

Giving The People a Voice



Understanding Citizen Assemblies

Democracy isn't just about casting a vote every few years. It's about people having a real say in the decisions that affect their lives. Yet many Americans feel disconnected from their government, believing their voices go unheard amid the noise of special interests and partisan politics. What if there was a way to bring everyday citizens directly into the decision-making process? This is where citizen assemblies come in.

What Is a Citizen Assembly?

A citizen assembly brings together everyday people from all walks of life to tackle important issues facing their community or country. Think of it as a jury, but instead of determining someone's guilt or innocence, the group works through challenging public problems and recommends solutions.

Unlike elected officials, the members of a citizen assembly aren't politicians. They're your neighbors, coworkers, and friends—regular folks selected through a process that ensures the group represents the wider population. This might mean selecting members based on age, gender, income level, education, and geographic location to create a true cross-section of America.

When James Madison from Springfield was selected for his state's citizen assembly on infrastructure spending, he was surprised. "I'm not political at all. I'm just a plumber who pays my taxes and minds my business," he told me. "But they explained that's exactly why they wanted people like me. They needed regular folks, not just the usual suspects who show up at every town hall."

How a Citizen Assembly Works

Let's walk through how a typical citizen assembly unfolds.

First comes the selection process. Thousands of invitation letters go out to randomly selected households. From those who respond with interest, a smaller group is chosen to reflect the community's diversity. This random selection is crucial—it prevents the assembly from being dominated by the loudest voices or those with the most time and resources.

Once assembled, members begin a learning phase. They hear from experts with different perspectives on the issue at hand. They review studies, reports, and data. They listen to testimony from affected groups and stakeholders. This education process is thorough and

balanced, giving members the knowledge they need to make informed decisions.

Sarah Rodriguez participated in a citizen assembly in Arizona focused on water conservation policies. "At first, I was overwhelmed by all the information," she said. "But the process gave us time to learn. We heard from scientists, farmers, city planners, and environmental groups. Each expert had thirty minutes to present, followed by our questions. No rushing, no soundbites—just real conversations about complex issues."

After the learning phase comes deliberation. Members break into small groups to discuss what they've learned and share their thoughts. They identify areas of agreement and disagreement. They consider different options and their potential impacts. This isn't a debate where the goal is to win—it's a conversation aimed at finding common ground and understanding different perspectives.

Finally, the assembly develops recommendations. These might be specific policy proposals, general principles, or a combination of both. The recommendations, along with the reasoning behind them, are compiled into a report and presented to government officials or the wider public, depending on the assembly's purpose.

Why Citizen Assemblies Matter

You might wonder why we need citizen assemblies when we already have elected representatives. The truth is, our current system has limitations that citizen assemblies can help address.

For one, elected officials face constant pressure from election cycles, party politics, and powerful interest groups. They often focus on short-term wins rather than long-term solutions. Citizen assemblies, free from these pressures, can take a more thoughtful approach to difficult issues.

Mark Johnson, a state representative from Michigan, initially viewed citizen assemblies with skepticism. "I thought, 'That's my job—I was elected to make these decisions,'" he admitted. "But after seeing the assembly's work on our state's pension system, I changed my mind. They came up with solutions my colleagues and I couldn't because we were too worried about the next election. They broke through partisan gridlock we couldn't overcome."

Citizen assemblies also bring diverse perspectives to the table. While our elected bodies have become more representative over time, they still don't reflect the full diversity of America. Assemblies that intentionally include people across age, race, income, and

education levels ensure that all voices are heard.

Perhaps most importantly, citizen assemblies can rebuild trust in our democratic institutions. When ordinary citizens see people like themselves making thoughtful decisions about public issues, they're more likely to trust the outcome—even if they don't agree with every recommendation.

Citizen Assemblies in Action

These aren't just theoretical ideas. Citizen assemblies have been used successfully around the world and are gaining traction in the United States.

In Oregon, the Citizens' Initiative Review brings together small groups of voters to evaluate ballot measures. After studying the issue from all angles, the group writes a statement highlighting the strongest arguments for and against the measure. This information helps other voters make informed choices at the ballot box.

In Maine, a citizen assembly examined the state's healthcare system and recommended ways to improve access and affordability. The process brought together people from across the political spectrum—conservatives worried about government overreach, progressives advocating for universal coverage, and moderates seeking practical improvements to the current system.

"I went in thinking we'd never agree on anything," said Robert Thompson, a participant in the Maine assembly. "I'm conservative, and there were some pretty liberal folks in the room. But when you spend time really listening to each other, you find more common ground than you'd expect. We didn't agree on everything, but we found solutions most of us could live with."

Internationally, Ireland used citizen assemblies to address contentious issues like abortion and same-sex marriage. The assemblies' recommendations led to constitutional referendums that changed the country's laws on both issues. What's remarkable is that these changes came after decades of political stalemate—the citizen assembly process broke the logjam.

Challenges and Limitations

Citizen assemblies aren't perfect, and they're not a replacement for other democratic institutions. They face real challenges that need to be addressed.

First, running a high-quality citizen assembly takes time, money, and expertise. Members

need compensation for their time, facilitators must be hired, experts must be brought in, and materials must be prepared. This investment is worthwhile but requires commitment from governments or foundations.

There's also the question of authority. Some assemblies are purely advisory, making recommendations that officials can ignore. Others have more direct power, with their recommendations automatically going to a public vote or being implemented by the government. Finding the right balance of power is crucial.

Another challenge is ensuring that assemblies truly represent the population. Even with careful selection, some groups may be underrepresented if they're less likely to respond to invitations or participate in public processes. Extra efforts may be needed to ensure full representation.

Finally, there's the issue of scale. Most successful assemblies have addressed specific issues at the local or state level. Applying this approach to national issues in a country as large and diverse as the United States presents additional challenges.

The Future of Citizen Assemblies in America

Despite these challenges, citizen assemblies hold tremendous promise for American democracy. They offer a way to address complex issues that have become bogged down in partisan politics—from climate change to immigration to healthcare.

They also provide a middle path between direct democracy (where all citizens vote on all issues) and representative democracy (where we elect others to make decisions for us). Citizen assemblies combine the inclusiveness of direct democracy with the deliberation and learning that complex issues require.

For citizen assemblies to flourish in America, we need governments willing to invest in the process and share decision-making power with citizens. We need organizations skilled at facilitating deliberative processes. And we need citizens willing to participate when called upon.

The good news is that Americans have a long tradition of civic participation. From town meetings in New England to community organizing in urban neighborhoods, we've always found ways to work together on common problems. Citizen assemblies build on this tradition while bringing it into the 21st century.

Your Role in Democratic Renewal

You might be wondering what this means for you personally. How can you support or participate in citizen assemblies?

If you receive an invitation to participate in a citizen assembly, consider accepting. Your perspective is valuable, even if—especially if—you don't consider yourself politically active. The strength of citizen assemblies lies in bringing together diverse voices, including those not usually heard in political discussions.

If you're not selected for an assembly, you can still engage with the process. Follow the assembly's progress. Attend public sessions. Review their recommendations with an open mind. Even if you disagree with some conclusions, appreciate the thoughtful process behind them.

You can also advocate for citizen assemblies in your community. Talk to local officials about using this approach for difficult issues. Many communities are looking for new ways to engage citizens, and officials may be open to experimenting with this model.

Democracy works best when citizens are engaged, informed, and empowered. Citizen assemblies offer a promising path toward this ideal—not replacing our current institutions, but strengthening them by bringing the wisdom of everyday Americans directly into the heart of our public life.

As Thomas Jefferson said,

"I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves."

Citizen assemblies put this principle into practice, reminding us that in a true democracy, the people don't just choose their leaders—they actively participate in solving the challenges we face together.

Citizens' Assemblies continue this legacy, empowering us to address contemporary challenges with unity and resolve.

Establishing a Citizens' Assembly requires resources—organizing meetings, facilitating discussions, and supporting participants.

This investment pales in comparison to the cost of inaction or misguided policies. By harnessing the collective insight of our fellow citizens, we pave the way for solutions that are both effective and reflective of our shared values⁴¹.

⁴¹ <https://newamerica.org/political-reform/briefs/comparing-citizens-assemblies-across-the-united-states/>

Now is the time for us to rise to the occasion:

1. **Build a Coalition:** Gather like-minded community members, local organizations, and stakeholders who are passionate about participatory governance.
2. **Define the Scope:** Identify the specific issues or challenges your assembly will address, ensuring they resonate with the broader community.
3. **Seek Guidance:** Utilize resources like the "How to Run a Citizens' Assembly" handbook to understand the intricacies of organizing and facilitating the process⁴².
4. **Secure Funding:** Explore grants, local government support, or community fundraising to cover necessary expenses.
5. **Engage the Community:** Promote the initiative through local media, town halls, and social platforms to ensure transparency and encourage participation.

Imagine the transformative power of numerous Citizens' Assemblies operating across the nation.

Each assembly, rooted in its unique community, contributing valuable insights and solutions.

Collectively, they create a mosaic of informed perspectives that can guide state and national legislators.

This grassroots involvement ensures that policies reflect the true needs and desires of "We the People," revitalizing our democracy from the ground up.

⁴² <https://www.demsoc.org/public-square/articles/how-to-run-a-citizens-assembly-handbook>