Citizens' Assemblies

Strengthening self-determination for all Europe's people

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Introduction

Democracy the world over is in crisis, with widespread alienation from political decision-making linked to increasing disengagement and disaffection. Trust in political institutions has been on a steady decline in most countries for decades[1], and politicians are consistently ranked as one of the least-trusted professions around the world[2].

The proliferation of reactionary groups and the increasing traction of conspiracy theory thinking are just two symptoms of this complex crisis, revealing potentially disastrous outcomes if power-holders dismiss critiques. Political polarisation often feeds this negative feedback loop, as lasting change that satisfies diverse interests becomes more difficult to secure, leaving nobody satisfied and eroding everybody's trust.

Within the European Union (EU), constitutional gridlocks and democratic deficits within and between nations further accelerate this trend and widen the gap between the governed and governing. For example, in Scotland and Catalonia, publics have delivered democratic mandates for constitutional change that have been ignored to the detriment of trust in both democracy and the EU. Withholding the right of self-determination for some of Europe's people undermines democratic principles for everyone and forecloses any possibility of a Europe built on mutual respect, dignity, equality and sustainability.

In 2019, the European Commission and European Parliament announced plans for a 'Conference on the Future of Europe', which aims to consider the medium and long term future of the European Union, its policies and institutions. While there is vocal agreement that such an initiative should deeply engage citizens, there is ongoing debate on how this can be best achieved. Considering the constitutional challenges apparent within the EU, it is paramount that care is taken to design engagement that does not reinforce disaffection, but instead upholds the right of all people to determine their future.

In recent years, a thriving 'democracy' sector has arisen, with experts offering fresh and experimental thinking to innovate the fundamentals of how our societies operate, and specifically how we connect decision-making to communities and the broader electorate beyond the ballot box. Deliberative processes are one such site of innovation, covering a broad range of techniques and methods to encourage dialogue and debate on key decisions, with the aim of achieving more nuanced policy responses while at the same time building trust and engagement in democracy.

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1   https://ourworldindata.org/trust
2   https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2019-09/global-trust-in-professions-trust-worthiness-index-2019.pdf

Citizens' Assemblies (CAs) stand out as one of the success stories of this emerging field of democratic innovation, with powerful advances made on particularly thorny constitutional and policy issues. The basic logic of the CA is that mutual trust between the public and their representatives can be developed at the same time as establishing a popular mandate for positive change by enabling a representative group of citizens to engage deeply with a specific problem and offer their own recommendations. Consequently, people are more likely to trust these decisions and to be invested in their implementation, with the understanding that 'normal people' and not just a perceived 'political elite' developed the ideas. The process itself as a deliberation between radically diverse perspectives and identities supports better mutual understanding for different opinions within broader society by establishing a community of common cause, ideally creating enriching opportunities to bridge between differences and societal divisions.

This briefing will provide a brief explainer of Citizens' Assemblies including their defining features. It will detail the process of initiating, designing and delivering a CA, and point to key factors in achieving successful outcomes. It will provide examples of CAs in action across Europe, recognising the many forms a CA can take, and suggest some potential uses for such a tool in the coming years.

Deliberative Democracy

'Deliberation' is dialogue and debate with the objective of arriving at a decision. Recently pioneered 'deliberative processes' focus on the need for reflection, learning, and disagreement in making informed decisions. It is intended to bring more complexity and nuance to the logic behind decisions by introducing and exploring various trade-offs and points of tension.

This means avoiding sloganeering or simplistic explanations, and instead taking the time to sit with the multifaceted nature of opposing perspectives. The ideal outcome is that participants achieve more mutual appreciation of differing standpoints, and more empathy for decisions they may disagree with, while at the same time learning to be a more active participant in a democratic society.

What is a Citizens' Assembly?

I Citizens' Assemblies 101

Rather than seeing democracy as something that citizens participate in every few years at national or regional elections, Citizens' Assemblies attempt to build 'deep democracy' skills. While it is widely agreed that CAs will take on context and subject-specific contours, CAs include two basic objectives: to use deliberation to arrive at better policy recommendations and to strengthen engagement and trust in decision-making processes.

Evidence from many places around the world that have used CAs shows that citizens are willing and able to deliberate and develop recommendations on highly contested and complex political issues. While disagreements are inevitable, and consensus sometimes impossible, practitioners of CAs document again and again that when citizens are invited and supported to participate in crucial decision-making processes, they take this duty very seriously[3]. This 'stake' in the outcome of the CA develops over time as citizens build connections with different CA members who form a community of common cause and broaden their own understanding of the issues at hand. This however can all too easily be lost if the process is badly-designed, inexpertly facilitated, or does not anchor into a transparent decision-making process.

To this end, democracy organisation Involve developed a set of ten Standards that provide a benchmark for anyone interested in initiating a CA:[4]

1. **Clear purpose**, responding to a key question, conflict or intractable problem that would benefit from deeper reflection and is expedient in the political context

2. **Sufficient time**, taking place over a number of weeks or even months, with normally four sessions at a minimum

3. **Representative** by bringing together a large group (circa 40-100) with randomly selected citizens that broadly reflect the community / region / nation's demography

4. **Inclusive** with up-front financial support to enable people to participate and full accessibility and consideration of any other barriers which may prevent participation

5. **Independent** of any party political affiliation and instead impartially facilitated

6. **Open** with regards to full process, agenda, participants and core organisers, potentially even publishing sessions via livestream to reach beyond the core participants

7. **Generative learning** with diverse and balanced 'expert' guests and witnesses, and agency for citizens' to develop questions and 'expert' suggestions independently

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3   https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/reports/2020/iidp-citizens-assembly.pdf
4   https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/knowledge-base/how-do-i-setup-citizens-assembly/standards-citizens-assemblies

8. **Structured deliberation**, ideally with the help of professional facilitators who communicate a clear and well-designed process of deliberation

9. **Collective decision-making** is enabled with a variety of ways to express views and agree recommendations, including a co-created final report and engagement with policy decision-makers

10. **Evaluated** to hear feedback from citizens on their experience of the process

Ultimately, CAs aim to generate stronger policy outcomes with real-world applicability, enriched by feedback and debate between a diverse group of participants, including those most disenfranchised by existing democratic processes. This can help overcome some of the shortcomings of representative democracy, for example ensuring that minority voices are amplified and that self-interested groups do not capture the policy-making process. Such a process can create a strong public mandate for action, enabling politicians to make difficult or major decisions that appear politically impossible, confident in the knowledge of the nuance and complexity behind recommendations. CAs also empower citizens to celebrate their agency, civic responsibility, and unique knowledge contributions, free from politically partisan agendas. If combined with effective public outreach and promotion of the process, CAs have the potential to strengthen transparency and integrity in public decision making beyond participants, enhancing trust in the political system and demonstrating the values of mutual understanding and public spirit. This way, CAs can work as part of a broader package of democratic institutions to advance and reinforce self-determination.

II Designing your Citizens' Assembly

Is a Citizens' Assembly the right choice?

CAs are an ideal method if you want informed judgement by diverse residents to shape your future policy. In designing your CA, it is vital to make sure you have the resources, time, political mandate and policy challenge to create the conditions for success. While CAs are more resource-intensive than many other consultation methods, they provide unparalleled depth and rigour. The bottom line is that a successful CA will only be achieved if you have all of the key factors in place; it will also undermine the long term objectives of strengthening democracy if the process is well-resourced but lacking in expediency or influencing power in real decision-making mechanisms.

Setting the question

Getting the core question correct is vital to frame the purpose and remit of the CA. A question should be neither too broad or too specific, but is helped by mentioning known constraints such as budgets and timelines. The question should be brief, clear, and require a complex answer with acknowledgment of possible trade offs. Ideally it will speak to an issue that is already live and engaging for the public in order to generate high levels of interest and buy in. Setting the question is also an ideal opportunity to work with an advisory group (more below) on agreeing the key parameters of the CA.[5]

When designing your question...

DO

· Start with a clear question, not a statement or description
· Ensure that it correlates with the policy decision that will be made
· Keep it manageable, but not too narrow
· Include limiting factors when possible, such as budgets or timelines
· Include an explanatory statement of the problem to give people background
· Test the question
· Use words that open up possibility such as 'can' and 'could'

DON'T

· Don't choose a yes/no question
· Don't choose a question that is overly broad or philosophical
· Overcomplicate with many different questions
· Use framing which leads participants to a pre-determined answer

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5   See here for an elaboration on a useful set of general principles for framing the remit of a CA: https://www.newdemocracy.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/RD_Note_-_Framing_the_Remit.pdf

Logistics and structure

Citizens' Assemblies are normally composed of a learning stage, a deliberation stage and a final process of decision-making. The best process design will always be responsive to its specific context. For this reason, there is no cookie cutter template for CAs, and instead rough estimations of what has been most successful. Key decisions to be made include: the governance and organising structure, the number of meeting sessions and the period of time over which they take place (normally no less than 4 days), the number of people who will be asked to participate, the experts and witnesses to invite, and recruitment of participants.

The governance and organising structure can benefit from an independent group of people forming an impartial Advisory Group. This group should be appointed by the CA organisers, or in partnership by organisers and the initiating body if these groups are different. An Advisory Group can be made up of a balanced group of local stakeholders, a knowledgeable group of academics or experts, and/or a cross-party group of influential politicians to lend weight and credibility to the process. Alternatively, some models call for a Coordinating Group as core organisers, accompanied by a Monitoring Group that can keep plans on track. Regardless, a knowledgeable group of around 6-14 advisors can help from the start in assessing a context-specific design and remit reflecting limitations like budget and timeline.

Identifying 'Experts'

A balanced and diverse group of 'experts' provide the source material for the learning stage. These need not all be experts in the academic or professional sense, but could instead be testimonies of experience, key campaign or interest groups, marginalised voices, service users etc. The point is not to create an exclusive academic environment, but instead to provide as many different sources of evidence as is useful and practicable for the task at hand. A key consideration is ensuring different types of evidence, whether audiovisual, textual, experiential or otherwise. This maximises accessibility and the CA principle of 'inclusivity'. While identifying experts can be overseen by the advisory group, participating citizens and the wider public can participate by submitting their own suggestions of experts, establishing a generative, collaborative thinking space.

Recruiting for the assembly

The largest citizens assembly to date had 160 participants, in British Columbia. While larger delibera-

tive processes involving many more people do exist, these tend to last for only one or two days because of the intensity of trying to equally engage all participants. While larger numbers appear more politically significant, this is often a trade-off with the quality of debate and citizen buy in. Most CAs tend to include less than 100 people.

Achieving a broadly representative population sample can be aided with the use of a specialised agency and should normally reflect the wider public in terms of gender, age, location of residence, ethnicity and potentially other criteria. Demographic specificity will depend on the context as well as the specific ques-

tion facing the CA - for example, to ensure participation of a key group who may otherwise not be equally represented. As an example process, a random batch of 10,000 letters could be sent to a random selection of potential attendees, asking them to notify their interest in participating via an online questionnaire that can also capture demographic data. From those who respond, a random-stratified sample can be built to match a predetermined demographic criteria. Messages of confirmation can be sent to the full suggested list of attendees, and for every drop out, an analogous demographic can be found to fill their spot.

Citizens' Assembly Template

	BEFORE YOUR ASSEMBLY
Communicate to the wider public	**Agree it is the right method: Do you have appropriate budget, time, policy challenge, political buy-in?**
	• Establish a structure: Organising Management, Advisory Group, Facilitators, Process Designers, Recruitment, Communications and outreach
	• Agree the Question and the policy lever it will connect to
	• Design your CA: number of meetings, number of people, location, method of delivery, witness/experts, itinerary, seating and set-up, activities and tools needed, documenting your CA
	• Recruitment: randomly selected citizens that broadly reflect the community / region / nation's demography

Communicate to the wider public

DELIVERING YOUR ASSEMBLY

Set Expectations: Clarify objectives, timeline, and outcomes.
Together agree behaviours and values.

- Stage 1: Learning Phase: Hearing from witnesses and experts, with adequate time for questions and responsive discussions

- Stage 2: Deliberative Phase: Structuring conversation to answer the Question - agreeing core priorities, identifying knowledge gaps, considering existing policy ideas, generating new proposals, debating points of tension, and capturing the development of arguments

- Stage 3: Decision-Making Phase: Presenting final proposals, debating, using methods such as rounds of voting / consensus building to arrive at complex recommendations.

Communicate to the wider public

MULTIPLYING IMPACT AFTERWARDS

Policy impact: delivering a co-authored report with participants to policymakers to be anchored into a specific decision-making mechanism

- Institutional Change: building internal capacity to maximise new skills and training within institutions at different tiers of governance

- Democratic Cultures: complimenting the CA with other democratic tools and local empowerment projects to allow participants to continue to use newly developed skills

III Delivery

Facilitation

Facilitating a CA requires a complex skillset, supporting participants to make best use of collective knowledge and insight while at the same time remaining impartial. Successful facilitation by a trusted third party with expertise in deliberative democracy - neither 'citizen participants' nor the commissioning body of the CA - is a foundation on which to build trust in the neutrality of the process and to resolve conflicts as citizens move beyond their comfort zones to engage with new or opposing perspectives. Facilitators should be trained in recognising and mitigating power differences within groups, and to steer discussion without overwhelming debate.

The team of facilitators should be involved in the planning and design of the process to support with expertise from initiation to evaluation. While of course it is impossible to ever be completely free of bias, organisers can best ensure that facilitators provide a neutral discussion space by working closely with non-partisan organisations with experience in running CAs and other deliberative experiences.

Establish collective purpose, behaviours and values

The initial step of any CA should be to clearly set expectations together. The first task should be to clarify the scope of the CA: the objectives, timeline, and how outcomes will impact decision-making. Participants should feel that their unique input is highly valued and should be clear in what the CA will and won't achieve. Overpromising the potential impact of the CA might have short-term gains by increasing engagement, but will ultimately undermine the long term process of building trust by disappointing participants when their expectations are not met. With a clear aim and parameters for the CA, participants should then work together on agreeing collective behaviours to guide how deliberation will take place. This establishes boundaries and mutual understanding of appropriate and inappropriate action as defined by the group to make every participant feel safe. Lastly, participants should agree together the values with which they will approach their task, as a gentle introduction to the deliberative skills they will be using and strengthening as the CA proceeds.

Creating the conditions for optimal deliberation

There is a potentially endless list of factors to consider to make sure successful delivery of a CA. Seating plans and the balance of plenary discussions with small groups can be considered to make sure groups have the time to build trust and feel comfortable while also not allowing particular group dynamics to settle. Daily agendas can be structured to allow sufficient time for individual and collective reflection on the most important issues without feeling the pressure to rush into recommendations. Digital tools can be used to speed up question rounds or votes on priorities, leaving more time for deep discussion. Facilitators can have a pre-agreed method of structuring conversation to ensure everyone gets the chance to participate and to steer conversation towards conclusions, using the collective expectations that were set out at the beginning to explain decisions. Employing diverse activities including group discussion, reflective writing, and anonymous voting or questions can sustain energy and interest while appealing to different types of learning and communication styles. Documenting progress of the CA, for example with creative and visual representations of discussion and note-taking using post its, helps to create a sense of forward momentum and purpose. It goes without saying that accessibility should be paramount in everything from the choice of venue to the words used to explain the CA.

Stage 1: Learning stage

Exposing citizens to new thinking, facts and perspectives to enrich understanding is the primary objective of the learning phase. This is delivered with a well-curated and balanced set of 'expert' contributions, potentially delivered in diverse ways - audio-visuals, readings, short talks, infographics and workshops. Citizens should have sufficient time to reflect on each new learning, individually and as part of a group, and should be encouraged to question and challenge 'experts', providing that they remain within the formerly agreed behaviours and values. A dynamic learning environment will also support people to recognise gaps in understanding and learning, and potentially involve a distribution of responsibilities to gather information to plug gaps.

Stage 2: Deliberation stage

After thoroughly exploring new learning, citizens move into the deliberative stage of the CA. With the help of the established purpose, behaviours, and values, facilitators set out a clear framework for discussion that provides opportunities for everyone to engage and directs conversation back to the core remit of the CA. This might for example include establishing key questions that need to be answered in advance of making recommendations, mapping core priorities that should undergird recommendations, staking out the different tensions and trade-offs between competing perspectives, opportunities to focus more deeply on specific issues by group consensus or informal votes and returning to new learning materials as needed. Visual tools such as argument mapping and post its can help to cluster and organise arguments, evidence and counterarguments, building holistic understanding of complexity.

Stage 3: Decision-making stage

Ultimately, a primary objective of the CA is to reach a set of recommendations that feed into decision-making. Depending on your design, this might be achieved through different rounds of voting to clarify preferences, or building consensus at each stage of argumentation. Arriving at this point should involve meaningful collaboration and discussion, and

might involve moving between smaller and larger groups to allow a rich circulation of perspectives and opportunities to establish common ground and divergences. The design of any 'votes' or points for consensus should not be binary or foreclose complexity, but instead be formulated on the basis of deliberation and should embrace opportunities to capture caveats and complexities.

Communicating the assembly

With the high intensity of work that is required to co-create a successful CA, organisers should seek opportunities to multiply impact and reach beyond the core group of citizen participants. This requires clear messaging from recruitment to completion of the CA, and an outreach strategy that reaches diverse audiences and interests. This can involve the use of communications tactics such as bespoke websites, social media channels, clear contact information, full transparency of timeline and process, and opportunities for the broader public to engage for example through suggesting 'experts' or making learning phase tools open access. An added benefit of a robust public outreach approach is that it reinforces legitimacy for the process and the efforts to build more engaged, empowering democracies.

Impact

Armed with a clear understanding of how their efforts contribute to a broader challenge facing decision-makers, it is vital that the CA doesn't end after the final convening session. Without capacity to take forward recommendations, CAs will quickly lose credibility, and participants can feel rightly frustrated. However impact of CAs is not reserved for policymaking processes, but can be effective in transforming institutional practices and fostering new democratic cultures to emerge in broader society

· Policy impact. A well-designed CA will have clear and actionable recommendations and a direct decision-making process to plug into. A final report of the CA, potentially co-authored by participants depending on their interest and capacity, should capture these recommendations. If participants are unable to directly author the report, it should at least go through consultative rounds to ensure it fairly represents outcomes. Ideally, participants can be involved in presenting these recommendations to power-holders, who will have a duty to respond to recommendations in a timely manner, and provide accessible routes to monitor progress on any recommendations that will be implemented.

· Institutional practice. CAs provide opportunities for public servants to also learn new skills from partnering organisations and advisory group members. Participating in a CA can help institutionalise 'deep democracy' principles at the heart of different institutions at different tiers of government by training staff involved in key skills of facilitation, process design and deep listening. By working with deep democracy experts, the use of CAs in conjunction with other democratic policy tools can build a pool of in-house 'deliberative' experts who can be pioneers, bringing innovative methods and approaches beyond the CA into the day-to-day functioning of public institutions.

· Democratic cultures. Participants in CAs report leaving the process with a revived sense of civic purpose and understanding. To maximise positive impact, CAs should be complemented by a range of engagement-enabling practices, supporting citizens' to continue to exercise their democratic muscle and grow confidence in their capacity to participate in decisions which impact their lives and their community. Instead of seeing the CA as a one-off process, it can instead be an opportunity among many to revive democracies in everyday ways.

Success Factors

- ✓ Adequately resourced to support participation
- ✓ Well defined task
- ✓ Clear relationship with decision making processes
- ✓ Diverse and representative group of citizens
- ✓ Accessible and inclusive
- ✓ Well-promoted recruitment
- ✓ Communicated clearly to broader public

- ✓ Professionally facilitated
- ✓ Underpinned by higher objective of common good
- ✓ Realistic expectations
- ✓ The right balance of other deliberative tools and institutional reform
- ✓ Embraced by all sides of any debate
- ✓ Not politicised or coinciding with political races

Common critiques - What can go wrong?

- **CAs are the most expensive and time-intensive deliberative process.** There are no half measures when it comes to establishing a CA - a well-resourced and planned CA will always deliver better, deeper engagement than a rush job. Before embarking on a CA it is crucial to make sure you have the resources you need, otherwise it might be worthwhile considering other, less resource-intensive deliberative methods such as citizens' juries, consensus conferences, planning cells or deliberative polls.

- **Gaining a broadly representative group of people can be challenging and expensive.** There is no way around this fundamental detail of CAs, since their legitimacy is underpinned by a fair reflection of diverse perspectives in broader society.

- **CAs mainly serve to get politicians off the hook for making difficult decisions.** While indeed, decision-making is shifted to a different forum, as long as politicians with power are invested in taking forward CA suggestions, a well-designed CA can in fact be a great way to redistribute decision-making power to regular citizens rather than a fairly narrow group of political representatives. This can also be further avoided by enabling citizens to trigger a CA through a formalised process so they have agency in deciding when the tool is used.

- **They are just a talking shop with no real power.** Without adequate clarity on the connection between the CA and policy implementation, badly-designed CAs can lead to more entrenched disaffection as citizens' time is wasted and well-meant efforts are lost.

- **Cherry-picked 'experts' constrain the discussion.** Working with a diverse and independent advisory group complemented by the option for participants to suggest additional expert contributors will ensure high levels of trust in the learning content of a CA.

- **They are used to achieve political ends.** There is evidence to suggest that decisions made at CA are more likely to deliver cosmopolitan, egalitarian and collectivist value orientations in their final decisions[6]. However, it is key that CAs are never seen as partisan projects, but have cross-party backing and endorsement.

- **They only have positive impacts on participants, so don't change broader disaffection with democracy.** The reality is that the process will have most significance for those who are engaged in the CA, but through support and routes to continuing engagement and deliberative skills, it need not be the end in participants' deliberative journeys. Treating a CA as an end in itself misses the point of the broader field of deliberative democracy, which encourages a combination of tools that can work together to achieve permanent transitions to more active and engaged citizenries.

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6   https://newint.org/features/2019/12/14/citizens-assemblies-and-next-democratic-revolution

Citizens'
Assemblies
in Action

Citizens' Assemblies in Action

The specific ways a CA plugs into a decision-making process will have tremendous bearing on engagement and outcomes. There is already a rich, global community of CA practitioners, and in Europe alone, there are many different models that have already been pioneered. This includes subject-specific CAs for a particularly contentious policy area, large scale mobilising efforts to grapple with complex challenges, citizen-triggered mechanisms that put agenda-setting power into public hands, and institutionalised assemblies that become a formal part of the democratic architecture. While some of these models have significant shortcomings, they show that there is an active debate within Europe on how CAs can best strengthen our democracies.

Subject-specific

The Irish Citizens' Assemblies organised to discuss abortion and same-sex marriage were connected to a referendum process that was put to the public after the outcomes of the CAs were published and promoted. This process recognised that the CA was not an end in itself, but the beginning of a public conversation on issues that had been facing emotionally wrought divisions in Irish society. This approach created a space for sharing understanding and building consensus that reached across these differences, whether religious, generational, gendered or otherwise, and was positively linked to a national decision.

Large Scale

The Citizens' Convention for the Climate launched by the French Government in 2019 had a well-defined but very complex remit of deliberating on how France can achieve 40 percent reduction of greenhouse gases by 2030, with the option to call for more ambitious action as citizens see fit[7]. This initiative emerged in the aftermath of civil unrest as a consequence of climate policy implementation. Instead of a top-down approach, a 'national conversation' invites people to take ownership of the policy-making space, airing grievances and seeking compromises that can attend to the multifaceted nature of climate change. However, the recommendations of the Convention were met with resistance by different political actors, showing how important it can be to have cross-party buy in for a CA for it to have policy impact[8]. Furthermore, there have been several critiques of the design and delivery of the Convention, undermining the legitimacy of proposals and the time citizens invested into participation[9].

Citizen-led

The Polish municipality of Gdańsk now has a mechanism whereby if enough citizens sign a public petition on a particular subject, a CA is automatically triggered. This allows agenda-setting power to be shared with the public, challenging the binary categories of decision-maker and citizens. This mechanism

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7   https://www.conventioncitoyennepourleclimat.fr/
8   https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/entry/convention-pour-le-climat-pluie-de-critiques-sur-les-propositions-ideologiques_fr_5ef0762fc5b6532b50975869
9   https://france.attac.org/nos-publications/les-possibles/numero-25-automne-2020/dossier-suite-de-la-convention-citoyenne-pour-le-climat/article/quelques-critiques-de-la-convention-citoyenne-sur-le-climat

is underpinned by accountability, whereby all recommendations where 80% agreement is achieved amongst CA participants are implemented. If the result is instead between 50 and 80%, the mayor has discretion about whether to implement or not, counter to the referendum method in Ireland. In this example, the Assembly is recognised as a legitimate method of decision-making in itself.

Institutionalised

The Parliament for the German-speaking region of East Belgium was the first representative institution to instigate a permanent set up for a CA[10]. The 'Citizens Council' is made up of a randomly selected group of citizens that sits for a year. The membership is rotated regularly, but it is a permanent body, forming part of the democratic infastructure. The Council takes evidence from government, parliament, civil society organisations, ordinary citizens about what issues need to be dealt with by a citizens' assembly, resulting in two to three CAs every year, and recommendations go to the relevant committee within parliament. This both shares agenda-setting power and creates a permanent home for deliberative democracy within governance.

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10 https://www.foundationfuturegenerations.org/files/documents/news/20190226_dgpermanentcitizensassembly_pressrelease.pdf

Citizens' Assemblies and international challenges

Most CAs so far have been at the local, regional or national level. A larger scale CA is yet to be successfully completed, though the global nature of common challenges such as the pandemic and climate change should force us to consider how innovative democracy tools can be brought into transnational decision-making. The Conference on the Future of Europe is one such arena that would benefit from deep democracy tools such as CAs. Considering that the Conference aims to significantly engage citizens on questions central to all of their futures, relying on outdated and ineffective consultation tools will not be enough.

The challenge of such a project is, of course, in the design. A process that connects localised CAs to a broader international forum could fundamentally alter some of the baseline conditions we would seek to retain in any CA. What we want from participants in a citizens' assembly is a willingness to think about the common interest, however if people come into a

forum with a strong mandate to represent a specific region, the assembly could take on a different character. In this way, it would become a representative assembly, not a citizens' assembly, which is supposed to complement representative democracy through alternative organising principles. Instead, a Europewide CA should be so from the outset, bringing people from diverse geographies together on thematic areas that can build common ground and purpose.

Such an initiative must respond to the specific needs and interests of under-represented groups, including those living in stateless nations, emerging new States, regions and traditional minorities in Europe. This could be achieved by organising a specific pillar of work led by the interests of these regions, including a CA that can amplify the voices of citizens who are too often marginalised from democratic decisions because of their minority status.

Conclusion

Citizen's Assemblies are not a silver bullet for fixing the multiple and interlocking challenges we face, but they can play a fundamental part in forging a new deal for democracies at local, national, regional and international levels. A renewed, deeper social contract would tackle widespread alienation, transforming outdated institutions into thriving, deliberative cultures that bring decision-making to citizens and vice versa. This vision will be most successful when tools such as CAs are designed to avoid the shortcomings of existing systems of representation. This includes expanding the voice and empowerment of peoples most marginalised within current systems. CAs thus can support our objectives, moving beyond intractable partisan deadlocks that protect the interests of the few, to instead uphold the fundamental principle and right of self-determination for all.