ASSEMBLIES AS A TOOL FOR JUST DEMOCRACY

CASE STUDIES | SEPTEMBER 2025

BY BEN PALMQUIST

PARTNERS FOR DIGNITY & RIGHTS

CASE STUDIES

As we discuss in our accompanying report, "Assemblies as a Tool for Just Democracy," assemblies are a powerful model of participatory governance that have been pursued all over the world. In this document, we highlight a number of assemblies across North America, Latin America and Europe. On our website we link to additional case studies that others have published.

BRAZIL'S NATIONAL PUBLIC POLICY CONFERENCES, HEALTH COUNCILS AND PARTICIPATORY PLURIANNUAL PLANS

Since the fall of its dictatorship in the 1980s, Brazil has emerged as a global leader in participatory democracy and assemblies. This case study discusses three innovative models—National Public Policy Conferences, Health Councils and Participatory Pluriannual Plans—that each employ a federated system of national, state and local assemblies. These systems have involved the participation of millions of Brazilians over the years, have shaped politics and policies and have increased accountability at all levels of government.

Location: Brazil

Type of assemblies: federated governing-power assemblies

Years active: 1990 to present

Integration with social movements: Social movements helped win all three of these processes. In each of them a majority of seats are reserved for civil society, including both individual participants and representatives from a wide array of community and labor organizations. The processes have often served as venues in which community participants have been able to build common political subjectivity and policy visions, thereby strengthening movement organizing beyond the assembly processes.

Integration with government: All three processes are commissioned by the national, state and local governments to make official recommendations to electeds and public agencies and to monitor the development and implementation of government plans and budgets. Government representatives participate in each of the processes as full participants, holding a minority of seats (12.5% in Health Councils).

Integration into the policy processes: All three processes are formally integrated into the agenda-setting, policy-formulation and monitoring and oversight phases of national, state and local policymaking. They have had proven success over the years in driving legislation and budgetary decisions and in shaping government plans.

National Public Policy Conferences

National Public Policy Conferences (NPPCs) trace their early origins to the 1940s, but were developed into a participatory governance process in the 1990s. They are a federated system of local, state and national assemblies that were designed to increase government transparency, give the public a role in evaluating past policies, identify priorities and make policy recommendations to the government.

NPPCs are commissioned by the national government, but carve out important roles for community and labor organizations. For each NPPC, the government convenes a planning team that is usually made up half of government representatives and half of appointees from civil society. NPPCs hold a majority of assembly seats for direct stakeholders: civil society representatives from stakeholder communities including patients, residents, workers, students, women, Black people, Indigenous people

and others. Government representatives and other key stakeholders (like hospitals, clinics and other health care providers) are also involved as assembly participants, but hold a minority of seats.

In NPPCs' federated structure, local assemblies are open for anyone to attend. Participants work together to identify policy priorities, generate recommendations for government and elect delegates to their state assembly. In the state assemblies, local delegates are joined by additional delegates who are elected by civil society groups and any other key stakeholders (like healthcare providers) and also by representatives from the state government. The state assemblies prioritize and refine the local assemblies' proposals, advance their chosen proposals and elect delegates to the national assembly. In the national assembly, the state assemblies' delegates are again joined by civil society, key stakeholder and national government representatives. Together they review the state assemblies' proposals, prioritize and refine them and put forward a set of final recommendations to the national government. Although the government is not required to pursue NPCCs' recommendations, because the conferences are officially commissioned by the government and involve government representatives as participants, their priorities and recommendations are strongly positioned to be taken up in public agencies' policies, plans and budgets.

In 1990, after the fall of the dictatorship and under social movement pressure, Brazil's newly elected national government reinvigorated NPPCs and expanded them from health care to other sectors including education, social services and minority rights. The Workers' Party (PT) was the chief advocate of participatory democracy in the 1990s, but helped push other parties to pursue NPPCs too. After years as a minority party, in 2002 the PT won the 2002 national election. Over the next several years, they held an average of ten NPPCs each year covering issues including health, education, environment, science and technology, rural development and minority rights for groups

Key lessons:

1. Assemblies can be federated to balance mass participation with actionability. Open-invitation local assemblies can be designed to involve tens or even hundreds of thousands of participants, and they can elect delegates to regional, state and/or national assemblies to prioritize, refine and turn these local assemblies' ideas into a set of actionable proposals and decisions for higher levels of government.
2. Assemblies can be structured to intentionally correct inequities by reserving seats not just for demographically selected population groups, but for organizations that represent frontline communities. And rather than planners cherry picking a few select groups to be involved in the process, they can invite a large, inclusive and diverse set of stakeholder organizations to send participants to ensure that the many voices and perspectives who are active in the political arena are also equitably included in the assembly process. Assemblies, in this approach are not an apolitical, technocratic space: they create an inclusive, just and effective space for collaborative, effective, solution-oriented politics.
3. Both organized social movement and strong political leadership from elected officials and political parties are needed to establish assemblies and collaborative governance at a large scale. Key external events that shape political eras, like Brazil's transition to dictatorship from democracy in the 1980s and 1990s and, more recently, the distance of that memory, significantly shape the political terrain in which everyone operates.
4. There are both benefits and risks when assemblies and participatory governance are closely tied to one political party. Such a party can help drive collaborative governance especially when it holds power and sometimes, as in the 1990s in Brazil, even when it is in a minority position.

including women, elders, indigenous peoples, people of color, people with disabilities and LGBT+ people. As Thamy Pogrebinschi explains, these NPPCs have helped social and cultural groups build collective identities, develop policy demands and work to translate those demands into government action while also deepening legislators' knowledge and improving working relationships between the legislative and executive branches.

A staggering seven million Brazilians participated in local NPPC assemblies from 2003 through 2011, and the conferences helped drive national legislation before they were discontinued by right-wing President Jair Bolsonaro.

Health Councils

At the same time as it worked in the 1990s to revive National Public Policy Conferences, Brazil's national government also instituted a second model of collaborative governance: Health Councils. Health Councils also used a federated system of local, state and national assemblies to institutionalize public and health care worker participation into governance of the healthcare system. They are a robust model of collaborative governance that go beyond mere public input on a prescribed set of issues: they authorize participants to deliberate on broad matters of health policy and health care provision.

Like NPPCs, Health Councils reserve a majority of seats for direct stakeholders: 50% for health care users including organized patient, community and labor organizations, 25% for health care workers, 12.5% for health care providers like hospitals and clinics and 12.5% for government representatives. In Brazil's 34 indigenous health districts, 50% of seats are reserved for indigenous members. Across the board, members are elected to health councils by their own constituencies, not by elected officials.

Health councils are also granted real power: they oversee the government's formulation, approval and monitoring of local, state and federal health plans, approve the annual plans and annual budgets and monitor the plans' and budgets' implementation. Health councils' efficacy varies according to local politics, but where politicians respect councils' deliberations and decisions, they have been very effective. In 2025, there are over 5,500 municipal health councils operating across Brazil plus 26 state councils, 34 indigenous district councils and one federal council.

NPPCs, Health Councils and Participatory Pluriannual Plans Since 2018

When Jair Bolsonaro was elected president in 2018, he disbanded the National Public Policy Conferences and limited the power of the Health Councils. (The Health Councils were enshrined in law, so unlike the NPPCs, could not be completely abandoned.)

After Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was reelected president in 2022, his government reestablished NPPCs and bolstered the Health Councils, and also brought public participation into the federal, state and local governments' required pluriannual planning process every four years. In 2023, Lula's government launched the Participatory

Pluriannual Plan ("Participatory PPA") by holding assemblies in all 26 Brazilian states and the federal district of Brasília. These assemblies were open to all citizens, social movements and civil society organizations, and invited participants to deliberate on public policies and make recommendations to the federal government. In parallel to these assemblies, Lula's government also relaunched the Intercouncil Forum, which brings together representatives from public policy councils and civil society organizations to help prepare and monitor the government's development of its four-year plan. It has complemented both of these efforts by launching a new digital participation platform, Brasil Participativo, to solicit policy ideas and generate discussion among large numbers of participants. As of September 2024, 1.4 million people had engaged on the platform and submitted over 8,000 policy ideas.

Collaborative governance in Brazil remains closely tied to the Workers' Party and its electoral fortunes, so its future remains uncertain. But if history is any guide, the breadth and depth and success of these participatory models will put pressure on future officials from all parties to continue operating participatory processes in at least some capacity, and Brazil's NPPCs, Health Councils and Participatory PPA will continue to inspire similar efforts around the world.

Further reading:

- For information on the institutional design, history, issue focuses and impacts of National Public Policy Conferences, see "Latin America – Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations" by Thamy Pogrebinschi for European Democracy Hub and Participedia's page on NPPCs.
- For a broad discussion of Health Councils, see "Rights to Health and Struggles for Accountability in a Brazilian Municipal Health Council" by Andrea Cornwall, Silvia Cordeiro and Nelson Giordano Delgado in *Rights, Resources and the Politics of Accountability*, edited by Joanna Wheeler and Peter Newell.
- For stories on Health Councils in recent years, see "Over 4.000 delegates gather to discuss future of Brazil's iconic health system" by Clara Alves Silva for People's Dispatch and "Migrants in Brazil mobilize for health policies" by Alexandre Branco-Pereira for LatinoAmérica21
- For more on Participatory PPA and the Intercouncil Forum, see "Brazil launches participatory national planning process" by Tarson Núñez and Luiza Jardim for People Powered
- For discussion of Brazil's new digital engagement platform, Brasil Participativo, see "Bridging the Digital Divide: Lessons from Brazil's national participatory planning process" from People Powered and "Scaling Participation in Brazil" by Eduardo Veciana for Democracy Technologies

BRONXWIDE PLAN

The Bronx, a diverse borough in New York City with a population of 1.4 million people, is rich in culture, community and possibility. It is home to some of the region's largest economic anchors in the educational, medical, civic and cultural sectors including the Bronx Zoo, Montefiore Medical Center, Fordham University, the NY Botanical Garden and the Hunts Point Terminal Produce Market and Cooperative. Yet despite these major economic engines, the Bronx remains a heavily impoverished area sandwiched between wealthier Manhattan and Westchester County.

Location: The Bronx, New York, United States

Type of assembly: began as a policy-platform assemblies and evolved into a governing-power assembly

Years active: 2019 to present

Integration with social movements: Grassroots groups founded the coalition and utilize the assembly model to engage leaders from diverse neighborhoods and areas of expertise and to build their base.

Integration with government: The assemblies are wholly funded and operated by the Bronxwide Coalition without government, but as described below, collaborated with the Bronx Economic Development Corporation.

Integration into the policy processes: In 2024, the Bronx Economic Development Corporation, the economic development arm of the Bronx Borough President's Office, began collaborating with the Bronxwide Coalition. Together, they worked to build on the coalition's community engagement and economic development vision by co-creating a federally certified Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy for the borough.

In 2019, a coalition of community development and organizing groups, already strategizing around Bronx-wide issues and the goal of deepening economic democracy, identified a strategic opportunity. A competitive race for an open congressional seat presented a chance to engage Bronx residents, build political and economic power and reinvigorate a coalition of faith groups, workers, tenants, teachers, elders and youth—exactly the kind of coalition that had built local institutions including the unionized, worker-owned Cooperative Homecare Associates and large housing cooperatives like Amalgamated Houses and Coop City. The re-formed coalition decided to focus on developing a people's policy platform. They recognized the platform development process as an opportunity for their organizations to grow their membership bases, align and strengthen their efforts, influence Congressional candidates' platforms and shift the public narrative about the Bronx's future.

In 2020, during elections for the city council, mayor and the state legislature, the coalition took their initial congressional platform and adapted it into people's platforms for city policy and state policy. They engaged candidates around a shared vision, values and critical questions grounded in policy "systems" and economic "sectors."

At the same time, the coalition launched its assembly process. During the height of COVID-19 isolation in 2020 and 2021, it organized both in-person and online assemblies to engage Bronx residents, workers, small business owners, local institutions and other stakeholders. These assemblies provided participants with a grounding in the coalition's shared values and principles of racial justice and economic democracy, introduced economic democracy as a framework and borough-level planning as a lens, and created space for residents to express their visions for the future of the Bronx. Through the assemblies, participants also identified community strengths, assets, challenges and opportunities (essentially a SWOT analysis) across several economic sectors such as housing, health, mobility, innovation and technology and energy and the environment. The SWOT analysis of key economic sectors informed priorities and highlighted existing aligned projects. Using the open-source Consider.It tool, participants evaluated the pros and cons of proposed projects through this online interactive platform and ranked them in order of priority.

Key lessons:

1. Policy-platform assemblies can strengthen and align coalition organizations while helping them organize and deepen the leadership of their membership bases for broader organizing efforts.
2. Platforms and economic development planning processes can generate new consensus on values and priorities, and can be leveraged to secure resources from multiple levels of government.
3. Assemblies, as a method and container, can adapt over time to support groups as they advance their work and respond to changing external conditions. In this case, the coalition began by using assemblies to develop policy platforms, and has since adapted their assemblies for education, priority-setting and power-building across the Bronx.
4. Combining virtual and in-person organizing is an effective way to engage more subgroups within diverse communities.

After these elections, the coalition shifted toward a longer-term focus, working to build a sustained movement for an equitable and democratic Bronx economy through a comprehensive economic development plan. Drawing from a long legacy of organizing in the Bronx, and inspired by Jackson People's Assembly, ʻĀina Aloha, Thunder Valley CDC and the book *Planning from Below*, the coalition launched the Bronxwide Plan and formed a leadership team to coordinate their efforts.

All told, between 2020 and 2023, these assemblies and the people's guide drew on the voices of over 1,500 Bronx residents, workers and small business owners in five languages and through dozens of in-person and online meetings ranging from 10 to 300 people.

To help shift from policy platforms towards a vision of planning and development, the coalition created a People's Guide in July 2023, which articulated community values, strengths, and priorities in six areas: housing, land and healthy neighborhoods; small business support and resilience; education and workforce; manufacturing, innovation and technology; energy, mobility and environment; and finance.

In addition to engaging so many community members in co-creating the People's Guide

and participating on the online platform, the planning process also helped the convening organizations align around common goals, craft a unified narrative and develop actionable strategies together.

At the end of 2023, the coalition's years of planning culminated in developing a rubric for collective decision-making on how to prioritize values-aligned projects, and launched its first initiative, the Sustainable Economy Partnership, designed to move their work from advocacy, civic action and input into public governance toward collectively implementing equitable economic development efforts.

Impressed by the coalition's community process, in 2024, the Bronx Economic Development Corporation (an arm of the Bronx Borough President's Office) invited the coalition to co-develop a federally certified Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). This co-developed plan legally codified the borough's commitment to democratizing development and building community wealth and established broad-based buy-in for a shared vision of economic democracy and environmental justice. For the coalition, co-developing the plan was also a chance to further broaden the coalition and grow their power.

Through its first five years, the Bronxwide Coalition has adapted its assemblies and strategies from an initial focus on creating policy platforms toward building community leadership, mobilization and civic infrastructure. It now focuses on equipping Bronx residents and community leaders with the tools and capacity needed to implement their plans and projects collaboratively with partners in business and government.

One challenge for the coalition has been expanding participation beyond its member

organizations' established base of individual members. For instance, when the coalition launched its online platform, it advertised widely with bus ads directing people to the platform. However, organizers soon realized that most people required direct, interpersonal engagement to feel inspired and motivated to participate. Even in the social media era, traditional face-to-face relationships remain indispensable for fostering meaningful connections and driving social change.

In 2025, the coalition is continuing to hold quarterly assembly meetings to monitor ongoing project development by partner organizations and values-aligned groups, create a more permanent borough-wide container for accountability and goal-setting and advance their vision for democratizing development and building a community-owned, democratic economy. As they build a base to organize Bronxwide for economic democracy over the long term, they are also advocating for $12 million in state funding from New York lawmakers to finance the Sustainable Economy Partnership as a foundation for equitable development. In the months and years ahead, the coalition aims to pursue policy and funding opportunities at local, state and federal levels while remaining rooted in community organizing and their commitment to building a community-owned solidarity economy.

BRUSSELS' AGORA PARTY AND 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 worked both proactively and reactively: it proactively developed policy resolutions to introduce to parliament through its representative, and it reactively responded to what happened 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 were replaced through a new civic lottery. Assembly members were provided with roughly 40 euros per day, and were offered childcare.

Location: Brussels, Belgium

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

Years active: 2018 to 2024

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 public financing 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

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.

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 pushed the party away from its organizers' initial radical intent to "hack" the system toward a more programmatic approach of 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:

- Agora's website and the Brussels Citizens' Assembly website
- "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

Key lessons:

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

BRUSSELS' DELIBERATIVE COMMITTEES

In 2019, the Parliament of the Brussels-Capital Region and the French-Speaking Parliament of Brussels both passed bills 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 otherwise 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 the first two years, committees were formed to develop policy recommendations on 5G, homelessness, citizen participation in crisis planning and management, and biodiversity.

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.

Each committee receives 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, 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 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 one day, and the government authorities deliver 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.

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. Additionally, 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.

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.
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.

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

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, Mississippi, 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 outside investors. The Assembly was launched as a 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.

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 when 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, focused 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.

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 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 a hostile white-dominated state government and a financial system that deems it unprofitable and thus not worth to invest in clean water and

community supports for Jackson's residents, the water system and violence continue to be big problems.

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.

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 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.

Unfortunately, the first Mayor Lumumba died a little over a year into his term. 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 toward either working more or less through city government, but they 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:

(from "The City as Liberated Zone: The Promise of Jackson's People's Assemblies" in *Jackson Rising: The Struggle for Economic Democracy and Black Self-Determination in Jackson, Mississippi*)

- "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"

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. Their experience also points to the challenges of building democratic institutions that can endure across electoral cycles.

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.

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 followed a wave of civic participation efforts in Madrid in the early 2000s. The platform 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), then 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 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 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. The council 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, passed the new organizational structure 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.

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. Assemblies can use broad community input as a starting point for their deliberations.
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. Assembly participants can be given power by allowing them to decide what issues they want to focus on and empowering them with 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 do not 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 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
- "An Experimental Participatory Ecosystem" by Melissa Ross
- "Models of representative deliberative processes" by Ieva Cesnulaityte for the OECD

PETALUMA FAIRGROUNDS ADVISORY PANEL

Local officials in Petaluma, California, a city of 60,000 people near San Francisco, wanted public input around what they should do with a 55-acre city-owned fairground. The property had been leased for $1 per year to a state agency, which both ran the fair and acted as year-round property manager to the many businesses, schools, and other organizations that rented space on the site. An advocacy group had formed to support continuation of the lease, while others wanted the City to take back control—to turn the property into a "central park," into housing, or into other uses—or simply to take back rental revenue for the City. Regardless, the topic was at a binary stalemate between the agency and its supporters and the City (though City leaders themselves were not united on a vision for the site), leaving out the vast majority of Petalumans from meaningful ways to engage on what was, to many, the most important issue in town. City leaders had heard about civic assemblies, 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.

Location: Petaluma, California, United States

Type of assembly: one-time civic assembly[1]

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. The state agency which controlled the site at the time was also a co-equal recipient of results, though it did not initiate or pay for the project.

Integration into the policy processes:
City officials decided the issue and question to put before the assembly, in consultation with the fair agency, and invited participants to help formulate policy proposals for the city council and agency board to receive.

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 a stipend equivalent to $20 per hour for their time, and were provided accommodations to facilitate their full participation, including reimbursements for childcare, elder care and transportation as well as laptops, tech support, translated materials and simultaneous interpretation in Spanish throughout.

Healthy Democracy convened an Informational Advisory Committee (IAC) to determine which speakers and what information would be presented to the assembly participations.

The Committee included representatives from the City and the fair agency, as well as representatives of 12 community organizations, each reflecting an issue category. These organizations were drawn from a pool of dozens of organizations identified by City Staff and Council through a modified lottery process, to ensure diverse representation. Healthy Democracy moderated the plenary and brought in small-group moderators from a diversity of backgrounds. After the IAC's initial presenter selections, participants selected all further presenters and documents—amounting to a majority of the information inputs to the process. Outside of the assembly, participants led a communications and outreach strategy, and the assembly hosted an afternoon public workshop and broader survey, but there was no major community power-building strategy: the participants, not the broader public, were the focus of the process.

The panel participants wrote three documents to deliver to the city manager and city council: a prioritized list of values and decision-making criteria that any site decisions should take into consideration; a collection of site use options for the fairgrounds; and a final report with three overarching visions for the site (each containing a set of prioritized site uses), as well as several key, near-100% consensus recommendations. To facilitate follow-through on the panel's recommendations, each participant joined one of four subcommittees: a policy impact subcommittee, a process subcommittee, a public 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 moderator and a budget for printing and miscellaneous costs.

The whole effort cost approximately $450,000. In follow-up surveys and interviews, both panel participants and city officials expressed positive reactions to the panel, and voiced interest in commissioning more civic assemblies in Petaluma in the future. The assembly was very successful in its key goals of starting a multi-year site planning process for Petaluma and, most importantly,

Key lessons:

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

unsticking and diversifying what had been an exclusionary and binary fight over the fairgrounds.

The process was not without its challenges. Some board members of the fair agency 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. Researcher Marjan H. Ehsassi 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 guidance for government-convened assemblies than government representatives can provide on their own.

In fall 2022, the city council decided that the best way to implement the Assembly's recommendations was to take back planning and management of the site. As of spring 2025, the City is initiating the next stage of site planning for the fairgrounds, using the Assembly's final product—its three potential visions—as the starting point for alternatives and alternatives analysis. The city is also considering bringing Assembly Delegates back to serve in advisory or leadership roles within the further stages of the site planning process.

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

PORTO ALEGRE PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING ASSEMBLIES

Porto Alegre, Brazil, is famous for having launched the first participatory budgeting process in the world. Its participatory budgeting was a rigorous, expansive exercise in participatory democracy and collaborative governance, and assemblies were the backbone of the process. Porto Alegre's initial wave of participatory budgeting ran from 1990 through 2004, and has inspired many other participatory budgeting and participatory governance efforts in Brazil and around the world in the years since.

Location: Porto Alegre, Brazil

Type of assembly: federated civic assembly / participatory budgeting assembly

Years active: 1990 to 2004, with subsequent dissemination and evolution

Integration with social movements: Yes, strong roots in and leadership by neighborhood councils and the labor movement

Integration with government: Yes, a core project of the city government

Integration into the policy processes: In a first in the world, assembly participants were given direct decision-making power over significant portions of the public budget.

The original participatory budgeting process was co-created by political leaders from the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, or PT) along with autonomous people's movements outside of government who were organized through institutions like neighborhood councils. Together, they launched participatory budgeting following the PT's victory in the 1988 city elections on a platform that included participatory democracy as core plank.[1]

The PT and social movement conceived of and launched participatory budgeting amid a nationwide democratic surge following the end of Brazil's 20-year military dictatorship in 1985 and the inauguration of the country's new democratic constitution in October 1988. Within this context, participatory budgeting was one of many efforts to expand and deepen democracy and worker and community organizing, but it took a unique approach to structuring direct popular participation in governing decisions.

Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting was built around neighborhood- and district-level assemblies as the foundational mechanism of popular participation. As André Passos Cordeiro explains, the city government and social movement organizations worked together to divide the city up into sixteen districts. They held an assembly in each district, gave the assemblies fourteen possible budget priorities and tasked each district assembly

1 Iain Bruce, "From First Steps to Final Strategies," in *The Porto Alegre Alternative: Direct Democracy in Action*, ed. Iain Bruce (Pluto Press, 2004), 38-53.

with identifying its top four. These priorities included things like sewers and drains, housing, social services, paving, water supply, education, street lighting, health, transport, leisure areas, sports and leisure, economic development, culture and environmental improvement. Then within their top four priority areas, the assemblies were asked to draw up specific investment proposals for their districts.[2]

A few years into the process, organizers added an additional layer of citywide thematic assemblies covering issues like labor, small business, culture and environment that weren't always sufficiently addressed in neighborhood and district assemblies. These thematic assemblies were specifically designed to elicit participation from union members, students, small business owners and other constituencies who were underrepresented in neighborhood assemblies. They worked in parallel to the neighborhood and district assemblies to draw up their own budget proposals for the citywide budget.[3]

The assemblies, Cordeiro explains, were scheduled annually to feed into the city's budgeting calendar. In March and April, the process opened with an open public meeting for each district and thematic assembly. A coordination team for each assembly, made up of delegates elected by the assembly the prior year plus one city staffer, planned the agenda, and a city representative reported back on the government's progress in implementing the participatory budgeting decisions the previous year. In April and May, the district and thematic assemblies held additional public meetings, typically drawing between 400 and 1,500 people to each session. A city representative reported to the assembly how much money was available in the budget to spend, and participants were invited to speak. The mayor attended each of the assemblies at least once to say a few words, but was mostly there to listen. The participants were then asked to vote on their top spending priorities and to elect delegates to the citywide council that managed the whole participatory budgeting process.[4]

Key lessons:

1. Participatory budgeting exemplifies the inspiring possibility of bringing public deliberation and direct decision-making into areas of governance that are typically managed through top-down decision-making by electeds and elite "experts."
2. Assemblies can be scaled up into a mass governing structure involving tens of thousands of participants by federating local assemblies and enabling each assembly to elect delegates to a larger assembly spanning the entire political jurisdiction.
3. Assemblies can be given self-governing powers by enabling participants to vote on big questions and to elect delegates to a committee to handle day to day decisions and operations.
4. Social movement organizing is a critical ingredient that is necessary for government-sanctioned assemblies and collaborative governance efforts to produce significant (rather than superficial) changes in policy decisions, power relations and popular engagement.
5. Collaborative governance efforts are shaped by larger political currents that can both create and hinder possibilities, and force collaborative governance models to evolve over time.

2 André Passos Cordeiro, "Porto Alegre: The City Budget," in *The Porto Alegre Alternative: Direct Democracy in Action*, ed. Iain Bruce (Pluto Press, 2004), 63-84.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

The entire participatory budgeting process was self-governed through a federated structure in which district and thematic assembly participants elected delegates to citywide district and thematic forums, which met monthly, as well as the citywide participatory budget council, which held overall responsibility for governing the whole participatory budgeting process and met twice a week throughout the year. The council had 32 seats for district assembly delegates, 12 seats for thematic assembly delegates and one seat each for delegates from the Municipal Workers' Trade Union and the Union of Neighbourhood Associations. There were also ad hoc bodies on social services, public works, and other areas of work and expertise over time.[5]

The assemblies were given autonomy to determine their own operational rules without interference from the government. "These rules must be drawn up in complete autonomy by the community, which then makes a social contract with the local government. The PB is not a finished or perfect construct. It is, and must remain, open to discussion," says Ubiratan de Souza.[6] At the end of each year's budgeting process, the assembly considered proposals for rule changes and votesdon what changes to make for the following year.

Participatory budgeting reached a truly impressive scale in Porto Alegre and across Brazil. At its peak in the early 2000s, Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting process engaged over 30,000 residents a year in the assemblies—a staggering number for anyone who has ever organized an assembly process involving even a few dozen people.[7] Around the same time, participatory budgeting also reached a high watermark across Brazil, with 138 municipalities adopting their own participatory budgeting processes.[8]

The success of Porto Alegre's participatory original participatory budgeting model inspired thousands of participatory governance efforts around the world, not least in Porto Alegre's own state of Rio Grande do Sul state, where participatory budgeting's success forced the PT's rival party, the Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB), to come up with its own platform for participatory democracy. Since the turn of the century, both city and state elections have bounced back and forth between the PT and MDB, with the PT usually working to implement participatory budgeting involving deliberative assemblies, and the MDB generally replacing participatory budgeting with "popular consultations," online participation platforms, advisory councils other models of public engagement. Over time, as Melissa Ross explains, this has led Rio Grande do Sul away from participatory budgeting rooted in in-person assemblies toward multimodal forms of public participation. And as Gianpaolo Baiocchi and Ernesto Ganuza argue, as participatory budgeting has spread around the world to the United States and other countries, it has increased public participation in budgeting but in most cases has also constrained the public's role to a consultative or managerial role that does not enable communities to contest entrenched power and drive more substantive changes.

5 Ibid.

6 Ubiratan de Souza, "Basic Principles," in *The Porto Alegre Alternative: Direct Democracy in Action*, ed. Iain Bruce (Pluto Press, 2004), 57-62.

7 Bruce, supra note 2.

8 Brian Wampler's and Benjamin Goldfrank, *The Rise, Spread, and Decline of Brazil's Participatory Budgeting: The Arc of a Democratic Innovation*. Springer International Publishing, 2002.

Further reading:

- For details on how participatory budgeting worked in Porto Alegre, see Iain Bruce's *The Porto Alegre Alternative: Direct Democracy in Action*, especially the chapter by André Passos Cordeiro.
- For how participatory budgeting and participatory democracy have evolved in Porto Alegre and Rio Grande do Sul since the early 2000s, see Melissa Ross's "Healthier Democracies Case Study: Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil" for Public Agenda.
- For how and why participatory budgeting has declined in Brazil since the early 2000s, see Brian Wampler's and Benjamin Goldfrank's *The Rise, Spread, and Decline of Brazil's Participatory Budgeting: The Arc of a Democratic Innovation*.
- For the importance of social movement mobilization and contestation in participatory governance, and critiques of how participatory budgeting has evolved away from these orientations as it spread outside of Porto Alegre and Brazil, see Gianpaolo Baiocchi's and Ernesto Ganuza's *Popular Democracy: The Paradox of Participation* and Brian Wampler's *Participatory Budgeting in Brazil Contestation, Cooperation, and Accountability*.

SOUTH LOS ANGELES HEALTH AND HUMAN RIGHTS CONFERENCES

In 2009, St. John's Community Health convened eight other community health clinics and base-building organizations in South Los Angeles, a primarily Black and Latino section of the city. Together they authored the South Los Angeles Declaration of Health and Human Rights and held the South Los Angeles Health and Human Rights Conference, which was an assembly that brought people together for relationship building and political education, and to ratify the declaration. The declaration and conference were designed to build alignment among organizations across South Los Angeles in support of equity, justice and human rights for people of color, poor people and other oppressed and marginalized people and to demonstrate "the effectiveness of community-led, place-based, and results-oriented approaches to healthier communities and human rights." Over the years, the core organizations secured endorsements from dozens more organizations, and have held annual conferences and advocated to the county and state governments for better health policies.

In recent years in the face of repeated state threats to cut funding for community health, St. John's has worked closely with SEIU Local 721, who organizes health care workers at St. John's and other community clinics, to advocate for lawmakers to fund community health. This labor-community alliance is solidarity in action. St. John's leverages SEIU's political influence and relationships at the federal, state, and local levels to protect its workforce and ensure services for patients. St. John's has also organized its patients through Right to Health Committees to be powerful self-advocates in budget and policy advocacy. Looking ahead, St. John's, SEIU and their allies will continue focusing the summits on key flashpoints, including protecting Medicaid funding and healthcare for undocumented immigrants and transgender people.

Location: Los Angeles, California, United States

Type of assembly: policy-platform assembly

Years active: 2009 - present

Integration with social movements: Created and led by a coalition of community organizations, labor organizations and community health clinics

Integration with government: No

Integration into the policy processes: The conferences are designed to build community power to be able to influence the city's policy agenda and policy decisions through an outside advocacy strategy, but they have no formal connection to government or policy processes.

Key lessons:

1. A values-based framework like a human rights framework can help in bringing together diverse coalition partners such as community organizations, labor unions and community health centers.
2. The process of developing and ratifying shared policy agendas helps build relationships, mutual commitment and strategic alignment across organizations.
3. Shifting political and economic contexts require organizations and assemblies to adapt over time through a continual process of analysis and adaptation.

WASHINGTON STATE COMMUNITY ASSEMBLIES

In 2024, after years of work, Just Futures—a grassroots partnership between Front and Centered, Statewide Poverty Action Network (SPAN) and People's Economy Lab (PEL)—successfully advocated for Washington State's legislature and governor to commission community assemblies across the state with a budget of $2 million. 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."

Just Futures designed the assemblies to center participation from low-income residents and residents of color, whom traditional policy processes have underserved, to identify environmental and anti-poverty policy priorities, to build up grassroots leadership and capacity to engage in governance and to lay foundations for additional assemblies and other models of collaborative governance.

Following the legislature's appropriation, Just Futures won the contract to work with the Economic Justice Alliance (housed in the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services [DSHS]) to implement community assemblies. Just Futures invited community-based groups around the state to apply to anchor the community assemblies, and selected six organizations: Blue Mountain Action Council, Community to Community Development, ECOSS, Equitable Recovery and Reconciliation Alliance, Nuestra Casa and UTOPIA Washington. These organizations all have membership bases in communities on the frontlines of environmental, racial and/or economic injustices in Washington including low-

Location: Washington State, United States

Type of assembly: governing-power assembly

Years active: 2024

Integration with social movements: Three "movement partner" organizations—Front and Centered, Statewide Poverty Action Network and People's Economy Lab—designed and ran the Community Assemblies program in partnership with the Economic Justice Alliance housed in Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS). Each of the six 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 legislature and operated through DSHS. Movement partner organizations consulted additional state and local agencies, offices and elected officials through the assembly process and secured their attendance at some assembly sessions.

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

income Latine communities in Walla Walla, Latine farmworkers in the Lower Yakima Valley, LGBTQIA+ Pacific Islanders in King County, multiracial residents of South Seattle's Duwamish River corridor and Black, Indigenous and other business owners of color across the state.

From September through December 2024, the six anchor organizations, with support from the three Just Futures "movement partner" organizations—Front and Centered, SPAN and PEL—held their assemblies. Each assembly recruited between 20 and 44 participants from stakeholders in their communities who had lived experience of injustices and thus a direct stake in developing governance solutions that will work for everyone in Washington State by centering people on the frontlines. The assemblies were explicitly designed to engage people who have not been involved in policy advocacy and to develop their civic understanding and civic muscles to be able to help co-create policy, program and budgetary solutions.

Key lessons:

1. Collaborative governance efforts can build on each other over time, sequentially adding up and reinforcing each other.
2. Building trust and working relationships between community groups, agency staff and elected officials is essential. It takes years and the process never ends.
3. Targeted 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 policymaking and civic engagement.
5. Running simultaneous assemblies in different communities is a lot of work, but broadens community engagement and provides an opportunity to experiment with different designs and approaches.

The assemblies were held over one to four days. In the first session, participants were welcomed and led through relationship building and exercises to identify their communities' strengths and to name and prioritize core challenges people are facing. Because the communities involved have all experienced neglect and harm by government and thus entered the room with some skepticism, the anchors and movement partners were intentional about allocating substantial time to this initial grounding, and decided not to invite any government representatives into the first assembly session.

In the sessions that followed, assembly participants focused on one or more priority issues they had identified, and then brainstormed, developed and prioritized possible solutions. These solutions were quite varied: some took the form of policy and budgetary recommendations for the state legislature or local city and county councils, others were programmatic ideas that could be taken up by state or local agencies, and others were actions that could be pursued by the movement partners, anchors or other community organizations.

Because of the state's budgeting cycle and a November ballot measure that threatened to repeal the funding source (the measure ultimately failed), these assemblies were held over the course of just three months, a short timeframe. For those reasons and because this was the first time any of the groups involved had held assemblies on this scale, everyone

involved had to learn quickly and adapt in real time. The assemblies necessitated a ton of work in not only the planning and preparation phase, but also during and after the execution of the assemblies. They stretched the capacity of anchors and movement partners, but facilitated significant learning among participants and organizers alike. The participants, anchors and movement partners all expressed significant satisfaction for the amount of space participants were given to dive deep into issues and to self-identify both problems and solutions, contrasting this with the relative shallowness of other forms of community "engagement."

The community assemblies, importantly, build on a number of recent efforts bolstering collaborative governance.

In 2017, anti-poverty organizations got Governor Jay Inslee to create a Poverty Reduction Working Group and a steering committee that brought together people with personal experience living on low incomes together with Native Tribes, community-based organizations, legislators, advocates, philanthropy and academics to provide guidance and oversight to state agencies on anti-poverty efforts.

In 2021, the state legislature passed the Climate Commitment Act, which raised millions of dollars for environmental efforts through a new cap-and-trade program designed to reduce industries' greenhouse gas emission. That same session, Front and Centered pushed the legislature to pass the Health Environment for All (HEAL) Act, which made environmental justice an official priority for state agencies and created an Environmental Justice Council to advise the state government on environmental justice priorities for low-income communities and communities of color. And that same year, People's Voice on Climate funded and ran a civic assembly process, the Washington Climate Assembly, which included collaboration with some legislators, state agencies, Native Tribes and community organizations.

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.

In parallel to the 2024 state assemblies, Front and Center experimented by convening a cohort of its coalition members to run their own community assemblies earlier in the year, and the City of Seattle's Green New Deal Oversight Board and Office of Sustainability and Environment commissioned two assemblies, contracting with MLK Labor, Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle and People's Economy Lab to work through labor issues, climate change, displacement, food insecurity, environmental hazards and other challenges facing communities of color in the city.

Finally, because collaborative governance ultimately comes down to relationships, Just Futures has been working since its formation to build trust and strong working relationships with staff in state agencies.

After the final assembly sessions, movement partners, anchors and DSHS focused on identifying the entities with the power to implement the assemblies' proposed solutions—state and local agencies, the legislature, community colleges, and others—and what mechanisms will be needed to facilitate collaboration and hold government accountable. Due to time constraints and the 2024 election year, it was not possible to co-create these mechanisms before the assemblies, or to secure pre-commitments from elected officials and staff to attend the assemblies. It remains to be seen how responsive state and local government and private institutions will be to the assemblies and their proposals. Moving forward, the partners and anchors are collaborating with government to map implementation pathways and build accountability mechanisms, and at the same time are working to secure funding to continue holding community assemblies in future years.

Further reading:

- Just Futures' website and community assemblies report
- "Collaborative Governance: Empowering Communities in Washington Through Community Assemblies" report by Just Futures
- New America interviews with the movement partners and a staff person from DSHS
- "Community Assemblies" request for proposals from DSHS

WISCONSIN CONSERVATION CONGRESS

The Wisconsin Conservation Congress (WCC) 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.

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 was 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.

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 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 all 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 of residents and collected 11,500 responses.

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.

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 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.

Although the WCC only has advisory powers, the Congress carries some weight, evidenced by the degree of active resident participation (in 2023 there were 360 delegates, 19 active subcommittees, and those 11,500 survey submissions) and also by reports from conservation organizations. The Sierra Club, for example, points to 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. Together they opposed a proposed metallic sulfide mine in Northeast Wisconsin that threatened to pollute local waters and 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 in which the conflict and cross-racial alliance building played out.

More recently, in 2023, environmental and progressive organizations 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 said 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, stated that the WCC "operates at the behest of recreational hunters and trappers, without regard for ethics, science or public values." Environmental organizations have published op-eds and encouraged environmentally-minded residents to vote for and run as delegates, and have said 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 do not erase political contention and do not 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

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