

## Citizens' assemblies work fine - in theory

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Associate Professor Anne Twomey from Sydney Law School writes how citizens' assemblies are a good idea but don't work in real life.

Will a citizens' assembly help build consensus in Australia on how to deal with climate change? On overseas experience, probably not.

The point of a citizens' assembly is to attempt to ascertain how the community, if fully informed, would prefer to deal with a difficult political or social problem. A broad cross-section of voters is randomly chosen and given information and access to experts who explain the issues. The voters deliberate on the problem and recommend a way of resolving it.

Some have complained we already have a citizens' assembly, the Parliament. A citizens' assembly would be different, however. It is intended to replicate the ideal electorate - one fully informed and able to learn from experts and debate the issues with fellow citizens before deciding.

In real life most voters have neither the time nor the motivation to study every policy and evaluate and debate its likely effects. They take their voting cues from other indicators, such as the parties, bodies or commentators that support particular policies.

The charge of duplicating Parliament is closer to the mark. Citizens' assemblies are most commonly used to deal with subjects in which

politicians have a [conflict of interest](#), such as electoral reform. As MPs have a vested interest in retaining the electoral system by which they were elected or changing it to their party's advantage, places such as British Columbia, Ontario and the Netherlands have used citizens' assemblies to deliberate on electoral reform.

[Climate change](#), however, does not raise the same conflicts of interest so it is less apparent why the Parliament cannot deal with it. Perhaps it is an admission of the unfortunate truth that parliamentary votes are nearly always based upon party dictates, rather than an objective study of information, expert guidance and genuine deliberation.

So yes, a citizens' assembly is likely to come to a better informed result because of its different process - but this gives rise to the inherent difficulty in trying to use one to assess or build consensus. Unless it is given such status and trust by the people that its views will be accepted and change attitudes, it will not reflect or build a consensus. It might indicate how an extremely well-informed electorate might decide but it will not influence the real electorate.

Faith in citizens' assemblies is usually undermined from the start. They can never be truly representative - invitations might be sent on a random basis but the people prepared to attend are by definition self-selecting. They have sufficient interest in politics to consider it worthwhile and time and resources to devote to it.

As the Prime Minister has suggested, the citizens' assembly would last a year and involve people all around Australia. Participants would need to travel extensively and devote many weekends to assembly work. In Ontario, for example, the Citizens' Assembly met for two weekends every month for six months. Many people, including shift workers and those with family commitments, could not be involved.

The second main criticism of citizens' assemblies is that the information provided to them and the types of experts appointed to guide them are biased towards a particular outcome. The participants are often seen as being manipulated by ruling elites. There is commonly criticism of the narrowness of the agenda and the inability of the assembly to approach the problem in a different manner.

The biggest criticism is that they usually fail to achieve anything, other than to educate the participants themselves. Where the assembly's role is purely advisory, the government will most likely leave its report to suffer a lingering death of neglect if it conflicts with what the government wants to do. (Remember the much-hyped 2020 summit.)

If, on the other hand, it is used to initiate substantial change, experience shows a referendum on such a change is likely to fail as it did in Ontario and British Columbia (twice). Why? Because a citizens' assembly turns the ordinary voters who participate into a well-informed elite. It does not transform the electorate or build a consensus in the community.

Worthy as a citizens' assembly might be, if the purpose of this proposal is to build a consensus, then much more will need to be done.

Provided by University of Sydney

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