on April 25 shows that he will return to the spirit of his 2017 campaign and pursue a democratic shake-up in the second half of his mandate. The president offered a robust defense of representative democracy and ruled out the most radical ideas put forward by the yellow vests.

A [stalled constitutional reform](#) provides the government with an opportunity. In 2018, Macron proposed to reduce the number of parliament members, elect 15 percent of members by proportional voting, and ban members from instituting more than three consecutive parliamentary or local executive mandates. Although not particularly far-reaching, the proposals sparked controversy months before the yellow vest crisis began. The political opposition accused the government of attempting to weaken the parliament. Senators feared that proportional voting would deprive the parliament of its links with rural areas.

In his April 25 press conference, Macron said the government would present a slightly bolder version of the reform. The share of proportional voting could go up to 20 percent. However, Macron bluntly rejected the idea of introducing a citizen-led referendum initiative (known as RIC, or *referendum d'initiative citoyenne*), a core ask of the yellow vests in late 2018. According to this proposal, a nationwide referendum would be triggered automatically when a petition hits a signature

threshold. It could be used to propose a new law or a constitutional change, to remove an existing law, or to let an elected or executive member go. But most experts and commentators believe this idea would seriously threaten political stability.

Earlier this year, Macron's party, En Marche, and a center-left think tank, Terra Nova, proposed different types of RICs. Both argued that citizen-led initiatives should include a deliberative phase. Terra Nova's deliberative RIC would bring together a randomly selected citizen assembly and a group of parliament members to discuss a petition for three months before deciding whether it should go to a referendum. Similarly, the citizens' initiative put forward by En Marche would send a petition with 1 million signatures to a citizen jury before deciding whether it should go to parliament.

If adopted, either of these new channels of citizen participation would mark a significant step forward for French and European democracy. So far, deliberative processes have only been embraced in midsize, prosperous, highly educated democracies, such as Australia, Canada, and Ireland. If France was to institutionalize the participation of randomly selected citizens in policymaking, it would send the signal that democratic norms are shifting.

But Macron does not seem ready to make that step. The president is merely proposing to ease the conditions for a shared-initiative referendum. The RIP (or *referendum d'initiative partagée*) [already exists in French law](#) but has never been triggered.<sup>2</sup> It makes it possible to put a legislative proposal to a referendum if endorsed by one-fifth of parliamentarians and signed by 10 percent of the electorate (approximately 4.7 million voters). The latter threshold could be lowered to 1 million to resemble more common referendums of today, like those in Switzerland.

Other measures announced on April 25 include reinforcing local petition rights, whereby a minimum number of signatures would trigger a debate in a local

elected assembly. In addition, about 150 randomly selected citizens will be able to participate in the Economic, Social and Environmental Council, a consultative chamber bringing together social partners and nongovernmental representatives. Finally, a one-off convention of 250 randomly selected citizens will be set up to reflect on climate transition measures by the end of June.

To understand Macron's caution, it is important to remember that any constitutional reform needs to be approved either by referendum or by a two-thirds majority in parliament. Even if he takes the parliamentary route—as he suggested on April 25—there is no guarantee he will succeed in the adverse political circumstances he is facing. After months of street violence and discussions, during which party politics was put on hold, getting back to normal business feels like a hangover for the government. Debates over pensions, unemployment benefits, and state spending cuts have reopened old rifts. Campaigning around the European Parliament elections indicates a toughening of the political debate.

Even if Macron's democratic reform is adopted, it will take a long time to produce effects, and more reforms will be required to change France's confrontational politics. A new culture of compromise and trust will only emerge when the people think the political system delivers for them and when a balance between rights and responsibilities is restored. In other words, it is not enough to blow off some steam. A democratic renaissance will take a modest and patient attitude, which is not quite Macron's style. At least he is trying.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## NOTES

- 1 According to the Grand Débat's official website as of April 7, 2019, <https://granddebat.fr/>.
- 2 After garnering enough support in parliament, the French Constitutional Court is now examining an [RIP proposal](#) on the privatization of Paris airports.

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