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What is the citizen participation in the energy transition?

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“Energy is part of our daily lives. Every person will become, increasingly every day, an actor in the transition. This transition must be carried out by and for the citizens. Citizens must be listened to, informed, educated, involved and supported.” The adage of a “transition by all and for all” has been frequently cited during the French National Debate on Energy Transition (DNTE), based on the vision of a more decentralized governance and on opportunities for citizens to become actors in projects on their territories. Nearly four years after the DNTE, what conclusions can be drawn regarding the importance given to citizen initiatives in the French energy transition? And how do the presidential candidates intend to integrate the citizen factor into their energy policy project?

Citizen and participatory renewable energy projects at the heart of the debates

The reflection on citizen participation in the energy transition focuses mainly on citizen and participatory projects on renewable energies. Behind these concepts is actually [a multitude of models](#), based on varying degrees of involvement of local citizens and actors in the funding and governance of projects, which promise several ultimate benefits: strengthening the social acceptance of projects, increasing the economic spin-offs for the territory and, more generally, transforming the role of the citizen from that of a simple consumer to more of an actor in the transition. Inspired by the [feedback from Germany](#), where the citizens themselves have developed nearly half of the renewable energy projects, the Energy Transition Act has brought a series of measures to promote the emergence of this type of project in France. And the first results appear positive: according to [a recent ADEME study](#), more than 150 citizen projects have already been set up in France, and the use of crowdfunding digital platforms for energy projects is growing rapidly. Many regions have initiated calls for proposals to support these projects or have promoted the networking of actors. While representing an almost insurmountable obstacle to citizen projects, calls for proposals for medium and large-sized photovoltaic installations now include a [“participatory bonus”](#) to encourage minority investment from local actors in projects. Despite these promising signs, effective citizen participation is currently the exception rather than the rule. This is also true in the proposals advanced by the presidential election candidates. Despite [demands from a group of involved organizations](#), Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Benoît Hamon are the only ones to mention the subject, although they do not make firm proposals: the former seeks to encourage local cooperatives for the production and consumption of renewable energies; while the latter promotes decentralized and citizen-based energy production

Reinventing participatory models with digital technologies

Beyond the “crowdfunding” revolution that underlies the development of participatory renewable energy projects, other innovative models could serve as inspiration. This is particularly the case for the new collaborative tools being tested in cities, around the concept of [crowdsourcing](#): using digital technology to reinvent communication processes, to share information and co-produce sustainable development solutions in the territories. A [recent IDDRI study](#) has highlighted the potential of these innovative solutions for the development of sustainable cities. Going beyond the concept of the smart city based on the intelligence of technologies, crowdsourcing proposes a more human vision, which puts the collaborative approach and the collective intelligence at the heart of public action. And the examples seem promising: the information provided by users through digital tools and applications makes it possible to rapidly and cost effectively identify problems of public infrastructure for the better targeting of work and development; participatory budgets renew the democratic link by giving citizens the possibility of directly submitting their choices in terms of the allocation of part of the public budget; and crowdsourcing can even be a tool for the co-production of the city of tomorrow, by identifying project preferences and ideas, as is already the case in the [development of the cycling infrastructure](#). New opportunities could thus emerge by applying these innovations to the energy transition, particularly if, as in other fields, some associations seize these tools to complement their actions. The deployment of the direct use of solar energy (calls for proposals with a total volume of 450 MW over 3 years were launched in March 2017) could thus be an interesting opportunity, at the crossroads of digital innovation and citizen and territorial re-appropriation of energy, as shown by the [first attempts at solar blockchains](#). The exchange of information between users could also be an effective lever to

facilitate the identification of energy-intensive homes and propose adapted solutions, by combining public action with the exchange of experiences and pooling of resources (renovation on a district scale rather than per individual homes). Similarly, through the richness of data produced for example by car-sharing platforms or through its ability to account for user experience (public transport, for example), crowdsourcing could become a powerful tool to address the challenge of sustainable mobility, a poor relation of energy transition policies. The analysis of the increasingly precise traffic data associated with user feedback can thus help identify deficiencies in public transport infrastructure, facilitate the creation of cycling routes and encourage the creation of new car-sharing solutions (particularly for local trips, following the example of [Ecov](#)).

Which governance model for the energy transition?

Whether crowdfunding or crowdsourcing, social innovations at the crossroads of digital technology and new organizational models could fundamentally change the energy transition approach. Nevertheless, beyond the tools that need to be implemented, the question of the objective should be raised: what political vision do we want to define [in terms of energy transition governance](#)? Is it a question of moving towards more decentralization and territorial autonomy according to the slogan “small is beautiful” and to make every citizen an actor in the energy system? Or is it about maintaining a national model that is vertically integrated around major industrial champions? Or giving a free rein to market forces to achieve an economic optimum? This question of governance models has hardly been addressed in the political debate but nevertheless seems all the more important as the French model has been built on very specific principles of a national public service, which must now be reinvented in the face of new energy transition challenges. This is an issue that deserves an in-depth debate between the presidential election candidates...! ***This blog post is part of a series on energy transition in the French presidential election:***

- [2017, a pivotal year for French energy transition](#)
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- [Energy renovation in France: the challenge of implementing the national objectives](#)
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