

PUTTING THE PUBLIC BACK IN PUBLIC POLICY

Citizens' Assemblies:
An Introduction to
Definitions & Guidelines

October 2024 (version 1)

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S NOTE

¹

Citizens' Assemblies - a broadly representative group of randomly chosen people who are tasked by public authorities to develop collective, informed proposals on policy issues - are blossoming across North America. This exciting form of deliberative democracy presents an opportunity to develop shared understanding around this innovation.

As Citizens' Assemblies become more prevalent, we must develop a common language and taxonomy. Our community of practitioners, public officials and managers, donors and researchers will benefit from definitions and guidelines that enhance understanding and improve implementation.

This document seeks to articulate key components, guiding principles and best practices. Over the past several months, FIDE - North America has sought input and guidance from Board members and affiliated partners including Matt Byrne, Linn Davis, Yves Dejaeghere, Harry Nathan Gottlieb, Amy Lee, Matt Leighninger, Valerie Lemmie, Peter MacLeod, Sara McPhee-Knowles, Laura Ryan, David Schechter and Alice Siu.

Rather than rigid rules, we offer a framework to illuminate the distinguishing elements that define a Citizens' Assembly. Our intention is to provide guideposts while leaving room for innovation and adaptation to a variety of contexts. We see this as a living document that will evolve along with the field. We warmly invite input from deliberation experts and practitioners to refine and expand these recommendations over time. Our plan is to incorporate new learnings and perspectives and to revise and update this resource annually.

Our hope is that these shared definitions and guidelines will provide clarity and coherence for democratic innovators. We are grateful for the thoughtful feedback and the individual comments we have received over the past several months by e-mail and during work sessions. We are thankful for the organizations that have endorsed this report including the Berggruen Institute, the Center for Democracy Innovation at the National Civic League, IDEA, newDemocracy, MASS LBP and Unify America.

We welcome you to engage with these ideas and join us in strengthening the practice of Citizens' Assemblies across North America and beyond.

Marjan H. Ehsassi

¹ The term 'Citizen' is used in the broadest sense of the word and follows the OECD definition: "It is not meant in the more restrictive sense of a legally recognized national of a state and is used interchangeably with people."

WHAT MAKES A CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY?

The short answer is that a Citizens' Assembly meets a specific set of deliberative principles, including representativeness by democratic lottery or sortition, time, information, accountability, deliberation, and a free response.²

“Is this like how Champagne is only Champagne if it’s from the Champagne wine region?”

No, it’s not simply when something is commissioned by a government or run by the right people that makes it a citizens’ assembly. It’s more like how Fair Trade products must meet minimum definitions related to labor practices and environmental sustainability.

The application of these guidelines helps ensure that deliberative engagement projects meet their full potential. By adhering to these principles, we create positive experiences for all involved—from decision-makers exploring deliberative processes for the first time, to the communities investing their time and energy, to the engagement providers facilitating the project.

Successful implementations build trust and enthusiasm for democratic innovation. They demonstrate the power of collaborative problem-solving and inspire further use of these methods. By outlining best practices, we aim to support and guide those excited about citizens’ assemblies, helping them realize the full potential of these tools for addressing complex public issues.

“What if I want to run a citizens’ assembly but have limited resources?”

Citizens’ Assemblies may not be the answer to every public problem. We understand that assemblies require significant investment and may not always be feasible. The good news is that you can still incorporate many deliberative principles into your engagement efforts, even if you can’t implement a full citizens’ assembly.

By applying these principles creatively within your constraints, you can enhance the quality and impact of your public engagement initiatives. Remember, any step towards more deliberative and inclusive decision-making is valuable!

² Citizens’ Assemblies go by different names. Some of the alternative names used in North America for engagements that meet the criteria outlined in this document include: citizens’ juries, policy juries, community panels, deliberative panels, reference panels and citizens’ reviews.

PRINCIPLES GUIDING CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES

It is difficult for large groups of people to find agreement on complex decisions. The [OECD](#) and the [United Nations Democracy Fund](#) recommend key principles that improve the deliberative quality of group work by creating the ideal environment for the consideration of the broadest range of sources while giving people time, an equal share of voice and influence. This document draws inspiration and builds on these guiding principles and definitions.

01

REPRESENTATIVENESS

Democratic lottery/Sortition methods ensure diverse representation, bringing together everyday people from all walks of life to contribute their unique perspectives. Additional measures should be introduced to remove barriers and reduce the cost of participation.

02

A CLEAR REMIT

A well-defined scope empowers participants to address specific problems and explore potential solutions within agreed-upon parameters. Also known as mandate.

03

ADEQUATE TIME

Providing sufficient time allows participants to learn, consider balanced information, and collaborate effectively, resulting in thoughtful and well-reasoned outcomes.

04

DIVERSE INFORMATION

Exploring a wide range of sourced and diverse perspectives, including expert opinions requested by participants, enriches the deliberation process and strengthens the final recommendations.

05

DELIBERATION, NOT DEBATE

Skilled, independent deliberative facilitation fosters an environment of active listening and respectful exchange of ideas, allowing all voices to be heard and multiple perspectives to be considered as collective intelligence emerges.

06

A FREE RESPONSE AND A FINAL REPORT

Participants are empowered to develop their own recommendations, rationales, and supporting evidence based on their collective learning and deliberation. This independent, impartial and open-ended approach encourages creative problem solving and ensures the group's output is in their own words and genuinely reflects their work product.

07

ACCOUNTABILITY

Follow-up mechanisms and clear communication about how the government or mandating authority will act on or respond to the final report and recommendations ensures the process has meaningful impact.

A DEFINITION FOR CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES:

Setting Guidelines and comparing Citizens' Assemblies with other forms of engagement

How to read the table:

Hit all seven squares in green and you've got yourself a citizens' assembly. Dip your toes into the purple and we recommend you use a different name and consider what promises you're making. Anything in pink, and you're doing community engagement that might have some deliberative elements.

	CITIZENS' or CIVIC ASSEMBLIES	DELIBERATIVE PROCESSES such as <u>DELIBERATIVE TOWN HALLS</u> and <u>DELIBERATIVE POLLING</u>	COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT such as <u>TOWN HALLS</u> and <u>COMMUNITY FORUMS</u>
01 REPRESENTATIVENESS	<u>Democratic lottery</u> is a kind of stratified random selection based on criteria such as age, gender, race, socio-economic status, geography.	Diverse random sample, but often not fully stratified or not drawn from the full population.	Self-selected participation
02 REMIT	Assembly is asked to collectively draft proposals to a clearly articulated public problem.	Participants are asked to provide their position on a series of questions.	Attendees often gather around a topic area.
03 TIME	Recommended minimum four days or approx. 36 hours, predominantly in-person	Generally, less than 25 hours.	Single instance workshop.
04 INFORMATION	The assembly is presented with carefully curated balanced, diverse, and credible information. Participants should be able to request additional materials.	Limited to a small pool of stakeholders, sometimes controlled by the sponsor or steering group. Often with limited government involvement.	Limited. Generally based on a single document prepared and provided by government.
05 DELIBERATION	Full facilitated deliberation. Participants learn together, weigh options, consider trade-offs, and seek rough consensus.	Participants deliberate but the result is an aggregation of individual responses rather than common ground or supermajority decision.	Debate or limited discussion. No deliberation.
06 OUTPUT	Participants collectively draft policy proposals and present their final report directly to the mandating authority for consideration.	Often no direct government commitment to the process. Indirect processes are often conducted by third parties seeking to influence a decision.	Advisory only. No commitment to respond.
07 ACCOUNTABILITY	A commitment by the mandating authority to respond to proposals in a timely manner.	The report may be a polled exercise of pre-written options or not supermajority recommendations. Response provided by an entity other than the government/decision-maker.	Generalized summary report written by engagement staff or consultants.

"WHAT HAPPENS IF I DON'T STICK TO THE GUIDELINES?"

Processes that do not meet the definition of a Citizens' Assembly can still be meaningful in addressing community needs and solving public problems.

We advocate for Citizens' Assemblies because:

- ✔ A **representative** sample selected through democratic lottery enhances trust in the process. It ensures diverse perspectives are included, especially from those who might not typically participate. This approach brings together a true cross-section of the community, enriching the deliberations with a wide range of lived experiences.
- ✔ Providing ample time for deliberation allows participants to explore the issue from all angles. This thoughtful approach enables the group to find **common ground** and develop **well-considered recommendations**. Adequate time demonstrates the organizer's commitment to a thorough and unbiased process.
- ✔ Offering a **comprehensive range of views** and allowing participants to request additional information empowers them to examine the issue thoroughly. This open approach builds trust in the process and enables participants to form well-informed opinions, leading to more robust and credible proposals.
- ✔ The sense of **belonging and community** that emerges amongst participants along with enhanced learning, enthusiasm, engagement and a feeling of consequential voice strengthens civic muscle resulting in empowered and activated citizenship and democratic renewal.
- ✔ Ensuring the Assembly has a **meaningful level of influence** on decisions motivates diverse participation. When people know their input will have a tangible impact, they're more likely to commit their time and energy. This creates an **inclusive process** that attracts a wide range of voices, not just the usual participants.
- ✔ Empowering participants to respond freely to questions and **write their own recommendations** fosters creativity and independent thinking. This approach maintains the integrity of the process and encourages innovative solutions, allowing the potential of **collective intelligence** to emerge.
- ✔ Skilled, independent facilitators support deliberation by guiding participants through a process of learning, perspective-sharing, and thoughtful consideration of trade-offs. This facilitated approach helps the group move beyond debate to find areas of agreement. Using a **rough consensus** or super majority principles ensures the final recommendations reflect broad consensus, presenting decision-makers with **well-supported proposals**.
- ✔ Accountability is ensured with a **clear and well-articulated follow-up mechanism**. The assembly presents the final report to the mandating authority, who in turn makes a **commitment to consider and respond to the proposals within a reasonable time**. Over time, these processes strengthen the citizen-state relationship and can enhance trust in political institutions.

The following organizations have endorsed

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If you would like to endorse this publication, write to us at:
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