



A quick guide to Citizens' Assemblies

Across the globe, political decision-makers are increasingly using what are called **Citizens' Assemblies** to involve people more directly in solving some of the most pressing issues today. So, what are these processes, how do they work, and why?

What are they?

Citizens' Assemblies are a combination of two key elements: democratic lotteries and citizen deliberation. Let's break those two down:

Democratic lotteries are a method for fairly choosing a mix of people to participate in an assembly. We can't invite everyone to deliberate so to fairly narrow down the group to something like 40 people, we use a computer to randomly generate a list of names or addresses and send out invitations. From those that accept the invite, we do another computerized draw that matches the group to the wider community. This means the group will be broadly representative of the wider population by a few important measures like age, gender, education, and location.

Citizen deliberation involves listening, questioning, considering different points of view, and encouraging critical thinking before finding agreement. An easy way to understand this is to compare it to debating where people argue from an already established point of view and try to win rather than working together to discover what common ground exists in a productive and cohesive manner. It's common for skilled independent facilitators to oversee a deliberation and help develop citizens' skills in critical thinking and biases, as well as offering support for working together and finding common ground.

The combination of those two makes up a Citizens Assembly and it looks like this:

A representative mix of everyday people come together for 40-50 hours over the course of a few months to address a challenge posed to them by the government.

They're asked to consider a lot of information from a wide range of sources, discuss that information with expert speakers and among themselves. They work together to find common ground around trade-offs on proposals that address their problem, ultimately finding agreement on recommendations and handing those to decision-makers with supporting evidence and rationale.

How do they work?

It is difficult for large groups of people to find agreement on complex decisions. The OECD and the United Nations Democracy Fund recommend seven 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 citizens time, an equal share of voice and authority.

They are:

- 1. Influence:** There should be clarity how recommendations will be responded to by the decision-maker.
- 2. A clear remit:** It should be clear that you're asking people to address a specific problem and what their scope is for making change.
- 3. Democratic lottery:** This ensures there is a fair method for choosing citizens that gets beyond the usual suspects and includes everyday people of all ages and viewpoints.
- 4. Adequate time:** People need enough time to consider lots of information and find work together to find agreement, any less and the quality of the work is at risk.
- 5. Diverse information:** There are lots of views on any given topic, people will need to consider a wide range of sources to be able to fairly justify their final recommendations, this often involves citizens being able to request experts they trust.
- 6. Dialogue and deliberation, not debate:** Group deliberation requires careful and active listening, considering multiple perspectives. Every juror should have an opportunity to speak, all of which requires skilled and independent

facilitation.

7. **A free response:** A group should be able to provide their own set of recommendations with a rationale and supporting evidence that emerges from their shared learning without feeling led by government or limited in their exploration of the issue.

Why do they work?

Citizens' assemblies address many of our toughest problems because of the way they encourage considered thinking between people from all over the community without the normal political pressures of lobbying, factions, and fickle voters.

They deliver:

1. Better policy outcomes because deliberation results in considered public judgements rather than off-the-cuff public opinions.
2. Greater legitimacy to make hard choices because a representative mix of everyday people publicly support the difficult trade-offs they're recommending.
3. Enhanced public trust in government and democratic institutions by giving citizens an effective role in public decision making.
4. More inclusive governance by opening the door to a much more diverse group of people.
5. Reduced polarisation and disinformation because recommendations are made with reference to critical thinking, unconscious biases and supporting evidence.

What can I do?

If you're not involved in politics:

- Make sure you've signed the petition [here](#).
- Get in touch here – polly@change-politics.org.au
- Share this with your mates.

If you're an elected official or in their office:

- Get in touch here – iain.walker@newdemocracy.com.au



www.change-politics.org.au