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Democratic Mini-Publics and Citizens' Assemblies

David Löw Beer

Deliberative Mini-Publics (DMPs) employ randomly selected groups of citizens, who work together to develop recommendations on specific issues. In democratic practice, DMPs, which include *Citizens' Assemblies*, *Citizens' Councils*, *Deliberative Panels*, *Citizens' Jury*, etc., are usually called into action by policymakers to complement representative decision-making. The following describes how DMPs work, why they are used, and what determines their success.



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How do DMPs work?

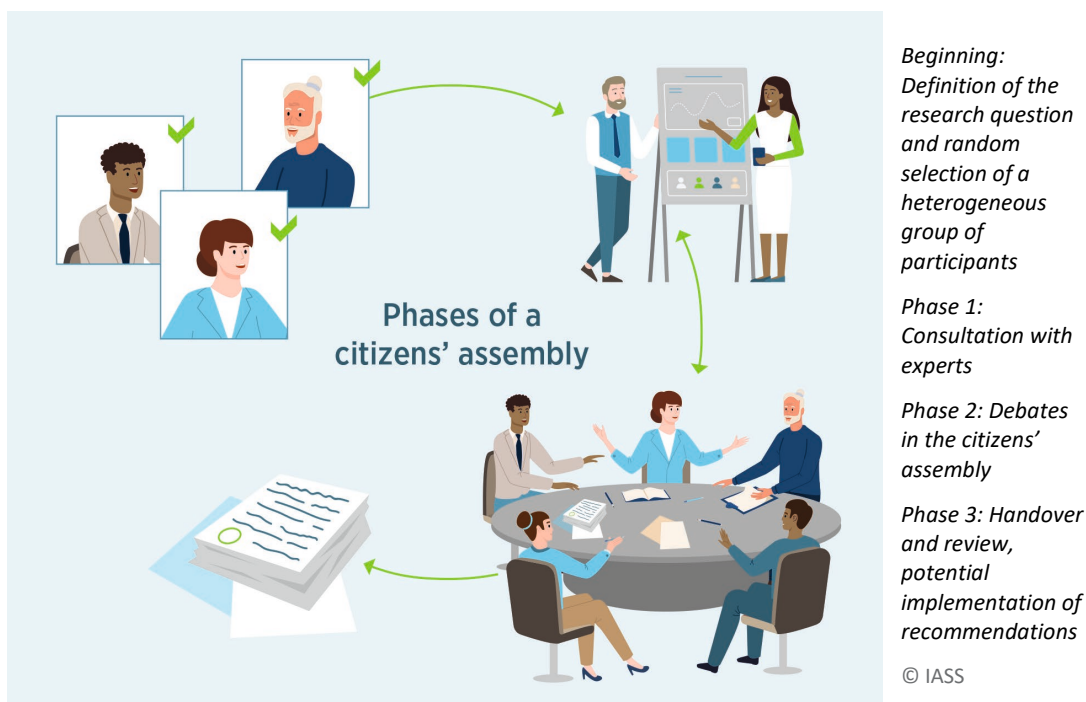
As informal participation processes, DMPs are not governed by fixed rules. They may take very different forms depending on the context, the issue in question, and the political level at which they come into action. For example, while local *citizens' councils* often comprise around 15 people and issue their results within just a few days, state-wide or national *citizens' assemblies* may involve more than 100 people, who may meet repeatedly over a period of months to develop recommendations on much more extensive issues. Some DMPs convene in person, while others are convened online or in a blended format.

DMPs are institutionalised to varying degrees. They range from one-off events to institutionalised committees comprised of randomly selected citizens. Their work does not solely consist in discussing a single issue: They can also make recommendations to policymakers regarding further issues that should be tackled within subsequent participation processes.

down. Then the random selection process to recruit the participants begins. A citizens' assembly should reflect the diversity of a society to the greatest extent possible. In other words, the participants should roughly represent a cross-section of the population, i.e. the distribution in the citizens' assembly should more or less correspond to the actual distribution of genders, places of residence, age groups, educational qualifications and migration backgrounds in the general public. Most DMPs draw random samples of citizens from public databases like resident registers.

The participants' task is to collectively propose solutions to the issues at stake, which are summarised in a "citizens' report". Citizens' assemblies consist of three phases.

In the first phase, experts are heard by the participants of the DMP. Experts can be stakeholders, scientists or persons affected by the issue. The purpose of these hearings is that participants can form an informed and differentiated opinion.



For DMPs to deliver high-quality results, they must be well prepared and accompanied. First, a topic that is of significant interest to both principals (typically political leaders) and citizens must be selected and narrowed

In the second phase, the deliberation phase, an exchange takes place in small groups. This process is moderated with two aims: firstly, that all participants can express and discuss their experiences, opinions and arguments as

freely and equally as possible (Renn, 2008), and secondly, that the exchange is collaborative, factual and respectful (Atlee et al., 2009).

In the third phase, recommendations are formulated and handed over to policymakers.

DMPs are consultative participation processes. Whereas in referendums or plebiscites those entitled to vote make a political decision, in deliberative participation processes, citizens submit proposals to elected representatives. Accordingly, their goal is to complement representative democracy, not replace it (Carson, 2008; Setälä, 2011). In other words: The process enables participants to actively and creatively contribute their ideas and perspectives to the political consensus-building process.

DMPs have been enacted in very different forms and formats, such as *Citizens' Assemblies*, *Citizens' Councils*, *Deliberative Panels*, *Citizens' Juries*, *Citizens' Initiative Reviews* or *Planning Cells*. Almost all western democracies have employed DMPs.

Why are DMPs used?

In recent years, deliberative participation processes have been increasingly implemented in Germany and other countries. This is due to higher expectations among citizens, changes in the media system, more complex requirements, and positive experiences with citizen participation. The following are other important factors:

- The desire for codetermination, self-efficacy, transparency and a focus on the common good is growing. Citizens want to be able to participate more in politics than “just” by voting in elections. The reasons for this development are the rising level of education among the population, the feeling that one can obtain in-depth information on any topic via the Internet, and the move away from opinion-pooling organisations such as political parties, churches and trade unions. Deliberative procedures take up the desire for co-design. At the same time, participants are made co-responsible (Lietzmann, Renn, Freier, Kirby & Oppold, 2021).
- Today, many decisions are complex and demand the consideration of multiple perspectives (*ibid.*). Both the Covid 19 pandemic and climate mitigation are issues that illustrate the need to take different needs and priorities into account in political decisions. Participation processes offer a chance to find lines of compromise that sometimes cannot be found due to political blockades within the political decision-making apparatus.
- Among some members of the population, the acceptance of political decisions has declined, as evidenced, for example, by the increased support for right-wing populist and extreme right-wing positions. At the same time, the principles and values of democracy continue to be held in high regard (Lietzmann et al., 2021). DMPs offer an opportunity to increase transparency, legitimacy, and shared responsibility. Some studies suggest that those most likely to want to participate are the same people who do not feel represented by the usual party and interest group politics (Neblo, Esterling & Lazer, 2018).
- For policymakers, participation processes offer the opportunity to engage with the positions and ideas of citizens in greater depth than is possible with opinion polls due to the fact that they involve constructive exchange. This also distinguishes these processes from exchanges which take place solely over social media. Moreover, in deliberative processes, representative politics often receives increased recognition, which in turn allows a constructive, joint search for the best solution for all (Dienel, 2020).
- Concerns are often expressed that citizens are unable to find solutions to complex challenges. Existing research in fact points in a different direction. Although the political skills of individual citizens are on average rather underdeveloped, good solutions can still be found if participation processes are competently carried out in

groups (Dryzek et al., 2019). Even citizens who are sceptical of science are interested in obtaining scientific evidence to help them come to good solutions in such processes.

- A number of DMP processes have been able to reach a broadly accepted societal solution to conflictive political problems. A pioneering example is the Irish Constitutional Convention (2012-2014), which was composed of two-thirds citizens and one-third politicians. After a significant decline in trust in political institutions, particularly as a result of the global economic crisis, the Convention succeeded in launching far-reaching constitutional reforms and increasing trust in democratic processes (Suiter, Farrell & Harris, 2016). Among other things, new regulations were agreed upon concerning socio-political issues such as marriage and abortion law. Despite discernible majorities, an agreement in parliament had previously failed because massive public opposition was expected.

What are some criteria for good DMPs?

While only a limited number of scientific evaluations are available on citizens' assemblies, existing studies are very detailed. The focus of this fact sheet lies on the Germany-wide citizens' assemblies that have been conducted to date: the *Bürgerrat Demokratie* (Citizens' Assembly Germany) and the *Bürgerrat Deutschlands Rolle in der Welt* (Citizens' Assembly Germany's Role in the World).

- The *Bürgerrat Demokratie* was organised in 2019 by the association Mehr Demokratie and the Schöpflin Stiftung. 160 randomly chosen individuals took part. In their citizens' report, they proposed the fundamental expansion and specific design of procedures for direct democracy and citizen participation. The citizens' assembly was evaluated by the research unit "Democratic Innovations" at the Goethe University Frankfurt.
- The *Bürgerrat Deutschlands Rolle in der Welt* convened at the beginning of 2021

under the patronage of the former President of the Bundestag, Wolfgang Schäuble. The question posed by the citizens' assembly had been agreed upon in advance by the Bundestag's Council of Elders across party lines. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the citizens' assembly was held entirely online. As a result of this assembly, guiding principles for German foreign policy were laid down, among them the desire to be a "fair partner and mediator". The citizens' assembly was evaluated by the Institute for Democracy and Participation Research (IDPF) at the University of Wuppertal and the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS) in Potsdam.

The following section highlights quality criteria for citizens' assemblies as a special form of DMPs and explains the extent to which the citizens' assemblies in Germany have succeeded in implementing them.

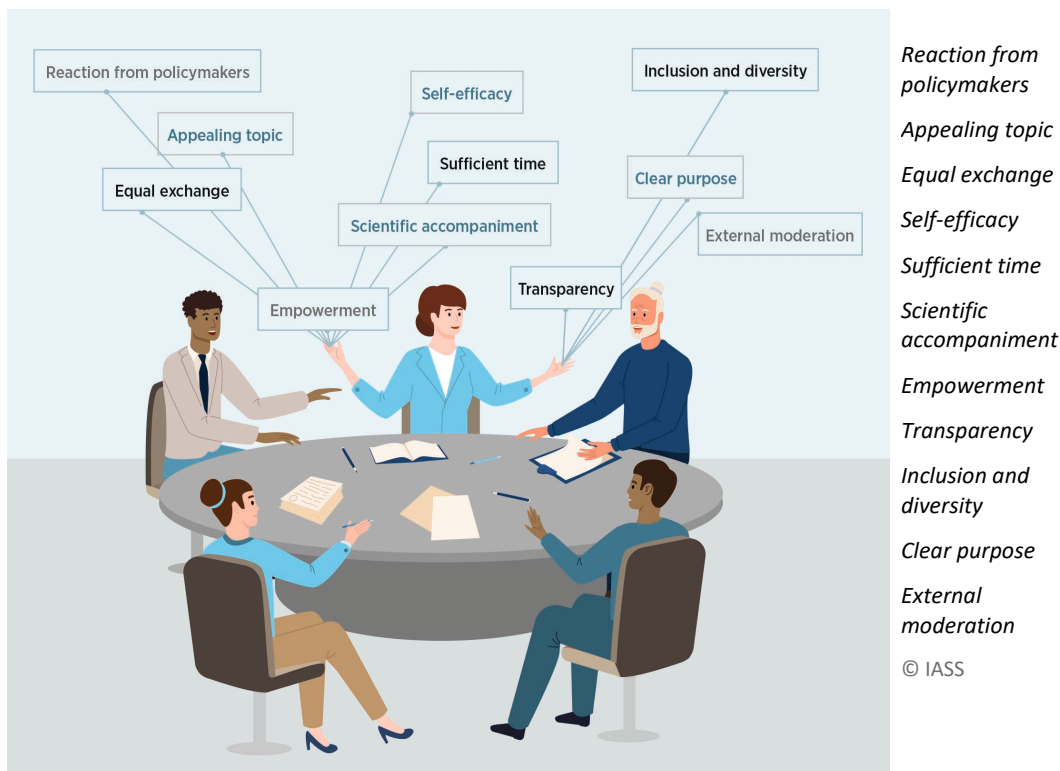
- *Linking the process to the political and media system:* Citizens' Reports should be clear in their purpose and who they are addressing. A steering committee should bring together policymakers and implementers on a regular basis to ensure that the citizens' assembly addresses the issues that policymakers are seeking advice on and to make sure that the citizens' assembly receives the information it needs for its activities. Ideally, it is clear at the beginning of the citizens' assembly who will receive the proposals and when which steps will follow (e.g. referral to the relevant political bodies, feedback to the public). Both nationwide citizens' assemblies succeeded in creating a high level of political resonance and connectivity by involving political and civil society actors at different levels as well as the relevant specialised administrations throughout the process and by achieving a high level of media coverage (Geißel et al., 2019; Kirby et al., 2021, pp. 24-28). The only complaint concerning the *Bürgerrat Deutschlands Rolle in der Welt* was that reporting focused primarily on its method rather than its substantive outcomes (Kirby et al., 2021, p. 43).

■ **Inclusive and diverse participation:** A citizens' assembly should reflect the diversity of society to the greatest extent possible. To this end, the participant selection process should approximately reflect distributions of genders, places of residence, age groups, educational qualifications and migration backgrounds in the general public. Consideration of diverse groups is important to achieve the broadest possible acceptance of the process throughout the population (Schroeter, Scheel, Renn & Schweizer, 2016) and to arrive at socially viable and less polarising outcomes (Fishkin, 2018).

were overrepresented, while only a few participants had a secondary school graduation certificate.

In the Bürgerrat Demokratie, very few participants said they were critical of direct democracy, while in the population as a whole, about a quarter prefer representative procedures (GESIS) (Geißel, Dean, Jung & Wipfler, 2019, pp. 13-16). In the Bürgerrat Deutschlands Rolle in der Welt, supporters of the CDU/CSU and the Green Party were slightly overrepresented (Kirby et al., 2021, p. 13). To increase diversity one could either further refine the selection process (Geißel et al., 2019, p. 3) or include more controversial opinions in

Criteria for good citizens' assemblies ?



Both national citizens' assemblies recruited participants through stratified random selection, i.e., a large group of the population was randomly asked whether they would potentially like to participate. Citizens' assemblies should be constituted on the basis of a variety of criteria (gender, age, ethnicity etc.) so that they broadly reflect the population as a whole. As in all similar participation processes to date, in the Bürgerrat Demokratie and the Bürgerrat Deutschlands Rolle in der Welt people with higher educational qualifications

the process by involving diverse experts and appropriate moderation methods (Lietzmann et al., 2021). In both processes, socioeconomic barriers to participation were minimised, among other things by covering travel costs and by granting an expense allowance (Geißel et al., 2019, p. 13).

Balanced, high-quality preparation and empowerment: It is costly but possible to prepare all participants for a fair and at the same time factual high-quality exchange and to support

them in obtaining additional information. Information and assessments from various bodies (e.g., ministries, associations, science) must be obtained and condensed. Topics must be selected with the participants, and information must be prepared for different target groups in an understandable way and in different forms. If these conditions are met, the influence of elites on deliberative processes can be successfully limited (Curato, Dryzek, Ercan, Hendriks & Niemeyer, 2017).

In the Bürgerrat Demokratie, background information and an exchange with experts succeeded in preparing participants effectively and, for the most part, in a balanced manner (Kirby et al., 2021, p. 17f.). In evaluations of both assemblies, longer exchange times in small groups were suggested. This was also something the participants mentioned as desirable.

Free and equal exchange: Good moderation is characterised by rules of conversation and discussion; the creation of a safe space in which arguments can be freely expressed; language that is understandable to all; and supportive structuring. If moderation fulfils all of these requirements, it provides each participant with an adequate space to express their arguments and views and to engage in an exchange with the other participants. Spokespersons should be avoided. Participants in both national citizens' assemblies frequently indicated that inclusive, fair, and respectful language was used. In the Bürgerrat Deutschlands Rolle in der Welt, the participants, especially the pupils and those with lower secondary school graduation certificates, had the impression that their participation and arguments carried weight and influenced the outcome. In the discussions, it was primarily positions oriented toward the common good that prevailed. The only suggestion participants made for improvement was that the moderator should include more controversies in the process (Kirby et al., 2021, pp. 21-23; 44f.). Complementing the extremely positive overall assessment, the evaluation of the Bürgerrat Demokratie suggests that the moderators should be trained more intensively so that they can answer more questions

from the participants (Geißel et al., 2019, pp. 21-24).

Sufficient time and deliberation before voting: Sufficient time should be available to examine and weigh the respective arguments and contents (Nebenführ 2020). Likewise, there should be time to seek a consensus – voting should not begin too early.

The topic of a citizens' assembly should be relevant to the participants, close to their life-world, controversial, and offer a variety of starting points (Lietzmann et al., 2021, p. 7). The exact topic should be specified according to these criteria in an exchange with participants. Here, there was criticism of the Bürgerrat Deutschlands Rolle in der Welt: Overall, many respondents emphasised that they “would like to see domestic issues more closely related to the reality of their own lives” (Kirby et al., 2021, p. 35).

Participants feel personally involved: Participants in both citizens' assemblies overwhelmingly expressed satisfaction with both the processes and the outcomes. They report perceiving a high level of self-efficacy in the process. In the case of the Bürgerrat Demokratie, they state that they are more likely to actively participate in political processes. The vast majority of respondents reported learning new things during the processes, and many participants also reported rethinking the content, at least in the case of issues (Geißel et al., 2019; Kirby et al., 2021, pp. 28-31).

Transparent process: The participation process should be transparent both internally and externally. This means that any important information is available to the participants and that they can understand which processes are reflected in the procedure (Renn, Benighaus & Benighaus, 2016). They should also have an overview of the conditions under which they are participating in the process, why it is taking place, and how the results will be used (Smith 2009).

Deliberative processes can be successfully conducted online: Sixty-five per cent of respondents in the Bürgerrat Deutschlands Rolle in der Welt said that the digital

implementation of the process had a positive or partly positive effect, while 15 per cent felt the effect was negative. This is despite the fact that around half of the respondents stated that they had never or only rarely taken part in video conferences (Kirby et al., 2021, p. 20f.). The higher compatibility with work and everyday commitments was noted as particularly positive, as was the fact that it was easier to recruit experts. On the other hand, it was seen as problematic that arguments were de-emotionalised and that non-verbal communication was missing (Dienel, Blanckenburg & Bach, 2021).

In terms of technical implementation, it is recommended that participants receive training opportunities and comprehensive support during the process. In addition, technical equipment should be made available as needed (Kirby et al., 2021, p. 20f.). In terms of content, the use of suitable visualisation platforms is suggested, as is an adjustment of times towards more frequent, but shorter meetings. In addition, a more active role is recommended for moderation in discussions; in particular, controversies should be highlighted more strongly, otherwise the online format may have too strong a “pacifying effect” (Dienel et al., 2021, p. 48).

Independent implementation and scientific monitoring: To ensure quality, it is advisable to commission independent implementation institutes. Feedback should be provided to implementers and policymakers at various points in the process, and the process as a whole should be evaluated.

Summary

DMPs are a unique family of citizen participation processes. Within them, a diverse and randomly selected group of citizens works together to develop recommendations on a specific issue. The participants receive varied information from different experts and the process is accompanied by professional facilitators. DMPs are usually appointed by political bodies or decision-makers, though there may be other principals. This Fact Sheet details how DMPs work, why they are (increasingly) used, and what makes for successful citizens' assemblies, which are one of the most prominent forms of DMPs and can be a useful complement to representative decision-making. Their design requires a high level of preparation and process expertise.

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Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies e. V. (IASS)

Berliner Strasse 130
14467 Potsdam

Tel: +49 (0) 331-28822-340

Fax: +49 (0) 331-28822-310

Email: media@iass-potsdam.de

www.iass-potsdam.de

Contact:

Dr David Löw Beer
David.loewbeer@iass-potsdam.de

Editing:

Dr Bianca Schröder

Translation:

Clay Johnson

ViSdP:

Prof. Dr Mark G. Lawrence,
Managing Scientific Director

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