

August 2025

CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES: LESS ACCURATE THAN TOSSING A COIN?

A Policy Exchange Research Note

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Foreword by Lord Glasman

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Foreword

by Lord Glasman

The first thing to say about Citizens' Assemblies is that they are not 'Assemblies' and have little connection with citizenship, the tradition of urban self-government that has its roots in both Biblical and Classical political practice. The Assembly has played a crucial role in defining and refining democracy. It bestows legitimacy and requires real physical presence and action.

In Ancient Israel, all men were required to go on foot three times a year to the 'Great Assembly' where they renewed their covenant with God and their loyalty to the State, and when King David replaced King Saul, the men of the 'Great Assembly' blessed the new dynasty in much the same way as Parliament 'Assembled' to bless William of Orange in the Glorious Revolution.

This is the basis of the Ancient Constitution, in which Parliament has the power to choose Kings. The basis of this was the Assembly called in Saxon times at St Paul's Cross in the City of London where 'Citizens' were called together at times of crisis to organise the militias and protect the City from attack. William the Conqueror 'came friendly' to London and allowed London to keep its language, its courts and its laws in deference to the power of the 'Mayor, Commonalty and Citizens of London in Common Council Assembled'. This Assembly was the foundation of Parliament.

In ancient Athens, the 'Assembly' was the gathering of ALL citizens and was the fundamental unit of democracy, involving all the political skills; rhetoric, organisation and drama. The very opposite of 'evidence-based policy development'. There are vague echoes of the Assembly in our culture, the school assembly for example where the years, classes, prefects and teachers stand together in some form of solemnity but that is supposed to be a preparation for politics, not the thing itself.

The very title, 'Citizens' Assembly' is deceptive and misleading. It owes something to the idea of 'deliberative democracy' associated with Jurgen Habermas and Liberal Republicanism which enjoyed some academic interest in the 1980's. This was always more aligned with a Kantian legal order than the dirt and danger of an

agonistic Polis. A more appropriate term would be a “peoples’ panel”, in which a random selection of the public, like a jury, are invited to reflect on matters where there is ‘deadlock’ such as assisted dying, electoral reform, immigration, lowering the voting age or the legalisation of marijuana. Participation is voluntary and paid. It is made up of 25 people. Unlike a jury, its judgement is not of guilt and innocence and its decision is not decisive. All evidence suggests that the participants in the citizens’ assembly are more educated, more politically interested and more progressive than the norm. The reality is that it is another form of consultation, another way of bypassing democracy in its name, another way of avoiding politics and the hard work of persuading your fellow citizens.

As this essay argues, all evidence suggests that it is heavily biased towards progressive outcomes and the majority of its recommendations have been defeated in subsequent referenda. In no case has the public endorsed a citizens’ assembly recommendation at the same levels as the citizens’ assembly did. Nowhere near.

There is a genuine need for a renewal of democratic politics, for the restoration of the practice of assembly, for political accountability to an increasingly remote ruling class. This is the trick of the citizens’ assembly, it appropriates the language of democracy and participation while promoting the opposite. It overcomes polarisation by avoiding politics.

The fundamental issue here is that of accountability. There is a tradition of Assemblies that did hold their leaders to account and that is the Tribune in Ancient Rome. In this those who ran Rome’s prisons, armies, schools and welfare were invariably from the ruling class but their appointment, and renewal, were in the hands of the Tribunes, an Assembly of people who were served and who served in those institutions. No Citizen, which meant no substantial property owner, was allowed to participate in the Tribune. It was made up of ‘proles’. And they voted to remove, or not to renew, the employment of their rulers if they were corrupt, lazy or negligent.

The practice of Assembly, of politics, of accountability is a vital one for the renewal of our democracy. The idea of the Tribune points the way, particularly in relation to local place-based institutions. The turnout in local elections, and now in General Elections, indicates a genuine disaffection with the ability of the political system to act. The appointment of headteachers, hospital CEOs, welfare chiefs and police, by what might be called a Parish Commune, a Tribune, is a much more promising

practice to promote. As in Ancient Rome, it would require all the political skills; rhetoric, organisation and drama, it would hold leaders to account and those most affected would vote on their future employment. Real interests would be in play, real decisions made, and that would be real politics. Not an evidence-based consultation exercise whose recommendations are odds-on to be rejected in a vote.

Executive Summary

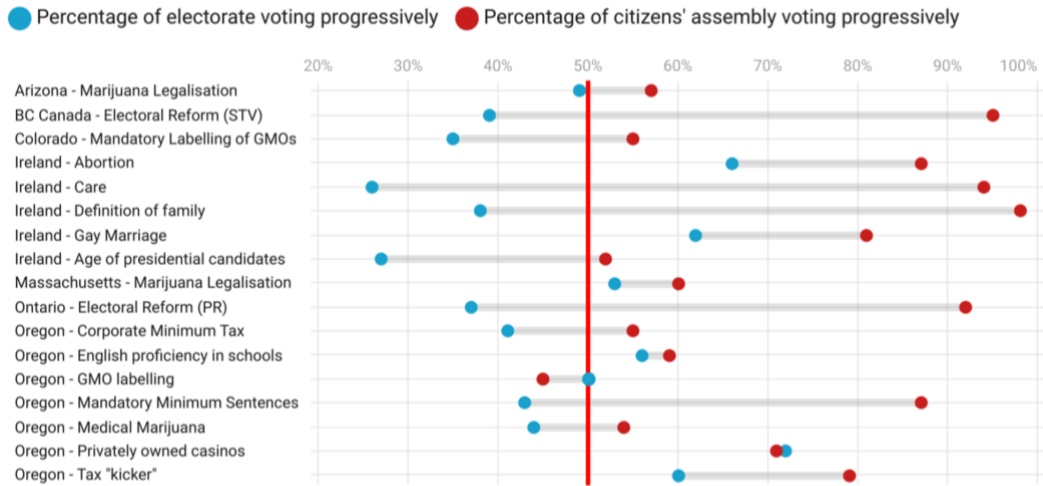
Citizens' Assemblies, in which a representative selection of members of the public are invited to consider policy on contentious areas, are increasingly in the news. Supporters claim they will enhance public confidence in democracy, and could also break the deadlock on issues from assisted dying to climate change. They are claimed to give politicians and policy makers insight into what an informed common ground might look like.

This paper examines the case for these claims. We have reviewed over 700 initiatives covered in an OECD database, focusing in particular on 17 examples from Ireland, several US states and two Canadian provinces where the deliberation of a citizens' assembly was followed by a public vote on the same subject. We have then analysed the results in the light of academic literature on political behaviour and opinion forming.

Our conclusion is that citizens' assemblies are a poor predictor of what the public is likely to decide if asked. With the recommendation of citizens' assemblies rejected on 10 out of 17 occasions, they are worse at forecasting the public mood than tossing a coin. Even in cases where assemblies were praised for anticipating the popular vote, like on abortion or gay marriage in Ireland, the winning margin at the assembly was around 40 percentage points higher than at the referendum. The error is consistently in the same direction - assemblies were more supportive than the general public of progressive policies on 15 of 17 occasions¹ and the proportion of people who voted for the progressive option was, on average, 25 percentage points higher in the citizens' assembly than in the subsequent referendum. Even when every effort is made to conduct them robustly, the structure of these assemblies seems highly vulnerable to a series of biases, in particular selection bias, issue framing and 'polarization effects' - a type of group think. There is good evidence that the contentious issues for which they are most often proposed, like assisted dying, might be the very ones for which citizens' assemblies are least suited.

¹See table 2 for analysis of the 17 cases, including which is the 'progressive' option. One case (Oregon measure 90 on open primaries) did not involve an obvious ideological divide.

Figure 1: Disparities between citizens' assemblies and the electorate



For Ireland's vote on abortion, we have taken the Assembly's vote on their first question (do you think article 40.1.3 should be retained in full or not retained in full?) as this is closest to the referendum question. BC Canada held two referendums on electoral reform; we have used the result of the second referendum since the first failed to meet the 60% threshold and the public were thereafter provided with enhanced information on the issue.

What are Citizens' Assemblies?

Citizens' Assemblies² have their origin in the USA and Germany in the 1970s. In Germany these developed as 'planning cells' or Planungszelle, developed by Prof Peter Dienel of the University of Wuppertal. Planning cells consist of 25 members, sub-divided into sub-groups of five. They are commissioned by local and national government bodies, most often to address practical planning models. In the United States, citizens' assemblies were pioneered by Ned Crosby of the independent Jefferson Centre in Minneapolis, and have increasingly been used to examine issues of public policy.

In the UK, IPPR was a pioneer. A 'Citizens' Panel' was established by the Labour government and used between 1998-2002 to consult on a range of policy issues, -with a further initiative launched by Gordon Brown in 2007³. Projects have continued, though largely in the local government and health sectors. They have been used, for example, by the board of NHS England's NHS citizen programme, designed to 'give everyone in England a voice on how the NHS works and enable the public to influence NHS decision making'⁴.

Typically (eg in Oregon and Ireland) a large number of invitations are sent out, inviting participation in a panel. Of those expressing an interest, a subset of between 20-100 are chosen, designed to reflect as accurately as possible the wider population. There is then a structured process of briefing, discussion, formulating and voting on recommendations.

Sometimes the ultimate client for this is policy makers or legislatures. In a more limited number of cases, notably in Oregon and Ireland, the Assembly reviews proposals which are to be put to a popular vote.

There has been growing interest in this process in the UK. Sue Gray, the Prime Minister's former Chief of Staff, was interviewed in Tom Baldwin's biography of Starmer announcing her determination to make greater use of citizens'

²There are a range of different names, including also Citizens' Juries and Deliberative Polls, all these models are broadly similar in structure, and for convenience's sake this report refers to 'citizens' assemblies' throughout.

³Research Briefing 'Citizens' Juries', House of Commons Library (2007). [Link](#)

⁴NHS Citizen Learning report (2016); [Link](#)

assemblies. She described the proposal as ‘transformational’ while warning that ‘Whitehall will not like this because they have no control’⁵. Labour rapidly rowed back from this announcement, briefing that this is not an official party policy and there are currently no plans related to their potential use⁶. Enthusiasm for the process has taken a knock following the crushing defeat in Irish referendums of propositions on the family and care which had been strongly endorsed by a citizens’ assembly.

The idea remains widely supported, however. Last year’s Institute for Government report on changes to the centre of government recommended:

“The centre should also have more capacity to draw in evidence and expertise directly from citizens. It should use methods of democratic participation and deliberative engagement models to understand the perspectives of people affected by policy and input these perspectives into strategic decision making. This would make for a more open centre of government, with access to more of the information ministers need to set and deliver effective strategy”⁷

The thinktank Demos has similarly set up a Collaborative Policy Network⁸ to encourage the wider adoption of this approach.

Citizens’ Assemblies are being advocated in some particularly sensitive areas. The Nuffield Council for Bioethics held a “Citizens Jury” to look specifically at assisted dying⁹, which was published in September 2024. This followed a similar initiative in Jersey which led to legislation allowing the practice for the first time. Similarly, one of Extinction Rebellion’s three headline demands is for a “Citizens’ Assembly on Climate and Ecological Justice”.

⁵Baldwin, Tom: Keir Starmer, William Collins 2024

⁶Daily Telegraph: [Link](#)

⁷Institute for Government: Commission on the Centre of Government: [Link](#)

⁸[Link](#)

⁹[Link](#)

The Case for Citizens' Assemblies

The OECD has a team which champions the process and tracks the progress of interventions, and they have created a database covering over 700 interventions across 32 countries plus several international bodies¹⁰

The OECD in its tool kit comes up with a good summary of the arguments in favour of citizens' assemblies:

“Most public participation processes are not designed to be representative or collaborative. Deliberative processes, on the other hand, create the space for learning, deliberation, and the development of informed recommendations, which are of greater use to policy and decision makers.

It gives public officials and policy makers greater legitimacy to make hard choices. These processes help policy makers better understand public priorities, and the values and reasons behind them, and identify where consensus is and is not feasible. Evidence suggests that they are particularly useful in situations where there is a need to overcome political deadlock and weigh trade-offs.

Enhance public trust in government and democratic institutions by giving citizens a significant role in public decision making. People are more likely to trust a decision that has been influenced by ordinary people than one made solely by government.

Independence: Thanks to civic lotteries, the members of a deliberative body can avoid being 'captured' by interest groups or influenced by powerful or wealthy people and organisations.

Cognitive diversity: Research has shown that, for developing successful ideas, diversity is more important than the average ability of a group.

Favourable conditions for quality deliberation: Information, time, and skilled facilitation lead to informed, detailed, and rigorous recommendations, which consider trade-offs.

¹⁰[Link](#). The list is not complete, however – during research we identified several interventions not included in the table

A focus on the common good: The members are not there to represent any particular interest group, company, political party, etc. They are there to collectively develop recommendations for the common good.

High levels of trust: People have lost trust in politicians and experts, but they do trust everyday 'people like them'. At the end of a deliberative process, it is its members - a microcosm of the population - who explain their recommendations to the public¹¹.

What distinguishes a citizens' assembly from an opinion poll is obviously the deliberative element. "Theorists have argued that deliberative minipublics can give observers evidence about counterfactual, "enlightened" public opinion—what the people would think about an issue if they had the opportunity to deliberate with their fellow citizens. **If** the conclusions of a deliberative minipublic are received in this spirit **and** members of the public revise their opinions upon learning them, **then** deliberative minipublics could be a means of bringing *actual* public opinion into closer conformity with *counterfactual*, enlightened public opinion"¹² [our emphasis].

What's the Evidence?

The problem is there is very limited evidence for the public taking much notice. A few recent studies have suggested that awareness of these sorts of initiatives can have a slight positive impact in voters' perceptions on 'how much can people like you affect what the government does'¹³. Evidence that voters are likely to align their views with those of a citizens' jury is even thinner, and largely based on an experimental model¹⁴.

There are, moreover, a series of cases where we can directly compare the outcome of a citizens' jury with a popular vote held shortly afterwards on the same subject. Oregon's "Citizens' Initiative Report" (CIR) is specifically designed to use a citizen assembly format to review subjects being put to statewide ballot, then

¹¹[Link](#)

¹²Ingham and Levin: *Can Deliberative Minipublics Influence Public Opinion? Theory and Experimental Evidence* (2018) [Link](#)

¹³Knoblauch, Barthel and Gastil *Emanating Effects: The Impact of the Oregon Citizens' Initiative Review on Voters' Political Efficacy* (2019) [Link](#)

¹⁴Ingham and Levin *ibid*

informing the voters of the CIR panel's findings and their reasoning. Similar approaches have been taken in Ireland, in two Canadian provinces and three other US states. The subjects at issue varied from hugely contentious (abortion) to more technical issues of electoral reform and matters such as allowing privately owned casinos.

Comparing the outcome of the assemblies to the public vote is important if we want to assess whether the citizens' assemblies are **either** a reliable proxy for popular opinion in themselves **or** if awareness of their deliberation and conclusions may help move public opinion in the same direction.

This is adopting the measure of success that advocates have used themselves. Defending themselves against criticism, the chair of the Irish Citizen's Assembly on Gender Equality noted on the outcome of a previous Assembly:

“At the time when the recommendations were made, some commentators questioned whether the results were representative of the views of the general population. However, the Marriage Equality Referendum was passed with 62% of votes cast and the repeal of the Eighth Amendment with 66% of votes cast which indicates that the views of the members broadly reflected the views of the general population¹⁵”

This assumption looks questionable when the 17 case studies are reviewed in detail, however.

In ten cases, the citizens' assembly came to a conclusion that was rejected by the electorate. The average difference in the margin in these cases between the forecast outcome and the actual winning outcome is almost 50 percentage points. Only once (the Oregon initiative on private casinos) was the assembly outcome within five percentage points of that in the popular vote. In four cases, the difference was over one hundred percentage points (eg on STV in British Columbia, a victory for the proposition of 90 percentage points was followed by a popular defeat by 16 percentage points).

What is also striking about the graph is how consistent the skew is. In almost all cases, (15 out of 17) the citizen assembly comes up with considerably more progressive results than the popular vote, while the difference in the other

¹⁵First Report and Recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly THE EIGHTH AMENDMENT OF THE CONSTITUTION: [Link](#)

direction is small for the two remaining cases. There is not a single case where an assembly rejected the progressive option only for this to be endorsed in the public vote. Across the 17 case studies, the proportion of people who voted for the progressive option was, on average, 25 percentage points higher in the citizens' assembly than in the subsequent referendum'.

Nor is there much evidence that the existence of the citizens' assembly had a material impact on the way the electorate voted. In two Oregon cases, voters were surveyed to find out whether they had been aware of the recommendations of the jury and whether this had influenced their decision. Findings were split. On measure 73 (mandatory minimum criminal sentences) there was evidence of an impact, with 78% of initially undecided voters who later read the Citizens' Statement subsequently decided to oppose Measure 73, compared to 47% who did not read the Citizens' Statement¹⁶.

On measure 74, however (regulated medical marijuana, which the jury supported), reading the Citizens' Opinion significantly increased voter knowledge and actually decreased voter support for Measure 74. Only 39% of those who read the Citizens' Opinion supported Measure 74, compared with 47% of those who did not read it¹⁷.

Possible reasons

The most obvious is the risk of selection bias on the panels. This seems to have been a problem in early Assemblies in Canada. The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly participants, for example, turned out to be more civically active than the wider population, more politically knowledgeable and less satisfied with the existing political system¹⁸. An early study of assemblies agreed that 'those who decide to attend are usually somewhat more politically active and better educated than the initial sample'¹⁹.

¹⁶Oregon Citizens' Review Statement, Measure 73: [Link](#)

¹⁷Oregon Citizens' Review Statement, Measure 74: [Link](#)

¹⁸Carty, K., Blais, A. and Fournier, P. (2008). "When citizens choose to reform SMP: The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform." In Andre Blais, ed. *To Keep or to Change First Past the Post*. Oxford: (pp140-62)

¹⁹Fishkin, J. And Farrer, C. (2005) *Deliberative Polling* in Gastil, J. And Levine, P. (eds). *The Deliberative Handbook: strategies for effective civic engagement in the 21st century*.

Some claim similar effects in Ireland. Eoin O'Malley, politics professor at Dublin City University and an early supporter of the process is reported as saying "there is a danger that citizens' assemblies have now become a part of the policymaking system in Ireland that supports the various agendas of lobby groups,". He noted that people who agreed to spend weekends discussing arcane topics with strangers often had strong, preconceived views, while assembly chairs, who were civil servants, could shape outcomes through selection of experts.²⁰

To be fair, some processes demonstrate considerable effort to avoid this. Those volunteering to participate in a citizens' assembly are typically carefully filtered to ensure those chosen are representative. In Oregon, effort is made to ensure party, demographic and geographic balance, and even to reflect depth of political commitment (measured by how frequently panellists have voted at recent elections). In Ireland, "recruitment was undertaken so that the Members, chosen at random, would be broadly representative of the following demographic variables as reflected in the Census: age, gender, social class, and regional spread", though this does not seem to involve balancing by political outlook as well.

Response rates are, moreover, very low. The OECD database suggests response rates vary between 2 and 15%, and the situation is often made worse by attrition (successive Irish citizen assemblies saw almost half its members leaving and having to be replaced by substitutes²¹). While participants are remunerated (at \$150 a day in the case of Oregon), the time commitment and loss of income is bound to impact some groups disproportionately. There is evidence that liberals may be more active politically and might therefore be more likely to volunteer for these initiatives. For example, *More in Common* found the small 'progressive activist' group (around 13% of the population) are almost five times more likely than any other group to share political material online²².

²⁰Guardian: [Link](#)

²¹First Report and Recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly THE EIGHTH AMENDMENT OF THE CONSTITUTION *ibid*

²²More in Common, Britain's Choice (2020): [Link](#)

Drawbacks and Implications

Bias in the Process

There is an obvious risk of the agenda of citizens' assemblies being hijacked by activist causes, leading to what is known as the 'framing effect' – the way the question is put. We know from psychology and political science that these have an enormous impact on the conclusions reached in both individual and collective decision making²³. The Extinction Rebellion proposal for citizens' assemblies talks about participants hearing 'balanced information from experts'. But this is to include "information on how this crisis came about – this would include historical responsibility, colonialism, global justice, and the economic structures that have created the crisis". And witnesses are to "include people with lived experiences.. include voices from people already affected by the CCE [Climate Change Emergency] – from the UK such as farmers with failed crops or families with flooded homes, and from other countries for whom famine, floods, drought, and fires are a daily reality". This does not sound like a serious attempt to put both sides of the argument.

This is what might be expected from a lobby group, and there is evidence of effort being put in to avoid this sort of bias once official assemblies are established. Typically, representatives of both sides are invited to put their views and review the material. But the Irish abortion referendum saw criticism of the experts chosen. Participants in Ireland and Oregon are polled after the event for their views on balance in the process, typically showing strong satisfaction (though the weight to be put on this depends on the participants being representative in the first place). Even with best efforts it is possible that an element of implicit bias on the part of facilitators remains, this being something difficult to avoid completely, particularly when emotive issues are being discussed.

²³Tversky, Amos; Kahneman, Daniel *The Framing of decisions and the psychology of choice*. Science.58–453 :(1981) (4481) 211 .

Polarization effects

There is also the risk of group dynamics among assemblies shifting views some way from the mainstream. Cass Sunstein, the founder of 'nudge' theory describes cases where views in small groups polarise to a startling degree.

One experiment set up citizens' assemblies in Boulder and Colorado Springs, CO. These involved panels of six people deliberating on the most contested issues. Individuals were first polled anonymously, and the issues were then debated together. Over the course of the deliberation, the groups from the more left wing city Boulder skewed further left, while the groups from more right wing Colorado Springs skewed further right. At the end of the process individual views were again taken anonymously, revealing that individuals' opinions had moved too, suggesting the deliberation process had 'internalised' increasingly radical views²⁴.

This study replicated earlier work involving panels reviewing the severity of criminal sentencing. Here too, groups where the individuals had started with a preference for less severe punishment, saw a 'leniency shift' meaning a rating that was systematically lower than the median rating of individual members before they started to talk with one another. The same happened in the opposite direction – a 'severity shift' among those who were already disposed to tougher sentencing²⁵.

There may be evidence of a similar phenomenon in play in the assemblies we looked at. Certainly Oregon measure 74 (mandatory minimum sentencing), saw a considerable hardening of opinions against the measure during the course of the deliberations. The fact that in 9 cases out of 17 the more progressive option scored over 75% in the citizens assemblies while not a single winning side in a referendum or ballot initiative scored so highly suggests a similar dynamic is in play.

²⁴David Schkade et al; *What happened on Deliberation Day?* 95 Calif L Rev 915 (2007)

²⁵Schkade, Sunstein and Kahnemann: *Deliberating about Dollars: the Severity Shift*. 100 Colum. L Rev. 1139 (2001)

Deliberation and Values

Underlying the whole idea of citizens' assemblies is a sense that there is a technically correct answer to policy issues that can be reached with sufficient effort through evaluating evidence in a non partisan background, insulated from political lobbying. Commentators like Martin Wolf have suggested an analogy with juries and proposed that citizens' assemblies might break the deadlock on 'specific contentious issues'²⁶. The name citizen *jury* which is sometimes used is misleading here. Juries have a clear and bounded responsibility to come to a judgement on fact. Assessing the right policy to adopt in a complex and contested area is a totally different sort of task.

	How Chosen?	Voluntary?	How is the process facilitated?	Task
Jury Service	At random from electoral roll	No	Adversarial system, moderated by judge	Finding of fact
Citizens' Assembly	Invitation; a representative sample of those declaring an interest are invited	Yes	Facilitators and organisers invite both sides to make cases and facilitate the process	Recommendation on a point of policy

This technocratic approach to policy development seems to reflect a suspicion of popular democracy, and an assumption that better policy outcomes might be delivered by a smaller subset of better informed citizens, or if the better informed were more influential among voters at large.

²⁶Wolf, Martin: *The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (2023)

This underestimates the extent to which contested policy issues are frequently driven by deep value issues, or involve allocating weights to conflicting values on which there can be no technically “correct” answer. There is little evidence that agreement on this is likely to come through greater deliberation.

Indeed there is lots of evidence pointing in the other direction. Experience of groups including people on both sides of the argument suggested ‘the greatest depolarization [happened] with obscure matters of fact...and the least depolarization with highly visible public questions....familiar and long debated issues do not depolarize easily’²⁷ There are few subjects that have been discussed more exhaustively, and where the arguments are more driven by ethical and philosophical assumptions on both sides than assisted dying, proposed by Nuffield and others as a prime candidate for a ‘citizens’ assembly’.

In some cases, relevant data does exist which might challenge strongly held opinions. It is not clear however that an intense time limited session in a small group asked to produce a binary answer will ensure maximum receptiveness among those who come with strong prior convictions. Indeed, there is good evidence to the contrary. There seems to be no correlation between cognitive ability and the ability to detach yourself from “Myside bias” (adhering to prior convictions in the face of evidence)²⁸. Some studies go even further, suggesting that those with strong political convictions even struggle to read data accurately when it challenges their preconceptions²⁹. Researchers have even been able to map unique brain patterns when committed people are seeking to maintain their political beliefs in the face of counterevidence.³⁰

The group of people best qualified to balance strongly held beliefs and come up with a workable option are politicians, because that is their job. If direct input from the public is sought, looking at this evidence and the many other examples included in books like *The Wisdom of Crowds*³¹ suggests a better way to reach a fair outcome might be the independent pooling of multiple views held by the

²⁷Brown, Roger, *Social Psychology* pp 203-26 (1985)

²⁸Stanovich, West and Toplak, *Myside Bias, Rational Thinking, and Intelligence* (2013) [Link](#)

²⁹Kahan, Peters, Dawson and Slovic: *Motivated numeracy and enlightened self-government* (2017), [Link](#)

³⁰Kaplan, Gimbel and Harris: *Neural correlates of maintaining one’s political beliefs in the face of counterevidence*, *Nature* (2016) [Link](#)

³¹Surowiecki, J: *The Wisdom of Crowds* (2004)

broadest range of citizens with different levels and types of knowledge and experience. Like at an election – or even a referendum.

Active Citizenship

Measures like ‘citizens’ assemblies’ are held out as improving citizens’ involvement in democracy and potentially increasing their confidence in the process as a result. As we have seen, the evidence of this from actual votes is very thin. Citizens’ assemblies do not seem a remotely reliable way of assessing how the public is likely to think on controversial issues.

Given they are a poor predictor of results when their deliberations are followed by a referendum, we should be even more wary of using them as evidence of informed public opinion when taking forward sensitive legislation as Jersey recently did on assisted dying.

The political philosopher Richard Tuck has an interesting take on citizens’ assemblies. He compares the idea of a panel perfectly mirroring the electorate to the Isaac Asimov short story where the supercomputer ‘Multivac’ picked one completely representative citizen to be that year’s Voter³².

Tuck argues that political systems should not focus on mirroring the electorate as if they were a passive actor, but that democracy involves ‘active citizenship, and that people create their opinion in the act of deciding’³³.

“the vogue for sortition [choosing people by lot] and citizens’ assemblies should also be resisted...to put the case against them bluntly, what do I do while waiting for the tiny number of my fellow citizens, who have been chosen without election to represent me, to report on their decision. Have I played any role in their activity, other than to lobby or petition, rather as people could do in the monarchies of Ancien Regime Europe?”

The decline of interest in the political system, membership in political parties, and low voting turnout (particularly among the working classes) over recent decades is a serious problem. Interposing a new layer of consultation with

³²Asimov.I: ‘Franchise’ in *Earth is Room Enough* (1957)

³³Tuck: *Against (many kinds of) representation: in Sceptical Perspectives on the Changing UK Constitution* ed Johnson and Zhu (2023)

pretensions to provide a more objective assessment and a more direct reflection of public opinion but without any accountability for their recommendations arguably risks undermining the political process further by putting undue weight to proposals which lack real democratic legitimacy. Certainly, seeking to sanitise and distil public engagement through technocratic processes like citizens' assemblies is no substitute to inspiring the public with a programme that actually addresses the difficulties they face, and which voters believe has a real chance of being delivered.

Annex: the 17 case studies in detail

Yes is considered to be the progressive option except in the rows shaded.

Nation - Issue	Citizens' assembly		Electorate	
	% Yes	% No	% Yes	% No
Arizona - Marijuana Legalisation	57	43	49	51
BC Canada - Electoral Reform (STV)	95	5	39	61
Colorado - Mandatory Labelling of GMOs	55	45	35	65
Ireland - Abortion	87	13	66	34
Ireland - Care	80	20	26	74
Ireland - Definition of family	98	2	38	62
Ireland - Gay Marriage	81	19	62	38
Ireland - Age of presidential candidates	52	48	27	73
Massachusetts - Marijuana Legalisation	60	40	53	47
Ontario - Electoral Reform (PR)	92	8	37	63
Oregon - Corporate Minimum Tax	55	45	41	59

Oregon - English proficiency in schools	41	59	44	56
Oregon - GMO labelling*	55	45	50	50
Oregon - Mandatory Minimum Sentences	13	87	57	43
Oregon - Medical Marijuana	54	46	44	56
Oregon - Privately owned casinos	29	71	28	72
Oregon - Tax "kicker"	79	21	60	40

*Oregon GMO labelling initiative was narrowly defeated.