

World view

By Claudia Chwalisz



The pandemic has pushed citizen panels online

It's time to apply research on in-person public deliberation to the virtual world.

Here's the familiar news: governments around the world face a crisis of trust. Populations are increasingly polarized. Politicians struggle to make tough decisions that demand consensus and a long-term view.

Less familiar is the fact that governments are increasingly turning to the public for help in decision-making, through deliberative processes such as citizens' assemblies and juries – and it seems to be working. But now the events of 2020 have moved much of this online, and we shouldn't take success for granted.

As a policy analyst at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), I research deliberative processes around the globe. They cover many policy issues, often in urban planning, health and environment. A June 2020 report analysed 289 examples from all levels of government (see go.nature.com/2ktz2gw).

The 'deliberative wave' has been growing since the late 1980s, yielding a solid idea of what works for public input into decision-making. Insights from our data analysis, combined with input from practitioners, public servants and academics, were distilled last year.

Deliberative processes gather people chosen to reflect a cross-section of society and charge them with providing detailed guidance about complex public policies. Through facilitated discussion, they consider evidence from experts and stakeholders to find common ground and develop informed proposals. For instance, 99 randomly selected people in the Irish Citizens' Assembly were tasked with proposing how abortion legislation could change if the public voted to ease strict provisions. The 150 members of France's Citizens' Convention on Climate were asked how the country could reduce greenhouse-gas emissions by 40% by 2030 (from 1990 levels) in a spirit of social justice.

Until 2020, most assemblies took place in person. We know what they require to produce useful recommendations and gain public trust: time (usually many days over many months), access to broad and varied information, facilitated discussion, and transparency. Successful assemblies take on a pressing public issue, secure politicians' commitment to respond, have mechanisms to ensure independence, and provide facilities such as stipends and childcare, so all can participate. The diversity of people in the room is what delivers the magic of collective intelligence.

However, the pandemic has forced new approaches. Online discussions might be in real time or asynchronous; facilitators and participants might be identifiable or anonymous. My team at the OECD is exploring how

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virtual deliberation works best. We have noticed a shift: from text-based interactions to video; from an emphasis on openness to one on representativeness; and from individual to group deliberation.

Some argue that online deliberation is less expensive than in-person processes, but the costs are similar when designed to be as democratic as possible. The new wave pays much more attention to inclusivity. For many online citizens' assemblies this year (for example, in Belgium, Canada and parts of the United Kingdom), participants without equipment were given computers or smartphones, along with training and support to use them. A digital mediator is now essential for any plans to conduct online deliberation inclusively.

Experiments have also started to transcend national borders. Last October, the German Bertelsmann Stiftung, a private foundation for political reform, and the European Commission ran a Citizens' Dialogue with 100 randomly selected citizens from Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Italy and Lithuania. They spent three days discussing Europe's democratic, digital and green future. The Global Citizens' Assembly on Genome Editing will take place in 2021–22, as will the Global Citizens' Assembly for the United Nations Climate Change Conference.

However, virtual meetings do not replace in-person interactions. Practitioners adapting assemblies to the virtual world warn that online processes could push people into more linear and binary thinking through voting tools, rather than seeking a nuanced understanding of other people's reasoning and values.

To be open to finding consensus, people need to build trust, which is harder without physical connection and eye contact. Informal moments over coffee help people to get to know one another, and are important for creating a dynamic in which they are willing to find common ground.

I propose caution. We need to explore hybrid approaches that include both digital and face-to-face deliberation. The current learning, experimenting and innovation will enrich our understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of each.

We are studying online assemblies to understand the trade-offs involved with face-to-face and digital approaches to each stage of a deliberative process – recruiting, learning, deliberation and decision-making. We aim to produce evidence-informed guidance about what hybrid approaches would be the most democratic and effective.

What is clear is that, whether face-to-face or online, the deliberative wave continues to gain momentum. Governments increasingly recognize that giving citizens a meaningful role in decision-making can help them to make hard choices and increase public trust. Despite the constant run of distressing news, these trends give me hope for the future of democracy.

Correction

This World View erroneously stated that the Global Citizens' Assembly on Genome Editing will take place in 2020–21. In fact, it will take place in 2021–22.