

RIFS-Blogpost

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Making the Case for a Foundation for Participatory Democracy]



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Discussion at the Citizens' Assembly for Democracy in Leipzig.

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1.1 Towards the Institutionalisation of Citizens' Assemblies

Democracy thrives on the active participation of citizens. While elections, referendums, and petitions are among the more familiar ways of influencing political decision-making, other, less well-known forms of engagement have gained traction in recent years. Dialogue-based participation processes, such as citizens' assemblies, are becoming increasingly popular as avenues for public involvement.

A number of proposals for institutional arrangements for citizens' assemblies are summarised in a submission to the Bundestag that I co-authored with other experts on public participation (Lietzmann et al. 2021). There, we recommended the establishment of an "Office for Participatory Democracy" within the German Bundestag, reporting directly to the Bundestag Oversight Committee (Council of Elders), to support the administration of citizens' assemblies in the near term. However, for the longer term, a more robust solution is required to guarantee their political independence and ensure continuity: namely, a foundation dedicated to participatory democracy.

1.2 The challenges of institutionalisation

Citizens' assemblies consist of randomly selected groups of citizens, who engage in in-depth analyses of political issues and develop recommendations. Participants contribute their own experiences and perspectives, while experts supply relevant factual input (Bächtiger et al., 2014). This form of participation can enhance the legitimacy, transparency and comprehensibility of political decisions – especially in times of growing political disenchantment and social polarization. Many people feel their views and interests are not adequately represented in political decision-making. Citizens' assemblies have the potential to bridge the gap between the political sphere and citizens (Oppold and Renn, 2021).

Although citizens' assemblies have been conducted in various contexts across Germany, a binding framework to anchor them permanently in the political landscape is still lacking. To ensure that their recommendations have impact, these must be systematically integrated into the institutionalized political decision-making processes. Without strong institutional anchoring, citizens' assemblies risk losing their legitimacy (Curato and Böker, 2016; Strohtmann and Liesenberg, 2024).

There are numerous proposals in the literature on how citizens' assemblies could be integrated into Germany's political culture as a fundamental component of political decision-making processes (Schatz et al., 2025). Suggestions range from establishing a national citizens' office to creating an independent foundation. Together with several colleagues, we recommended in a statement to the Bundestag the creation of a dedicated "Office for Participatory Democracy" within the German Bundestag (Lietzmann et al., 2021). This unit could commission external service providers to run citizens' assemblies, coordinate process design and quality



assurance, and ensure strong links between citizens' assemblies and parliament. This connection could be facilitated, for example, through parliamentary group leaders and by setting up cross-party committees responsible for preparing, conceptualising, monitoring, and following up on the process. This would enable parliament to exercise its right of initiative in convening citizens' assemblies, allowing new assemblies to be launched promptly and with consistent quality. While this model offers a practical way to administer citizens' assemblies in the short term, a more robust long-term institutional solution is needed – one that ensures independence, continuity, and secure funding. In our view, establishing a foundation for participatory democracy presents a particularly promising path forward.

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1.3 A foundation for participatory democracy

In the long term, responsibility for citizens' assemblies should be transferred to a public-law foundation. This independent institution would ensure that citizens' assemblies continue across legislative periods, unaffected by shifts in political power. Such a foundation could guarantee procedural transparency and quality, and, like Germany's Board of Trustees for controlling public broadcasting providers, maintain its independence through a diverse composition. A foundation for participatory democracy offers several key advantages and comparatively few disadvantages over alternative solutions:

Independence from current political events: As the foundation does not report to any government, citizens' assemblies can be organised independently of party-political interests. This independence is a significant advantage over state or federal institutions, which often have limited autonomy relative to their supervising departments. A



foundation would also be compatible with the appointment of a State Councillor for Participation, as currently practiced in the German State of Baden-Württemberg. The Councillor could draw on the foundation's services and expertise as a professional partner in implementing participatory formats.

Continuity over longer periods: Political institutions are often shaped by elections and shifts in power, which can affect their stability. In contrast, a foundation would provide long-term continuity, independent of election cycles. Its Board of Trustees and Advisory Board could be appointed on a schedule that does not align with electoral periods, enhancing the foundation's independence and shielding it from the turbulence of day-to-day political affairs.

Platform for institutional learning: The foundation could collect, evaluate and further develop knowledge about successful procedures so that citizens' assemblies can be continuously improved. It could also host a research library tasked with gathering and analysing key national and international literature on the subject.

Representation of social diversity: The Board of Trustees could be structured to ensure balanced representation of diverse social groups from politics, business, science, and civil society. Foundation boards are well suited for this purpose and often carry significant prestige, making appointments attractive to both organisations and individuals.

Sustainable financing: A foundation could secure long-term funding from both public and private sources, ensuring the stable and reliable organisation of citizens' assemblies. To achieve this, it must be institutionalised in a way that guarantees sufficient, ongoing



financial resources, avoiding dependence on fluctuating public or private donations.

Of course, these advantages come with potential drawbacks. Depending on how the Board of Trustees is composed, certain interests may still become overrepresented. Public foundations often include political parties according to proportional representation, which can lead to the prevailing political majority dominating decisions. Established interest groups might also be favoured, potentially limiting innovative approaches. However, these outcomes are not inevitable. If the Board's composition is carefully designed with input from experts, practitioners from organizations that design and conduct citizens' assemblies, and representatives of civil society and business, a more balanced and forward-thinking governance can be ensured.

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1.4 Establishment and organisation of the foundation

The establishment of such a foundation would require approval by the Bundestag and should be funded through the existing federal budget to maintain flexibility in responding to political and societal demands. Initially, the foundation could be commissioned by parliament or the executive – including government bodies, public agencies, and federal or state authorities – to organise citizens' assemblies or similar participatory processes on politically sensitive topics. To ensure the process is as targeted and effective as possible, clients should define the topic, outline the policy options to be discussed (while allowing participants to propose or amend options), and identify potential conflicting objectives in advance. Based on its expertise, the foundation would then assess the suitability of the proposed topic for a citizens' assembly or similar procedure, with the authority to reject or request improvements if necessary.

In addition to political bodies, civil society organisations, business associations, and interest groups could also submit requests to the foundation to convene citizens' assemblies. A Board of Trustees would decide which proposals to pursue. Although such requests do not come directly from politicians, applicants must clearly identify the target audience for the recommendations and specify the decision-making processes they aim to influence or initiate. The objective is not to generate a general snapshot of public opinion, but to develop concrete policy recommendations with clear, actionable outcomes.

The Board of Trustees should embody social diversity and heterogeneity. Although political parties should be represented, they must not hold a majority of seats. Instead, broad societal representation should be ensured through members from civil



society, business organisations, trade unions, cultural institutions, and religious communities. In addition to the Board of Trustees, the foundation should establish a Participation Advisory Board made up of experts in participatory processes, including academics, practitioners, and implementing organisations. This advisory board would review submissions, develop or refine procedural proposals, and oversee ongoing projects. While it could offer recommendations, final decision-making authority remains with the Board of Trustees. The foundation's operational management would be the responsibility of a managing director, supported by specialists and administrative staff as needed, depending on workload.

To safeguard the foundation's independence and ensure its long-term continuity, the legal barriers to dissolution should be set correspondingly high. If established by the Bundestag through legislation, the law could require a qualified two-thirds majority for any decision to dissolve the foundation. Additionally, a guaranteed minimum level of funding and resources should be stipulated. While foundations may accept donations from third parties, these donors must not be allowed to influence the foundation's policies or procedures. The precise legal framework in which the foundation is embedded should be developed in consultation with leading experts in legal and political science.

In addition to implementing and organising citizens' councils, the foundation should be mandated to commission independent studies that continuously assess their effectiveness and support ongoing improvements to the process. This commitment would help ensure that citizens' assemblies genuinely enhance democratic practice. Furthermore, the foundation should prepare an annual report to be submitted to parliament.

1.5 An impetus for deliberative policymaking

Citizens' councils are not a substitute for parliamentary democracy, but a supplement to it. They supply informed advice to parliament and government on addressing complex challenges and propose solutions to deadlocked conflicts. As such, citizens' assemblies serve not only to democratically and deliberatively broaden political decision-making but also to generate practical solutions to real-world problems. This makes them particularly valuable in times marked by post-factual uncertainty and rising polarization. Citizens' councils cannot resolve all the issues facing today's democracies, nor fully counteract authoritarian tendencies. But they represent an innovation that, if well organised and professionally supported, can provide valuable impetus for political decision-making processes (Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2016; Curato et al., 2017). The OECD (2020) also rates them as particularly suitable for national and international participation processes. However, in order to be effective in the long term, they must be embedded in the political institutional landscape. In my view, establishing a public foundation with a pluralistic board of trustees and a stable annual budget offers the most promising approach. If citizens' assemblies can be successfully integrated into political structures in the long term, they could become an important pillar of democracy.

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