



Do Citizens Juries Support or Hinder Representative Democracy?

In a democracy, citizens elect representatives who make decisions on their behalf. This system, known as representative democracy, is based on the idea that elected leaders act as agents for the people. Elections are meant to ensure that these representatives remain accountable to public opinion. However, over time a gap can develop between what citizens want, what representatives intend, and the policies that are actually implemented. This gap can be especially significant for marginalised groups whose voices are often not included in political decision-making. When policies are created for such groups rather than with them, important concerns may be overlooked.¹

Society is made up of many different interest groups that have varied and sometimes competing interests. In theory, democracy should combine the preferences of individuals to produce collective decisions. However, people's preferences are not formed in isolation. They are shaped by social conditions, economic inequalities, and differences in power. As a result, some groups have greater influence over political decisions than others. Because of these inequalities, relying only on elections may not fully represent the diversity of views within society.² Participative forms of democracy attempt to address this problem by giving citizens more direct opportunities to take part in decision-making processes.

One method used to promote participative democracy is the citizen jury. Citizen juries, sometimes called citizen panels, have been used in several local government contexts in Australia. Their purpose is to help improve

¹ Smith, G. & Wales, C. (2000). Citizens' Juries and Deliberative Democracy. *Political Studies*, 48(1), 51-65. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.00250>

² Smith, G. & Wales, C. (2000). Citizens' Juries and Deliberative Democracy. *Political Studies*, 48(1), 51-65. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.00250>

understanding of complex issues and support better decision-making by involving ordinary citizens in structured discussions.³

Citizen juries work by selecting a small group of citizens to deliberate on a specific public issue. Invitations are first sent to a randomly chosen group of people from the community. From those who accept the invitation, a smaller group is selected to ensure that the final jury reflects the demographic diversity of the community, such as differences in age, gender, and background. This group of citizens, often described as a “mini-public,” is then given a key question or problem to consider.⁴

The jurors meet over several days to discuss the issue comprehensively. Their discussions are guided by an independent facilitator who ensures that the process remains fair and organised. During the deliberation process, jurors receive background information and listen to presentations from experts and witnesses who have knowledge about the issue. These experts may come from within local government or from outside organisations. The discussions are usually held in closed sessions to allow open conversation, although observers may sometimes attend if they follow certain rules.

At the end of the process, the citizen jury produces a set of findings and recommendations for the local council. These recommendations aim to reflect the collective judgement of the jurors after careful discussion and consideration of evidence.

Citizen juries do not challenge the authority of elected representatives. The final decision always remains with the council or the elected officials. Citizen juries serve as an advisory mechanism that helps representatives better understand the views and concerns of the community.

³ Russell, W. The macro--impacts of citizen deliberation processes. NewDemocracy Foundation Research Report 2015-2017.

https://newdemocracy.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/docs_researchpapers_2017_DrAWendyRussell_nDF-ImpactReport_18Apr17.pdf

⁴ Victorian Local Governance Association. Citizen Juries- an overview.

<https://www.vlga.org.au/sites/default/files/v4-Citizen-Juries-an-overview.pdf>

Citizen juries support representative democracy by giving ordinary citizens the opportunity to be directly involved in discussing public issues and contributing to deliberations on issues. They help include a wider range of perspectives and encourage informed discussion among citizens.

Citizen juries also pose significant challenges as forums of participative democracy. The issues they deliberate on may sometimes be framed too broadly, making it difficult for participants to clearly understand the specific problem being addressed. In addition, earlier decisions about the policy issue may influence the jury's discussions and final recommendations. This can create a situation where existing approaches continue to shape outcomes, making meaningful change less likely.⁵ Participative democracy such as this is therefore influenced by representative democracy. Another important factor is the timing of the jury within the policy analysis process. If a citizen jury is engaged too late, after major policy directions have already been decided, its ability to influence outcomes may be limited. In such cases, the process may appear consultative but have little real impact on the final decision. Furthermore, public engagement and consultation processes require considerable time and financial resources. These costs may limit participation and place pressure on the financial capacity of local governments. The effectiveness of citizen juries also depends on the receptiveness of political leaders to the jury's recommendations. If elected officials are unwilling to seriously consider or implement the recommendations, the influence of the jury on policy outcomes may remain limited.

Overall, citizen juries represent an important attempt to strengthen democratic participation by involving citizens more directly in discussions about public policy. While they provide valuable opportunities for deliberation and community input, their effectiveness depends on factors such as the clarity of the issues being discussed, the stage of the policy

⁵ Gooberman-Hill, R., Horwood, J. & Calnan, M. (2008). Citizens juries in planning research priorities: process, engagement and outcome. *Health Expectations*. 11(3), 272-281.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1369-7625.2008.00502.x>

process at which they are used, the willingness of leaders to engage with the recommendations, and the resources available to support meaningful participation. Citizens' juries and other consultation processes need to not only serve the policy process, but more importantly become 'grounded', such that individuals are agents, involved in the development of policies affecting their lives.⁶

Questions

1. Discuss a pressing issue affecting your community by putting together and enacting a citizens' jury. Reflect on your learnings.
2. What are your thoughts on when social issues can be said to be resolved?
3. Do you think citizens should be consulted in deliberations on all policy issues? Where might it be ineffective to take their inputs?
4. What other forms of public engagement can you think of, and which policy problem were they used for by the authorities concerned?

⁶ Kashefi, E. & Mort, M. 2004. Grounded citizens' juries: a tool for health activism? *Health Expectations*, 7(4), 290-302. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1369-7625.2004.00295.x>