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Policy Brief

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Addressing Democratic Disenchantment Through Community Assemblies

A Complementary Approach to Representative Democracy

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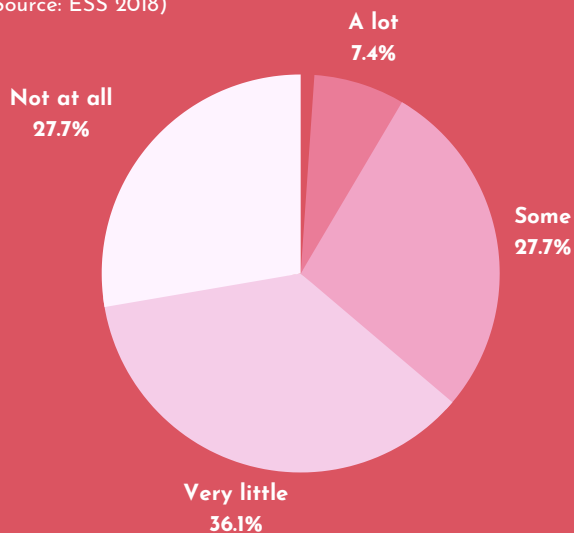
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many Europeans perceive democracy as a monolith far removed from their daily lives. These beliefs are a breeding ground for authoritarian politics that, time after time, have ravaged the world. We argue that Community Assemblies can be a remedy for democratic disenchantment. Through deliberation, citizens can participate in democracy beyond the ballot and realise the power they hold in a democratic and open society.

THE PROBLEM

European citizens support democracy (89%)¹, but only 36% believe their political system allows people to influence politics.² Experts attribute this to a sense of powerlessness, highlighting the need for democratic innovations to address dissatisfaction.³

How much would you say that the political system in [country] allows people like you to have an influence on politics? (Source: ESS 2018)



Democratic disenchantment has fuelled the rise of authoritarian and extremist ideas across the world in recent years. These inflammatory narratives have polarised politics and deteriorated two of the pillars of democracy—dialogue and cooperation.

Now more than ever, in the middle of a climate emergency and a pandemic, governments must reach a consensus on long-term solutions. Democratic fatigue poses a threat to this.

THE SOLUTION

We propose institutionalising Community Assemblies as a tool to combat democratic disenchantment. Community Assemblies are citizens' forums in which participants are selected via stratified random sampling. They operate at the municipal level to address issues important to the local community.

Community Assemblies will complement representative democracy by focusing on cooperative problem-solving involving entire communities. Their objective is three-fold:

1. Improving policy responsiveness and its quality, through collective decision-making in a diverse group.
2. Promoting citizen participation in democracy beyond the ballot.
3. Facilitating a diverse environment for deliberation focused on policy rather than politics. This way, Community Assemblies could play a role in fighting rising polarisation and misinformation.

Community Assemblies can function as an effective complement to representative democracy, improving policy by cutting across party lines - while also producing better-informed citizens, building social capital in local communities, and bridging the gap between democratic institutions and citizens. At every stage, dialogue and cooperation are an integral part of Community Assemblies. This way, citizens are empowered to become democratic entrepreneurs in their local community, which could have very positive social effects way beyond politics.

Our proposed Community Assembly is designed to maximise the quality and local legitimacy of its participants' proposals, informed by the latest findings from research³ and by input from citizens' panels.⁴

Training of participants

1

Selected participants (25-30) first receive basic training in critical thinking, how to navigate the legislative system, and how to communicate with the public to set a level playing field.

The training must ensure that all participants are confident about their ability to engage in the Community Assembly. Innovative ideas could otherwise be discarded only because they did not find their proper voice.

One consensus among citizens in Lövgärdet was that knowledge of institutional practices or the lack thereof determines whether you have a voice or not.

Critical thinking helps participants distinguish between facts and opinions, allows them to substantiate points and arguments, and facilitates a general sense of confidence. Knowledge of the rules and procedures of the legislative system enables participants to incorporate legislatures' concerns from an early stage and to formulate proposals in a structured and recognisable way.

Above all, the proposals must reverberate in the public: the Community Assembly will have to successfully communicate the relevance and importance of each proposal to a large segment of the population for the proposals to prosper.

In the first meeting, the Citizens' Assembly deliberate local issues together through a process of generating and deliberating ideas, then prioritising and further developing proposals. This can be integrated with input from the broader local community via an online forum running in parallel.

The first deliberation must incentivise dialogue and teamwork rather than division, as the objective is for participants to break new ground rather than repeat party lines.

Public outreach and civil service proposal

The 3% signatures' threshold legitimises each proposal, while incentivising participants to maximise the public outreach of all proposals. As Geib (2021) points out, engaging with the public is crucial for the success of citizens' assemblies.

2

First deliberation

We recommend dividing the meeting into three parts: (1) a brainstorming session where all ideas are laid out, (2) a prioritisation session to establish which proposals to divert more attention to, and (3) a development session in which participants spend most of the time working on a few proposals. Participants are compensated hourly for their work.

Once the first deliberation is over, participants promote their proposals in their local community to get signatures. Proposals that get support from at least 3% of the community are referred to public servants for scrutiny and development.

3

The proposals must be properly communicated, by organising an informative public event or inviting local media to discuss the Community Assembly and its proposals. Partnerships with local media would be particularly useful to get the word out and promote local debate.

Finally, the Community Assembly convenes to revise the changes made by public servants, before submitting the proposal to the local council for deliberation. This final meeting also acts as the nexus for the next round of the Community Assembly: the assembly's structure is reviewed, and two participants are voted to take part in the next round as moderators. This ensures that the structure and procedures of the Community Assembly stay responsive to the participants and previous experiences can be carried over to future cohorts.

4

Final deliberation

Civil servants' role is to complement the Community Assembly by converting their proposals into legislative language, ensuring that they are ready for implementation.

SOURCES

¹ EVS/WVS (2021). European Values Study and World Values Survey: Joint EVS/WVS 2017-2021 Dataset (Joint EVS/WVS). JD Systems Institute & WWSA. Dataset Version 1.1.0, doi:10.14281/18241.11

² ESS Round 9: European Social Survey Round 9 Data (2018). Data file edition 3.1. NSD - Norwegian Centre for Research Data, Norway – Data Archive and distributor of ESS data for ESS ERIC. doi:10.21338/NSD-ESS9-2018.

³ Geib, J. (2021). Dynamics of instituting mini-publics for a more participatory democracy. IYTT Working Paper No. 1. Available at: <https://iythinktank.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/iytt-working-paper-no-1-26-april-2021.pdf>

⁴ As part of a citizens' panel in Lövgärdet, a neighbourhood in northeast Gothenburg, we received feedback on a draft of our policy brief. This input, along the IYTT working paper and poll results from the IYTT European Youth Panel (<https://iythinktank.com/european-youth-panel/>), informed the development of our policy brief as part of the IYTT Bottom-Up Policy Advice Loop (<https://iythinktank.com/our-method/>). The dynamic exchange of Community Assemblies outside themselves—with the public and with civil service—is inspired by the open exchanges built into the IYTT loop.

Arvidsson, L., Baptista, J.D., Bienert, B., Bortoletto, F., Brocaj, E., Caro, F.L., Dimcheva, Y., Dutailly, P., Eid, Y., Ferenczy, A., Hysneli, F., Karasmani, A., Kuhlmann, J., Lavrentyeva, V., Marcu, M.I., Mastiaux, L., Melandinos, I., Melzer, F., Mowatt, Olasehinde, E.J., Orlean, L., Piekarska, M., Pietri, A., Porter, E., Rodebjer, P., Shirreff, A., Stravopodis, M., Steinwandel, L., Touma, A., Turcza-Jurczynski, S., and Urquijo, D.H. (2020). Towards an Open Society (final conference report). International Youth Conference 2019, International Youth Think Tank (IYTT). Gothenburg (11-14 Nov). 21 Feb. <https://iythinktank.com/2020/02/21/the-final-report/>.

BACKGROUND

This policy brief builds upon the proposal "Reviving the Democratic Tree: Enhancing Participation and Accountability of Our Leaders" from the IYC 2019 Final Report (Arvidsson et al., 2020), and is the final product of the first run of the IYTT Bottom-Up Policy Advise Loop. Geib (2021) provided a theoretical framework and informed the final design of the Community Assembly. We thank participants at the Lövgärdet Citizens' Panel held by the IYTT, as well as the IYTT European Youth Panel, for their invaluable feedback.

INTERNATIONAL YOUTH THINK TANK

The IYTT is a Gothenburg-based initiative mobilising youth from diverse backgrounds across Europe with the aim of promoting a democracy movement based on open society values. Activities center around annual youth conferences in which participants develop and present policy proposals for strengthening an open and democratic society, while being brought together with executives from industry, academia, culture, politics, and civil society. Participants publish their proposals in a conference report and, engaged afterwards as Youth Fellows, develop them into policy briefs through the "IYTT Bottom-Up Policy Advise Loop", an infrastructure for policy proposal development, involving open deliberations with decision-makers, scholars, peers in the IYTT European Youth Panel, and engaged community groups in the form of Citizens' Panels.

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