

The next democratic paradigm

*Our vision for a more just, joyful,
and collaborative future, where
everyone has meaningful power
to shape their societies*

DemocracyNext

“There is something going on in the world right now. There is a hunger across the globe in political systems to get citizens involved in decision making and policy development. *And citizens want to be involved in this.*”

Art O’Leary, Chief Executive, Ireland Electoral Commission
DemocracyNext Advisory Council member

We are DemocracyNext, an international, non-profit and non-partisan research and action institute.

We believe in a more just, joyful, and collaborative future, where everyone has meaningful power to shape their societies. We work to shift who has power and how we take decisions in government and in institutions of daily life like workplaces, schools, and museums.

We are an international knowledge hub on deliberative democracy. We create tools and resources to build the field and experiment with innovative governance approaches. We advise on the design and establishment of new democratic institutions, processes, and spaces, including Citizens’ Assemblies.

We want more people to see the democratic potential of sortition (selecting decision makers by lottery), deliberation, and participation for strengthening trust, reducing polarisation, and improving decision making. We believe that these principles enable us to be with complexity, channel our collective wisdom, and find common ground.

This document will tell you the why, who, what, how and where of our work. We hope that it will make you want to find out more, and to get involved.

Impact

Where we want to get to, and the role we play

01 Scaling the field

- Exponentially increase the number of high-quality Citizens' Assemblies and other deliberative forums with decision-making power that are embedded in a systematic way.
- Increase the number of organisations - from workplaces, unions, schools, universities - embedding portion, deliberation and participation into their governance and ways of working.
- Our role as a field-builder is to equip more people and organisations to have the knowledge, skills, and infrastructure to be able to design, implement, and evaluate Citizens' Assemblies and other democratic innovations. This work is in service of bigger aims: we want more people to have agency, to trust one another and their institutions, and to overcome polarisation.

02 Standards & innovation

- Uphold high standards.
- Push the field of democratic innovation to continue evolving, experimenting, and learning.
- We are one of only a small number of organisations in the field working internationally, and so a key element of our work is to cross-pollinate, share learning and set high standards.
- We draw on best practices, adapt to and learn from local contexts, tap into our extensive networks of experts and practitioners, and continually test and evaluate new approaches, technology, spaces, and institutions.

03 Creative storytelling

- Give people hope that another democratic future is possible.
- Strengthen demand for democratic systems change.
- We show this by doing - through our projects on the ground; through storytelling - about the impacts of Citizens' Assemblies on Assembly Members and on legislation; and through our creative collaborations with curators, artists, architects, museums, and other cultural institutions on exhibitions, installations, and public programming.

What is the problem we are trying to solve?

4 billion ...the number of people who will go to the polls this year.

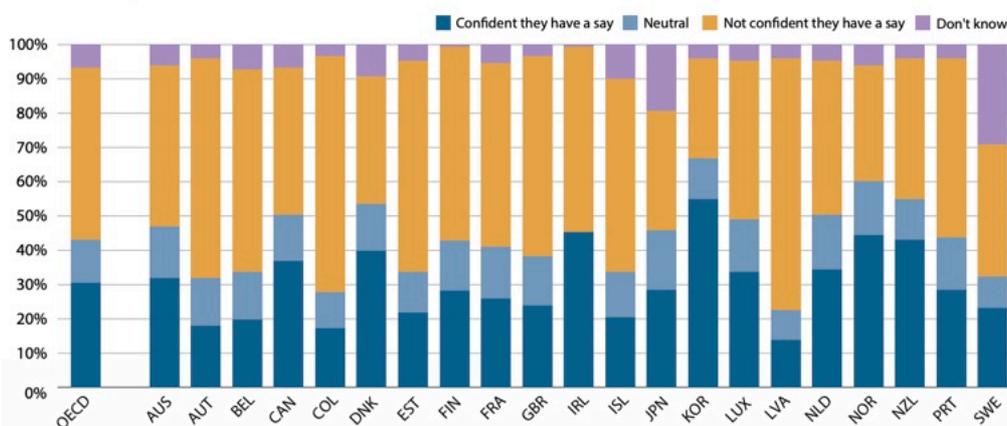
2024 is being framed as a “mega-election” year, with all eyes on the four billion people eligible to go to the polls across the globe. The main political fault line is between democracy and autocracy. How did we get to such a point, where we’ve exited the realm of substantive policy debates to focus on defending the foundations of democratic life?

Rising authoritarianism is the unintended outcome of the current democratic political system. Large parts of society are legitimately withdrawing their consent from a representative system that has failed to represent them and left them feeling left behind in the globalised world, not in control of their lives, living under the pressures of changing climate and insecurity, and experiencing war fatigue. Autocratic actors exploit the flaws of the current democratic system and people’s feelings of disillusionment.

Zooming out of 2024 to the bigger picture, we see the deep roots of the democratic crisis as people feeling a lack of agency to shape their lives, their communities, and the organisations which they are part of - from workplaces to schools and school boards, cultural institutions, banks, and local associations amongst others.

FIGURE 7. Half of respondents say the political system does not let them have a say in government decision-making

Share of respondents reporting different levels of confidence that the political system lets them have a say in government decision-making (0-10 scale), 2021



Note: Figure presents the within-country distributions of responses to the question “How much would you say the political system in your country allows people like you to have a say in what the government does?” The “Confident” proportion is the aggregation of responses from 6-10 on the scale; “neutral” is equal to a response of 5; “Not confident” is the aggregation of responses from 0-4; and “Don’t know” was a separate answer choice. “OECD” presents the unweighted average across countries. In Norway and Finland, the question was formulated in a slightly different way. Mexico is excluded from the figure as the data are not available. For more detailed information please find the survey method document at <http://oe.cd/trust>. For access to data see <https://stat.link/8alv9m>.

Source: OECD Trust Survey (<http://oe.cd/trust>)

Experiencing a lack of agency is related to a lack of dignity and belonging.

Polarisation has increased in a climate of “[high conflict](#)”, which journalist Amanda Ripley defines as one when discord distils into a good-versus-evil kind of feud, the kind with an ‘us’ and a ‘them’. In this state, the normal rules of engagement no longer apply, and the brain behaves differently. We feel increasingly certain of our own superiority and, at the same time, more and more mystified by the ‘other side’.

High conflict is in opposition to ‘good conflict’, which is respectful, necessary, and generative, and occurs in settings where there is openness and curiosity. In this context, our electoral politics too often fuels divisions, the legitimacy of democratic institutions is weakened, and [trust is faltering](#) in all directions (of people in government, of government in people and of people in one another).

Beyond politics, we have big questions to solve around the governance of institutions and companies that shape our world. Many people feel that we are facing manifold public and existential challenges.

If the roots of the democratic crisis are about agency, dignity, belonging, complexity, curiosity, and trust, there is a need to develop new democratic cultures, practices, spaces, and institutions that enable all those things.

This extends beyond the realm of government into other organisations and institutions of daily life. We need deliberative spaces that allow people to truly listen to one another and to be heard, to recognise and acknowledge each other, even in difference, to grapple with complexity and to spark curiosity – in ideas as well as in why others believe what they do; to have empathy and also to be able to do the hard work of finding common ground on the shared challenges we face.



What's the solution we're proposing?

At a time when the debate is between defending democracy and choosing autocracy, we believe that we cannot merely defend the status quo. Reforms to voting methods or to party financing might be important for the short term health of our systems, but they do not tackle the deeper root problems.

Democracy needs to be renewed with governance innovations that genuinely shift who has power and how decisions are taken.

It's why we believe in the power and value of the principles of [sortition \(representation by lottery\)](#), [deliberation](#), and [participation](#), which are manifest in deliberative processes and institutions, such as [Citizens' Assemblies](#), and can be applied to the governance and workings of political systems and a wide spectrum of organisations - from schools and universities, to banks, corporations, and cooperatives, as well as cultural institutions including museums, and others.

Deliberative Assemblies bring together diverse and broadly representative groups of people for extended periods of time, creating the epistemic conditions for them to be able to consider complex policy and political issues, and to find common ground. This does not mean that everybody is in 100% agreement on everything. That is not possible, nor arguably even desirable. But the threshold of agreement necessary for a proposition to be adopted by the group is often around 70%.

To date, the [OECD has counted](#) around [700 examples](#) of representative deliberative processes like Citizens' Assemblies for policy making around the world. They typically last at least 40 hours, often more. They are skilfully and impartially facilitated. People define their shared values, and they spend many hours learning and interacting with experts, stakeholders, and people with lived experience of an issue, which entails a large breadth and diversity of information.

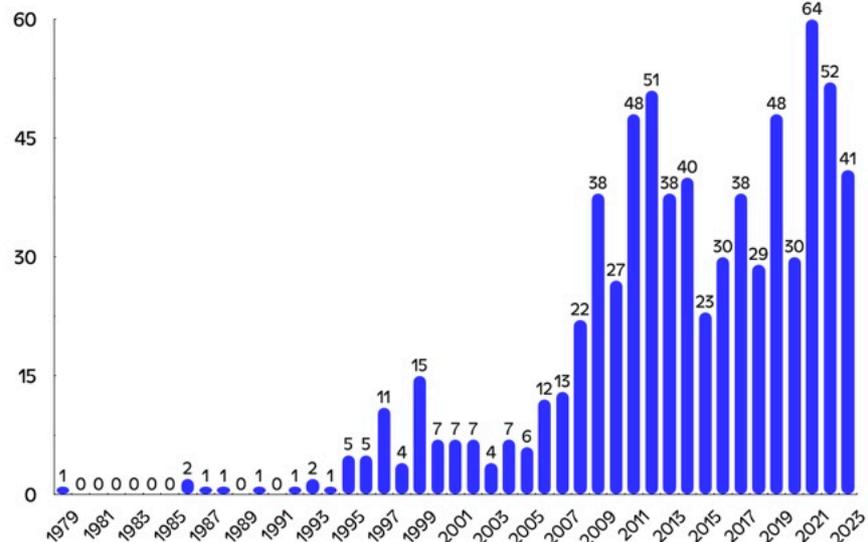


A growing “deliberative wave” of over 700 worldwide examples has demonstrated that Citizens’ Assemblies work

Number of representative deliberative processes per year, 1986 – 2023

Note: n=733; Processes that spanned over multiple years are noted by the year of their completion (except for permanent ongoing processes).

Source: OECD Deliberative Democracy Database (2023).



We have a wealth of evidence today that Citizens’ Assemblies are effective and democratic – leading to better decisions by leveraging our [collective intelligence](#) (the principle that more diverse groups come up with better ideas than more homogeneous groups) – and that they are fair and legitimate. They also have a significant impact both on Assembly Members, who are increasingly likely to become more civic-minded and politically engaged, and policy and legislative changes (see the [seminal OECD “deliberative wave” study](#) co-authored by DemocracyNext’s Claudia Chwalisz and Ieva Cesnulyte, with references to literature, data, and examples).

The development of democracy has always evolved, and we need to keep innovating. To address the challenges of today, placing greater power in the hands of institutionalised Citizens’ Assemblies—in citizens themselves—can help to address the shortcomings of the current paradigm.

Beyond the increasing numbers of policy makers and elected officials interested in Citizens’ Assemblies, there is also high public demand for them. Pew Research Center [data](#) released in September 2023 on US citizens’ take on politics reports that ‘A little more than a year before the presidential election, nearly two-thirds of Americans (65%) say they always or often feel exhausted when thinking about politics’, furthermore ‘when asked to sum up their feelings about politics in a word or a phrase...79% use negative or critical words, with “divisive” and “corrupt” coming up most frequently’.

However, there is also a hunger for a less polarising, more hopeful story about democracy. On average, 79% of respondents in the US think that it is important for governments to create Citizens’ Assemblies where citizens debate issues and make recommendations about national laws (Pew). 73% of respondents want those Assemblies to have decision-making authority on laws.

We recognise that Citizens' Assemblies are not a silver bullet solution. Yet we believe that they need to be a central pillar to the democratic transformation needed, connected to other deliberative and participatory initiatives and other democratic reform efforts. There is no simple shortcut to solving the deep and difficult problems of agency, dignity, belonging, complexity, curiosity, and trust. It requires time and intentional processes, structures, and spaces that can enable a systemic shift.

Citizens' Assemblies are not a replacement to elected politicians, but they do need serious political commitment and investment and should be integrated into decision-making cycles to have a genuine impact on policies and public decisions. There is a real question of power involved, and of the changing relationship that needs to occur between people, politicians, and public administrations in a renewed democracy that gives people more agency in shaping the decisions that affect their lives.

Beyond politics, we are also interested in the transformative potential of deliberative democracy and systemic changes that shift power and transform relationships for the long run within our major institutions and corporations. It's why we are working with cultural and economic institutions, and seek to expand to working with educational, financial, and other organisations of public life as well.

Currently the field of practitioners working in deliberative democracy and Citizens' Assemblies is relatively small. As interest grows, our role as an international field-builder is to enable as many people and organisations as possible to share a vision, hold the relevant skills and knowledge, have the capacity to experiment and innovate, and evaluate the impacts on people, policy, and society.



"It's democracy, it's the game. In this Assembly, everybody was listened to. When you read the report, there is a large part of the work that is about palliative care. It's because of this that those of us who were against some of the measures voted in favour overall, *because we felt that we were really listened to.*"

How we work

We learn and iterate by doing, working in the following ways:

- **Advocating** for sortition, deliberation, participation as defining principles of a new democratic paradigm.
- **Experimenting** with, creating, and evaluating new practices, technology, spatial infrastructure, systems, and institutions that advance the field of democratic innovation.
- **Researching** the practices and impacts of new forms of democracy, notably those that are anchored in the principles of deliberation, sortition (representation by lottery), and participation, such as Citizens' Assemblies and other deliberative and participatory forums.
- **Creating** tools, resources, learning, as well as field- and capacity-building programmes, and convening networks that enable more people to have the knowledge and skills to be able to advocate for, design, and implement new democratic practices and institutions.
- **Working with** governments, policy makers, practitioners, civil society organisations, international organisations, and other actors about how to design new democratic institutions, such as Citizens' Assemblies.
- **Collaborating** with cultural institutions, curators, artists, designers, architects, and other actors to promote the ideas of a new democratic paradigm in creative ways that engage a wider public's imagination through exhibitions, public installations, programming, and other initiatives.

Our 'action lab' way of working draws on our founder's successful attempts to catalyse Citizens' Assemblies in Europe, in collaboration with partners.



“A phenomenal resource on how to launch a rigorous Citizens' Assembly with practical examples from around the world. A must-read that will answer many questions you have”

Jonathan Mosković, Advisor on democratic innovation to the President of the French-speaking Brussels Parliament on our Assembling an Assembly 'how to' guide.

Institutionalising Deliberative Democracy

The Basque case



→ *How we work: a case study*

The following example shows how it is possible for one pilot to be scaled up to over 250 Assemblies in the space of three years, taking an approach to intentionally building capacity and skills collaboratively from the start.

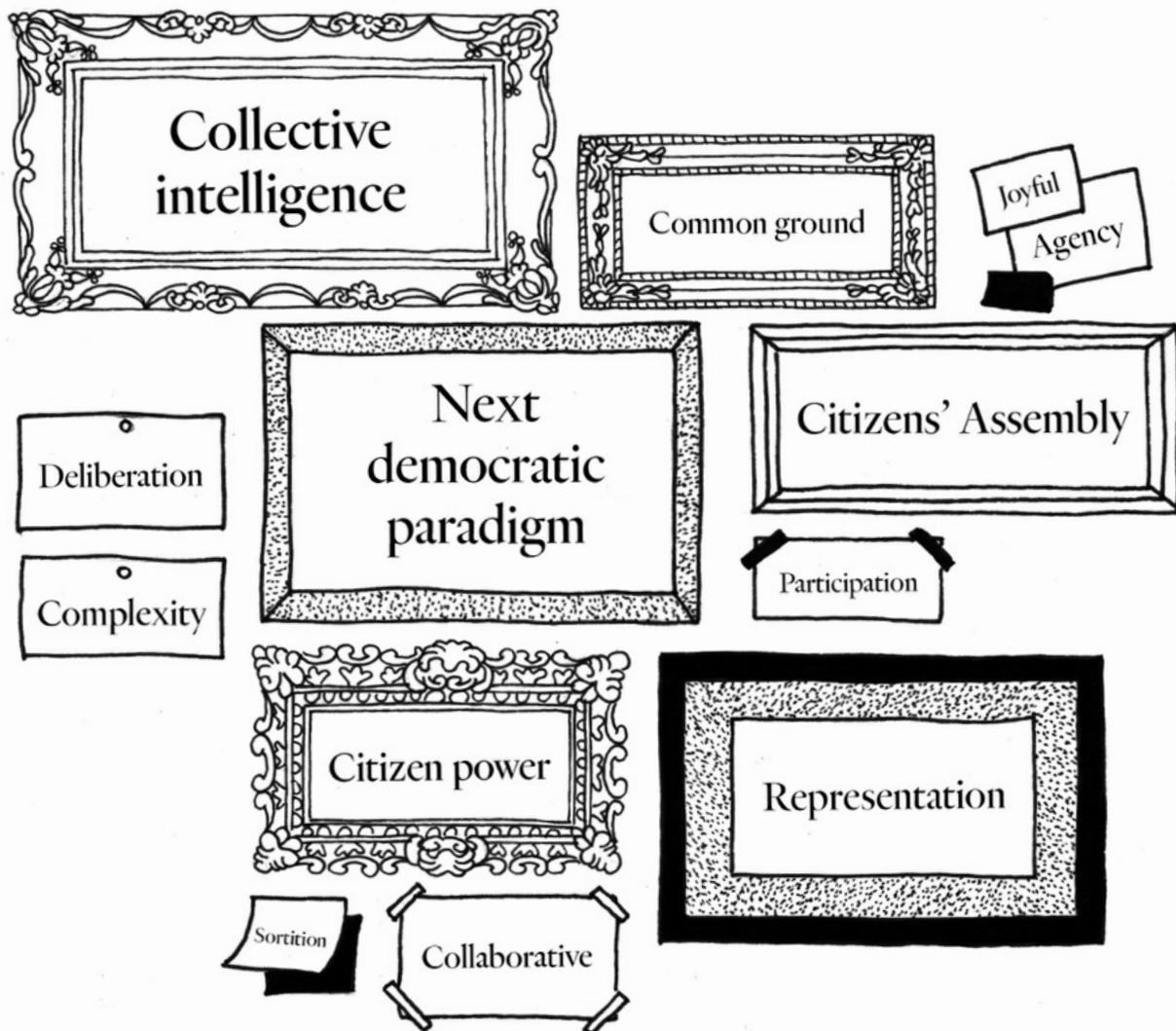
Partnering with [Arantzazulab Democracy Innovation Lab](#) in the Basque country in Spain on a single pilot in Tolosa (a city of 20,000) in 2020, working in conversation with a second (separate) pilot at provincial level, has today led to reflections on [how to institutionalise Citizens' Assemblies across all 251 local councils, three provincial governments, and the federal government](#). The proposals for this institutionalisation of Assemblies is happening despite a change in political leadership, This is because both the government and the opposition convened the Citizens' Assembly together and received its recommendations.

Our approach included in-depth strategy work, a broader capacity-building and a learning program involving the Arantzazulab team, representatives from all three layers of government, as well as civil society and practitioner organisations, from the get-go. We trained two local organisations with experience in adjacent activities such as community dialogues in how to design and run Citizens' Assemblies, and provided support and mentoring advice during the implementation phase. Today, the team at Arantzazulab is driving forward conversations, having developed the expertise to be able to do so with our support. We remain in contact to provide advice and answer questions when needed.

[During 2024 we will again be partnering with Arantzazulab to work with a major international corporation to look at how to democratise their governance processes.](#)

10 Highlights from our first 18 months

- We published our flagship 78-page [Assembling an Assembly Guide](#), an illustrated and accessible compilation of our knowledge and experience of how to set up a high-quality Citizens' Assembly—online and print!
- We launched a flagship paper [Six Ways to Democratise City Planning](#), developed over 9 months with an International Task Force of 15 leading experts, and we received feedback and inputs from a group of nearly 200 stakeholders from around the world.
- We co-launched the [Tech-Enhanced Citizens' Assemblies Pop-Up Lab](#) with the MIT Center for Constructive Communication, harnessing technology to serve democracy rather than undermine it.
- We collaborated with [Design & Democracy](#), Nexus Institute, the Bundestkunsthalle and SKD Dresden on two groundbreaking [Citizens' Assemblies on Democratising the Museum](#). A first exhibit at the Bundeskunsthalle on Redesigning Democracy is opening in May.
- We published a paper with the European University Institute and distinguished experts Carsten Berg, Kalypso Nicolaidis, and Yves Sintomer outlining a blueprint for the [EU Citizens' Assembly](#). The European Commission has just recommended that EU member states do more introduce Citizens' Assemblies on important issues.
- We followed closely the [French Citizens' Assembly on End of Life](#), made up of 184 citizens who reached 92% consensus over 4 weeks of meetings. We published [eye-opening reports](#) from inside the assembly's proceedings by our board member Hugh Pope and our Strategic Advisor Hélène Landemore served on the Assembly's Governance Committee. Claudia Chwalisz appeared on [France 24](#) afterwards to discuss the Assembly's significance.
- Claudia spoke with former [U.S. President Barack Obama](#) about Citizens' Assemblies as part of his foundation's leadership programme.
- The [OECD Deliberative Wave report](#), written by Claudia Chwalisz and Ieva Česnulaitytė, was translated into [Japanese](#) and [Spanish](#). The latter was an initiative of the Mexican government's electoral agency itself; Ieva spoke at the launch.
- We published op-eds or were interviewed in [Fast Company](#), [The Guardian](#), [RSA Journal](#), [Responsible Statecraft](#), [Carnegie Council](#), Baratunde Thurston's [How to Citizen](#), [Design Emergency](#), [Cultures of Assembly](#), [Tortoise Media](#), the [Seattle Times](#), [The Stranger](#), and the [Stanford Social Innovation Review](#).
- We held workshops or met with civil servants and democracy practitioners in London, Aarhus, Seattle, San Francisco, Bend, Cambridge, LA, DC, Boston, New York City, Lisbon, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, Bogota, Vienna, Vilnius, Warsaw, India, New Zealand, South Africa, The Hague, Copenhagen, and Brussels.



Want to find out more?

Read the following links which will tell you more about:

- [What we're working on](#)
- [16 Questions \(and answers\) on Citizens' Assemblies](#)

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