

Citizens' assemblies: how to bring the wisdom of the public to bear on the climate emergency

June 27 2019, by Graham Smith



Credit: Vincent M.A. Janssen from Pexels

A new form of politics is gaining steam as a solution to the climate crisis. Six parliamentary committees in the UK are to [commission a](#)

[citizens' assembly](#), in which randomly selected citizens will consider how to combat climate breakdown and achieve the pathway to net zero emissions.

This unexpected move complements increasing experimentation with assemblies across the world. Having struggled to realise necessary action on [climate](#) breakdown through traditional routes, citizen assemblies could well help governments kick-start the tough but urgently needed steps to safeguard a healthy and stable world.

In a nutshell, these assemblies bring together 50 or more citizens over a number of days or weeks to learn about a particular policy challenge, deliberate together and recommend how to deal with it. Citizens are selected to reflect the demographic diversity of the population. The process is typically facilitated by an independent and apolitical organisation, which brings in experts across a wide range of disciplines, as well as competing interest groups and the voices of those personally affected by the issue in question.

A [growing evidence base](#) suggests that this form of participatory politics works. The balanced and structured process of deliberation results in more informed preferences. A requirement to justify opinions, for example, counteracts the bias of prior beliefs. Opinions tend to be neither polarised nor uniform, with participants developing increased respect and understanding for opposing viewpoints.

Such a respectful and deliberative context gives rise to considered judgements that can cut through political deadlock on even the most complex and contentious issues. Most famously, Ireland used such an assembly to decide on the constitutional status of abortion. Bridging charged emotions on both sides, the assembly [confidently recommended liberalisation](#), which was backed by a national referendum and enshrined into law.

Evidence from citizens' assemblies and similar deliberative processes [suggests](#) that the broader public have confidence in the judgements of such bodies, especially when compared to traditional political institutions. This is true even of populist-minded voters, who appreciate that decisions are being made by citizens like themselves.

Fixing the climate crisis

As a particularly [politically divisive](#) issue, citizens' assemblies could be vital in uniting populations around the challenges of responding to the climate breakdown—but the devil is in the detail. Past assemblies offer valuable lessons in how they can most effectively address the climate emergency.

Ireland is the only country to have [already run](#) a national citizens' assembly that addressed climate breakdown. The assembly considered a wide and diverse range of issues from transport to peat extraction—but only had two weekends to do so. This was not enough time to consider these challenges in depth, and made it easier for the government [to drop](#) more controversial proposals, such as the significant reduction of agricultural emissions.

Given the diverse areas of policy that the climate crisis cuts across, it would be a herculean task for a single assembly to deal with. The amount of time it would take to consider issues in enough depth would place excessive demands on the selected citizens.

Aspects of the [climate crisis](#) can be treated individually, as successful [citizen](#) assemblies and other similar deliberative models in the [US](#), [Australia](#), [Canada](#), and the Polish city of [Gdansk](#) have shown.

An alternative would be to run separate assemblies in parallel, each considering a digestible chunk of the agenda, with time set aside for

assemblies to coordinate with each other when cross-cutting issues emerge. This has never been done before, but nor have humans ever encountered a problem of the scale of climate breakdown.

Empowering citizens

More radically, citizens' assemblies on the climate emergency may need to be empowered to make binding decisions, not just advisory recommendations. Politicians are in a bind: they know that they need to act, but are constrained by their concerns over a public backlash and vested social and economic interests that profit from the status quo. Radical policy suggestions emerging from these assemblies are likely to be watered down—as may have been the case in Ireland, whose strong agricultural lobby cannot be ignored.

Empowering assemblies could break political deadlocks on climate. In Poland for example, activist [Marcin Gerwin successfully persuaded](#) city mayors to implement any decision supported by 80% of an assembly, with the mayor having discretion when support is below that threshold. Resulting changes have for instance helped the city [respond faster](#) to severe flooding.

Social movement Extinction Rebellion has been [quick to criticise](#) the proposed assembly in the UK for lacking such power. As it stands, the plans fall short of the direct action movement's [demand](#) for a citizens' assembly to have authority to tackle both the climate and biodiversity emergencies.

But the UK citizens' assembly on climate breakdown can be seen as a positive development. The details of how focused the task will be, including whether the assembly will be empowered to consider a more demanding transition than the government's current 2050 target, are yet to be made public. Nor do we know how much time the assembly will

have to deliberate.

And while it is primarily structured to [inform parliamentary committees](#), its high profile means it could make a real difference to climate policy. If successful, it may well give rise to the type of empowered citizens' assemblies that bring the wisdom of citizens fully to bear on the climate and ecological emergency.

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