

Exploring An Innovative Approach to Democratic Governance

A Funder's Guide to Citizens' Assemblies

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[New America](#) pioneers a new kind of think-and-action tank: a civic platform that connects a research institute, technology lab, solutions network, media hub, and public forum. New America incubates ideas, policies, and solutions for the new America. New America's [Co-Governance Project](#) is researching and identifying the best innovations in democratic revitalization by engaging cross-sectoral actors to understand what kinds of institutions, organizations, and policies promote inclusive civic engagement and deepen belonging.



[Democracy Funders Network](#) (DFN) is a cross-ideological learning and action community for funders concerned about the health of American democracy. DFN is a community for funders who want to learn together, build and strengthen relationships, and ultimately identify opportunities for coordination and collaboration.

Together, DFN and New America created this guide by drawing on interviews and publications from assembly practitioners, funders, researchers, and technological innovators.

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I. Introduction

For decades, American democracy has largely operated on a status quo governance model, despite the [continued](#) decline in Americans' [trust](#) in government efficacy and efficiency. While tweaks have been made around the margins, this moment in our nation's history calls out for reimagining how our democracy might operate to rebuild public trust, break through ideological polarization, and improve government responsiveness to the communities it serves. Public frustration has reached a boiling point, which we are currently seeing play out through aggressive reductions in the federal workforce, prosecution of public servants, and roll-backs in government rulemaking and oversight responsibilities. Even as we see some of these decades-long trends of declining trust play out in harmful ways, innovators around the country are exploring how to make democracy more responsive at the state and local levels — radically reimagining what democratic governance can look like.

For too many Americans, the prospect of engaging with lawmakers about the important issues in their lives is either logistically inaccessible, or unsatisfactory in result.

A citizens' assembly¹ is a model that re-envision the roles and responsibilities of the public by bringing together an intentionally-selected, representative group of community members to engage in a structured [deliberation](#) about pressing community issues.

The deliberation then culminates with the assembly members generating actionable policy recommendations for lawmakers to implement. Citizens' assemblies belong in the broader field of [collaborative governance](#), an umbrella term for public engagement that shifts governing power and builds trust by bringing together government officials and community members to collaborate on policy outcomes through shared decision-making. Collaborative governance as a model traces back to ancient Athenian democracy, where citizens were allocated to governing positions using random selection.

In the last ten years, communities, governing bodies, democracy practitioners, and philanthropic stakeholders in the United States have begun experimenting with hosting citizens' assemblies, drawing on international momentum.² To name a few global examples, citizens' assemblies in the [United Kingdom](#) have tackled issues around climate change, public transportation, and post-pandemic recovery; [Canadian assemblies](#) have explored provincial-level electoral reforms; [Ireland](#) has convened assemblies on marriage equality and abortion access issues. The results³ of these assemblies include increased public trust in governance, expanded use of the citizens' assembly model, the institutionalization of the assembly process within government, and the passage of more durable and representative policy reforms.

This funder guide was created in the spirit of DFN's commitment to education and field-building in promising but lesser-known areas of the democracy field. Our attention was piqued as a small number of funders in our network grew excited about the potential of citizens' assemblies to catalyze democratic innovation in the U.S. and were modeling what it looks like to come together in the spirit of learning and action. We chose to partner with New America to spotlight the citizens' assembly model in more depth — not because the model is superior or some kind of panacea — but because exploring a model like this will provide donors with a tangible and actionable example of democratic innovation in a time when the field must find a way to keep experimentation and imagination alive.

II. Understanding Collaborative Governance

[Collaborative governance](#), often shortened to co-governance, has the potential to reinvigorate democratic engagement by amplifying community members' voices on particular policies and helping decisionmakers build more enduring policies. Many of these models incorporate technology to allow digital or hybrid participation and lower the barriers to participation. Some of the key differences across models include:

- **how participants are selected (e.g., through sortition (“drawing straws”) or volunteers);**
- **the structure of engagement (e.g., structured deliberation with or without experts);** **2**
- **the length of the engagement (e.g., compressed or extended); and**
- **the outcomes (e.g., binding outcomes or recommendations to the governing body).**

Archon Fung (2006) has a [framework](#) of public participation which includes: 1) who participates; 2) how participants communicate with one another and make decisions; and 3) how discussions are linked with policy or public actors.⁴ Many of these deliberative experiments fall under the category of mini-publics, a term coined by political scientist Robert Dahl (1989).⁵ In a mini-public, a small group of representative citizens are brought together to learn, deliberate, and inform public decision-making. In essence, recreating the small scale of Athenian [democracy](#).

In [Table 2](#) of the Appendix, we summarize the two main categories of co-governance models.

- In the first category, citizens inform policy recommendations and budgetary expenditures. Examples include citizens' assembly, citizens' jury, consensus conference, participatory budgeting, and city observatory.
- In the second category, citizens are surveyed for their opinions on policy proposals. Examples include citizens' dialogue, deliberative poll or survey, and citizens' initiative review.

At a time when traditional governing processes often fail to engage with community sentiment and foster public trust, co-governance models have the power to impact individuals, communities, and governing institutions.

III. The Citizens' Assembly: A Burgeoning Model of Co-Governance in the United States

Collaborative governance encompasses a wide [variety](#) of representative deliberative processes that share the fundamental element of bringing community representatives into government decision-making. Citizens' assemblies have demonstrated that deeper public engagement and deliberation can result in durable policies that are well-tailored to the needs of a particular community. Funders deeply engaged in this field also posit that this model can help address a larger reality that plagues our democracy: many political and administrative policymaking bodies face structural obstacles to consistently and effectively delivering solutions and resources for the public good.

International precedents have inspired localized American experimentation with citizens' assemblies. Progress has been shaped and strengthened by the work of many stakeholders to implement citizens' assemblies, research and teach about best practices, host trainings and convenings, and/or disseminate knowledge within the field. Below is a non-exhaustive overview of some of the nonprofit leaders in the space:

- [The American Public Trust](#) (practitioner/knowledge sharing)
- [Assemble the Field](#) (convener/knowledge sharing)
- [Civic Genius/National Civic League](#) (implementer)
- [DemocracyNext](#) (research/action)
- [Democracy Rising](#) (practitioner/research)
- [FIDE](#) (research/trainings)
- [Hannah Arendt Center at Bard College](#) (trainings/action)
- [Healthy Democracy](#) (implementer)
- [Local Policy Lab](#) (research/trainings)
- [MassLBP](#) (implementer)
- [New America's Political Reform Program](#) (research/convener)
- [Partners for Dignity & Rights](#) (research/advocacy)
- [Unify America](#) (implementer)
- [YOUunify](#) (implementer)

There are also informal networks of people convening, network weaving, and organizing, such as the CADA network.

To date, a small number of American funders have focused on the production and execution of individual citizens' assemblies, but the nascent nature of this field has limited the ability for case-making and evidence-building. Many funders are disinclined to invest without additional proof of concept, fueling a chicken-or-egg dynamic where critical innovation cannot occur without more proof of results. In some European countries, citizens' assemblies have been institutionalized within governing bodies. While conditions are not yet ripe for this kind of institutionalization in America, at this moment philanthropy may be uniquely poised to catalyze innovation in this field.

For funders interested in increasing the ability of government to deliver results — and therefore deepen trust and positive perceptions of government functioning among citizens — innovation at the edges of current models is essential. Funders interested in citizens’ assemblies can invest in jurisdictions across the country that are planning and hosting citizens’ assemblies, as well as the researchers who are studying the results and impacts of recent assemblies. In later sections, we delve into the nuances of adapting this model to the U.S. context and how critical philanthropic investments are at this juncture.

The Elements at the Heart of a Citizens’ Assembly

[DemNext](#) and [FIDE](#) have produced illustrative, robust guides on the citizens’ assembly process. In [Table 3](#) the Appendix, we analyze the main players in a citizens’ assembly, and how their participation can transform their experience and role in the governing process. While debates exist within this field over the precise program design that constitutes a citizens’ assembly, for funders considering investment in democratic innovation, a clear working definition provides an essential foundation:

A citizens’ assembly is a democratic process that brings together a representative group of community members to engage in structured deliberation about public issues and generate recommendations that influence policy decisions.⁶

EXAMPLES OF AMERICAN CITIZENS’ ASSEMBLIES	
	In 2022, the city of Petaluma convened the first municipal citizens’ assembly in California, bringing together 36 community members to deliberate on the future of the city’s publicly-owned fairgrounds. Residents engaged enthusiastically with the process, and 90 hours of learning and deliberation resulted in three reports with specific recommendations heard by the city council on the fairground’s future. Healthy Democracy and DemNext were involved in the execution of this citizens’ assembly. The Berggruen Institute commissioned an analysis of the Petaluma assembly.
	Beginning in 2023, Montrose, Colorado hosted a citizens’ assembly on childcare access . This topic was selected based on public presentations and stakeholder conversations. A public lottery randomly selected 64 representatives to serve. Participants were provided financial, technological, and childcare supports to aid their full participation. Participants developed policy proposals and reviewed proposals from community members. Ultimately, five proposals received support from over two-thirds of the assembly. Afterwards, local leaders publicly committed to implementing several of these proposals and to further researching others. Unify America was involved in the execution of this citizens’ assembly.
	In 2024, Deschutes County, Oregon convened a citizens’ assembly to address youth homelessness. The project was endorsed by a bi-partisan coalition of local officials, including the Deschutes County Commission and the Bend City Council. It was supported by local stakeholders including Oregon State University, Youth Advisory Board, Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council, and the Regional Housing Council. The Central Oregon Civic Action Project subsequently launched an effort to sustain this work. Healthy Democracy was involved in the execution of this citizens’ assembly.

With this definition as our foundation, we examine the three core components that make citizens' assemblies an effective model for reimagining American democracy: (1) genuine public engagement; (2) in-depth policy learning and deliberation; and (3) direct ties to decisionmakers and policy outcomes. Funders and practitioners deeply engaged in this space have open, ongoing debates over the precise contours of these components: the required duration of an assembly; the frequency of assembly convenings; the method of selecting participants; and the required response from the governing body. We work to note throughout this guide the nuances within these debates.

1) GENUINE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Assemblies bring together a cross-section of the [community](#) in which they take place. Rarely-heard voices, including those that cannot vote in elections, carry equal weight to regular public contributors. There are different models for selecting this representative group. Some assemblies use pure random selection through a [lottery](#) or sortition, while others strategically oversample certain demographics. For some practitioners in this field, sortition is an essential and non-negotiable element to ensure a neutral sample that accurately reflects the makeup of the surrounding community. Others believe oversampling for greater representation of a particular category of individuals adds value and legitimacy by ensuring the voices of those most impacted by the policy question are well-represented.

Sortition begins with sending out a large number of invitations from the convening authority to the community. The second phase involves narrowing down responses to a representative community sample. This can include sorting for diversity across age, gender, race/ethnicity, educational level, and neighborhoods. While selection methods vary, the goal remains constant: creating a group that reflects the community. Having a representative group helps bolster the legitimacy of this group in making policy recommendations on behalf of the larger community.

Technology can be deployed to aid with the recruitment and sorting of community members. Some community members may also benefit from the use of technology to facilitate hybrid in-person and online public engagement. To remove barriers to participation and ensure equitable representation, assemblies often provide childcare, cover transportation costs, and, most importantly, compensate participants for their time.

Deciding between sortition or oversampling boils down to finding the right tool for a particular assembly. Sortition removes civil society from the process, which reduces the influence of special interests but can also require more downstream effort to build political support for the assembly's recommendations. Models that rely on intermediaries or oversampling of impacted communities may come with existing infrastructure to support the assembly's recommendations, but it does not create the same deliberative space for a cross-sector of a community to engage in conversation.

In the recent Deschutes County Civic Assembly on Youth Homelessness, 12,750 invites were initially sent, which culminated in 25 participants that reflected the racial, religious, and socioeconomic diversity of the community. Over four and half days of deliberation spread over several weekends, assembly members received the equivalent of \$15 per hour for their time, transportation, and childcare.

2) IN-DEPTH POLICY LEARNING AND DELIBERATION

The starting point for a citizens' assembly is creating community buy-in to convene around a pressing, relevant issue. It is key to frame the issue in a manner that allows for genuine deliberation, while also ensuring the responding government has authority and a commitment to act. Assemblies commonly address land use, housing, transportation, and city charter reform issues. But they have also been used to tackle thornier issues like climate, end-of-life care, abortion access, and homelessness.

Assemblies provide participants with the opportunity to share their own expertise and collectively explore various sources of information. Participants [build literacy](#) around both the issues and the process of policymaking. Assembly facilitators play a crucial role in curating materials and expert testimony so participants learn from a diversity of perspectives, with no one voice dominating. An effort is often made to translate technical information into accessible language.

At the heart of every assembly is structured deliberation that moves beyond surface-level debate to meaningful dialogue. Professional, unbiased facilitators curate the experts and educational materials and foster learning environments where participants deepen their trust and understanding of each other. This is crucial to participants being able to explore different perspectives, challenge their own and others' assumptions, and work toward common ground. Having this opportunity to learn and act across lines of difference can help break down polarization within a community. Assembly participants take direct, hands-on control of [crafting solutions](#). They learn how to wrestle with complex trade-offs and craft workable solutions.

3) DIRECT TIES TO DECISIONMAKERS AND POLICY OUTCOMES

Assemblies ideally provide the public with a direct pathway to partnering with government on policy choices. Many governments already have mandates to devote staff and financial resources to community engagement and public input. Since this is a newer innovation, interested stakeholders may need to initiate conversations with lawmakers about how citizens' assemblies are designed and funded, as well as the potential for impact.

For some funders and practitioners in this field, it is essential that assemblies possess a transparency and accountability [mechanism](#) where government commits upfront to seriously considering and acting on recommendations. When assemblies lack a direct route to policy change, participation may not feel distinct from the one-sided experience of regular public comment opportunities. When governing bodies disregard assembly recommendations, it can further cement public distrust in governing institutions.

While there is clarity on the overarching core components for a citizens' assembly, the particulars of these components require further examples, research, and analysis. Philanthropic investments in hosting additional assemblies and funding analysis of their results can help develop the learning agenda that may someday lead to evidence-based best practices for the assembly field:

- How many days, at minimum, should an assembly ideally last?
- How much time, at minimum, should be allotted for deliberation and policy development?
- How many community members, at minimum, should be brought together in an assembly?
- How much in-person deliberation versus technology-facilitated engagement is required for success?

Adapting International Precedents to the American Context

Other countries have been at the forefront of experimenting with co-governance models. Citizens' assemblies have demonstrated results internationally, particularly in [Europe](#), while innovations in [participatory budgeting](#) began in the Global South. OECD has [charted](#) which deliberative models have been used across the world, as well as regional trends.

In some European jurisdictions, citizens' assemblies have been institutionalized within governing bodies:

- **France:** In [Paris](#), the city government established the Citizens' Assembly, which is a permanent deliberative body of 100 Parisians representing a cross-section of the city based on gender, age, educational level, and neighborhood.
- **Belgium:** The [Ostbelgien](#) region established the permanent Citizens' Council to act as a third democratic institution, alongside the legislative and executive branches.
- **Germany:** Germany has hosted ten nationwide citizens' assemblies since 2019, and has moved from implementing assemblies through nonprofits to hosting them within [the German government](#).

By moving citizens' assemblies from one-off experiments into institutional homes with stable government funding sources, these countries demonstrate how assemblies can become integral parts of democratic infrastructure and policymaking processes.

While there is precedent to draw on from the European context, adapting citizens' assemblies to meet local needs requires navigating a complex web of cultural, political, and structural factors within the American context. This complexity is not a dealbreaker, but there are unique considerations that must inform how this model is developed and implemented in the United States.

- **Deep partisan divides:** The United States faces significantly higher levels of political polarization than many European countries.⁷ Issues that generate straightforward discussion elsewhere — like climate policy — often trigger intense partisan responses here. This reality requires careful attention to issue framing and process design to prevent assemblies from being perceived through a partisan lens.
- **Cultural relationship to government authority:** While Americans currently have [historically low trust](#) in government institutions overall, they express comparatively higher trust in local government. Americans also trust government less than [the citizens of many other democracies](#). Even community members with greater faith in government may be rightfully doubtful of its ability to meaningfully act. Americans' skepticism towards government, while rooted in valuable democratic traditions, can create additional hurdles for government-supported deliberative processes. Assembly designs must acknowledge and work with this inherent distrust rather than try to simply override or ignore it.
- **Geographic and demographic complexity:** Americans have dramatically different experiences of democracy based on socioeconomic status and racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural identities. Americans are also spread across a large country with great variation in terrain, topography, and demographics. This diversity shapes communities' views on what issues government should be prioritizing, and what resources or solutions government should offer. This national diversity is also complicated by intentional or historic [sorting](#)

into homogenous [communities](#) across different personal identities and ideologies. Such a context reinforces the need for intentional assembly designs that take this into account and offer opportunities for meaningful deliberation.

- **Decentralized federalism:** Lawmaking and governing power in the United States is spread across a constellation of lawmakers operating at the city, county, state, and federal levels, each vested with the power to make laws within their domain. Government [funding](#) and investments are [spread across](#) this decentralized system of government, with varying sources of revenue, mandates, and authorizations. Addressing a community or policy issue requires navigating this distributed system in order to reach the decisionmakers with the authority or funding to implement solutions. This decentralized structure provides ripe opportunities for experimentation at the local level, where public trust in government is [the highest](#). Cities, states, exurban, suburban, and rural communities can serve as laboratories for developing uniquely American approaches to collaborative governance.
- **Learning from other traditions and fields:** Many [Indigenous governance traditions](#) factor people, place, and history in building governance processes for the long term that focus on the interest of future generations. Incorporating futures visioning into this field can help participants broaden their policy recommendations and consider impact on future generations. The American entrepreneurial spirit provides fertile ground for weaving elements from various traditions to chart a new path to civic participation.

The Benefits and Challenges of Citizens' Assemblies

Citizens' assemblies have gained attention for their potential to have positive impacts on individuals, communities, and governing bodies. In spite of their promise, there are some common critiques that arise based on a few core challenges, which are important for interested funders to understand and address.

BENEFITS TO BUILD ON:

- **Individual and Community Impacts:** Participants in shape decisions that affect their lives, which can de democratic processes. The removal of [logistical and](#) engagement from community members who could engage in citizens' assemblies report [enhanced un](#) government functions, which can lead to [increased](#) report feeling motivated to share their learning with [continue exploring](#) innovative modes of civic engag can help transform how the larger community views Assemblies also give individuals the opportunity to members and policymakers they might never other understanding and respect through [collective prob](#)

In 2019 and 2020, France convened a citizens' assembly of 150 randomly selected citizens who deliberated over seven sessions and produced 149 national policy recommendations. Subsequently, 13 participants ran for elected office at the regional level, with one reflecting: "[p]articipation is a transformative experience that changes you and your perception of your place in a democracy for the rest of your life."

- **Government Impacts:** When governing bodies open themselves to genuine community input, it can [surface novel ideas](#) or identify new groundswells of public support for existing proposals. By engaging community members upfront, government decreases the likelihood that a policy “[fail\[s\]](#) at first contact with reality” and reduces potential opposition to [implementation](#). Lawmakers themselves report that deliberative processes help [strengthen](#) their ability to govern effectively and learn from diverse perspectives. When people witness government operating in partnership with communities, [trust can grow](#), albeit at slower speeds for communities that have been historically marginalized or underserved. Transparency, accountability, and demonstrated commitment to equity on the part of government can help build trust and encourage repeat engagement in governance processes from skeptical citizens. Some participatory processes offer incentives for elected officials to deepen their relationships with constituents with the potential to benefit their bids for re-election.

CHALLENGES TO NAVIGATE:

- **Costs:** Executing a citizens’ assembly requires significant financial investments to cover assembly logistics and infrastructure, participant supports, and the fees for facilitators and other experts. These costs are generally in the hundreds of thousands, with the range depending on number of participants and length of the assembly. The high costs also create sustainability barriers, which poses the risk that a one-off engagement with an assembly fails to provide participants with a pathway for repeat interactions with government. A recent [article](#) by Tiago Peixoto and Paola Spada outlines the limits of representativeness in citizen assemblies, including the challenges around scaling due to their cost. Costs can be covered by the governing institution, or private or philanthropic investment, or some combination. Proponents of citizens’ assemblies suggest that philanthropy can surmount this challenge by providing funding for proof-of-concept, with public dollars supplementing or ultimately supplanting private investment. While hundreds of thousands may sound like a lot compared with no investment, many local governments already have significant resources they are allocating towards public engagement — often without the same impact or representation that citizens’ assemblies can offer.
- **Time Commitment:** The duration of citizens’ assemblies allows for in-depth policy learning and community deliberation. Yet this length of time, even with the mitigation of practical barriers, can pose a hardship for community members who want to participate but have to balance work, family, and other life commitments. Online tools offer the opportunity to reduce the time commitment; however, many practitioners in the space feel strongly on the need for in-person deliberation. In addition, the length of time to develop, fundraise, and execute a citizens’ assembly often means this model is not well-suited to pressing community challenges that require rapid resolution.
- **Changes in Government:** With term limits and elections operating on different timelines than a citizens’ assembly, there can be situations where the elected officials that committed to responding to the assembly’s recommendations are out of office before the implementation phase begins, or by the time the recommendations are published. Elected officials who take office after the assembly may not be wedded to the recommendations, or aligned with the practice of receiving community input in this form. While assemblies often include a commitment from decisionmakers, it is not binding. Therefore, there is little accountability if elected officials do not ultimately heed the recommendations. This risk

can be mitigated by working to institutionalize a sustainable culture of public engagement within a governing body that does not rely on one or two elected champions.

- **Legitimacy Perceptions:** Depending on how the assembly participants were selected (sortition versus oversampling), there may be lingering community perceptions about the legitimacy if the public feels that certain subsets of community members had too little, or too much, say in the process. Overcoming these perceptions is crucial for the assembly's recommendations to have community buy-in and resonance with lawmakers. Transparency around the selection process and facilitated deliberations to build consensus can help alleviate skepticism around an assembly's legitimacy.

IV. Philanthropic Engagement with the Citizens' Assembly Ecosystem

Impacting the Trajectory of Citizens' Assemblies in the United States

Philanthropic institutions and donors have provided critical seed investments to incubate and launch citizens' assemblies in the United States. Funders have a variety of philanthropic approaches to exploring whether and how citizens' assemblies in the United States produce similar impacts on public trust and government efficacy as they have in Europe.

Below, we explore options interested funders have for nurturing and stabilizing this nascent field, in a suggested order of priority based on conversations with funders and practitioners embedded in this work.

- **Invest in assembly production and execution:** Funding individual assemblies and subsequent iterations helps catalyze experiments and innovations in this field, as well as a deeper understanding of the results assemblies have on domestic governance and civic engagement. Learnings from the local level could be used to host future assemblies that address state or federal policy decisions and governance issues.
- **Build a robust ecosystem to help assemblies drive impact:** Investing in a diversified array of practitioners, host communities, and governing bodies can help jurisdictions interested in hosting a citizens' assembly have confidence that there are a range of experienced actors poised to support them if they pursue this model.
 - ◆ Funding practitioners to deepen their expertise in demographic analysis and participant recruitment to help with recruitment of representative samples.
 - ◆ Funding assembly-specific and fieldwide evaluations to help the field ecosystem learn and advance. (For more details, see [Table 4](#).)
 - ◆ Funding technical assistance and implementation toolkits that build off these evaluations to help the field utilize best practices.

- **Develop philanthropy’s convenor and connector capacity:** Funders can help mature and socialize the field by bringing together community members, practitioners, and government stakeholders for collective learning and deeper collaboration. Below are some ideas from funders and practitioners about how to transform the competitive dynamics of this field, fomented by limited financial resources, into a collaborative environment.
 - ♦ **Idea 1)** Pair individual assembly practitioners with field-wide communications support. In this model, practitioners with deep expertise running individual high-quality citizens’ assembly processes could be paired with experienced communicators tasked with supporting the field at large.
 - ♦ **Idea 2)** Invest in the development of an organized cadre of professional educators by offering [civic fellowships](#), or the creation of citizens’ assembly schools, where the existing field can learn from each other while also training and supporting newcomers.
 - ♦ **Idea 3)** Invest in the creation and uptake of field-wide technological tools and resources that can be utilized beyond a particular assembly. Technology built by the private sector can pose financial barriers and create access issues. Field-wide technologies can lower the costs for individual assemblies; standardize tracking of field-wide outcomes and impacts; and aid with evaluations. Experimenting with emergent deliberative technologies, including those that are powered by generative AI, can help overcome barriers to scale and expand inclusivity options for community participation. Funding trainings for the field can help ensure equitable access and adoption of technology.⁸
 - **Leverage shared philanthropic infrastructure:** Because citizens’ assemblies are nonpartisan and topic-agnostic by nature, funders across a broad spectrum of subject matter interests and political ideologies may be interested in the potential of assemblies to build civic infrastructure and strengthen civic participation.
 - ♦ Pooled funding models could benefit governments and practitioners who would no longer have to chase down small grants across multiple sources. Pooled funds could also be valuable in helping the field track the pipeline of upcoming assemblies by detailing each assembly’s stakeholders, funding needs, and design features.
 - ♦ Pooled funding could also benefit donors who are curious about early lessons from this innovative model without wanting — or having — a deliberative model. Pooled funds could also be created between national, regional, and community philanthropy to ensure local citizens’ assemblies succeed.
- DFN is launching a pooled fund to support donor collaboration, learning, and experimentation around American citizens’ assemblies in 2025.
- **Unlock public and private investment in democratic infrastructure:** Blending money from philanthropy, private industry, and government sources has the opportunity to provide stable, long-term investments. Many businesses have longstanding community ties and charitable arms devoted to investing in the communities they serve and where their employees live and work. This nonpartisan avenue for business investment requires careful navigation of conflicts of interest and undue influence.

- ◆ Documenting outcomes and impacts from completed citizens' assemblies can help incentivize governments to utilize existing public engagement operations, funding, and staffing towards hosting a citizens' assembly, or advocating for new funding to be included in the next budget cycle.
- ◆ Funding organizations to advocate directly to governing bodies for investments in assemblies will be crucial for institutionalizing the particulars of a jurisdiction: establishment of private matching of philanthropic or business investment, creation or evolution of government department, secured, advocacy is likely still needed to ensure administrations and economic downturns.

For example, the city of [Fort Collins](#) in Colorado is contributing \$150,000 towards a civic assembly devoted to a stadium land use issue.

Additional Considerations for Funding Citizens' Assemblies

Funders who want to embark on supporting citizens' assemblies, or deepen their current investments, have a variety of considerations and challenges to parse:

Knowledge of collaborative governance models and government policy making: While citizens' assemblies have a long foothold internationally, their adoption and use in America remains on the vanguard. Funders may need to spend time learning about the practical aspects of citizens' assemblies, the players within the field, the contours of local government decision-making, and how this model can invigorate civic engagement. It can also be hard for funders to have visibility into which citizens' assemblies are in the development pipeline. Deeply embedding deliberative models like citizens' assemblies within broader philanthropic strategies assures practitioners of long term support for this work.

Level and scope of investments: Practitioners frequently note that the overall level of investment in the field is [meager](#) compared to other democracy fields, and rarely encapsulates the true costs of robust execution and evaluation. When underinvestment results in underresourced execution, it can detract from impact and discourage future investments. Establishment of a pooled or collaborative fund can help draw in new donors and combine investments to properly support leadership and capacity-building infrastructure, research and evaluation, and execution. While philanthropy cannot forever be the financial driver of citizens' assemblies, it can serve as the catalyst to increase private and public support.

In 2022, organizations working on participatory democracy and collaborative governance generated \$153.7 million in revenue — about 11% of the total \$1.4 billion allocated to organizations focused on good governance. This reflects a 19% decline from the previous year. Notably, even though overall revenue decreased, institutional philanthropy investments in this area doubled to \$68.9 million from \$34.1 million in 2021 — the largest increase among all good governance ecosystems.

Speed and life cycle of philanthropic investments: There is often a mismatch in the urgency and lifecycle of philanthropic investments and the time horizon for a citizens' assembly. Funders may be able to issue grants for an assembly faster than practitioners and governments can execute one, as they can only move at the speed of the trust they earn with citizens. Co-governance strategies rarely realize their full results within one grant cycle, which can conflict with short-term priorities or changing mandates within philanthropy. Longer-term investments are needed to properly execute citizens' assemblies, build out results from this field, and train a cadre of practitioners.

Expansive mindsets: Funding that encourages experimentation within the citizens' assembly model provides practitioners with flexibility to adapt to the particular circumstances of a community, rather than having to be rigidly wedded to a particular approach to meet grant requirements. While the business community regularly invests in experimentation and rewards measured risk-taking, this same mindset has not always been applied to the nonprofit sector. Some funders approach grantmaking in this field with a clear vision on which process, procedure design, and location should be selected. Others invest in models that give practitioners and communities the green light to break new ground in building models that match a community's needs. For many in this field, the following two examples may not fall within the definition of citizens' assembly, but they showcase experimentation within this model based on a community's needs:

- Washington state's [Just Futures Project and People's Economy Lab](#) hosted a series of [community assemblies](#) aimed at improving both civic participation in policymaking and the effectiveness of government programs, with a particular focus on addressing economic and environmental disparities in frontline communities. These assemblies were supported by state appropriations around climate resiliency and a partnership of community organizations. This government investment resulted from deep partnership between both the Department of Social and Health Service, as well as support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, showcasing how philanthropic investments can be leveraged to unlock public investments. These community assemblies do not use sortition, but rather intentionally engaged in outreach to disproportionately impacted community members.
- In 2024, [New Hampshire Together convened citizens](#) to deliberate on issues of trust in elections, government responsiveness, and political polarization. These topics were selected through lengthy engagement with a local New Hampshire institution: the community meeting. This process took place over one weekend with 50 citizens selected as delegates.

V. Conclusion

Reimagining democratic practice through experimentation with collaborative governance models has the potential to strengthen societal trust in governing institutions, increase lawmakers' responsiveness to community needs, and improve the agency of community members in deciding their own future. Sustained and comprehensive investments in the emerging American citizens' assemblies field can help build this international model into one that addresses Americans' viewpoints toward their government, harmonizes with our form of governance, and reflects the diversity of our citizenry. Learnings from experimentations will be critical to understanding how America's governing institutions can better respond and serve the communities they govern. Deeper, sustained funding across the field of collaborative governance could sow the seeds for a more representative, creative, and joyful democracy that blooms across the country for decades to come.

Interested in learning more about citizens' assemblies?

If you would like to learn more about citizens' assemblies or other models of collaborative governance, you can reach out directly to New America Senior Fellow Hollie Russon Gilman at gilman@newamerica.com and Democracy Funders Network at democracy@thirdplateau.com.

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VI. Appendix

Table 1: Guides and Case Studies

OECD maintains and publishes a [deliberative democracy database](#) that details the various deliberative proceedings around the world.

GUIDES AND CASE STUDIES	
 Collaborative Governance Guides	City Leader Guide on Civic Engagement. Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Institute Building the Democracy We Need for the Twenty-First Century. New America. OECD Guidelines for Citizen Participation Processes . OECD.
 Citizens' Assembly Guide	Assembling An Assembly Guide. DemocracyNext.
 Citizens' Assembly Case Studies & Exemplars	American in One Room. Stanford. How a permanent Citizens' Assembly in Paris passed a bill into law. DemocracyNext. Comparing Citizens' Assemblies across the United States. New America. Citizens' assembly on the next source of water for Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. University of Auckland. Citizens' Assembly on Lynetteholm. We Do Democracy. Citizens' assembly under wartime conditions. Bürgerrat. The promises and disappointments of the French Citizens' Convention for Climate. Deliberative Democracy Digest. The Irish abortion referendum: How a Citizens' Assembly helped to break years of political deadlock. Electoral Reform Society. How a Citizens' Assembly at Simon Fraser University Sparked Global Democratic Change The Ostbelgien Model: a long-term Citizens' Council combined with short-term Citizens' Assemblies. International Observatory on Participatory Democracy. Model American legislation for institutionalizing citizens' assemblies. Joe Mathews.

Table 2: Variations within Co-Governance Models

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2020 report, *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions* (Figure 2.1 and Table 2.1), includes a visual representation of the different representative deliberative models. We briefly summarize these models below:

CATEGORY #1: CITIZENS INFORM POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS AND BUDGETARY EXPENDITURES		
Models in this category require significant time commitments (several days or longer) to allow citizen participants to learn and fully develop recommendations. In most situations, a governing body has precommitted to responding to the citizens' policy or fiscal recommendations. Some of these processes are a one-time deliberation, while others have been permanently integrated into the regular practice of governing institutions.		
	Citizens' Assembly (OECD report pgs. 36-38)	Citizens' assemblies bring together a large group of citizens, typically chosen through sortition, to learn and deliberate on specific policy questions or areas of political or social tension for a significant period of time. Citizens' assemblies typically have four phases: learning, consultation, deliberation, and decision-making. They result in a set of policy recommendations voted on by all assembly participants. It is considered a robust representative and democratic process because of its longer length and the involvement of a higher number of citizens in the process.
	Citizens' Jury (OECD report pgs. 39-42)	Citizens' juries bring together a random selection of citizens (typically between 12-24 people) to learn, deliberate, and draft collective recommendations on a specific policy question over a relatively short time.⁹
	Consensus Conference (OECD report pgs. 43-44)	Consensus conferences bring together a small group of randomly selected citizens (the average size is 16 people) over a short period of time (three to four days) to deliberate on a specific policy question. Participants must reach a consensus on their recommendations before presenting them to a panel of experts and politicians on the final day of deliberation.
	Participatory Budgeting (OECD report pgs. 135-136)	Participatory budgeting is a process through which a portion of a municipality's budget is set aside and the public is invited to share opinions, co-design proposals, and vote on how to allocate those funds. People volunteer to participate in various elements of this process. Typically, non-citizens and people under 18 can participate.
	City Observatory (OECD report pgs. 59-60)	Developed and implemented by the city council of Madrid, Spain, the City Observatory is a permanent deliberative body that invites a rotating, randomly selected group of city residents that meet and deliberate on citizens' proposals eight times a year. The participants have the power to send these proposals to a local referendum to be voted on by citizens.

CATEGORY #2

CITIZENS ARE SURVEYED FOR THEIR OPINIONS ON POLICY PROPOSALS

These processes gather citizens' opinions on policy issues to benefit others' deliberation. These processes are often brief in their duration, and generally do not offer participants the opportunity to produce detailed recommendations. They generally do not commit decisionmakers to following a particular course of action. Instead, decisionmakers use these opinions to inform policy decisions, or the general public uses these opinions to inform their own voting decisions.



Citizens' Dialogue
([OECD report](#) pgs. 50-51)

Designed to inform citizens on policy issues and gather their broad opinions, citizens' dialogues are less time intensive, often two-day deliberation processes involving a large number of participants. The citizens are often randomly selected.



Deliberative Poll or Survey
([OECD report](#) pgs. 52-53)

Deliberative polls or surveys seek to capture changed citizen opinion on a policy question before and after a group of randomly selected participants have been given information and time to deliberate on specific policy questions.¹⁰



Citizens' Initiative Review
([OECD report](#) pgs. 55-57)

Citizens' initiative reviews invite a randomly selected, representative group of citizens to evaluate a proposed ballot measure over several consecutive days (or weekends), resulting in informed arguments for both sides of the measure which are then shared with fellow voters.¹¹

Table 3: The Players in an Assembly

Citizens' assemblies reshape how different actors engage in democratic decision-making. Assemblies create new roles that enable genuine collaboration between government and communities.

CURRENT REALITY	CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY MODEL
The Public: From Sidelined to Centered	
Community members may feel sidelined and powerless in many current governance systems. Many disengage or leave public comment sessions frustrated. Many see government as disconnected from their daily lives and needs.	Residents become architects of policy solutions. Through structured deliberation and direct drafting, assembly participants exercise real decision-making power. The greater public witnesses government listening to the community.
The Interests: From Dominance to Input	
Special interest groups have outsized capacity and resources to participate in public processes. Their outsized influence can contribute to polarizing policy debates and gridlocked decision-making.	Special interest groups are repositioned so that their expertise and perspectives inform assembly deliberations without allowing any single voice to dominate the conversation.
The Officials: From Crisis Managers to Implementers	
Elected and appointed officials spend significant time managing public processes that can be contentious. They may get caught up in responding to the loudest voices, without clear signals about broader public priorities.	Officials receive well-considered recommendations that reflect genuine public deliberation. With clear, actionable mandates from representative assemblies, they can focus more on effective implementation.
The Practitioners: From Consultation to Action	
Many governments already engage experts and outside consultants for research and public engagement. These consultants are often tasked with managing stakeholders and compiling community feedback. These engagements often focus on top-level stakeholders, rather than deep community connections, and can be quite expensive.	Professional assembly practitioners serve as neutral facilitators of genuine community deliberation. They create conditions for participant leadership while ensuring process integrity. Redirecting existing budgets for outside consultants towards the execution of citizens' assemblies rededicates these resources to active community engagement.
The Media: From Division to Possibility	
Media coverage of community politics often focuses on conflict and gridlock, amplifying polarizing voices, and deepening public cynicism.	Strategic media engagement around assemblies can help journalists document how diverse communities are working alongside government to solve complex policy challenges. It can help the broader public reimagine how their democracy should operate.

Table 4: Evaluating an Assembly

Measuring the impact of citizens' assemblies requires expanding traditional metrics to capture both quantifiable outcomes and qualitative signals of deeper democratic transformation. Different impacts emerge on different timelines. Process metrics and individual transformation appear immediately, while policy adoption and implementation typically show results in the medium term. The deepest impacts — community trust building and democratic renewal — require long-term evaluation frameworks that may span years or even decades. Below are some considerations to take into account when evaluating the impact of citizens' assemblies.

EVALUATING AN ASSEMBLY	
 Measuring Design Quality	• Did the design process lead to a representative community sample? • Did the participant support mechanisms — such as compensation, transportation, childcare, and translation — enable a diverse cross-sector of the community to participate?
 Assessing Policy Innovations	• Did the assembly generate novel solutions that would not emerge from traditional lawmaking and regulatory processes? • Did the assembly generate new avenues of public support for pre-existing policies or proposals? • Did the governing body adopt and implement the policy recommendations, and on what timeline?
 Tracking Impacts and Results	• Did assembly participants deepen their understanding of complex policy issues? • Did their participation build or deepen their trust in democratic processes? • Did their assembly participation inspire continued civic leadership and engagement?¹² • What is the re-election rate for lawmakers who supported and engaged with citizens' assemblies?

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The term “citizen,” in context of this model and this guide, is used to denote someone’s role in a democratic polity. It is not a reference to a person’s immigration or citizenship status.
- ² The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) publishes a [deliberative democracy database](#) detailing hundreds of proceedings around the world.
- ³ For analysis of the impact of citizens’ assemblies in other countries, see: [Representing European citizens: Why a Citizens’ Assembly should complement the European Parliament](#); Colm D. Walsh & Johan A. Elkink (2021); The dissatisfied and the engaged: citizen support for citizens’ assemblies and their willingness to participate, Irish Political Studies, 36:4, 647-666, DOI: 10.1080/07907184.2021.1974717; European Journal of Political Research 62: 156–173, 2023doi: 10.1111/1475-6765.12499; Institutionalising participatory and deliberative procedures: The origins of the first permanent citizens’ assembly HADRIEN MACQ1 & VINCENT JACQUET2; J Hayward (2014); Rethinking electoral reform in New Zealand: the benefits of citizens’ assemblies, Kotuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online, 9:1, 11-19, DOI:10.1080/1177083X.2013.869760; [When Citizens Decide: Lessons from Citizen Assemblies on Electoral Reform](#).
- ⁴ Fung, A. (2003). Recipes for public spheres: Eight institutional design choices and their consequences. *Journal of Political Philosophy* 11(3): 338–367.
- ⁵ Dahl, R.A. (1989). *Democracy and its critics*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- ⁶ De Gruyter. (2023). *De Gruyter handbook of citizens’ assemblies*. De Gruyter.
- ⁷ Boxell, L., Gentzkow, M., & Shapiro, J. M. (2020). Cross-country trends in affective polarization (NBER Working Paper No. 26669). National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w26669>
- ⁸ Many practitioners in the field are experimenting with digital enhanced tools: [Unify’s](#) creative use of videos; Larry Lessig’s work on deliberative, digital tools; YOUNify and CivicGenius’ work with chatbots; and DemocracyNext and MIT’s Center for Constructive Communication AI [experimentation](#).
- ⁹ The Citizens’ Jury was developed in the United States in 1971 by Ned Crosby and the Jefferson Center.
- ¹⁰ Deliberative Poll is an idea patented by James Fishkin at Stanford University in 1988. Other similar approaches are called Deliberative Surveys.
- ¹¹ Citizens’ Initiative Review was developed in the 2000s by Healthy Democracy and implemented in Oregon.
- ¹² One possible tool to use is the Belonging Barometer, which can help measure how assemblies strengthen participants’ sense of community and civic belonging. Over Zero and The American Immigration Council. (2024). The Belonging Barometer: The State of Belonging in America. Revised ed. <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/the-belonging-barometer>.



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