



Who holds the power? Challenges and opportunities for Citizens' Assemblies: A briefing for policymakers and practitioners

Key messages:

- To be truly effective, Climate Citizens' Assemblies (CAs) need to be able to meaningfully grapple with the systemic complexity of climate change. This means challenging some of the principles upon which most CAs are typically founded – in particular power.
- Assemblies that are too limited in scope give too much power – often unseen – to convenors. Citizens should have more power to set the agendas of assemblies.
- Rather than being tightly rational spaces, CAs should embrace people's emotional responses to climate change, to foster the trust needed to truly debate the complex trade-offs involved. Disagreement is inevitable and to be welcomed.
- Not all conclusions need to depend on the benevolence of state actors. A galvanising CA can empower participants, stakeholders and communities to demand change and act independently.
- One-off assemblies are valuable, but permanent deliberative chambers would be a better way to grapple with the complexity and scale of transformation required and ensure citizens have an ongoing 'seat at the table'.



Introduction

Systemic changes are needed to tackle climate and ecological crises, but policy and debate are too often artificially siloed. One of the main reasons progress is slow is because these crises are interconnected, requiring complex trade-offs and systemic solutions, but not often dealt with as such.

CAs could be an important way to navigate complex systemic changes and the trade-offs required. This briefing highlights some of the key design features that need to be got right – in particular, regarding who gets to decide what the CA is about and what happens as a result of CAs.

This briefing is based on a **CAST report**: ‘How can citizens’ assemblies help navigate the systemic transformations required by the polycrisis? Learnings and recommendations for practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and civil society – CAST guidelines.’

Who holds the power?

What is a CA allowed to debate? How are issues debated? Who is obliged to do *what* as a result of the CA deliberation? The people who get to decide these and other questions have huge power over the CA, including the terms and scope of debate. This power should be recognised and, often, challenged.

There are three types of decision-making space, summarised in the Power Cube framework as:

- *Closed spaces*, where the public isn't involved in government decisions (e.g. urgent responses to emergencies such as the initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic)
- *Invited spaces*, in which citizens are asked to participate by various kinds of authorities, generally within set parameters. (e.g. This is the 'standard' model of CA mandated by power holders such as legislative or executive bodies)
- *Claimed or created spaces*, where less powerful actors come together to initiate processes and act on their own agendas, independent of institutionalised power-holders (e.g. protests and citizens' assemblies organised independently of governments)

Invited spaces can be effective in helping build consensus and explore public sentiment around somewhat complex issues. But much of the power in these spaces sits with those who set the agendas, frame the questions, or decide how it is acceptable to debate. This power, which is often concealed or invisible, can result in systemic issues being kept off the table or challenging conclusions being ignored as 'out of scope'. For example, participants in the French Citizens Climate Convention were supportive of alternative models to the dominant GDP growth paradigm, but the notion of degrowth was dismissed by President Macron (See Box 1: The degrowth discursive context of the Convention Citoyenne Climat (page 16)).

Invisible power affects CAs in even deeper ways, such as by influencing citizens' learned expectations of what it means to 'participate', including how 'rational' (vs emotional) one is expected to be in such a space. Also important is the broader cultural milieu that can affect how issues are framed and conceived in the first place.

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These limitations frustrate many existing politicians. [Many MPs in the UK](#) recognise the need for systemic and transformative climate action but feel constrained by the terms of debate permissible within party politics and short-term election cycles. These constraints play into a wider public cynicism about whether politicians will make the big decisions needed to address climate, ecological and other systemic crises. CAs could be a way to help break this deadlock and rebuild trust. By acknowledging the challenges to 'closed' decision-making spaces, policymakers could present CAs as a way to better address complex critical issues.

Importantly, no one-off CA can truly challenge and address complex systemic issues. Surrounding democratic structures are crucial. Politics and policy need to value deep and ongoing democratic involvement across a range of spaces. This includes vibrant social movements, media and education, which can collectively ask the 'difficult questions' and hold policymakers to account.

Alternative models such as the [Global Assembly](#) challenge and invert invisible power. These alternative 'bottom-up' CAs, started outside the halls of power, can be more open and creative, enabling a diversity of citizens to take part and, importantly, set the CAs' terms. By working closely with social movements and grassroots civil society, models such as these have the potential to unlock democratic innovation and better connect to people's real lives and sense of 'fairness'.

Recommendations

1) Value controversy and emotional engagement

Political disagreement within CAs are both inevitable and important. The design of CAs should welcome these disagreements and 'lean into them' – digging into tensions, world views and implicit values to understand the reality of trade-offs. Policymakers should also recognise the importance of emotional engagement in deliberative processes. Incorporating techniques to foster emotional engagement, such as sharing personal stories and experiences, can lead to more meaningful and constructive discussions.

2) Invest substantial effort into engaging the broader public

It's important to engage the public in the rationales for, findings from and processes of CAs to strengthen their mandate. This can look like, for example, structured outreach initiatives and involving assembly members in media engagement to share their experiences directly with the public.

3) Give citizens the power to set the agenda and process of CAs

This can involve experimenting with a two-stage approach, in which citizens explore and narrow the scope of the CA themselves, before deciding its remit and process. This initial learning stage could focus on helping citizens understand the interconnections between climate, social and ecological systems, and explore the reality of political and economic trade-offs – to increase the chances of the CA coming up with genuinely transformative recommendations commensurate with the challenges faced.

4) Commit to acting on CAs' recommendations

The mandate for CAs critically depends on their conclusions having weight and leading to real change. Policymakers shouldn't be able to simply pick and choose the conclusions they like while ducking the most transformative, but 'hardest', recommendations. Some ways to strengthen the mandate of CAs include giving CAs the power to make binding recommendations and requiring politicians or civil servants to publicly respond to each recommendation, adopting each or justifying why not.

5) Go beyond 'invited' CAs towards participatory governance

CAs with strong mandates from public institutions cannot necessarily achieve transformative action on the climate crisis. They may have a direct connection to power but are likely to be limited in what they can ask that power to do. Assemblies outside of policy-making, initiated by diverse groups, offer potential for broader discussions and innovative ideas – for example, movements advocating for deliberative processes on economic system change suggest that there is a growing openness for conversations about post-growth or well-being economies.

Further reading

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- Youngs, R. (2022). Closing the Gap Between Citizen Participation and Mainstream Politics. *Carnegie Europe*. Available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/research/2022/12/closing-the-gap-between-citizen-participation-and-mainstream-politics?lang=en¢er=europe>

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