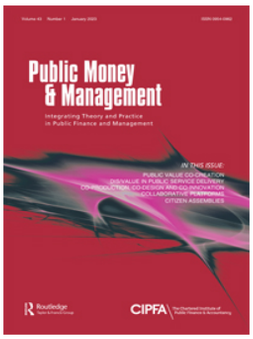

Public Money & Management

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpmm20

Local government and democratic innovations: reflections on the case of citizen assemblies on climate change

Martin King & Rob Wilson

To cite this article: Martin King & Rob Wilson (2023) Local government and democratic innovations: reflections on the case of citizen assemblies on climate change, Public Money & Management, 43:1, 73-76, DOI: 10.1080/09540962.2022.2033462

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2022.2033462

Published online: 16 Feb 2022.

PUBLIC MONEY & MANAGEMENT
2023, VOL. 43, NO. 1, 73–76
https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2022.2033462

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Local government and democratic innovations: reflections on the case of citizen assemblies on climate change

Martin King and Rob Wilson

Faculty of Business and Law, Northumbria University, UK

IMPACT

Since the 1980s, deliberative democracy has dominated thinking around democratic innovation as an approach to address the ongoing legitimacy crisis of public insitutions. One of the methods of implementing deliberative democracy, citizen assemblies (CAs), are increasingly being applied to mainstream decision-making. The scale in the UK has been notable—representing a seminal juncture in the adoption of CA as a method of public engagement. This article focuses on how these processes, so far, have connected to the wider public sphere and the decision-making processes of commissioning organizations to explore whether this represents a sustainable method for democratic renewal or a passing fad.

ABSTRACT

Local and national authorities are implementing citizen assemblies to address climate change. This represents a potentially crucial point in the development of citizen assemblies, and offers a new setting in which to explore unresolved questions in the literature about the relationship between deliberative minipublics and the wider public sphere and decision-making authorities. This article considers the significance of this recent development and the prospects that citizen assemblies present for sustained, meaningful democratic engagement. The authors focus on how these events are connected to the wider public sphere and institutions of decision-making and argue that these cases reveal normative and practical challenges crucial to understanding the sustainability and success of these events. Traditional approaches to analysing deliberative processes may be limited in their capacity to navigate these challenges; the authors outline potential approaches that may provide insight into these questions.

KEYWORDS

Citizen assembly; citizen engagement; climate change; deliberative democracy; environment; minipublic; public engagement; public participation

Introduction

A wave of citizen assemblies (CAs) has been initiated by decision-makers to address climate change and environmental issues. This includes national authorities in the UK, France, Scotland, Spain, and Denmark (Shared Future, 2021). There has been particular enthusiasm for CAs from regional and local authorities (LAs). This includes Budapest (Demnet, 2021), Gdansk (Gdansk, 2017) and, notably, LAs in the UK. At the time of writing, there have been at least 14 climate assemblies initiated by LAs in the UK—beginning with the Camden Climate Assembly in 2019 (Cain & Moore, 2019; Shared Future, 2021). This development raises interesting questions about the role of democratic innovations in the work of LAs:

- What is the significance of this development?
- Why are some LAs implementing these processes now?
- Is the experience of these assemblies valuable to the authorities and the public?
- What are the conditions of sustainability for this trend?
- Do CAs offer advantages over previous experiments in participatory policy-making (see Michels & De Graaf, 2010)?

This article reflects on the themes emerging from this current trend. These reflections are based on direct observation and interviews with commissioners, practitioners and participants of various local CAs conducted across the UK.

What is a citizen's assembly?

A CA is an example of a 'deliberative mini-public' (DMP). This is a forum that uses stratified random sampling or 'sortition' to bring together a representative microcosm of a population. The DMP is given time and expert support to deliberate on an issue and form collective preferences/recommendations. Forms of DMP include deliberative polls, consensus conferences, citizen juries and CAs. These vary in relation to the number of participants, the length of time and/or sessions of deliberation, and the expression of preferences. CAs involve between 40 and 250 participants and at least 30 hours of deliberation.

This practice can be understood as part of the 'deliberative turn' in democratic theory (see Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). DMPs can be understood as part of an 'empirical turn' within this tradition as scholars attempted to test theoretical claims of deliberation and create forums designed around the principles of high-quality deliberation. The practice of DMPs has encountered challenges within the literature. The 'systemic turn' of deliberative democracy advocates a deliberative systems perspective on deliberative forums. It cautions us against studying discrete instances of deliberation in isolation, and encourages us to attend to the relationship any instance of deliberation has to the

wider democratic system (Mansbridge et al., 2012; Owen & Smith, 2015; Curato and Boker, 2015). The democratic authority of DMPs and their relationship to decision-making institutions is also under active debate. A DMP is representative but not representing (participants are not elected), therefore the warrant for democratic authority differs from claims associated with representative democracy. Chambers (2009) and Lafont (2015) offer variations of a critique that DMPs risk shortcutting democracy. Boswell and Corbett's (2017) discussion of 'deliberative bureaucracy' suggests the study of deliberative democracy and DMPs has focused on will-formation rather than implementation.

For much of their history, DMPs have been applied experimentally with little or no direct connection to decision-making authorities. CAs involve significant commitment of resources, time, money, and organizational effort. Consequently, it is fascinating that many authorities have chosen to commission these processes. This provides an opportunity to explore the concerns raised by the literature. The cases do not provide conclusive answers to these debates, however they provide useful insights into the practice of CAs and illuminate gaps in knowledge.

Emerging themes in the delivery of local CAs

The prominence of CAs has been traced to the following developments: Ireland's 2016–2018 CA; the activist movement Extinction Rebellion demanding a national CA; national CAs initiated by UK and France (Cain & Moore, 2019). The initiation of local CAs appeared to partly depend on the presence of policy entrepreneurs interested in democratic innovation. Further evidence suggested that being seen to be first or innovative motivated some authorities.

The cases provide insight into the potential of technology to facilitate public engagement. Some CAs took part during social restrictions following the coronavirus pandemic, requiring adaptation to online delivery. Practitioners highlighted a number of benefits including recruitment, reducing barriers to entry (especially for participants in rural areas or with mobility issues), and widening the pool of potential speakers. On-boarding was found to successfully mitigate barriers of access and confidence in using technology (except varying internet quality). Some felt online communication was more awkward than face-to-face, reducing bonding and demanding greater effort for facilitators in co-ordinating deliberation. There was a contrary view that reducing social bonds benefited the authenticity of assembly members' conclusions.

A promising picture emerges of a wave of local CAs, carried by a current of enthusiasm, driven by policy entrepreneurs, and overcoming barriers. This invites the following related questions:

- What value do authorities see in CAs?
- What are they achieving?
- What are the conditions under which this approach becomes sustainable and embedded in LA practice?

On the question of what value authorities see in CAs, our findings suggest a range of distinct accounts within authorities and distinct departmental interests at play in perceptions of the CA's role and value. As with many innovations, deeper understanding of value only emerges after experience. Generally, people felt commissioners were sincere in their public engagement efforts, yet sometimes lacked clarity on the value, advantages, and disadvantages, of CAs with enthusiasm varied across participating organizations.

Understanding the impact of CAs is further complicated by a number of factors. An immediate issue is time—CAs have only begun to be completed relatively recently and the timescale of implementing particular recommendations is a matter of years rather than months and out of the hands of the commissioning body. There is an epistemological challenge in identifying causation; it's not clear what commissioners were considering prior to the assembly, and we cannot compare a counterfactual situation of their actions without an assembly. Furthermore, some outputs of CAs are difficult to measure and verify when they have been met.

In the following sections we turn to two areas, sometimes neglected in discussion, yet essential to our understanding of how CAs might become sustainable and embedded in practice. We explore the place of these democratic innovations within the wider democratic system, focusing on connecting the assembly to the wider public sphere and the work of LAs.

The wider communication of citizen assemblies

The communication of the CA to those impacted by its recommendations is crucial to understanding the success and legitimacy of the process (Raphael & Karpowitz, 2013). The public cannot be reasonably expected to accept the legitimacy of a CA's recommendations if they do not know what the recommendations are, that an assembly took place, or what an assembly is. An immediate challenge, therefore, concerns communication.

Communication also surfaces a proposed good of deliberation. Participants and observers of CAs identified the power of seeing citizens engage in high-quality, informed, non-partisan debate. The literature highlights the value of deliberation as a means to improve understanding and build empathy across divides (Mendelberg, 2002; Cohen, 1989; Fishkin, 1995), often contrasted with the current dominance of adversarial representations of debate. In providing a positive example of debate, effective communication of and by CAs may help realize this democratic good.

In practice, we encounter challenges in communicating the assembly. Some identified an assumption that delivery was sufficient, with little attention/resources dedicated to communication. There were further challenges with the capacity of LAs to command public attention. These were not unique to CAs, but reflected a wider challenge of co-ordinating knowledge across local communities about public interest issues. The deterioration of local media and fragmentation of media consumption were presented as factors in this challenge. It was suggested that achieving significant public awareness of the CA would involve resources at a scale beyond many LAs capacity (at the national level, public awareness is more mixed, with generally low public awareness in the UK but, reportedly, over 70% awareness in France—see Elstub et al., 2021).

This is an amorphous challenge and there is no universally-accepted approach to developing solutions to improve the communication of assemblies. Efforts to improve communication reveal not only practical challenges, but normative concerns. For example, one route may involve a more public-facing role for participants. Examples are provided by a citizen assembly in Canada which was supported by participants holding public hearings (see Fournier et al., 2011), others described participants of the CA in France taking part in radio interviews, while other interviewees suggested giving participants a spokesperson role or broadcasting parts of the assembly. This would expand the role of participants; they are no longer expected to simply represent their views, but to act as spokespeople. This would require development of capacity through training and support and may exclude people uncomfortable with these sorts of roles. Such efforts may compromise the anonymity of participants and consequently the integrity of the process. This highlights potential tensions between different goods that CAs aim to realize.

The potential tensions between different purported goods of deliberation is well-recognized in the literature (Thompson, 2008; Mutz, 2006), yet the manifestation of these in the practice of DMPs is less well explored. Furthermore, the traditional analytic criteria and methodologies developed to evaluate DMPs are arguably ill-suited to engaging with some of the practical challenges of communication. Where there is evidence on public perceptions of legitimacy of DMPs, studies artificially resolve these challenges, informing participants about the assemblies beforehand (Boulianne, 2018; Ingham & Levin, 2018a and 2018b). Yet the challenge of communication is vital to understanding the success of CAs, their function within the democratic system, and providing answers to questions the literature sets itself.

Connecting assemblies to the commissioning organization

Finally, we consider the challenge of connecting CAs to the work of the commissioning organization. We observe a range of issues. Enthusiasm for CAs varied within organizations. Resistance sometimes stemmed from concerns about other members of the organization (for example suspicion an assembly is a cynical attempt to advance partisan interests). There was concern the assembly would duplicate the work of experts or representatives, thus presenting a threat to professional status/authority. Enthusiasm is also tempered by concerns around cost and value for money. Accounts of the purpose, scope and value of the assembly differed. Commissioners described 'building a mandate', 'educating the public', 'generating ideas', 'providing direction'. Different departments held distinct interests in the process (for example communications teams, policy-makers). Views on the scope of CA differs, specifically the extent to which recommendations should focus exclusively on areas under the LA's control.

These issues suggest a need for greater collaboration prior to the assembly in navigating political and occupational concerns to establish buy-in and develop a shared understanding of the CA's role/value. In principle, there should be a willingness to engage with differing perspectives and ambitions for the process, but we should be alert to the following issues:

First, compatibility—do the ambitions/values compromise the integrity of the CA? Would alternative methods be preferable?

- Second, we must consider potential tensions between realizing different values.
- Third, where values are ambiguously expressed (i.e. they do not clearly delineate the role of the assembly relative to the organization), this risks duplicating work and/or obscuring the impact of the assembly. Finally, we may ask how effectively the assembly realizes these values.

In navigating the challenges of connecting CAs to the commissioning organization we encounter limited support from traditional methods of analysis. DMPs were developed with a particular set of concerns in mind, which can be traced, in part, to traditions of deliberative democracy and critical theory (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). These approaches are characterized by the pursuit of a critical orientation towards institutions of power (Blaug, 2000, 2002), commitment to ideals of deliberation explicitly contrasted with strategic action common to political organizations, and an explicit resistance to prescribing constitutional or institutional settings for deliberative democracy rooted in a critique of technocratic approaches (Blaug, 1999). In this context, questions of implementation, organizational or procedural adaptation, navigating institutional needs and interests, go against the grain of the field. In exploring these questions, it may be helpful to turn to the literature on collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008), organizational learning (Easterby-Smith, 2000) and organizational ambidexterity (Boukamel & Emery, 2017). These literatures centre discussion around the capacity for an organization to learn, adapt and problem solve, while retaining the ability to efficiently perform routine tasks. In this context, CAs can be understood as a mechanism for facilitating the kind of bottom-up learning advocated by these literatures. This would involve re-orientating the focus of our analysis of CAs, but may represent a promising perspective to explore the challenges of embedding CAs within the democratic system, improving their sustainability and impact.

Conclusion

The wave of authorities commissioning CAs presents a new opportunity to explore the relationship between democratic innovations and the wider democratic system. We observe that in practice a series of normative and practical challenges emerge when seeking to connect these processes to the wider public and the work of commissioning organizations. Our efforts to explore solutions to these challenges may require reaching beyond traditional approaches to analysing deliberative processes. An interesting contrast emerges between the environment of the gestation of CAs and the context of application. We encounter new sets of interests, expectations and concerns placed on CAs through the roles and responsibilities of the stakeholders involved. This requires a process of learning and adaptation on the part of advocates of deliberative democracy, engagement practitioners and citizens. There remains a need to develop the institutional practices of commissioning organizations with sustained communication between the parties involved. The role of

digital technologies and platforms in these areas, which have been developing in parallel, also needs careful review so as to be confident that innovations scaffold and augment deliberative engagements to improve relationships and not to automate them—thereby rendering them performative. The pace of response and how effectively these concerns are addressed and navigated is crucial to both understanding the conditions of sustainability for the CA processes and ensuring that the integrity of the CA is not compromised.

ORCID

Rob Wilson http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0469-1884

References

Ansell, C., & Gash, A. (2008). Collaborative governance in theory and practice. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, *18*, 543–571.

Blaug, R. (1999). *Democracy, real and ideal: Discourse ethics and radical politics*. SUNY Press.

Blaug, R. (2000). Outbreaks of democracy. *Socialist Register*, *36*, 145–160.

Blaug, R. (2002). 'Engineering democracy. *Political Studies*, *50*(1), 102–116.

Boswell, J., & Corbett, J. (2017). Deliberative bureaucracy: reconciling democracy's trade-off between inclusion and economy. *Political Studies*, *66*, 3.

Boukamel, O., & Emery, Y. (2017). Evolution of organizational ambidexterity in the public sector and current challenges of innovation capabilities. *The Innovation Journal*, *22*(2), 1–27.

Boulianne, S. (2018). Minipublics and public opinion: two survey based experiments. *Political Studies*, *66*(1), 119–136.

Cain, L., & Moore, G. (2019). *Evaluation of Camden Council's citizens' assembly on the climate crisis*. UCL.

Chambers, S. (2009). Rhetoric and the public sphere: has deliberative democracy abandoned mass democracy? *Political Theory*, *37*, 323–350.

Cohen, J. (1989). Deliberation and democratic legitimacy. In A. Hamlin, & P. Pettit (Eds.), *The good polity*. Blackwell.

Curato, N., & Boker, M. (2015). Linking mini-publics to the deliberative system: a research agenda. *Policy Sciences*, *49*, 173–190.

DemNet. (2021). Public consultation launched on the new climate strategy of Budapest. https://demnet.hu/en/tarsadalmi-egyeztetesen-budapest-klimastrategiaja/.

Easterby-Smith, M. (2000). Organizational learning: debates past, present and future. *Journal of Management Studies*, *37*(6), 783–796.

Elstub, S., Farrell, D. M., Carrick, J., & Mockler, P. (2021). *Evaluation of climate assembly UK*. Newcastle University.

Fishkin, J. (1995). *The voice of the people: public opinion and democracy*. Yale University Press.

Fournier, P., van der Kolk, H., Carty Blais, A., & Rose, J. (2011). *When citizens decide: lessons from citizen assemblies on electoral reform*. Oxford University Press.

Gdansk. (2017). The second Gdansk citizens' panel—how to improve air quality? https://www.gdansk.pl/panel-obywatelski/drugi-gdanski-panel-obywatelski-jak-poprawic-jakosc-powietrza,a,2864.

Gutmann, A., & Thompson, D. (1996). *Democracy and disagreement*. Harvard University Press.

Ingham, S., & Levin, I. (2018a). Can deliberative minipublics influence public opinion? Theory and experimental evidence. *Political Research Quarterly*, *71*(3).

Ingham, S., & Levin, I. (2018b). Effects of deliberative mini-publics on public opinion: experimental evidence from a survey on social security reform. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, *30*(1).

Lafont, C. (2015). Deliberation, participation, and democratic legitimacy: should deliberative mini-publics shape public policy? *Journal of Political Philosophy*, *23*(1), 40–63.

Mansbridge, J., Bohman, J., Chambers, S., Christiano, T., Fung, A., Parkinson, J., & Warren, M. E. (2012). A systemic approach to deliberative democracy. In J. Parkinson, & J. Mansbridge (Eds.), *Deliberative systems: deliberative democracy at the large scale*. Cambridge University Press.

Mendelberg, T. (2002). The deliberative citizen: theory and evidence. *Research in Micropublics*, *6*, 151–193.

Michels, A., & De Graaf, L. (2010). Examining citizen participation: local participatory policy making and democracy. *Local Government Studies*, *36*(4), 477–491.

Mutz, D. C. (2006). *Hearing the other side: deliberative vs participatory democracy*. Cambridge University Press.

Owen, D., & Smith, G. (2015). Survey article: Deliberation, democracy and the systemic turn. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, *23*(2), 213–234.

Raphael, C., & Karpowitz, C. F. (2013). Good publicity: the legitimacy of public communication of deliberation. *Political Communication*, *30*, 17–41.

Shared Future. (2021). https://www.northoftyne-ca.gov.uk/projects/citizens-assembly-on-climate-change/.

Thompson, D. F. (2008). Deliberative democratic theory and empirical political science. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *11*, 497–520.