PARTNERS FOR DIGNITY & RIGHTS

*DRAFT* REPORT

# Assemblies as a Tool for Just Democracy

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**This is a draft report.** We welcome feedback and conversation on anything in here, and plan to refine the report and add an executive summary, additional case studies and a resource library to the final version. Please contact Ben at ben@dignityandrights.org if you have any input or questions on the report or if you want to engage with us around assemblies and co-governance.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 The urgency of democratization

The 2024 elections in the United States and across the world have been a pivot moment for liberal democracies. By the end of the year, 72 countries with half the world's population, 3.7 billion people, will have voted in democratic elections. Yet rather than marking a high water mark in democracy, many countries are experiencing profound threats to democracy.

Even in the best of times, effective governance is always a challenge, especially in societies like the U.S. that are shaped by profound racial and economic differences in political and economic power. Yet this is not the best of times. Decades of neoliberal governance have shrunk democratic control over housing, jobs, education and whole swaths of the economy, built up the military and police state, driven up the cost of living, pushed people into precarity and inflated racial, economic, gender and generational inequality to extreme and destabilizing levels. Countries around the world are also experiencing democratic backsliding as right-wing ethno-nationalists, religious fundamentalists and their corporate and billionaire co-conspirators undercut democratic institutions, rule of law and human rights. Changes in technology, media and the climate are accelerating and turbo-charging all of this.

In spite of these challenges, there is real cause for hope. Most people around the world are, at least on some level, supportive of democracy. Democratic reformers inside and outside of government have been working to engage voters, counter disinformation, maintain democratic institutions, and deepen democracy through *assemblies* and other models of *participatory governance*. Labor and social movements are organizing people to build countervailing power and mount a serious challenge to both the corporate-billionaire class and right-wing forces.

If we are to democratize governance and the economy, repair inequities and fend off authoritarian threats, we can build on and further strengthen these efforts through an equitable, power-building approach to co-governance. *Co-governance* or *collaborative governance* is, as we define it, a collection of participatory models and practices in which government and communities share power by working together through formal and informal structures and relationships to make collective policy decisions, co-create programs to meet community needs, and ensure those policies and programs are implemented effectively.

***Co-governance*** is a collection of participatory models and practices in which government and communities share power by working together through formal and informal structures to make collective policy decisions, co-create programs to meet community needs, and ensure those policies and programs are implemented effectively.

*Equitable, power-building co-governance* creates space for groups of people who are marginalized and poorly served by traditional modes of governance (including people of color, young people, tenants, and low-wage workers, among others) to directly participate in policy-making and policy implementation. It centers equity in both governance processes and policy outcomes, and works to cultivate countervailing power among these communities both inside and outside of government.

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As the Transnational Institute writes, strong co-governance decenters public institutions to incorporate civil society as active participants in governance, forms new models of collective control between the civic selector and public institutions, and expands the commons as a sphere of popular democratic control outside of government that gives people the opportunity to participate in making the rules and governing the systems that affect them.

Co-governance can take many forms, but in this report we focus on assemblies as a key model of direct popular mobilization that is showing great promise to advance equity and effective governance and to build community power. There are no silver bullets or quick fixes to the challenges facing democracy and humanity in the 21st century, but, as part of a larger equitable, power-building approach to co-governance, assemblies can help deepen democracy beyond elections, expand the realm of democratic control over the economy, advance equity and inclusion, and improve the effectiveness of policy and government in ways that make a meaningful difference in people's lives and challenge the pull towards nativist, nihilistic politics.

## 1.2 Assemblies' potential to advance democracy and justice

Assemblies are gatherings in which large numbers of people come together to deliberate and make collective decisions, and they have been attracting increasing attention as a participatory democracy tool for good reason. Elections and representative governance are cornerstones of modern democracies, but are incapable of meeting this century's great challenges on their own. The shrinking sphere of democratic control, unaffordable cost of living, economic precarity, racial and economic inequity, climate change, widespread distrust in government and institutions, and right-wing White Christian nationalism are all immense challenges that cannot be solved solely through top-down decisions or politics as usual. They are multifaceted societal challenges that can only be addressed through the combined powers of governments and social movements.

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Assemblies and other participatory democracy models are not a cure-all—nothing is—but they are a powerful mechanism that can help build the robust, equitable, democratic forms of

governance and community organization that we need. Foundations, government and scholars have recently focused on civic assemblies (sometimes called "citizens' assemblies"[1]), and many movement organizations have focused on building people's movement assemblies (or on electoral organizing and advocacy). We see an important ongoing role for both civic and movement assemblies, and see especially strong potential to shift greater attention toward what we call *governing-power assemblies*. Governing-power assemblies are co-created by governments and social-movement organizations, and draw on the strengths of both to give the assemblies an official, empowered role in public policy-making and policy-implementation, and to simultaneously build organized, equitable community power.

Assemblies have demonstrated tremendous promise to be significantly scaled up in both government and movement organizing, but have often been short-lived, and have so far struggled to substantially change real-world policy outcomes and meaningfully challenge neoliberal governance and authoritarianism at scale. A key task in the coming years will therefore be figuring out how to build assemblies' impacts and their political durability, and how to scale them up to a much more prominent role in democratic societies that aids and complements the important ongoing roles of representative democracy and public administration.

This report argues for significantly expanding assemblies in public governance, offers guidance on when an assembly is and isn't the right tool for the job, shares a framework for which specific forms of assembly are best suited to different circumstances, and offers guidance on how to strengthen assemblies' impact and political durability by deepening their integration into social movements, government and policy processes.

# 2. Strengths, limits and the challenges of impact and durability

Assemblies offer a number of strengths that make them a strong complement to other forms of representative and participatory democracy. They can facilitate robust and potentially equitable public participation; be responsive to community needs, priorities and ideas; improve policy design; generate collective buy-in to policy decisions; and build civic capacity, protect and deepen democracy and improve public life.

**Strengths of assemblies**

1. Facilitate robust and potentially equitable public participation
2. Responsive to community needs, priorities and ideas
3. Improve policy design
4. Generate collective buy-in to policy decisions
5. Build civic capacity, protect and deepen democracy and improve public life

[1] In other countries, civic assemblies—lottery-selected assemblies commissioned by governments—are usually called citizens' assemblies. Because in the U.S., reactionaries have narrowed the term "citizen" to exclude immigrants from the polity and from civil and human rights, we use the term "civic assembly."

Given these strengths, there is tremendous potential to institutionalize assemblies far more widely in governance, but they are not the right model for every situation. Assemblies create space for thoughtful public deliberation, but deliberation can't solve every problem: political contestation will always play an important role in democratic societies. And given their size and intensity (assemblies involve dozens, hundreds or thousands of participants who meet for multiple hours or multiple days), other smaller participatory models like community advisory boards, tripartite governing boards or civic juries can be a better alternative to a full-scale assembly. Along with these and other models of participatory governance, assemblies should be a fundamental part of robust, democratic societies that are as familiar to people as jury duty and voting.

Assemblies have been implemented around the U.S. and across the world, with especially significant momentum in recent years in Latin America and Europe. Recent assemblies have achieved major victories, including allocating millions of dollars to community projects through participatory budgeting, beginning to shift public attention and dollars toward fixing Jackson, Mississippi's ailing water system, guiding Irish voters towards legalizing abortion in a national referendum and building ongoing public input into metropolitan planning and governance in Bogota, Toronto, Brussels, Paris and other cities.

**Key challenges**

1. Deepening assemblies' impact on policy decisions, policy implementation and real-world policy outcomes.
2. Building assemblies' political, financial and organizational durability, particularly across elections and political administrations.

Yet in practice, assemblies everywhere have struggled to effect significant changes in policy decisions and policy implementation that make a significant difference in people's lives, and have also struggled to maintain political and financial support over time. Policy recommendations from assemblies don't always translate into policy decisions and effective, accountable policy implementation by government. Participatory budgeting and civic assemblies have often been constrained in their scope and decision-making power, government-commissioned assemblies of all kinds have often been implemented by one political party only to be dissolved later by another, and movement assemblies have often struggled to translate their political visions and policy platforms into governing power and changes in people's lives.

These two challenges of impact and durability are significant. But by bringing together the authority and capacity of government with the knowledge, relationships, accountability and vision of member-based community organizations whose members are directly impacted by unjust policy outcomes, assemblies hold significant potential to develop and help build support behind solutions that work for everyone—if, as we we will see, they are effectively institutionalized in government, in social movements and throughout the policy process.

Institutionalizing assemblies both in government and in connection with social movements brings together the unique strengths of both government and community power-building organizations. This inside-outside approach can help balance the political power dynamics in which policy is made and executed, bring government and movement organizations together into organized relationships, sharpen policy to include and work better for all communities by centering those at the margins, deepen assemblies' real-world impacts and build enduring political support behind assemblies and the policy agendas that emerge from them.

# 3. Types of assemblies

There are multiple forms of assemblies in existence, including *movement assemblies* run by social-movement organizations and *policy assemblies* commissioned by governments, and there is especially exciting potential to expand upon what we call *governing-power assemblies*. When institutionalized at scale as governance structures, movement, policy and governing-power assemblies can all be structures as *federated assemblies*. We further describe these types of assemblies and what situations they are best suited to in Section 5, and share case studies of specific assemblies in Appendix II.

***Movement assemblies*** are run by social-movement organizations wholly apart from government. They include ***people's movement assemblies*** convened by organizations or coalitions to organize their membership base and ***policy platform assemblies*** bringing people together from across multiple organizations to vote on a shared policy platform. They also include ***member-governance assemblies*** that give organizations' members a direct role in organizational decision-making, ***semi-spontaneous mass assemblies*** that emerge in moments of acute crisis and mass protest and ***shadow assemblies*** designed to parallel and contrast with official top-down policy-making.

We focus in this report especially on people's movement assemblies and policy-platform assemblies. Examples of people's movement assemblies include the Black Nashville Assembly and other Southern Movement Assemblies across the U.S. South, as well as the Poor People's Campaign's Mass Poor People's & Low Wage Workers' Assembly. People's movement assemblies are common across Latin America too. Examples of policy platform assemblies include ʻĀina Aloha Economic Futures, Bronxwide Plan and the South Los Angeles Health and Human Rights Conferences.

***Policy assemblies*** are commissioned by governments. They may often involve advisory or contributory roles from community organizations, but government holds ultimate power over their form and function. They can include ***one-time lottery-selected civic assemblies*** convened by governments to provide advice on a single policy question, ***standing lottery-selected civic assemblies*** that are institutionalized as ongoing bodies with an advisory, recommendatory or oversight role in public governance, ***constituent assemblies*** that have open participation for all members of a political community who want to attend

(sometimes just citizens, sometimes all residents) and ***constitutional assemblies*** that are convened either as part of regular constitutional maintenance (as in U.S. states) or in moments of major national crisis.

We focus in this report on the two types of civic assemblies. Examples of one-off civic assemblies include British Columbia's Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, the Irish Citizens' Assembly and the more recent Petaluma Fairgrounds Advisory Panel on land use planning in Petaluma, California, and the Civic Assembly on Youth Homelessness in Deschutes County, Oregon. Examples of standing civic assemblies include Brussels' Deliberative Committees, East Belgium's Citizens' Council and Citizens' Assemblies, Paris's Citizens' Assembly and metropolitan Toronto's Planning Review Panel and Metrolinx Reference Panel.

***Governing-power assemblies*** combine the powers of the two prevailing forms of assemblies, movement assemblies and policy assemblies, with the goal of building equitable inside-outside community power to reshape governance. They are connected through formal structures or informal working relationships to government and the policy process, and simultaneously hold space for member-based social-movement organizations to shape the assemblies and build independent power.

In governing-power assemblies, both government and community groups play key roles. Government integrates the assemblies into the institutions and processes of government, and movement organizations ground assemblies in equitable participation by marginalized and underserved communities while also building the equitable, independent civic infrastructure and community power that are necessary cornerstones of a just democratic society. Together, these complementary roles imbue governing-power assemblies with the potential to make substantial impacts in policy and people's lives. Examples of governing-power assemblies include the Jackson People's Assembly in Jackson, Mississippi, Community Assemblies in Washington State, Barcelona En Comú's assemblies in Spain and participatory budgeting assemblies in the 1990s in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

***Federated assemblies*** or ***civic congresses*** are mass governance structures in which smaller assemblies with broad participation feed delegates and input into a larger organization-wide or region-wide assembly in which delegates make decisions on behalf of all of the assemblies. Movement assemblies, policy assemblies and governing-power assemblies can all be federated. Political party and labor unions conventions are examples of ***federated member-governance assemblies***, the Wisconsin Conservation Congress is an example of a ***federated constituent assembly***, and Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting assemblies were an example of a ***federated governing-power assembly***.

# 4. Deepening impact and political durability through an equitable power-building approach

## 4.1 An equitable power-building approach to governance

The two big challenges facing assemblies today are delivering a substantial policy impact in people's lives and establishing political durability to keep assemblies going across elections and political administrations. An ***equitable power-building approach*** to assemblies is critical to solving both these challenges. Whereas civic assemblies are designed to inject public input into the official policy process and movement assemblies to hold space for autonomous community gatherings, an equitable power-building approach uses assemblies as a tool intended to reshape institutions of governance to democratically deliver public goods; advance equity; redistribute power across government, the economy and civil society; achieve measurable changes in policies and policy outcomes; and permanently institutionalize assemblies and participatory democracy:

**Key goals of an equitable power-building approach to governance**

1. **Reorient governance around the primary goal of guaranteeing everyone's fundamental human needs are met through universal, equitably targeted, democratically controlled public goods** including education, housing, utilities, income and clean and safe environments.
2. **Create equitable governance processes** that bring everyday people, especially those on the frontlines of injustice, into direct participation in policy-making and policy implementation.
3. **Achieve measurable changes in policy decisions and policy outcomes** that are meaningful and palpable in people's lives.
4. **Establish effective monitoring, accountability and enforcement** to hold both government and private economic actors accountable to their responsibilities to the public good and human rights.
5. **Distribute power** by identifying communities whose needs are inadequately met by traditional governance, cultivating active civic participation and leadership among them, and building their community organization, capacity and power both inside and outside of government.
6. **Institutionalize assemblies and participatory democracy** as essential ongoing components of democratic governance in connection with elections, representative democracy and public administration.

Orienting governance and assemblies around these goals is essential if we are to deepen assemblies' impact. Governing-power assemblies therefore stand to play an important—and so far dramatically underexplored role—in reshaping governance. Governing-power assemblies are a strong intervention in three main situations:

**Situations best suited to governing-power assemblies**

1. Governance in specific economic sectors where there is a stark power imbalance in which a private power dominates a class of people, such as employers wielding power over workers, landlords over tenants, or health care companies over patients and health care workers.
2. One or more demographic communities in the political jurisdiction—such as people of color, poor and working class people, young people or rural residents—face pernicious disparities and injustices as a result of policies and governance across multiple sectors.
3. There is broad but passive support on a given issue like climate action, expansion of Medicaid (public health insurance), abortion rights, gun control or paid sick leave, but policy solutions and government action are thwarted by strong, concentrated interests like corporate lobbies or ideological extremists.

Winning changes in any of these arenas is inherently difficult. Powerful economic interests who benefit from the status quo team up with racial, gender and sexual reactionaries to oppose fundamental changes in governance and policy that redistribute power, wealth and life chances to everyone. Winning requires a *dual-power strategy* combining the strengths of government with those of social movement organizations, and governing-power assemblies are one important tool that can be incorporated into a larger dual-power, inside-outside strategy.

## 4.2 Deepening impact

Employing governing-power assemblies as part of a broader equitable governing-power approach to transforming governance helps increase assemblies' impact in key ways including:

**How a governing-power approach strengthens assemblies' impact**

1. Strategically engaging frontline communities as participants who bring expertise on where and how governance is failing people, and who have a direct stake in developing solutions that work for everyone.
2. Cultivating independent, organized civic power outside government that can counterbalance concentrated economic powers, strengthen the public's civic knowledge and muscles, and help build political will and mobilize community members behind policy decisions and effective policy implementation.
3. Providing clear focal points in government and policy processes for movements organizations to focus their energies and power on, thereby increasing their influence and facilitating further organizing and power-building.
4. Institutionalizing assemblies throughout the policy process, beginning by helping set the policy agenda, and continuing through designing and deciding on policies and

conducting oversight to make sure government and private economic actors are implementing them effectively and equitably.

Governing-power assemblies are not the only model for structuring such inside-outside dual power, but because of their size and formalized structure, they are an important one. Other models like tripartite oversight or standards boards can also be effective co-governance tools for balancing power in specific economic sectors, and ballot initiatives can skirt legislative hurdles and enable the public to pass broadly popular policies like abortion rights and, in the U.S., Medicaid expansion. Civic assemblies—most notably Ireland's civic assembly on abortion—have also sometimes played a supportive role in building public support behind ballot initiatives.

## 4.3 Building political durability

In addition to helping drive real changes in policy and outcomes, an equitable power-building approach to governance can also help build the political durability of assemblies in two key ways. First, by deepening assemblies' impact, a power-building approach demonstrates assemblies' worth, which builds active support for assemblies both inside and outside of government and makes it harder for opponents to raise questions about their worth. This helps normalize assemblies and establish them as broadly popular institutions, thereby helping them avoid being dismantled by future political administrations. Second, by actively engaging movement organizations as partners in designing and implementing assemblies, government leaders and staff and participatory democracy practitioners help establish an organized group of constituents inside and outside government who will champion assemblies.

## 4.4 Radical versus deliberative approaches

This power-building approach to assemblies and democracy-building is a *radical democratic* approach oriented toward transforming unjust systems, structures and power differentials.[2] This differs from a *deliberative democratic* approach, common among civic assemblies, that focuses more narrowly on thoughtful discourse and deliberation among a representative body as a way to reach considered, rational policy decisions.[3] Deliberation is an essential tool and

[2] For more on power-building governance frameworks, see Harmony Goldberg and Dan McGrath from Grassroots Power Project on governing power, Manuel Pastor, Jennifer Ito and Madeline Wander from Equity Research Institute on community power-building, Rosa E. Gonzalez from Facilitating Power on the spectrum of community engagement to community ownership, K. Sabeel Rahman on governing to build power, Rahman and Hollie Russon Gilman on civic power, Jedediah Britton-Purdy, David Singh Grewal, Amy Kapczynski and K. Sabeel Rahman on law and political economy, Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright on empowered participatory governance, Wright on eroding capitalism, LeftRoots on liberatory strategy, Black Socialists in America and the DSA's Libertarian Socialist Caucus on dual power.

[3] For more on the distinction between radical and deliberative approaches to assemblies, see Mads Ejsing's, Adam Veng's and Irina Papazu's "Green politics beyond the state: radicalizing the democratic potentials of climate citizens' assemblies," John Boswell's, Rikki Dean's and Graham Smith's "Integrating citizen deliberation into climate governance: Lessons on robust design from six climate assemblies," and Frederik Langkjær and Graham Smith's "Designing the Follow-Up to Climate Assemblies."

tactic within radical democratic practices, and civic assemblies and other deliberative democracy models deserve to play an ongoing role in policy-making. One-time civic assemblies are effective for working through political deadlocks involving competing values and multiple potential policy pathways, and helping build public consensus behind a course of action. Standing civic assemblies hold particularly exciting possibility, and should be much more widely implemented to introduce public priorities, input and oversight legislative processes.

In the context of an unequal, unjust society in which governance is often dominated by concentrated political and economic powers, however, deliberation among a small number of individuals in civic assemblies cannot solve many of our thorniest policy challenges. In many situations in addition to reasoned deliberation, we also need social movements who can organize and mobilize poor people, people of color, women, LGBT+ people, workers, tenants, debtors, patients and others who are systematically disempowered by governance—public and privatized—and wield political and moral power to expand our political imagination and change what is politically possible. Thus whereas civic assemblies focus on curating a careful mix of participants and cultivating robust discourse between them, a governing-power approach looks beyond the individual participants in the assembly toward the goal of using the assembly as a tool for equitably organizing and mobilizing large numbers of community members to take collective political action. These two approaches both hold important value, but as we will see in Section 5, are best suited to different circumstances.

## 4.5 Power-building versus reformist and separatist approaches

A power-building approach also differs from both reformist and separatist tendencies of various civil society and movement organizations.

In contrast to electoral organizing and policy advocacy, which aim to win reforms by influencing decisions by government power-holders, assemblies and other co-governance efforts aim to actually restructure who is part of public agenda-setting, decision-making and accountability processes, as well as whose policy needs are prioritized, what decisions get made and how effectively policies are implemented once they're passed. In areas of governance in which there is relative equality among social groups, selecting assembly participants by sortition is an effective way to ensure diverse, broad-based policy input. But in policy arenas in which specific communities face heightened injustices and are sidelined from wealth and power—whether social groups like people of color or young people, or economic groups like tenants, workers or patients—we need to give these communities disproportionately more participation and power in the policy process.

Governing power-assemblies thus serve an important complementary role to civic assemblies and other forms of civic republicanism, as well as to traditional modes of democratic participation like elections, interest-group advocacy and "civic engagement" efforts like surveys, public education, public meetings and notice and comment. Equitable power-building approaches like governing-power assemblies are needed to help counter top-down power of corporations and billionaires as well as exclusionary threats from the anti-democratic Right.

Meanwhile, people's movement assemblies are beautiful, necessary spaces for base-building organizations to recruit, organize and develop leaders and build relationships and alignment across people and organizations. But if movements want to have a meaningful impact at scale, they have to work to build majoritarian power. This requires (in tandem with efforts to build alternatives) engaging at least some of the time with government, policy-making and the unavoidable contradictions and compromises of governance in mass, pluralistic societies. Movement-only spaces including people's movement assemblies, policy-platform assemblies and member-governance assemblies will always have an important role in movement-building, but in order to mainstream and scale community visions, governing-power assemblies carried out in collaboration and productive tension with government are an important added dimension. As imperfect as existing government institutions are, movements have an important opportunity—indeed, an imperative—to strategically work with and through existing institutions even as they seek to transform them.

# 5. Different forms of assemblies are suited to different situations

In the following table, we define governing-power assemblies, four forms of movement assemblies and three forms of policy assemblies, and delineate which kinds of situations each form of assembly is best suited to. We also indicate which phase of the policy process each assembly is best adapted to: agenda-setting, policy formation, policy decisions, policy implementation, or monitoring and oversight. We discuss the five phases of the policy process further in the "Institutionalization throughout the policy process" section.

| Type of assembly | Definition | Examples | Best suited to | Stages of intervention in the policy process and movement-building |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Governing-power assembly** | Connected through formal structures and/or informal working relationships to government and the policy process, and simultaneously hold space for member-based social-movement organizations to shape the assemblies and build independent power. | Jackson People's Assembly, Washington State Community Assemblies, Barcelona En Comú, Porto Alegre participatory budgeting assemblies | (1) Governance in specific sectors where there is a stark power imbalance in which a private power dominates a class of people, such as employers wielding power over workers, landlords over tenants, or health care companies over patients and health care workers.<br><br>(2) One or more identifiable communities in the political jurisdiction—such as people of color, poor and working | Best suited to the agenda-setting, decision-making, and monitoring and enforcement phases of the policy process. Usually most successful at least a few years into community organizations' work once they have built sufficient trust, relationships and mobilization in their community, as well |

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| | | | class people, young people or rural residents—face pernicious disparities and injustices as a result of governance across multiple sectors.<br><br>(3) Issues like climate action, Medicaid (public health insurance) expansion, abortion rights, gun control and paid sick leave where there's broad but passive public support, but powerful opponents block policy solutions and government action. | as the capacity and know-how to be able to engage with government on their own terms and to implement assemblies effectively. |
| **MOVEMENT ASSEMBLIES** | | | | |
| **Type of assembly** | **Definition** | **Examples** | **Best suited to** | **Stages of intervention in the policy process and movement-building** |
| **People's movement assembly** | Organizing vehicles that are designed as a process and space through which one or more organizations' membership bases come together for political education, leadership development and | Southern Movement Assemblies | Movement and grassroots organizations working to grow their membership bases and deepen skills, knowledge, political education, and leadership development towards | Work well to help community organizations build capacity, power and political clarity in order to be able to engage in any stage |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | community building toward some form of collective action. | | independently shaping political agendas. | of the policy process through inside or outside strategies. Can be one-time or annual events. |
| **Policy-platform assembly** | Movement assemblies convened by one or more organizations for attendees to develop and ratify a joint policy platform. | ʻĀina Aloha Economic Futures, Bronxwide Plan, South Los Angeles Health and Human Rights Conferences | Multiple movement organizations want to build deeper strategic alignment and member-to-member relationships with each other, and develop a joint policy vision and set of demands. | Best during the agenda-setting phase of policy-making, and when coalitions want to forge deeper strategic alignment. |
| **Member-governance assembly** | Ongoing, institutionalized part of some member-based organizations' and coalitions' internal governance process in which members are asked to elect leaders and vote on resolutions, policy platforms, and other internal questions. | Labor union conferences, political party conventions | Movement organizations want to democratize their governance decisions, and hold staff and leaders accountable to the full member base. | Can be institutionalized as an annual event to ratify key decisions and exercise oversight and accountability over the yearly work of leadership and committees. |
| **Shadow assemblies** | Assemblies run by movement organizations to parallel and contrast with official closed-door, hierarchical government policy processes. | Global Assembly | When government officials refuse to commission an assembly and there is a need to delegitimize the official governance process and build public support | Shadow assemblies parallel any stages of the policy process that organizers wish to draw contrasts with. |

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| | | | behind more participatory modes of governance. | |
| **POLICY ASSEMBLIES** | | | | |
| **Type of assembly** | **Definition** | **Examples** | **Best suited to** | **Stages of intervention in the policy process and movement-building** |
| **One-time civic assembly** | A lottery-selected civic assembly convened by government to weigh in on a single policy question, and then disbanded. Almost always holds advisory power, with final decisions made by elected officials or voters. | Petaluma Fairgrounds Advisory Panel, Irish Citizens' Assembly | Policy issues that are deadlocked by competing values, for which there is no simple binary choice and there is a need to build public legitimacy behind the ultimate policy decision. | Typically most useful during the agenda-setting and policy formation phases of the policy-making process, and on issues where power imbalances aren't a major problem. |
| **Standing civic assembly** | An institutionalized annual lottery-selected civic assembly with an ongoing role in public governance. Holds advisory power, but is authorized to play an ongoing role in putting actionable policy proposals before legislators or voters, and/or to play an oversight and monitoring role. | East Belgium, Brussels Deliberative Committee, Paris Citizens' Assembly | Introducing regular broad-based public priorities, input and oversight into the annual legislative cycle. | Useful across all five stages of the policy process, particularly to help set the public agenda, formulate policies and monitor implementation, in policy areas in which most things are already working pretty well. |

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| **Constituent assembly** | An assembly that is open to all residents or stakeholders of a defined geographic area, and at which attendees are authorized to make one or more policy or procedural decisions. | Participatory budgeting assemblies, New England town meetings, Wisconsin Conservation Congress county assemblies | Small jurisdictions like towns or neighborhoods, but only if participation is not dominated by any identity or interest group. | One of the few forms of assemblies authorized to make direct policy decisions, but can also be employed in agenda-setting, policy formation and monitoring and design. |

# 6. Institutionalizing assemblies in governance and power-building

Multiple kinds of assemblies—including governing-power, civic and movement assemblies—have an important role to play in building a just, democratic society, but holding an assembly doesn't automatically guarantee it will change anything or become a permanent institution. But we can deepen assemblies' impacts and their political durability through an equitable power-building approach by institutionalizing assemblies in government, in movement-building and in policy-making. We can think of these as three dimensions of institutionalization: integrating assemblies *horizontally* into community organizing and power-building by movement organizations, integrating them *vertically* into official governance processes and integrating them *longitudinally* over time throughout the entire cycle of policy-making and policy implementation.

Over the longer term, institutionalizing assemblies should be aimed toward:

**Goals of institutionalizing assemblies in movements, government and governance:**

1. **Building strong social movements and civic capacity**
2. **Expanding equity, accountability and participation** in governance
3. **Replicating and expanding assemblies** as key mode of equitable democratic decision-making and accountability
4. **Institutionalizing assemblies** strategically in policy and governance processes
5. **Resourcing assemblies** effectively and efficiently
6. **Giving assemblies adequate powers and scope** to achieve a meaningful impact
7. **Cultivating equitable civic capacity and community power** outside of government
8. **Deepening assemblies' impact** in equitable policy changes and real-world outcomes.

Achieving these goals requires building mutual trust and strong working relationships between community and government.

## 6.1 Institutionalization in movement-building

Social movement organizations use people's movement assemblies, policy platform assemblies, member-governance assemblies, semi-spontaneous mass assemblies and shadow assemblies as powerful tools for building independent, democratic community power outside of government. Few models are as effective as movement assemblies at engaging a large number of organizations' members in directly governing their organizations and shaping their political agendas and strategies. Civic assemblies, in contrast, are often explicitly designed to sidestep interest-groups politics and depolarize political decisions, and they typically are not oriented

toward significantly engaging and mobilizing the broader public as part of a popular political force capable of driving political action. Such organization and mobilization is important in arenas in which inequities and power differences come into play. There is thus an important opportunity for governments to support governing-power assemblies that forge direct connections with community organizations for the expressed purpose of facilitating community power-building.

Community-led power-building also flips the traditional model of "community engagement" or "civic engagement" on its head. Instead of government conducting broad public outreach and then convening an participatory space for whoever happens to engage, power-building organizations begin by clarifying their base of potential members who are directly impacted by injustices (home health care workers, Black neighborhood residents, public school students, etc.). They then identify which other organizations share values and strategic alignment, and design assemblies to organize their member base and strengthen interorganizational relationships and strategy. These assemblies are thus spaces that community has created or "claimed," rather than passively being invited into government-created spaces. Communities can either create their own independent movement assemblies or work with allies in government to co-design and co-create assemblies.

Professionals in government, the academy and professionalized nonprofits sometimes express concerns that cultivating organized constituencies outside of government is undemocratic because it amounts to picking favorites, and electeds may worry that newly organized constituencies may unsettle the balance of power among stakeholders that got them elected. The reality is that wealthy, powerful interests are already highly organized and wield major influence in government and governance, so for electeds and agencies to do nothing is, by default, to cede power to employers over workers, landlords over tenants, wealthier white communities over communities of color and to other power-holders over people who are getting the short end of the stick. By creating space for encouraging *equitable* community organization, capacity and power in under-organized communities, government is investing in essential civic capacity and enabling a healthy, functional democracy.

Movements sometimes describe this as a "dual power" strategy. As the Equity Research Institute and Lead Local illustrate, by cultivating equity community power-building, government can help build stronger, more effective governance for everyone by helping catalyze, create and sustain a public agenda:

**How community power catalyzes, creates, and sustains conditions for healthy communities** (by Equity Research Institute and Lead Local)

**Set an Agenda:** Community power builders catalyze conditions by setting an agenda for change:

1. bringing attention to issues and problems facing marginalized and historically disenfranchised communities

2. developing analyses of root causes that inform solutions to the problems
3. building momentum through collective action and catalytic campaigns

**Achieve an Agenda:** Community power builders create conditions by
1. leveraging that momentum toward achieving an agenda
2. winning—or protecting—funding, programs, and services
3. developing, passing, and enacting policies and establishing alternative models or programs.

**Govern an Agenda:** Community power builders sustain conditions for healthy communities by governing an agenda:
1. developing leaders for key decision-making positions
2. building mutual accountability between decision-makers and communities
3. shifting the public discourse through narrative and culture-change work.

Source: Lead Local

In practice, power-holders never turn substantial power over to assemblies overnight. By first piloting assemblies on a smaller scale, government and movement partners can learn through the process and make adjustments to strengthen and grow the assembly over time. This approach of piloting then scaling and institutionalizing assemblies and governance allows government and their community collaborators to strategically build out what K. Sabeel Rahman and Hollie Russon Gilman call "institutional hooks and levers" through which community groups can exercise influence, deepen their democratic capacity and create feedback loops "as constituencies exercise more power, and policymakers grow more accustomed to engaging with these groups."

In addition, and very importantly, progressively implementing and growing assembly over time enables government representatives and community leaders to do the essential work of building mutual understanding, trust and strong working relationships with each other—work that cannot wait, but also cannot be rushed. Organizers often talk about "moving at the speed of trust," and building trust takes time. And because of underinvestment in civic capacity and outright political attacks on labor unions, Black organizations and other civil society organizations, many communities on the frontlines of injustice are under-organized and under-resourced. Sequentially building assemblies and other co-governance models enables community organizations to build their membership, staffing, knowledge and funding at a healthy pace.

## 6.2 Institutionalization in government

In addition to being integrated into social movements and community power-building, assemblies and other co-governance models should be strategically integrated into government and government processes including legislating, budgeting, administering public programs,

rulemaking and regulation. This integration should be designed to give assemblies a meaningful role with sufficient power to actually shape policy decisions and policy outcomes.

### 6.2.1 Benefits of institutionalizing assemblies in government and governance processes

For both government and movements, embedding assemblies in government and governance processes offers a number of benefits.

**Institutionalizing assemblies in governance helps government:**

1. Engage more people in governance, and do so more inclusively and more equitably
2. Increase responsiveness to community needs, priorities and ideas
3. Improve policy design and policy implementation
4. Build political buy-in behind tough policy and budgetary decisions
5. Enhance public trust
6. Strengthen civic capacity

**Institutionalizing assemblies in governance helps community organizations and social movements:**

1. Wield power to shape policy decisions and outcomes
2. Build knowledge, skills and capacity
3. Grow membership bases, strengthen member and staff leadership, and strengthen coalitions
4. Develop formal co-governance structures that institutionalize community power in government
5. Develop interpersonal working relationships with government staff and elected officials
6. Incentivize people to participate in assemblies by being able to say clearly how the assembly will influence decision-makers and policy
7. Increase accountability in policy implementation to ensure policy wins are upheld and implemented effectively

### 6.2.2 Key considerations

When considering how to institutionalize assemblies within government and governance processes, key considerations and decisions may include:

**1. Community capacity and accountability**

Which communities are inequitably served by existing governance processes? Are there existing community organizations representing these constituencies, particularly groups that have direct lines of democratic accountability to the community through a membership structure? Do community groups need time for further community organizing, fundraising, training and capacity-building or alignment-building across organizations before they can enter into co-governance processes on strong, independent footing?

### 2. Relationships and trust

How strong are existing relationships and trust between government and community organizations? How strong are relationships and communication across relevant parties within government and across relevant community organizations? Where do new relationships and deeper trust need to be built?

### 3. Legislative or executive authorization

Will the assembly be authorized by the legislature, the governor or mayor, or a government agency? How will it be funded, which government bodies will it advise or report back to, and will it be codified in law?

### 4. Powers and role in the policy process

What powers and authority will the assembly be given? Which stage of budgeting, policy-making or policy implementation will the assembly intervene in? What pre-commitments will government make to respond to and act on the assembly's recommendations and decisions? What powers will the planning committee and assembly participants have to shape the assembly process? Who will define the core framing questions for the assembly to focus on? How will assemblies complement existing legislative, regulatory and program administration processes, and how will they build on existing community engagement efforts?

### 5. Balancing political independence and policy impact

How much autonomy is government willing to give the assembly planning team and the assembly participants to independently determine the goals, values, central framing question or core purpose, and process of the assembly? Will participants be able to shape their own learning, deliberation and decision-making process, request information from government, hear from speakers of their own choosing and independently author their own recommendations and final report? How do community organizations want to approach

integrating the assembly into government in ways that increase its influence and power in policy decisions and policy implementation while still maintaining communities political independence and outside organizing? Can collaborators inside and outside government find common cause and co-strategize together through the many decision points they will face on how to strike this balance?

**6. Resourcing**

How much money, staffing and technical support needs to be allocated to the assembly for it to succeed, including for the pre-planning and follow-up phases before and after the assembly? Have specific government staff been designated to staff the assembly from pre-planning through execution and post-assembly follow up? Do they believe in the process, and do they have the funding, capacity, technical support and political backing they need to succeed?

**7. Political support**

How will elected officials voice and signal their support for the assembly process and the assembly recommendations to the public, to participants and to the government agencies? What kinds of community, labor, faith, small business or other coalition partners could help build political support?

Working through these and other questions requires convening key collaborators from inside and outside government to collectively clarify the purpose, goals and structure of the assembly, and to plan around the key challenges of building relationships and trust, strategizing to achieve real impacts and establishing ongoing political support. Community and government collaborators' answers to these questions will vary based on their local circumstances.

### 6.2.3 Building foundational trust between government and communities

Building mutual trust between government and communities is one of the biggest challenges to successfully implementing and institutionalizing assemblies.

On the community side, public distrust in government is widespread in contemporary U.S. life. Public trust in government hovers around 20% in the U.S., and over 90% of people feel that it is important to improve the level of confidence that people have in one another. Many people, especially in communities that have faced generations of state violence, government neglect and false promises by politicians—including Black and Native people, undocumented immigrants, poor people and people with fewer years of formal education—understandably often hold deep distrust of government. Even people who recognize an important role for

government and public policy may have been through participatory processes in the past that felt tokenistic and didn't change anything, and therefore may be skeptical that an assembly would be worth anyone's time. This is true among staff and leaders at community organizations as well as would-be assembly participants from the general public. Building trust cannot happen overnight, but assemblies and other co-governance models that bring government and everyday people together into constructive, collaborative working relationships offer an opportunity, if designed and executed thoughtfully, to begin to repair trust, relationships and democratic accountability.

In government, both elected officials and staff are likewise often skeptical that participatory governance can achieve enough to be worth the cost and effort. Some feel that a few loud voices dominate public forums and that the average member of the public either lacks enough information or is too single-minded to fully comprehend the issues and make the tough trade-offs needed in governance. In many cases, they feel that they already know from constituents and advocates what communities' policy priorities are, and they see political, procedural and budgetary barriers as the obstacles to progress, not a lack of public participation. Government staff often feel that they are already immersed in lengthy public meetings, notice-and-comment and other participatory processes already, and are wary that adding on yet another layer of participation will change anything. Given assemblies' size and cost, they are especially wary that assemblies are worth the money and time.

Assemblies have the potential to help elected officials and government staff effect change by equitably involving a large number of directly impact people (not just the highest-paid lobbyists or loudest voices) in ways that not only generate fresh policy insights, but also change what is politically possible. But building trust in these processes and in others involved takes time. Data and success stories from other assemblies and co-governance efforts can be convincing, but the most compelling way to get people in government fully on board with power-building approaches to co-governance is often to run pilots.

For community and government alike, collaboratively planning and running pilot assemblies and other co-governance efforts can be a tremendous way to build strong, active commitment to continue expanding and strengthening co-governance over time. It also creates a structured way in which collaborators can build interpersonal relationships and mutual trust, which are foundational to any successful collaboration.

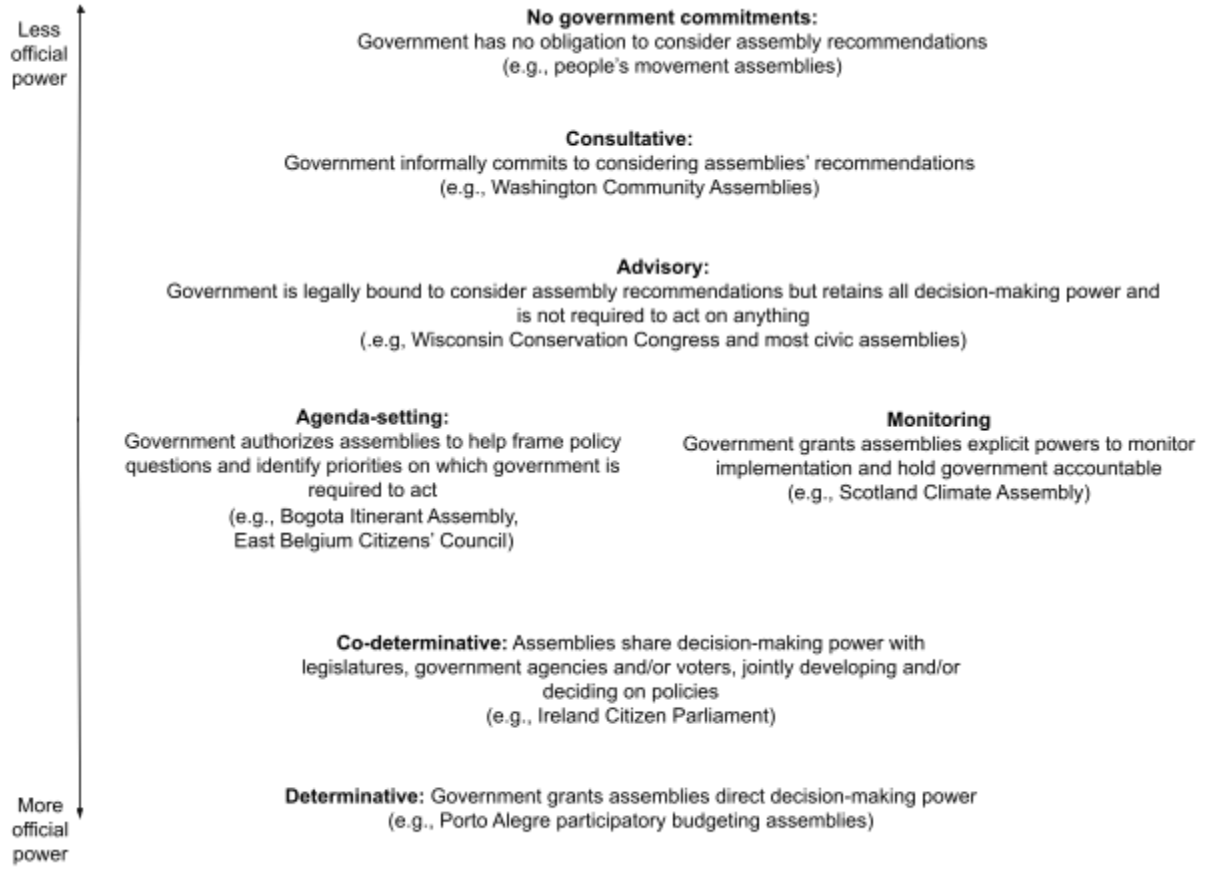
### 6.2.4 Giving assemblies meaningful power

A key challenge for all assemblies—civic and movement assemblies included—is building their impact and durability. This takes time. And choosing to run an assembly is not a binary decision: there are myriad smaller decisions about the design, execution and institutionalization of an assembly that determine how much power and influence it has in governance

As Rosa Gonzalez of Facilitating Power teaches us, it is helpful to think about co-governance efforts falling along a spectrum from tokenization and marginalization to community ownership

and empowerment. Community and government collaborators' goal, over time, should be to try to move assemblies toward holding greater official power in governance. The following graphic is adapted from Gonzalez's Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership and Frederik Langkjær and Graham Smith's continuum between consultation and empowerment:

**Spectrum of governing power**




In their discussions together, it is helpful for community and government collaborators to honestly assess together where along the spectrum they think community engagement and collaborative governance efforts are currently operating, and which points along the spectrum they would like to build towards together over time.

It is important to note that this chart maps only one dimension of assemblies' power: powers that are specifically authorized by government. As we discuss below in the "Institutionalization in movement-building" section, governing-power assemblies also hold outside power arising not from government, but from the size, organization and mobilization of their base of community members. The Jackson People's Assembly, for example, has only had an informal commitment from government to consider and act on its recommendations, but because of the number of people community organizations have gotten involved in the assemblies, those organizations' political weight and their ability to elect their own candidates to the city and council and mayor's office, the Jackson People's Assembly has held quite a bit of power to shape policy in Jackson even without much formally authorized power from government.

### 6.2.5 Ways government conveners can give assemblies independence

For community power-building organizations, there may be a tension between integrating assemblies into government to increase their policy impact while also working to maintain their political autonomy and keep from getting too caught up in the demands of byzantine legislative and bureaucratic procedures. This tension will always be present with governing-power assemblies, and is something community organizations and their partners in government must work through. There are a number of concrete steps that government conveners can take to give assembly planners and participants political independence:

**Ways government conveners can give assemblies independence**

**Establish planning and oversight committees:**

1. Commission an independent steering committee of community stakeholders and participatory democracy practitioners to plan and oversee the assembly process.
2. Convene an independent content team of community stakeholders and issue experts to package the information and testimony assembly participants receive.
3. Establish an independent community monitoring and oversight committee to oversee the assembly process.

**Enable participants to shape the assembly:**

4. Allow assembly participants to choose their own issues to focus within the defined scope of the assembly.
5. Allow participants to determine their own learning process, including the ability to request information from government and to choose additional speakers they want to hear from.
6. For recurring assemblies, allow assemblies to establish their own governing body with the power to set the assembly's budget and establish the assembly's rules of operation.
7. Allow, encourage and train participants to speak openly to the media about the assembly.

**Contract with independent organizations:**

8. Contract with a participatory democracy organization that has experience designing and running assemblies to convene the steering committee and help design, plan and facilitate the whole assembly process.
9. Identify communities who are poorly represented in standard electoral and participatory processes, and provide grants or contracts to organizations in these communities to conduct targeted community outreach, recruitment and engagement.
10. Contract with outside evaluators to conduct an independent analysis of the assembly process and its outcomes.

Giving assemblies independence through these kinds of measures is essential for ensuring the integrity of deliberation within assemblies, and for making sure that stakeholders and the broader public see assemblies as authentic, representative democratic spaces.

### 6.2.6 The role of government staff and elected officials in assemblies

Co-governance is fundamentally about bringing community stakeholders together with government officials and staff to build working relationships and to co-create policies and governance processes that meet community needs and fulfill community values, visions and priorities. Even though government representatives are not participants in most assemblies, assemblies still have an opportunity to invite government representatives in to witness participatory democracy in action and warm to its potential role in governance, and to lend their political authority, knowledge and staff time to support the assembly process and the assembly's policy recommendations.

Ultimately, in governing-power assemblies held jointly by community and government, the ways that government staff and elected officials engage in assembly planning and assembly sessions must be decided on between community and government. Whether government representatives take a more active or supportive role, government representatives and community collaborators should strive for transparency, open communication and mutual understanding in their interactions together, and should work to foster a culture of open collaboration and participant leadership in the assembly, and to balance the power dynamics that naturally exist between people in government and members of the public.

#### 6.2.6.1 Government staff's roles

Government staff can be tasked with a range of responsibilities to support assemblies, often including:

1. Pre-commit to publicly receiving and responding to the assembly's recommendations to their agency.
2. Sit on the planning committee alongside community stakeholders and participatory democracy excerpts to plan and execute the overall assembly process. Government staff can hold either a voting or a non-voting role in decision-making.
3. Sit on the content committee alongside community stakeholders and issue experts to help shape the testimony and information provided to assembly participants. This may include staff providing direct testimony to participants.
4. Share expertise, data and other information on issue areas discussed within the assemblies, as well as strategic information and advice for community partners to help them build political support for assemblies and increase their impact.
5. Provide logistical support (where allowed under government rules) with finances, finding assembly sites, food and supplies, recruitment, publicity, and other operations.
6. Answer questions and respond to information requests from assembly planners and participants before, during and after the assembly.
7. Attend assembly sessions as an observer who is on hand to answer questions and build relationships, but not to weigh in with opinions or engage in decision-making. Staff may sometimes be asked to step out of specific sessions to allow participants to deliberate privately.

8. Provide feedback on the assembly's draft policy proposals to help assembly participants make sure their proposals do not duplicate existing laws and programs, and to design them for successful real-world policy implementation.
9. Publicly receive and respond to any policy, program or procedural recommendations made by the assembly to a specific government agency. Staff should acknowledge the assembly's work, identify any alignment between the recommendations and existing programs and regulations, identify how the agency will act on the recommendations and, if they have decided not to pursue any recommendations, provide a reason why not.
10. In places where assemblies have been instituted as an annual process, staff or electeds are often asked to attend the year's first assembly session to report on the government's progress in pursuing the assembly's recommendations from the prior year.

To succeed in these roles, specific government staff need to be authorized to spend time working on the assembly, including through the pre-planning and follow-up phases before and after the assembly. And because many assemblies tackle issues that span the jurisdiction of multiple agencies, staff are often most successful when staff from multiple agencies have time committed to the work group and are able to coordinate through an inter-agency assembly working group.

To build truly collaborative community-governance relationships, it is helpful to work toward relationships in which government and community representatives are working as true partners with strong trust and alignment. But to make sure assembly participants feel they have sufficient space to drive their own learning and deliberation, community organizations may sometimes ask government staff who attend assembly sessions not to interject in conversations unless called upon. Yet having a staff presence at assemblies can help support the deliberative process and can also help build staff's understanding of and commitment to the assembly, which is critical to making sure staff are strong partners and advocates for continuing and expanding participatory democracy.

#### 6.2.6.2 Elected officials' roles

Elected officials can be involved to varying degrees in assemblies. Their role can range from being full assembly participants with voting power to participating in conversations but not voting to simply presenting information, silently observing assembly sessions, or being asked not to attend some assembly sessions at all. Specific roles may include:

1. Pre-commit to publicly receiving and responding to the assembly's recommendations to the legislature.
2. Speak at the opening session to voice their support for the assembly and welcome participants. Where assemblies are an annual occurrence, elected officials can report back on their progress following through on the recommendations of the prior year's assembly.
3. Help publicize the assembly and build visibility and support for the process among the public and other lawmakers.

4. Silently observe select assembly sessions to gain an understanding of the process and of community priorities.
5. Participate in assembly discussions as non-voting participants.
6. Participate in an assembly as a full voting participant alongside members of the public.
7. Publicly receive and respond to the assembly's recommendations by acknowledging the assembly's work and identifying which of the assembly's recommendations the legislature and government agencies will follow up on, what actions they will take, and for any recommendations they have decided not to pursue, why not.

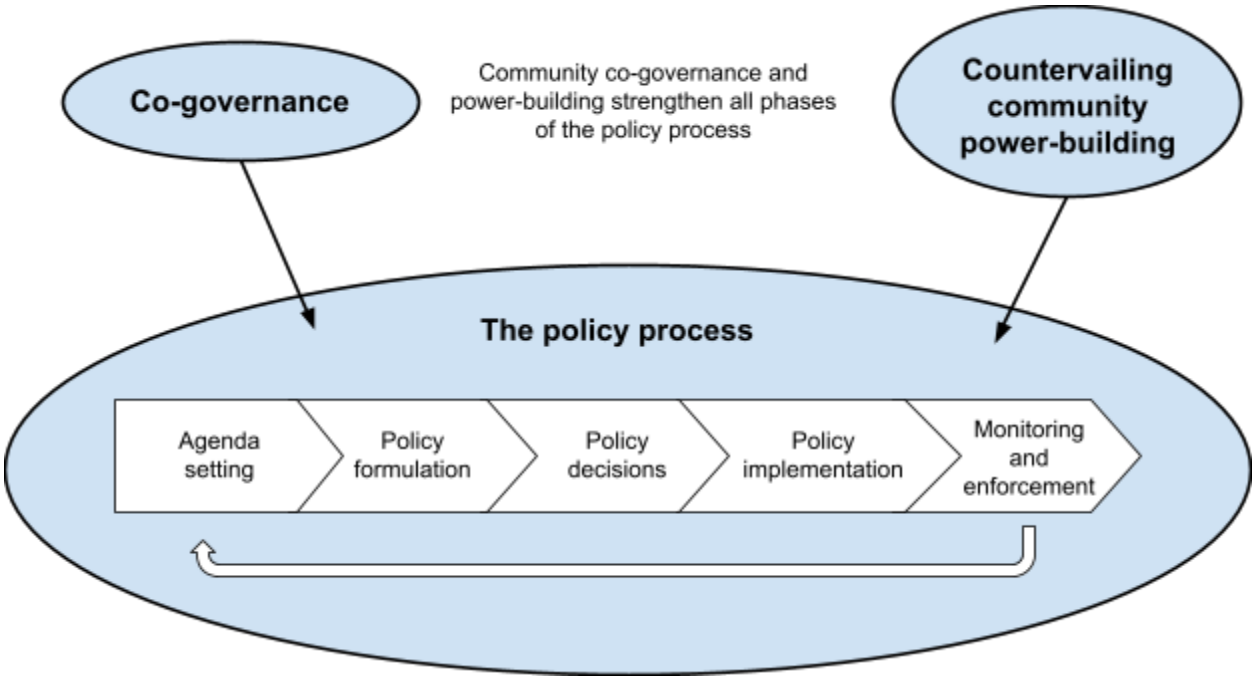
Most assemblies do not involve elected officials in deliberations, but in select instances like in Ireland and Ostbelgien, Belgium, assemblies have been designed as collaborative legislative committees in which legislators and a select number of public participants deliberate together to identify policy priorities and co-create draft legislation to be voted on the larger legislature. Involving legislators as assembly participants involves important trade-offs for assembly planners to consider. On the one hand, it brings public authority to the assembly, builds legislators' understanding of and commitment to participatory democracy, and can generate policy recommendations that are directly responsive to the public while also designed to be able to pass the legislature and be implemented successfully. On the other, involving legislators as assembly participants can risk creating an unequal power dynamic between different kinds of assembly participants and can limit the political horizons of what assembly members consider and recommend.

#### 6.2.6.3 Communicating clear roles and providing coaching

Given the authority that elected officials and even government staff carry, it is important for planners to clearly define their roles in the assembly and to communicate that to them and to participants. It is especially important to underline for participants that they are the decision-makers in the assembly, and that government representatives are there to listen and to support. It can also be helpful to emphasize with government representatives that where there is community distrust of or apathy about government, assemblies provide an opportunity to build trust and repair broken relationships—if they are intentionally designed and executed to do so. And because participatory governance is a muscle that everyone, both on the government and community sides, needs to exercise, it can sometimes be helpful to provide coaching or training to government representatives on how the assembly can help them in their work, and how they can engage appropriately in any assembly sessions they attend. Legislators are especially used to talking, so may need to be prompted to stay quiet and listen.

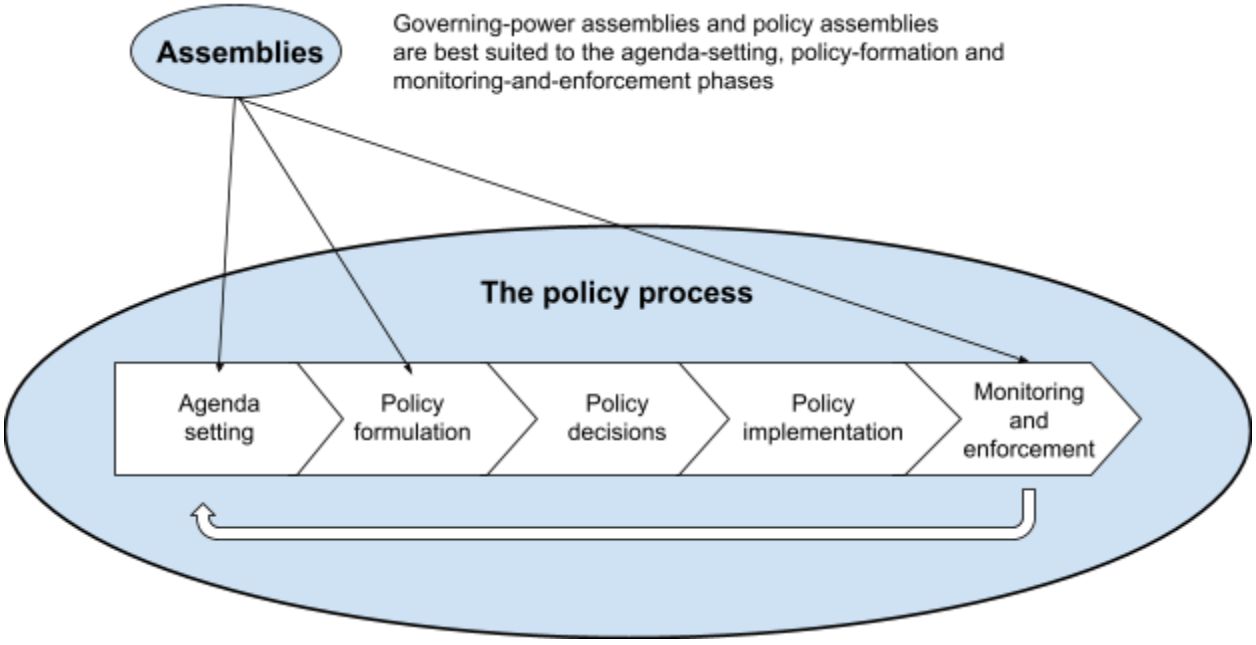
## 6.3 Institutionalization throughout the policy process

The policy process is often described in five stages: agenda setting, policy formulation, policy decisions, policy implementation and monitoring and evaluation. Every stage of the policy process can be made more effective and more equitable by incorporating community co-governance and by facilitating equitable outside community power-building to marginalized and oppressed communities wield countervailing power to corporations and other wealthy interests in the policy process and to help hold government accountable:




Movement assemblies are one important tool for community organizations to build countervailing outside power they can bring to bear at any stage of the policy process. Policy-platform assemblies are usually intended to feed into the agenda-setting phase of the policy process, but they are part of an outside advocacy strategy without formal connections to government.

Meanwhile governing-power assemblies and policy assemblies that are officially connected to government are generally best suited to intervening in the agenda-setting, policy formation and monitoring and evaluation phases of the policy process:



In the policy decision phase, decisions are usually delegated either to legislators or the voting public to ensure there is mass representation in decisions. In the policy implementation phase, in which government agencies are charged with implementing administering public programs, rulemaking and regulation, smaller, more nimble co-governance models like community advisory committees are usually better suited to working with agencies on the complicated and evolving process of policy implementation, though government agencies sometimes choose to convene their own assemblies apart from the legislature.

### 6.3.1 Assemblies in agenda setting

Assemblies can be given authority not just to answer policy questions that are pre-determined by government, but to select their own issues and frame their own questions for the assembly to address and for government to take action on. Giving assemblies agenda-setting power does not replace lawmakers' priorities, but complements it by creating space in which marginalized communities can self-identify important issues that are not being adequately addressed through existing policies and programs.

**Examples:**

- In Washington State's 2024 Community Assemblies, which worked within broad thematic parameters around environmental justice, poverty and racism, assembly participants spent their first session identifying a central challenge in their communities they wanted the assembly to focus on, and then generated solutions in the following sessions.
- In the Jackson People's Assembly in Jackson, Mississippi, participants over the years have focused on two ongoing challenges they wanted the city government to address: violence prevention and the city's ailing water infrastructure.
- In Ostbelgien, Belgium, a lottery-selected Citizens' Council is authorized to select up to three priority issues each year, and to convene a separate lottery-selected Citizens' Panel to generate recommendations for lawmakers on the chosen issue.

### 6.3.2 Assemblies in policy formulation

Assemblies create space for people who are directly impacted by policies to learn about complex issues, weigh multiple values and considerations, bring their direct personal experiences to bear, and collectively work to generate, shape and prioritize possible solutions.

**Examples:**

- Across the U.S., participatory budgeting assemblies invite participants to develop budget proposals for public spending. Proposals are voted on by residents of the district or municipality.

- Unders state law, Wisconsin's Conservation Congress is authorized to develop policy recommendations for the Department of Natural Resources. The recommendations are decided on less democratically by the Department's appointed governing board.
- In Jackson, Mississippi, assembly participants worked with friendly city council members and a friendly mayor to co-design a sales tax increase to help fund repairs to the city's water system. Since the assembly helped build public support behind the tax increase and worked with lawmakers to make sure it was well designed, the city council passed the tax increase.
- In British Columbia's 2004 civic assembly, participants created a proposal to replace the province's first-past-the-post voting system with a single transferable vote system. Their proposal was put before voters in a public referendum. The referendum won a majority of votes, 58%, but narrowly missed the 60% supermajority required for the referendum to go into law.
- Brussels' Deliberative Committees are made up of 15 members of parliament and 45 lottery-selected members of the public who deliberate together to develop recommendations for parliament on a defined policy issue. Parliament is required to officially receive the recommendations, decide what to take action on, and deliver an official response back to the Deliberative Committee explaining which recommendations they did and did not take action on and justifying their decisions.

### 6.3.3 Assemblies in policy decisions

As mentioned, assemblies are not usually authorized to make final, binding policy decisions. Decision-making is instead typically delegated to elected officials or to the voting public to try to ensure broad-based representation in decision-making. That said, there are a few exceptions in which assemblies are given direct decision-making power in policy, usually in smaller jurisdictions like neighborhoods or towns. Assemblies that invite all residents of a jurisdiction to attend, like neighborhood assemblies and New England town meetings, sometimes give attendees direct voting power.

**Examples:**

- Open-attendance New England town meetings and some neighborhood assemblies invite all residents to attend, and sometimes put votes on policy and budget decisions directly to attendees.
- In Gdańsk, Poland, the former mayor took the unusual step of pre-committing the city to enact any assembly proposals that were supported by over 80% of assembly participants. The city convened three lottery-selected civic assemblies in 2016 and 2017 (on flood prevention, on air pollution, and on citizen engagement and the treatment of LGBT people), and followed through on participants' recommendations.

### 6.3.4 Assemblies in policy implementation

Once policies are decided on, public agencies need to be allowed to implement their directives to run public programs and regulate private actors. There is a real need for greater community participation in policy implementation, but given their large size, assemblies are usually not the best co-governance model to conduct back-and-forth work with agency staff. There are a number of cases however in which government agencies, rather than elected officials, have decided to convene assemblies to engage the public, inform their operations and help hold them accountable.

**Examples:**

- Although participatory budgeting processes are most often convened by legislators, public agencies including New York City's Civic Engagement Commission and school districts including a number in Arizona have convened participatory budgeting processes to enable assemblies to make proposals for how to spend a portion of the agencies' budgets.
- The predecessor to Wisconsin's Department of Natural Resources first convened the Wisconsin Conservation Congress in 1937. The Congress makes policy recommendations to the department, and Congress delegates also have reserved seats on several of the departments' advisory committees.

### 6.3.5 Assemblies in monitoring and enforcement

There is no way to implement policy effectively and equitably without providing channels for structured feedback from people who are directly impacted by policies. There is thus tremendous potential—so far largely underexplored—to increase equitable public participation in monitoring, oversight and enforcement. Assemblies, as well as smaller co-governance bodies like standards board and oversight committees, can help conduct monitoring and provide feedback to help ensure that policy is implemented effectively, and can help hold both government and private economic actors accountable.

**Examples:**

- Assemblies that have been institutionalized as annual processes, including Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting assemblies in the 1980s and '90s and the Brussels, Ostbelgien and Paris civic assemblies today, require government representatives to report back at the start of each assembly on their progress in implementing the assemblies' recommendations from the prior year.

# 7. Conclusion

There is great potential to continue to employ and expand movement and civic assemblies around the United States and in other countries, and especially to further experiment with governing-power assemblies that combine civic assemblies' role in public governance with movement assemblies' community power-building. In this closing section, we share a brief overview of recent assembly efforts and six key directions for the future.

## 7.1 Growing momentum

Over the last year in the U.S., Southern Movement Assembly held a Summer of Assemblies across the South, and organizers in Los Angeles, Aurora, Illinois, and other cities held people's movement assemblies. Meanwhile Healthy Democracy, the Central Oregon Civic Action Project and Civic Lex, combining philanthropic grants with public funds, have launched new civic assemblies in Deschutes County, Oregon, and Lexington, Kentucky. Internationally, there are many recent examples of assemblies including civic assemblies in Bogota, Brussels, East Belgium, Paris, Melbourne and other cities and jurisdictions, as well as inspiring large-scale examples of governing assemblies in Kurdistan and Armenia, among other countries. Foundations and governments can follow their lead by further funding assembly efforts and the institutional training, capacity-building, technical support and research needed to pull them off, scale and replicate them effectively.

Meanwhile, Washington State has taken a big step in becoming the first U.S. state to pilot what it calls "community assemblies" across the state that center the participation and leadership of communities on the frontlines of poverty, racism and environmental injustice. With a $2 million allocation from the state legislature, the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) contracted with Just Futures, a coalition of environmental justice, anti-poverty and community-wealth-building organizations with whom the Department had years-long working relationships, to plan and carry out the assemblies. The first assembly session was held in September, and assemblies are planned to continue through December. What is especially innovative about the Community Assemblies is that local community organizations rooted in working-class Latino, Black, Pacific Islander and other communities on the frontlines of injustice have been given a leading role in designing, facilitating, selecting participants and running the whole process. Since this is the first time the Community Assemblies have been held, it remains to be seen exactly what kind of policy recommendations and working relationships with public agencies will come out of the assemblies, but this is exactly the kind of bold exercise in equitable, participatory democracy that is needed much more widely.

## 7.2 Ways to strengthen and scale

Overall, there are several key opportunities and areas of growth in the coming years that governments, philanthropy, community organizations and researchers can lean into deepen the impact and durability of assemblies, and scale them much more widely in movements and governance:

### 1. Centering equity and power

In a truly egalitarian society, broad public input and sortition would be sufficient to uphold democracy on their own, but that is not the world we live in. Public policy and governance have inequitably distributed wealth and economic and political power across racial, economic and social groups. Realizing justice and democracy therefore requires repairing past and ongoing harms, assessing equity in both governance processes and outcomes, centering the needs and leadership of people on the frontlines of justice, and orienting governance toward equitable solutions that work for everyone by focusing especially on the needs of people on the bottom and at the margins.

### 2. Piloting

Participatory budgeting began as an effort in a single city—Porto Alegre, Brazil—and has since been adopted around the world. In the U.S., participatory budgeting was first adopted in a single ward in Chicago, and has since spread across the country. The Jackson People's Assemblies has inspired the launch of assemblies in places as far afield as Los Angeles and Hull, England. Every assembly holds lessons and inspiration for all that follow. We need assemblies in communities everywhere.

### 3. Institutionalizing

Movement assemblies have been institutionalizing assemblies within broader movement-building for years, and in recent years civic assembly practitioners especially in Latin America and Europe have made great strides in integrating civic assemblies into legislative governance. We need more of all of that, and especially more efforts to institutionalize governing-power assemblies *horizontally* into community organizing and power-building, *vertically* into government, and *longitudinally* over time throughout the entire cycle of policy-making and policy implementation.

### 4. Resourcing

Both governments and philanthropy have an important role to play in funding assemblies. This includes funding assembly processes and the supports like stipends and childcare that low-income people need to be able to participate. It also, importantly, includes longer-term work to build up the civic capacity needed for assemblies, participatory governance and democracy to succeed. Assembly practitioners consistently identify the need for more funding for community organizing, organizational development, public education and engagement, network-building, capacity-building anchor institutions and resource hubs, and training for both community members and government staff. The Washington State legislature's $2 million commitment to Community Assemblies and grants from Ford Family Foundation, Brooks Resources, Omidyar Network, Porticus, Quadrivium, and the Rockefeller Foundation to support the Deschutes County civic assembly are great models for other governments and foundations.

## 5. Capacity building

It takes significant knowledge, skills, staff or volunteer time, money and inter-institutional coordination to successfully run an assembly, and also to successfully integrate it into movement-building, government and the policy process. Both community organizations and their partners in government need capacity-building support in the form of funding, personnel, training, and tools. To a large degree, this is a matter of strengthening existing organizations' and public agencies' capacity, but there are also some institutional gaps that may require new institutions. Individual public agencies can allocate staff time and funding to support assemblies and align them with other co-governance efforts, and elected officials can found new government offices like the New York City Mayor's Public Engagement Unit to help coordinate and support co-governance efforts across government. Philanthropy can fund nonprofit community capacity-building institutes to help grow civic capacity and community power through training, tools, grants, research, documentation, civic participation schools, communities of practice and other forms of support.

## 6. Sharing lessons

Community organizers, legislators and government staff interested in assemblies are hungry for case studies, models, best practices and direct learning exchanges with people who have already carried out assemblies. We hope this report helps contribute, but we still need much more documentation, network-work building, learning exchanges and communities of practice in the years to come.

# Appendices

## I. Definitions

**Assemblies** are a participatory governance tool in which large numbers of people come together to deliberate and make collective decisions.

**Co-governance** is a collection of participatory models and practices in which government and communities share power by working together through formal and informal structures to make collective policy decisions, co-create programs to meet community needs, and ensure those policies and programs are implemented effectively.

**Equitable, power-building co-governance** creates space for groups of people who are marginalized and poorly served by traditional modes of governance to directly participate in policy-making and policy implementation. It enters equity in both governance processes and policy outcomes, and works to cultivate countervailing power among these communities both inside and outside government.

**Governing-power assemblies** are assemblies that are connected through formal structures or informal working relationships to government and the policy process, but also hold space for member-based social-movement organizations to shape the assemblies and build independent political power. They are designed to build equitable inside-outside civic infrastructure and community power, which are essential foundations of a just democracy.

**Movement assemblies** are assemblies that are wholly controlled by social-movement organizations with no involvement by government. They include:

- **People's movement assemblies** are organizing vehicles that are designed as a process and space through which one or more organizations' membership bases come together for political education, leadership development and community building toward some form of collective action.
- **Policy-platform assemblies** are movement assemblies convened by one or more organizations for attendees to develop and ratify a joint policy platform.
- **Member-governance assemblies** are an ongoing, institutionalized part of some member-based organizations', coalitions' and political parties' internal governance process in which members are asked to elect leaders and vote on resolutions, policy platforms, and other internal questions.
- **Semi-spontaneous mass assemblies** emerge in moments of political crisis and rupture when large numbers of people pour into the streets and come together to form new collective political spaces.

**Policy assemblies** are commissioned by government to give the public a direct role in policy decisions and implementation. They include:

- **One-time civic assemblies** are lottery-selected assemblies convened by government to provide input on a single policy question, and then disbanded. Almost always holds advisory power, with final decisions made by elected officials or voters.
- **Standing civic assemblies** are institutionalized annual lottery-selected assemblies convened by government to play an ongoing role in public governance, usually to identify priority issues for legislators or public agencies, to put proposed policies in front of legislators or voters, or to conduct oversight and monitoring of government.
- **Constituent assemblies** are assemblies that are open to all residents or stakeholders of a defined geographic area, and at which attendees are authorized to make one or more policy or procedural decisions.
- **Constitutional assemblies** are public bodies of elected or appointed representatives who come together to draft or revise a national, state or municipal constitution or charter.

**Federated assemblies** or **civic congresses** are mass governance structures in which smaller assemblies with broad participation feed delegates and input into a larger organization-wide or region-wide assembly in which delegates make decisions on behalf of all of the assemblies. Movement assemblies, policy assemblies and governing-power assemblies can all be federated. They include:

- **Federated governing-power assemblies** like Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting process and **federated constituent assemblies** like the Wisconsin Conservation Congress, in both of which open-attendance regional or sectoral constituent assemblies send delegates to the region-wide assembly to report from their constituent assemblies and vote in decisions.
- **Federated member-governance assemblies** like political party and labor union conventions in which members participate in assemblies held by local affiliates, and those affiliate assemblies send delegates to vote in an organization-wide assembly.

# II. Case studies

## Overview

Assemblies have been pursued all over the world. In this section, we highlight a number of examples from North America, Latin America, Europe and Africa that are good examples of governing-power assemblies, movement assemblies and policy assemblies in different contexts. They each hold lessons for others who are thinking about how to design and institutionalize assemblies effectively. In this draft report, we have included written case studies of the models highlighted in blue. We plan to add additional case studies (likely those in gray) to our final report.

| | Case study | Type of assembly | Connected to social movement organizing | Recognized or supported by government | Phases of the policy process | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | Agenda setting | Policy formulation | Policy decisions | Policy implement-ation | Monitoring and oversight |
| **GOVERNING-POWER ASSEMBLIES** | | | | | | | | | |
| **1** | **Jackson People's Assembly** | Governing-power assembly | x | x | x | x | x | | x |
| **2** | **Washington Community Assemblies** | Governing-power assembly | x | x | x | x | | | |
| **3** | **Porto Alegre participatory budgeting assemblies** | Federated governing-power assembly | x | x | x | x | x | | x |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **4** | **Brazil's National Public Policy Conferences and Health Councils** | | x | x | x | x | | | |
| **5** | **Venezuela's Communal Councils** | Federated governing power assembly | x | x | x | x | x | | x |
| **6** | **Barcelona en Comú** | Federated governing power assembly | x | x | x | x | x | | x |
| **MOVEMENT ASSEMBLIES** | | | | | | | | | |
| **7** | **'Āina Aloha Economic Futures** | Policy platform assembly | x | | x | | | | |
| **8** | **South Los Angeles Declaration of Health and Human Rights** | Policy platform assembly | x | | x | | | | |
| **9** | **Bronxwide Plan** | Policy platform assembly | x | | x | | | | |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **10** | **Black Nashville Assembly** | People's movement assembly | x | | x | | | | |
| **11** | **East Africa Assembly on Land, Justice and Indigenous Peoples' Co-operation** | People's movement assembly | x | | x | | | | |
| **POLICY ASSEMBLIES** | | | | | | | | | |
| **Constituent Assemblies** | | | | | | | | | |
| **12** | **Wisconsin Conservation Congress** | Federated constituent assembly (civic congress) | (x) | x | x | x | | | x |
| **13** | **U.S. participatory budgeting** | Constituent assembly | (x) | x | | x | (x) | | |
| **Civic Assemblies** | | | | | | | | | |
| **14** | **Petaluma Fairgrounds Advisory Panel** | One-time civic assembly | (x) | x | | x | (x) | | |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **15** | **Madrid City Observatory and Decide Madrid** | Civic assembly plus mass digital participation | | x | x | x | | | |
| **16** | **Brussels Deliberative Committees** | Civic assembly | | x | x | x | | | x |
| **17** | **Brussels' Agora Party** | Civic assembly plus a political party | x | x | x | x | x | | |
| **19** | **East Belgium's Citizens' Council and Citizens' Assemblies** | Civic assembly tied | | x | x | x | | | x |
| **20** | **Belgium's G1000** | Civic assembly | x | x | x | x | x | | |
| **21** | **Deschutes County, Oregon, Civic Assembly on Youth Homelessness** | Civic assembly | (x) | x | | x | | | |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **22** | **Bogota Itinerant Citizens' Assembly** | Civic assembly | | x | x | x | | | |
| **23** | **Gdansk, Poland, citizens' panels** | Civic assembly | | x | | x | x | | |
| **24** | **France's Citizens' Climate Convention** | Civic assembly | | x | x | x | | | |

## Governing-power assemblies

### Jackson People's Assembly

The Jackson People's Assembly is a community-owned effort that for most of its history has existed wholly outside of government. Jackson is a city that is 80% Black and rich in culture and community, but also heavily impoverished, and has limited political and economic power in relation to white state legislators and international capital. The Assembly was launched as community organizing vehicle in the 1990s by the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement and the New Afrikan People's Organization, and in its current formation is co-coordinated by the People's Advocacy Institute, the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, the Mississippi Poor People's Campaign, and One Voice Mississippi.

From 2009 to 2014 the Assembly worked closely with Jackson's city government by electing Chokwe Lumumba first as a city councilmember and then as mayor. While Lumumba was in office, the Assembly served as a vehicle through which Jackson residents identified and shaped policy recommendations for the city. They used a participatory budgeting process to produce budget recommendations for the city, and similarly produced a People's Platform with policy demands. Mayor Lumumba's office codified these demands in its Jackson Rising Policy Statement. The administration also worked with the Assembly to pass a 1% sales tax to fund essential repairs to the city's aging water system, engaging the public in this decision and campaign.

One lesson from Jackson is that big changes are hard, and are not always within the power

**Location:** Jackson, Mississippi, United States

**Type of assembly:** governing-power assembly

**Years active:** 1990s to present

**Integration with social movements:** Grassroots groups founded the People's Assembly and have always run the space.

**Integration with government:** Integration has been informal rather than codified in law, and was strongest Chokwe Lumumba, who came out of the assembly, was elected first to city council and then as mayor, and later when his son, Chokwe Antar Lumumba, was elected mayor.

**Integration into the policy processes:** Participants set the public agenda, focusing on the water system and violence as their top two priorities, and helped formulate public policies to address these priorities, including co-designing a sales tax with Mayor Lumumba to fund repairs to the water system and organizing behind it to push the city council to pass the tax.

**Key lessons:**

1. Centering equitable community leadership—in Jackson, low-income Black residents—is essential for dismantling acute injustices.
2. Running an assembly, especially one with strong community participation and leadership, requires a lot of time for planning, outreach, preparation

of assemblies or even local governments to fully address. Guided by the assembly's leadership, the city government under Mayor Lumumba—and later under his son, Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba—has taken important steps to address the assembly's top two priorities: fixing the city's water system and preventing violence in the community. But because Jackson faces big structural challenges—not least a hostile white-dominated state government and a financial system that deems it unprofitable and thus not worth investing in clean water for Jackson's residents—the water system and violence continue to be big problems.

and follow-through.
3. Municipalities, and thus municipal assemblies, are sometimes constrained in how much they can achieve by higher levels of government and by global capital.

A second lesson is that running an assembly takes a lot of hours and a lot of expertise. The Assembly has always been very participatory, but it nevertheless relies heavily on the work of a smaller number of organizers and leaders to make it work. This capacity was tested when Assembly members decided to run Lumumba for mayor, as his election and time in office pulled many key organizers and leaders away from assembly work and into the campaign and the work of mayoral governance.

Unfortunately Mayor Lumumba died a little over a year into his term, and after his death, latent fractures within the community coalition behind the Assembly and his election (including class fractures between the small-business class and working-class residents) have posed challenges to co-governance efforts. Leaders involved in the Assembly have somewhat different interpretations that orient them either toward working more or less through city government, but they collectively remain committed to the People's Assembly as a vehicle for popular democracy.

Makani Themba Nixon's five significant aspects of the Jackson People's Assembly:

- "They provided clear, formal venues for listening to the issues of local residents."
- "They served as a training ground and leadership pipeline."
- "They provided a vehicle for coalition building around a broad agenda."
- "The focus on public policy pushed members into deeper engagement with governance structures—at the local and state level" including public budgets, tax policy, and the role of state agencies, the legislature and the governor in life in Jackson.
- "Assemblies took on independent projects to improve quality of life which served as concrete examples of the power of self-determination and collective action."

**Further reading:**

- Partners for Dignity & Rights' and Race Forward's case study with the People's Advocacy Institute
- Jackson Rising Statement

- Kali Akuno's book chapters, "People's Assembly Overview: The Jackson People's Assembly Model" and "Casting Shadows: Chokwe Lumumba and the Struggle for Racial Justice and Economic Democracy in Jackson, Mississippi"
- Makani Themba-Nixon's book chapter, "The City as Liberated Zone: The Promise of Jackson's People's Assemblies"

## Washington State Community Assemblies

In 2024, after years of work, Just Futures—a grassroots partnership between Front & Centered, the Statewide Poverty Action Network and People's Economy Lab—got Washington's state legislature and governor to commission community assemblies across the state, and to budget $2 million for the effort. Just Futures defines community assemblies as "a participatory democratic process that brings people together to articulate community needs, assess solutions, and mobilize for action, with a focus on those furthest from economic well-being." The assembles were designed to center participation by low-income residents and residents of color, who have been underserved by traditional policy processes, in identifying environmental and anti-poverty policy priorities, to build up grassroots leadership and capacity to engage in ongoing governance, and to hopefully set the state for permanently institutionalizing assemblies and other models of equitable, empowered collaborative governance.

The assemblies built on a number of earlier co-governance efforts. In 2017, anti-poverty organizations got Governor Jay Inslee to create a Poverty Reduction Working Group and a steering committee that brought state agencies together with Native tribes, community-based organizations, legislators, advocates, philanthropy and people with lived experience of poverty to provide direction and oversight to state agencies on anti-poverty efforts. In 2021, Just Futures and its allies got the state legislature to pass the Climate Commitment Act, which raised millions of dollars for environmental efforts through a new cap-and-invest program designed to reduce industries' greenhouse gas emissions, as well as the HEAL Act, which made environmental justice an official priority for state agencies and

**Location:** Washington State, United States

**Type of assembly:** governing-power assembly

**Years active:** 2024

**Integration with social movements:** The overall Community Assembly process was designed and run by three "movement partner" organizations—Front & Centered, the Statewide Poverty Action Network and People's Economy Lab—in partnership with Washington's Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS). Each of the seven assemblies was designed and facilitated by a local community-based "anchor" organization with support from a movement partner.

**Integration with government:**
The assemblies were recommended by the state's Environmental Justice Council, funded by the state legislature and operated through DSHS. Additional state and local agencies, offices and elected officials were consulted through the assembly process and attended some assembly sessions.

**Integration into the policy processes:**
The assemblies were designed to identify policy priorities and to propose solutions to inform the legislature's and state agencies' decision-making. The government made no formal commitments before the assemblies started to receiving or acting on their recommendations.

**Key lessons:**

1. Co-governance efforts can build on each other over time, sequentially adding up and reinforcing each other.
2. Building trust and working

created an Environmental Justice Council to advise the state government on environmental justice priorities for low-income communities and communities of color. People's Voice on Climate also funded and ran a civic assembly process that year, the Washington Climate Assembly, which included collaboration with some legislators, state agencies, Native tribes and community organizations. And in 2022, the governor signed an executive order creating the state Office of Equity and requiring all state agencies to work with communities to develop comprehensive plans to reduce racial disparities and advance anti-racist governance.

relationships between community groups, agency staff and elected officials is essential. It takes years, and the process never ends.

3. Targeted equitable recruitment of assembly participants from communities on the frontlines of injustice is an alternative participant-selection strategy to sortition and open-attendance models.
4. Organizations rooted in communities on the frontlines of injustice can play a key role in co-designing and running assembly processes that involve people who are disengaged from traditional policy-making and civic engagement.

Following all this, the Poverty Reduction Working Group and Environmental Justice Council pushed the state government to authorize a series of "community assemblies" to bring low-income people and communities of color into a direct role in setting public priorities. Thanks in part to advocacy by Just Futures' allies within government and agencies' years of experience working with the Poverty Reduction Working Group and Environmental Justice Council, legislators and the governor agreed, and authorized four community assemblies and $2 million to fund the effort. They contracted with the three Just Futures organizations as "movement partners" to help plan out and run the overall assembly process, and with local "anchor" organizations to work with one of the movement partners to plan and execute each assembly.

As of this publication, seven anchor organizations were scheduled to hold seven community assemblies across the state between September and December 2024. Each assembly was designed to be held over the course of two to five sessions, and to bring together 20 or more residents from a frontline community to self-identify a community policy priority and to develop recommendations for the state government—and, where appropriate, local government too.

Although the legislature funded the community assemblies, it did not make specific commitments to follow-through on the assembly's recommendations, nor to continuing the assemblies beyond 2024. A big part of Just Futures' work in 2025 will be working with the anchors to follow up with government on the assemblies' recommendations, and advocating for the legislature to re-commission assemblies in 2025 and beyond.

**Further reading:**

- "Collaborative Governance: Empowering Communities in Washington Through Community Assemblies" report by Just Futures

- New America interviews with the movement partners and a staffperson from DSHS
- "Community Assemblies" request for proposals from DSHS

## Movement assemblies

We hope to include case studies of policy-platform assemblies including ʻĀina Aloha Economic Futures, the Bronxwide Plan and South Los Angeles Health and Human Rights Conferences in our final report. We will also include case studies of people's movement assemblies, perhaps including Southern Movement Assemblies, the Black Nashville Assembly, the Poor People's Campaign's Mass Poor People's & Low Wage Workers' Assembly and the East Africa Assembly on Land, Justice and Indigenous Peoples' Co-operation.

# Policy assemblies

## Civic congresses

### Wisconsin Conservation Congress

The Wisconsin Conservation Congress is one of the oldest continually operating co-governance programs in the United States. The Congress provides residents a participatory channel through which to advise the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to "responsibly manage Wisconsin's natural resources for present and future generations." It makes policy recommendations to the Department, delegates members of the Congress to sit on DNR committees and collaborates with Department staff on public education, research, policy, enforcement and other efforts. Through its history, the Congress has at times been a site for democratic contestation, sometimes very tense, between predominately white, rural hunters and sport fishers, Native tribes, environmental conservation groups, and mining companies.

The Congress was created in 1937 by DNR's predecessor, the State Conservation Commission, to advise the agency on its work. In 1972, the state legislature codified the Congress into law in 1972. The state provides a modest budget to the Congress, which for the last twenty years has been $80,000 a year.

The Congress has a participatory leadership structure in which each year, residents of each of the state's 72 counties are invited to attend an assembly at which they elect five delegates to the statewide Congress. The Congress's 360 delegates serve for two- or three-year terms, and vote for fellow delegates to serve one-year terms on the Congress's leadership bodies, the Executive Committee and District

**Location:** Wisconsin, United States

**Type of assembly:** federated constituent assembly

**Years active:** 1937 to present

**Integration with social movements:** The Congress was created by Wisconsin's government, not by social movements, but various community and environmental organizations have gotten involved in the Congress over the years as one strategic front in their larger efforts.

**Integration with government:** The Congress was founded by Wisconsin's State Conservation Commission (now the Department of Natural Resources) and formalized through legislation in the 1970s.

**Integration into the policy processes:** Delegates in the Congress, who represent counties across the state, present proposals to the Department of Natural Resources's governing board. Some delegates also sit on some of the Departments' advisory committees.

**Key lessons:**

1. Assemblies can be institutionalized within government to provide community stakeholders with a formal role in advising and influencing government agencies.
2. Federated assemblies provide a structured way for local residents to directly participate in higher levels of

Leadership Council. To facilitate its work, the Congress has an Executive Committee, nineteen subcommittees and (since 2010 or so) a Youth Conservation Congress. Committee meetings are open to any WCC delegates, and meeting notes from subcommittees are posted online.

The members of the Congress engage the broader public in multiple ways. In 2023, the Congress worked with Department of Natural Resources staff to host open houses in every county in the state "to connect with the public, answer questions about resource management, and discuss local issues of importance." They also developed an online survey and collected 11,500 responses from residents.

government.

3. Annual assemblies can have their own governance structures that give participants control over the assembly itself.
4. Assembly deliberations should be inclusive and respectful, but assemblies are not free of politics: they can be sites of significant political contestation. Assemblies' guiding values and rules can help ensure they are inclusive, equitable and democratic spaces, but political conflicts often need to be worked out through a combination of collaboration and contestation both within the assembly and in other political venues.

Each year, the Congress also facilitates a process to collect, refine and vet proposed "citizen resolutions" to put forward to DNR's governing board as either recommended rule changes or advisory resolutions. Any Wisconsin resident can propose a resolution. Through a lengthy process involving multiple levels of WCC committee review, DNR staff review and a public vote, the Congress, staff and the public collaboratively shape resolutions and determine which get put forward to the board. The board considers the proposals, and votes to forward any rule changes it wants to pursue to the legislature for a vote. In 2022, the Sierra Club alone introduced 240 resolutions to the WCC, and won passage of 83% of them.

Although the WCC only has advisory powers, the Congress carries some weight, judged both by the degree of active resident participation (in 2023 there were 360 delegates, 19 active subcommittees, and those 11,500 survey submissions), and also according to conservation organizations. The Sierra Club, for example, points to instances of state legislators and the media citing the Congress when discussing legislative votes.

As with any democratic space, the Congress can become a site for contestation. Environmental groups like the Sierra Club and the Endangered Species Coalition have long been involved in organizing their members around the Congress, but most participants tend to be recreational hunters and sportfishers, groups that tend to be more rural, white, and politically conservative than the average state resident. In the 1990s, however, coming on the heels of racist opposition by some hunters and sportfishers against bands of the Ojibwe tribe and their spearfishing treaty rights, other white hunters and fishers found common cause with Native people (bands of the sovereign Ojibwe, Potawatomi, Menominee, and Mohican nations, plus the Midwest Treaty Network and Indigenous Environmental Network) as well as predominantly white environmental conservation organizations in opposing a proposed metallic sulfide mine in Northeast Wisconsin

that threatened to pollute local waters. Together they employed multiple strategies and tactics to oppose the mine. Most of their work entailed direct actions, advocacy and other tactics outside of the WCC, but the WCC was nevertheless one significant venue through which the conflict and cross-racial alliance building played out.

More recently, in 2023, environmental and progressive organizations have raised public concerns that the Congress has been captured by right-wing ideologues. Our Revolution affiliate Our Wisconsin Revolution published a press release saying that the Congress has become "an authoritarian, anti-democratic, and dysfunctional organization." They say that a small number of hunters control the Congress, and "citizens are shut out from even making public comments at District Leadership Council meetings and the resolutions supported by thousands across the state are squashed by a District Leadership Committee of 22 people." They urged the state to suspend funding to the WCC until it made more space for alternative viewpoints. This view has also been expressed by environmentalists. Heartland Rewilding, for instance, says that the WCC "operates at the behest of recreational hunters and trappers, without regard for ethics, science or public values." They have been publishing op-eds and encouraging environmentally-minded residents to vote for and run as delegates, and say that there's beginning to be more diversity of viewpoints on committees.

As with any political institution, participatory governance bodies like the Wisconsin Conservation Congress are intentionally designed as spaces for both collaboration and contestation. Sometimes different stakeholders will find themselves in alignment, and other times in tension. Organizations, lawmakers and public agencies who are committed to equity can help tilt the balance by establishing clear guiding values and mandates for participatory spaces, and the Wisconsin Conservation Congress's rules could be better. But the Congress is operating in a larger statewide political climate in which hard-liners on the right are working to capture every state political institution including the governorship, legislature, courts and elections. There are no shortcuts. Changing the membership of the Congress, the rules that govern it and the policies it promotes requires the long, hard work of bottom-up community organizing. Participatory governance and deliberative democracy don't erase political contention and don't automatically produce just outcomes, but they can at least create a forum in which the needs, rights and opinions of people who are directly impacted by policies have an official place in governance.

**Further reading:**

- The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has a webpage for the Conservation Congress with information about the Congress, its history, its organizational structure and committees, and meeting minutes.
- The DNR has a presentation explaining how the Congress advises the DNR, and the Congress has a formal code of procedures.
- Zoltan Grossman wrote two articles about the 1990s fight over Native tribes' spearfishing treaty rights.

- Our Wisconsin Revolution, Endangered Species Coalition and Heartland Rewilding, have been writing about right-wing capture of the Conservation Congress.

## Civic assemblies

### Petaluma Fairgrounds Advisory Panel

Petaluma, California, a city of 60,000 people near San Francisco, wanted to redevelop its old city-owned fairgrounds as a mixed-use development, and needed to build public consensus behind a plan of action. City officials had heard about civic assemblies and civic juries, and decided to commission one. They called it the Petaluma Fairgrounds Advisory Panel, and hired Healthy Democracy to help them design and run the panel.

Working closely with the city manager's office, Healthy Democracy conducted a lottery process to select 36 Petaluma residents to join the panel. The participants met for a total of 90 hours over the course of two months in 2022. Participants were paid $20 per hour for their time, and were provided accommodations to facilitate their full participation, including child and elder care, transportation costs, laptops, tech support, and language interpretation and translation.

The city manager's office and the agricultural cooperative that ran the county fair convened an Informational Advisory Committee with twelve community organizations, and together they selected the speakers and information. Healthy Democracy brought in outside moderators to help guide discussions and decision-making among participants, and participants were allowed to request information from the city. Outside of the panel, there was a communications strategy to communicate to the public about the panel, but there was no community organizing strategy:

**Location:** Petaluma, California, United States

**Type of assembly:** one-time civic assembly

**Years active:** 2022

**Integration with social movements:** The advisory panel was initiated and held by the city government and was not oriented toward community power-building, but the city brought in an independent nonprofit, Healthy Democracy, to help design and run the process, and invited a dozen community organizations to serve on an Informational Advisory Committee to shape the information participants received.

**Integration with government:** The assembly was commissioned by the city council and city manager to provide them with recommendations.

**Integration into the policy processes:** City officials decided the issue and question to put before the assembly, and invited participants to help formulate policy proposals for the city council and city manager to decide on.

**Key lessons:**

1. Assemblies can play an important role in developing plans and building public consensus around land use plans.
2. Governments can contract with

the panelists, not the broader public, were the focus of the process.

With staff support, the panel participants wrote three documents to deliver to the city manager and city council: a prioritized list of values, decision-making criteria, key interests, and important activities that the final recommendation should take into consideration; a collection of multiple visions and possibilities for the fairgrounds; and a final report with recommendations for the city. To facilitate follow-through on the panel's recommendations, Healthy Democracy established four subcommittees that panelists could join: a policy subcommittee, a design subcommittee, a communications and outreach subcommittee, and an evaluation subcommittee. Participants were paid for an additional 24 hours of work, and were given access to a technical advisor, a coordinator, and a budget for printing and miscellaneous costs.

The whole effort cost $450,000. In follow-up surveys and interviews, both panel participants and city officials expressed positive reactions to the panel, and an interest in commissioning more civic juries in Petaluma in the future. The process was not without its challenges though. Some board members of the agricultural coop felt they hadn't been adequately consulted through the process, and some city council members expressed frustration that the panel's final report presented an array of options with varying levels of support from panelists rather than a single clear, coherent recommended plan for the fairgrounds. To avoid such miscommunications, Marjan H. Ehsassi of the Berggruen foundation recommends that city councilors have more direct engagement in civic juries and assemblies, and also that planners convene an independent governance or oversight committee to provide more independent and diverse

participatory democracy experts to help plan and run assemblies, while also dedicating staff time to support the process.

3. Paying participants for their time and providing them with services including child and elder care, transportation, language interpretation and tech support gives people a fair chance to participate in assemblies.
4. Narrowing down an assembly's topline recommendations can help make its recommendations more actionable for elected officials.
5. It is helpful to establish buy-in from elected officials before embarking on an assembly process. Once a process begins, engaging elected officials during the assembly process and inviting them to attend assembly sessions can also help build their support.
6. After an assembly ends, participants can be invited to be part of the ongoing work of advocating for and implementing the assembly's recommendations.
7. Establishing an information or content committee and inviting community organizations to join gives community stakeholder groups a chance to help shape the assembly process, improves the information participants receive and helps build shared commitment to the assembly's ultimate recommendations.
8. Establishing an oversight committee can help ensure an accountable, effective assembly process, and build stakeholder support for the assembly and its recommendations.

guidance for government-convened assemblies than government representatives can provide on their own.

**Further reading:**

- "2022 Petaluma Fairgrounds Advisory Panel" webpage from Healthy Democracy
- "How Democracy Should Work: Lessons in Learning, Building Cohesion and Community" report by Marjan H. Ehsassi for the Berggruen Institute
- Interview with the Petaluma City Manager by New America

Madrid's Decide Madrid Platform and City Observatory

During a wave of progressive populism across Spain in 2015, a political coalition led by a brand new political party, Ahora Madrid, won control of the Madrid city council. They developed an innovative but short-lived model that holds lessons on how to combine mass digital participation with in-depth deliberation as well as the challenges of building democratic institutions that can endure across electoral cycles.

One of the coalition's early moves was to launch a new online platform, Decide Madrid, through which residents could contribute and vote on one another's policy ideas and bring the best ones to a public vote. Decide Madrid was built using open-source Consul Democracy software, and drew an impressive 400,000 registrants and 20,000 crowd-sourced proposals in its first two years. To be put before the city council, proposals had to first win "yes" votes from 1% of Madrid's voting-age public 16 and up (about 27,000 people), and subsequently win a majority of votes in a second round of voting. "This process drew in everyday people but," as newDemocracy describes, "it struggled to make their contributions substantive enough to work as hoped, and to bring their contributions to a public referendum when they were substantive enough." Many proposals were poorly developed in that they duplicated an existing law, for example, or were not designed for successful policy implementation. The volume of proposals was also too high for people on the website to see most of them, meaning that only two proposals, both introduced on the day the platform launched, ever reached the 1% voter threshold. Some neighborhood-based organizations were also concerned about steering people away from in-person community engagement. Decide Madrid

**Location:** Madrid, Spain

**Type of assembly:** civic assembly combined with a mass digital engagement platform

**Years active:** 2015 to 2019

**Integration with social movements:** The effort was born out of Spain's popular unrest in 2015, which, among other things, gave rise to a new political party, Ahora Madrid, that was deeply committed to participatory democracy.

**Integration with government:** Ahora Madrid and allied parties won control of Madrid's city council in 2015 and formed a coalition government. The coalition government launched a new public participation portal (Decide Madrid) to allow residents to propose policies to be brought to a city council vote, and transformed an existing government advisory committee (the City Observatory) into a civic assembly designed to put ballot measures before voters.

**Integration into the policy processes:** Decide Madrid and the City Observatory were both designed to help set the public agenda and to develop and propose community-designed policies to be voted on, respectively, by the city council and by voters.

**Key lessons:**

1. In moments of mass unrest and political upheaval, it can be helpful to try to channel some of that energy into building ongoing institutions to facilitate popular democratic control.
2. Assembly can use broad community input as a starting point for their deliberations.

needed another mechanism for the public to filter out good ideas and turn them into good, implementable policies.

The city council had an existing body of electeds and civil servants called the City Observatory that was tasked with analyzing public opinion through traditional data sources like polls and focus groups. It decided to reshape this body by replacing its government representatives with members of the public. The city council contracted with Participa Lab and newDemocracy Foundation to help redesign the City Observatory, and in January 2019, the passed its new plan into law. The new City Observatory was made up of 49 members of the public selected through a civic lottery. The members were tasked with reviewing the 40 post popular proposals on Decide Madrid, hearing expert testimony, considering input and proposals from the city council, and then deliberating to decide which proposals to flesh out into ballot initiatives to be put up for a public vote. They were given political independence from the city government to discuss any proposals from Decide Madrid of their choosing, and to call upon the city government to hold a public consultation on any issue. The city council could advise the Observatory on what to prioritize, but the decision-making power on what ballot initiatives to introduce and how to structure them sat entirely with the assembly members.

3. Assemblies and participatory democracy are usually implemented by political parties on the left, and are often dismantled by right-wing parties if they later win elections.
4. Assemblies can be given power by allowing participants to decide what issues they want to focus on, as well as the ability to put ballot initiatives of their own design directly before voters.
5. Community-generated policy ideas can be designed for successful implementation and to better align with existing policies and programs by creating a process through which government staff or elected officials advise—but don't make decisions on behalf of—assembly participants.
6. Digital platforms can complement assemblies by providing an opportunity for large numbers of people to engage, but can be difficult to design and implement effectively.

The City Observatory's new members were selected and convened in March 2019, and met briefly that year before the next election brought in more conservative council members who scrapped the plan and returned electeds and civil servants to the Observatory. Ahora Madrid and its allies failed to build sufficient, active support from the public and from politicians in other political parties to sustain political support for direct public participation in the assembly. This backsliding underscores the importance of protecting assemblies across administrations by institutionalizing assemblies in law, building both public broad public support and organized community power to defend assemblies, and working to build cross-party support from electeds.

**Further reading:**

- "Reimagining democratic institutions: Why and how to embed public deliberation" by Claudia Chwalisz for the OECD

- "The Madrid Observatorio de la Ciudad" by newDemocracy on the design of the assembly
- "Decide Madrid: Madrid's Direct Democracy Experiment" by CrowdLaw for Congress on the digital platform's successes and shortcomings
- "¿Te ha tocado? El sorteo llega a la política de Madrid" by Ernesto Ganuza and María Menendez-Blanco (in English)
- "El Observatorio de la Ciudad (The City Observatory)" from Participedia
- "Institutionalizing deliberative mini-publics in Madrid City and German Speaking Belgium – the first steps" by Graham Smith
- "Models of representative deliberative processes" by Ieva Česnulaitytė for the OECD

## Brussels' Deliberative Committees

In 2019, the Parliament of the Brussels-Capital Region and the French-Speaking Parliament of Brussels both passed a bill creating a new form of deliberative policy committee that brings together 15 members of parliament with 45 lottery-selected members of the public to deliberate on a specific policy issue and develop recommendations for parliament. Media attention during debates over the bills helped get reluctant legislators to sign on in support, for fear of being seen to oppose public participation.

Under Brussels' new system, a committee can be called either by parliament or by 1,000 resident signatures, though the final decision on which topics to focus each committee on sits with a parliamentary office called the Extended Bureau. In their first two years, committees were formed to develop policy recommendations on 5G, homelessness, citizen participation in crisis planning and management, and biodiversity. Each committee received oversight and technical support from a team made up of two parliamentary staff members, four experts on deliberation and four experts on the committee's policy issue. Public participants receive 70 euros per day for their participation, plus child care and language and disability accommodations.

The committee members spend at least four days together hearing testimony from experts, deliberating, and developing policy recommendations. At the end of their deliberation process, they hold two separate votes on which recommendations to send to parliament: the members of parliament take an open vote, and the residents take a secret vote. For any recommendations that a majority of public participants support, members of

**Location:** Brussels, Belgium

**Type of assembly:** civic assembly with participation by legislators

**Years active:** 2019 to present

**Integration with social movements:** No

**Integration with government:** The Deliberative Committees were created under law by two parliaments, and create joint committees in which 15 legislators join 45 lottery-selected members of the public to deliberate and develop proposed legislation.

**Integration into the policy processes:** The legislature, sometimes with public input through petitions, decide which issues to convene a Deliberative Committee on. The Committee then works on policy formulation, sending proposed legislation back to the legislature for a vote.

**Key lessons:**

1. Forming assemblies with joint participation by legislators and members of the public can help bring public input into policy-making while also helping structure the assembly's recommendations for legal and political success.
2. Training for assembly participants—both community and government participants—can help set people up to engage and collaborate successfully.
3. Paying assembly participants for their time and providing child care, language interpretation and disability accommodations gives people a fair chance to participate in assemblies.

parliament who vote against or abstain from voting on the recommendation are required to explain their reasoning.

After the vote, the committee's final recommendations are delivered to parliament, and the 15 participating members of parliament and any relevant public agencies have six months to prepare a formal response. The committee is reconvened for a day, and the government delivers their public response to the recommendations. They are required to respond to each and every recommendation from the committee, and though they are not required to follow through on any, they must explain their decisions and policy actions.

4. To help build accountability and follow through, legislators and government agencies can be legally required to publicly receive an assembly's recommendations, respond to them, report back on their progress with implementation, and explain any recommendations they have decided not to follow through on.
5. Narrowing down how many recommendations an assembly puts forward can help make assemblies' recommendations more actionable.

After the first couple committees, organizers made two key adjustments. The first committee, on 5G, delivered so many recommendations that the government struggled to prioritize them and follow up on them all. Parliament subsequently capped the number of allowable recommendations at 30, and required committees to include analysis of each recommendation and its trade offs in their final report. In addition, in both of the first two committees (on 5G and on homelessness), members of parliament tended to sit back, not speak much during deliberations, and hew to their party lines on the issues. Public participants expressed surprise during voting when members of parliament suddenly stepped in to amend proposals that they hadn't previously spoken up about. The organizers adapted in the third committee by coaching members of parliament on active participation in the deliberations, and by introducing an extra deliberation session before voting to allow everyone to comment directly on the draft recommendations. These measures, combined with the fact that the third assembly on public participation in crises addressed a policy issue that political parties didn't have existing policy stances on, improved deliberations in the third assembly.

**Further reading:**

- "Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave" and "Eight Ways to Institutionalise Deliberative Democracy" by Claudia Chwalisz for the OECD
- "Ostbelgien and Brussels Sortition" by GovLab
- "The Brussels Deliberative Committees Model" by newDemocracy

## Brussels' Agora Party and Its Citizens' Assembly

In 2018, participatory democracy advocates in Brussels formed a new political party, Agora, with the single policy goal of establishing a permanent civic assembly in city government. Taking advantage of Brussels' multiparty parliamentary system, which allocates legislative seats proportionally based on parties' share of votes, Agora won 5% of the vote and thus secured a single seat in parliament. Agora took the salary and staffing budget for their member of parliament and used the money to run a civic assembly, with the assembly's recommendations to be delivered to parliament through their elected representative.

The assembly works both proactively and reactively: it proactively develops policy resolutions to introduce to parliament through its representative, and it reactively responds to what's happening in parliament by analyzing bills under consideration and directing the representative on how to debate and vote on them. Every six months, half the assembly members are replaced through a new civic lottery. Assembly members are provided with roughly 40 euros per day, and are offered childcare.

In its first year, the Citizens' Assembly chose to focus on housing. Participants heard from multiple speakers put forward by Agora organizers, and produced a resolution with multiple policy recommendations that they introduced to parliament and also presented to the public at a public event. In the second year, the assembly focused on responding to what was already in motion in parliament, much of which focused on covid-19. In the third year, the assembly members chose to focus on employment, and in the fourth they focused on the environment.

**Location:** Brussels, Belgium

**Type of assembly:** civic assembly tied to a political party and legislative representative

**Years active:** 2018 to present

**Integration with social movements:** The Agora Party was founded by proponents of civic assemblies outside government who wanted to "hack" the electoral and parliamentary system and use it to fund an assembly that would determine how the assembly's elected member of parliament votes.

**Integration with government:** The Agora Party held one seat in parliament from 2018 to 2024, enabling it to use the member of parliament's pay to fund the assembly, and giving the assembly an official voice and vote in parliament.

**Integration into the policy processes:** With its member of parliament, the assembly was able to play a role both in setting the legislative agenda (by introducing resolutions to parliament) and in policy decisions (by determining how their representative voted).

**Key lessons:**

1. Forming a new organization or political party can sometimes be helpful for promoting assemblies and participatory democracy.
2. Paying assembly participants for their time and providing childcare gives people a fair chance to participate.
3. Organizers can think about creatively using local laws and institutions to open up non-traditional funding and organizing opportunities.

4. Movement candidates elected to office can utilize assemblies to direct their legislative work and hold them accountable.
5. It can be challenging to align assemblies and other direct democracy models with the culture, timelines, procedures and politics of legislatures.

Based on interviews with 20 party members, Nino Junius and his co-authors explain that once elected, Agora began facing inherent tensions of the electoral and legislative system that, to some degree, are pushing it from its initial radical intent to "hack" the system toward a more programmatic approach to working through parliament to win elections and pass legislation over time. The Agora Party lost its seat in parliament in 2024, but remains an interesting experiment, one that may continue to evolve.

**Further reading:**

- Brussels Citizens' Assembly website from Agora
- "Hacking the representative system through deliberation? The organization of the Agora party in Brussels" by Nino Junius, Didier Caluwaerts, Joke Matthieu & Silvia Erzeel in Acta Politica
- "Agora Party: The role of political parties in institutionalization" by Susan Lee for Democracy R&D