

Citizens' assemblies

A promising form of direct democracy?

Erin Miller reviews the concept and use of citizens' assemblies

EXAM LINKS

- **Edexcel** Component 1 Topic 1: UK politics.
- **AQA** 3.1.2.1: Democracy and participation.

Citizens' assemblies have their roots in the Athenian *boules* (councils) of Ancient Greece. They are often compared with jury service, owing to the random selection of participants. The Electoral Reform website describes citizens' assemblies as 'a proxy for what it would be like if everyone had the tools and time to discuss and debate the important issues'. In a citizens' assembly, a group of citizens come together to learn, discuss and make (non-binding) recommendations about a proposed policy. The assemblies are impartial on the issue at hand, and independent from political parties. They can occur at a national or local level.

In the UK's first-past-the-post system, where representation in terms of seats won is not produced, it is even more important to have forums such as these. Arguably, citizens' assemblies offer a fresh and exciting form of direct democracy, and a more in-depth way of involving citizens in the decision-making processes of government.

Box 1 Citizens' assemblies in action

The first citizens' assembly in the modern era was held in Canada in 2004, where citizens deliberated over proposed changes to the electoral system.

One of the most noteworthy examples of a modern citizens' assembly comes from Ireland in 2016, where citizens recommended revising the Irish constitution to repeal the amendment which protected the right to life of an unborn fetus (this amendment had made abortion illegal). At the time, it was felt that the citizens' assembly did not adequately represent the views of the Irish people. However, 64% of the assembly voted for terminations without restrictions, and when the question was later posed to Irish citizens in a referendum, 66.4% voted in favour of repealing the legislation banning abortion. The assembly was therefore highly representative of the Irish public's point of view, suggesting that citizens' assemblies are an excellent way to ascertain the public mood.

The British Parliament commissioned its first citizens' assembly 2018: the Citizens' Assembly on Social Care. Such assemblies appear to be gaining popularity on a local level too, with 23 local citizens' assemblies held in 2021 in the UK.

Box 2 Advantages

In a modern state with millions of citizens, it is difficult to reach people and gauge opinions. Citizens' assemblies offer a way of understanding public feeling about important issues. Because they are consultative, rather than the binary 'yes/no' question offered in referendums, they can offer deeper insight into the public mood, which can lead to better decision-making.

The regular use of citizens' assemblies would increase public participation in democracy. If, like with jury service, citizens' assemblies were understood to be a civic duty, then more voices would be heard, having an impact on the decisions that affect us all.

Although participants are selected randomly, stratified sampling for citizens' assemblies ensures representation, and sampling can occur for socio-demographic representation or for a range of attitudes towards a particular subject. This is advantageous because it ensures that a diverse range of people and viewpoints will be considered in the decision-making process.

Regular use of citizens' assemblies is likely to build trust between decision makers and the population, because people will feel that their voices matter and are heard. The involvement of citizens would create a better-informed public.

Box 3 Disadvantages

Some people claim that it is impossible for citizens' assemblies to capture the full gamut of public opinion, even with stratified sampling. Furthermore, the refusal rate is high, meaning that people who are interested in politics are more likely to accept an invitation to participate in an assembly. This could lead to an over-representation of activists.

The financial cost of coordinating citizens' assemblies is high. To fully understand a complex policy issue, experts need time to brief members of the assembly. The high fees of experts, hiring an appropriate venue and paying the expenses of the members of the assembly all contribute to substantial running costs.

The members of a citizens' assembly may lack competency. Being able to understand complicated policy issues requires significant experience and expertise, which randomly-selected members of the public are unlikely to have. Therefore, members of the public may not make the best recommendations.

ACTIVITIES

- 1 Compare citizens' assemblies with referendums. Which do you think is more effective?
- 2 Do the advantages of citizens' assemblies outweigh the disadvantages?
- 3 Do you think that citizens' assemblies should ever be involved in direct decision making, and should they override government decisions?

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