

TRUST THE PEOPLE

The Case for a Citywide
Citizens' Assembly on
Climate & Ecological Justice





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Images by Brandon Stanton (Humans of New York)

PREFACE

This handbook explains and makes the case for Extinction Rebellion's demand that New York City establish the only means of democratic engagement proven equal to the task of addressing the global climate and ecological emergency: a Citizens' Assembly. In the face of this unprecedented threat—when even the most fully-committed elected official considers the political price too high or the public consensus too weak to call for the dramatic changes that we so desperately need—a Citizens' Assembly is the most fair, effective, and transparent way for New York City to collectively chart a path forward. As demonstrated in this handbook—in part by examples drawn from other democratic countries—a Citizens' Assembly provides a process for synthesizing the public's will and translating it into action.

Extinction Rebellion has made its reputation and attracted its worldwide following by telling the truth, and insisting that truth is the key first step in confronting this unfolding planetary crisis. As we issue this demand for a Citizens' Assembly in New York City, it is becoming clearer than ever that telling the truth about the climate and ecological emergency must include telling the truth about other injustices that have long been threatening and oppressing the people of New York.

We issue this demand as the COVID-19 public-health and economic crises cause unmeasured dislocation and harm to our city, with a disproportionate amount endured by communities of color, especially in the Bronx and Queens, and in institutional settings like jails and nursing homes.

We issue this demand as tens of thousands of New Yorkers are repeatedly taking to the streets in reaction to the latest in an unending stream of police murders of black people here and across our country—demanding an end to systemic racism, police brutality, and state-sanctioned violence.

We issue this demand as COVID-19 is giving us a first taste of the simultaneous breakdown of multiple civic systems (the ones many of us rely on and take for granted)—a breakdown that we can expect to occur again and again as the globe warms, the seas rise, and the storms and wildfires intensify.

We issue this demand, in short, as crises pile on top of each other, and long-standing social injustices suddenly register on many whose privilege has blinded them to the fact that the dangers forecasted for everyone's future are already here for many.

Telling Some Uncomfortable Truths

The truth about the climate crisis is that it cannot be separated from the many other crises facing New Yorkers. The debate should not be which threat causes the bigger harm, but how each threat compounds the dangers of the others. Our world is too complicated for single-issue advocacy, and the climate and ecological emergency is not just one issue. Addressing climate change is about protecting the rights of our and all future generations to live dignified lives. Such protection cannot be separated from addressing other forms of racial, social, and economic injustice which rob people of this same fundamental right today.

Here are some examples of how this injustice manifests in everyday life:

- As now happens nearly every summer, one or more record-breaking heat waves is likely to hit New York City. Already, there are large numbers of families who can't afford air-conditioning and thousands experiencing homelessness. COVID-19 has made both of these injustices worse and has closed many public spaces and shops where people might cool off. Furthermore, because of racist land-use practices and public infrastructure investment, Black and brown people are far more likely to live in areas with demonstrably worse "urban heat island" effects.¹ Heat will only worsen in the coming years. How can we care about the human suffering caused by reckless carbon emissions without also caring about the human suffering caused by decades of racist development practices and community underinvestment? Can we really address one without addressing the other?
- Two in five households in the US with children under 12 years old cannot afford to put food on the table during this pandemic. These households are disproportionately black and people of color.² The UN now projects climate change may cut our worldwide ability to produce food by half over the next 30 years.³ How can we focus on the threat of hunger and starvation due to climate change without doing the same for the threat of hunger and starvation brought about by systemic racism, economic inequality, and COVID-19? Shouldn't we address them both at the same time?

These two examples only scratch the surface of a larger truth. We aren't meeting the needs of all, nor even most, today. But we are also rapidly eroding the planet's ability to sustain human life, forever.

All of these problems have been known for a long time. Our science has named them. Our most impacted communities have fought to address them. Our elected representatives have discussed them. And yet not only have we failed to anticipate or solve these problems, but in many cases they've actually gotten worse. Government inaction on issues of inequality and injustice maps directly onto government inaction on the climate crisis because they are deeply interwound.

An Unavoidable Truth: On Its Own, Our Current Political System Is Not Equal to the Task

Another way in which Extinction Rebellion tries to tell the truth about the climate and ecological emergency is by acknowledging that it doesn't have the policy answers. We do not claim to have the inside track on what set of actions would have the greatest chance for success in the face of this cascading set of problems.

Yet it is clear that our current political processes have shown themselves poorly equipped to identify those problems, assess means of immediate action, and move forward assertively and rapidly with solutions. We suspect that elected officials with deep, sincere concerns about the climate and ecological emergency—and about climate justice for their most disastrously impacted constituents—are keenly aware of the painful limitations that traditional political processes place on officials' ability to lead with the dramatic changes needed. These reasons include:

Structural Inequity: Our political institutions do not adequately represent the people most impacted by and familiar with these problems. Indeed, they most often represent the interests of those least impacted and most advantaged by current arrangements. The result is a broken social contract, placing some parts of the citizenry under immeasurably more threat than others and amplifying citizens' mistrust in government.

Hodgepodge Reform: Concerned-citizen and environmental-justice groups have proposed promising policies and actions. Yet they are often focused on only one part of the problem, leaving politicians no ready, rapid way to choose among sometimes competing and not always compatible remedies in order to assemble a coherent set of policies and actions that fit together. Even when a more comprehensive proposal is put forward, the political marketplace tends to pick apart the elements and water them down in the lengthy processes required for adoption.

Political Risk: Elected politicians are caught in a system that prevents them from being the agents of change that we need. Office holders will pay high political prices for sponsoring changes comprehensive enough to make a difference. Political risks make it impossible to gather enough support from others to build the powerful coalitions and majorities necessary for action in traditional political bodies.

Elite Consolidation = Citizen Mistrust: There is a clear and present danger that just a few people—those possessing more power and wealth—will be the ones making the far-reaching decisions affecting the health, safety, livelihoods, indeed the lives, of the rest of us. During the current emergencies, from the pandemic to racialized police brutality to a planet on fire, governance by a narrow segment of society wields life-and-death power not only in what it does but also in what it fails to do. Meanwhile, the average citizen has no obvious way to educate themselves or to know that their voice and needs have been heard. To implement solutions equal to the climate and ecological emergency, government will need unprecedented levels of public buy-in, at the very time when levels of trust in government are at an all-time low.



Case: New York City

Even when promising first steps have been taken, there has been limited follow-through. The Declaration of Climate Emergency was passed by the New York City Council in June of 2019.⁴ The City's and the Council's actions since passage hardly qualify as responses to what the City itself has now called an immediate emergency.

An impressive piece of legislation was passed, the so-called "Dirty Buildings' Bill," widely celebrated by many climate activists.⁵ Yet that bill clearly shows the limitations of our current political process. It focuses on a single dimension of the crisis, independent of and apart from all others, and it was diminished in force and coverage when running the familiar gauntlet of political horse-trading. Only a small percentage of New Yorkers had any idea the bill was being considered or had any input.

The truth is, we need a new process that finally puts the full breadth of our city's diversity and knowledge at the decision-making table. We need a process which empowers New Yorkers to comprehensively evaluate and confront the climate and ecological emergency and its interconnection with other ongoing crises. We need a process that will have credibility with all New Yorkers.

There is only one thoroughly democratic process equal to this task: a Citizens' Assembly, synthesizing the public's will and translating it into public action. A Citizens' Assembly offers the quickest, fairest, and most comprehensive approach to our current and oncoming crises.

Open this handbook to learn about establishing a Citizens' Assembly on Climate and Ecological Justice for New York City.

Case: New York State

Thanks to years of persistent citizen advocacy, the state legislature passed the Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act in 2019, mandating ambitious climate targets that could have far-reaching impacts on the lives of all New Yorkers. To increase accountability and representation, the CLCPA established a 22-member Climate Action Council (CAC) consisting of 12 state agency members and 10 citizen subject matter experts (appointed by elected officials) to develop plans in consultation with a series of advisory panels and working groups. Despite these efforts, the process has been bogged down by bureaucracy, delay, obfuscation, and politics. The small number of CAC members, appointed by elites—and by and large elites themselves—renders it far from representative of or accountable to the broader community, and particularly unrepresentative of those most impacted by the climate crisis. In response, the very coalition which tirelessly advocated for the bill has now formed its own People's Climate Action Council to convene assemblies and other deliberative spaces to support more widespread and democratic input.





INTRODUCTION

So, what is a Citizens' Assembly?

A Citizens' Assembly is a well-established way to make government decisions.

It brings a representative group of everyday people into one space and asks them to decide what should be done about an issue affecting their community.

Through a series of organized and facilitated meetings, the Assembly learns from diverse experts, hears from a wide array of stakeholders, has honest conversations, finds common ground, and reaches conclusions about what should happen.

Then these recommendations are turned into government policy.

This handbook is a proposal to use Citizens' Assemblies in New York City to address the climate and ecological emergency.

Yet, as mentioned previously, the climate crisis cannot be separated, as it often is, from the many other crises facing New Yorkers. Thus, in preparing for and fending off the worst effects of climate change, this Assembly would also open the possibility for a radical re-envisioning of our city, as residents themselves devise plans to transform our energy, labor, waste, consumption, and transportation patterns.

In short, this is a proposal demanding City Council give the people of the city a central role in determining its future.

The rest of this handbook explains why a Citizens' Assembly is a uniquely promising process, why New York City needs one right now, and what it would look like in practice. It provides relevant examples from around the globe and answers frequently asked questions.

1.

**WHY A
CITIZENS'
ASSEMBLY?**





WHY A CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY?

A Citizens' Assembly is the most democratic, impartial, and effective way to create a comprehensive plan for New York City to address the climate emergency with meaningful consideration of how all other social injustices contribute to, intersect with, and risk being further entrenched by the continued breakdown of the biosphere and government inaction.

It is democratic.

A Citizens' Assembly brings people from all walks of life into one space to learn about, discuss, and deliberate on a topic, typically over a series of weekend sessions, and then make concrete policy proposals to their government and their fellow citizens. With members chosen by democratic lottery, the Assembly's composition will mirror the City's population along lines such as gender, race, age, neighborhood, and socioeconomic status. It is visibly democratic in the most fundamental sense—every New Yorker will see participants who look and live as they do and share their concerns. Citizens will be compensated for their time and given resources to overcome childcare issues and other logistical barriers to participation.

It is impartial.

With no campaigning, no lobbying, and no backdoor influence by special interests, there is no way to stack the deck. Furthermore, a Citizen's Assembly allows participants to hear directly from the balanced mix of relevant experts, public actors, and civil society groups about the solutions they propose, thereby considering all significant recommendations in an even-handed way.

It works.

Any plan to address the climate emergency and the many social injustices which are integral to that task will require active consent from the public. A Citizens' Assembly lets policy makers know exactly what people want, don't want, and would prefer, instead of assuming or guessing. People are more likely to trust a program or process that is deeply informed by citizen voices. Citizen participation gives legitimacy to the solutions offered.

2.

WHY A CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY IS NEEDED NOW



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WHY A CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY IS NEEDED NOW

New York City needs to convene a Citizens' Assembly on climate and ecological justice right now because (1) the city has already declared a climate emergency, and New Yorkers must be brought into the conversation if the city is to actualize that declaration's bold goals; (2) the city itself has expressed a desire for more widespread and inclusive governance; (3) city unity, cohesion, and collective trust are especially important as New York charts a path forward in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis; and (4) a diverse, socio-economically representative group of New Yorkers must be the body charting this path.

1. A Citizens' Assembly on the climate crisis is the logical next step following the Climate Emergency Declaration.

On June 25th, 2019, in response to pressure from Extinction Rebellion, the New York City Council passed resolution No. 864-A, declaring a climate emergency and calling for an immediate emergency mobilization to restore a safe climate. The resolution states that New York City, "as the largest city in the United States, can act as a global leader by both converting to an ecologically, socially, and economically regenerative economy at emergency speed, and by organizing a transition to renewable energy and climate emergency mobilization effort."⁶ The City Council has therefore taken two critical first steps: acknowledging that the climate crisis is an emergency, and recognizing our responsibility to lead a global mobilization effort. A Citizens' Assembly on climate and ecological justice can capitalize on this progress and begin the process of mobilizing New Yorkers to join and embrace the emergency mobilization effort.

2. A Citizens' Assembly would help achieve the city's vision for more widespread and active civic engagement.

A Citizens' Assembly is a natural extension and powerful amplification of the vision that the Council is already moving toward with the City's Participatory Budgeting program—broadly engaging citizens in making the decisions that directly affect them. What we are calling for is in line with the city's larger vision of the future, as detailed in OneNYC 2050, where "New Yorkers actively participate in a vibrant democracy" and "all communities feel their voices are heard by government, including communities historically left out of decision-making."⁷ A Citizens' Assembly is the right tool for making this vision a reality.

3. COVID-19 has altered the future of the city and we need to come together to chart a way forward.

COVID-19 has caused an immeasurable amount of pain, revealing deep fault lines in our city. It has also shown how New Yorkers are capable of coming together in times of crisis. In addition to the climate crisis, a Citizens' Assembly will allow us to grapple simultaneously with the impacts of COVID-19 and other systemic and intersectional problems, and come to consensus on how to respond. With a Citizens' Assembly, we can begin to establish trust, hope, and stability for all, and emerge from this crisis more unified than ever.

4. A Citizens' Assembly would bring together a much more diverse and socio-economically representative group than our current processes ever have.

The ongoing protests concerning racial justice and police brutality highlight the fundamental need for communities normally excluded from our political processes to be actively empowered and meaningfully involved in government decision-making. While a Citizens' Assembly is in no way sufficient on its own to bring about the systemic change needed in NYC, it could certainly be an important step in the right direction.

Table 11 These were identified as areas we could move forward on together.

Post-panel How we Might Move Forward

votes
↓

⑧ Climate Change — agreement but will differences emerge in the details how actions will impact on/cost

⑧ NHS + Social Care — provide better care in order to prevent bed-blocking

⑦ Public Services — funding for the

④ Poverty — taxation — address — greater

②

3.

WHAT THE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY SHOULD BE ASKED TO DO

3

WHAT THE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY SHOULD BE ASKED TO DO

Ultimately, the government body convening the Citizens' Assembly decides what it is asked to do and how it should go about completing its task. This is why every Citizens' Assembly differs somewhat in structure, scope, and authority. In this case, the New York City Council would define the Assembly's mandate in the bill it passes creating the Assembly (see FAQ #18).

Climate Assembly UK, for example, was convened by six Parliamentary committees to answer the following question: "How should the UK meet its legally-binding target of net-zero emissions by 2050?"⁸

The Convention Citoyenne pour Le Climat in France was tasked with determining "How to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in France by at least 40% (in relation to 1990's levels) by 2030, in the spirit of social justice?" Members of the Assembly were also given authority to shape its organization and scope.⁹

The Irish Citizens' Assembly, in contrast, is a permanent assembly, which considers multiple issues over time and provides recommendations on each.¹⁰

XR NYC has the following suggestions for the questions that would provide the Citizens' Assembly with its mandate:

1. How should New York City act now to confront the climate and ecological emergency?
2. How can New York City achieve the goals outlined in its Climate Emergency Declaration?
3. In the wake of the COVID-19 health and economic crises, how should New York City act now to create a more equitable and prosperous future and protect its citizens from future crises?
4. How can New York City meet its targets committed to in the C40 Climate Leadership Group?¹¹

As an organization, XR NYC advocates that the maximum amount of power and autonomy be granted to the Assembly. However, XR NYC will not be involved in the planning or implementation of the Citizens' Assembly (see FAQ #19).



Citizens' Assembly of Scotland - 2019

4.

ROADMAP FOR THE NYC CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY



4

ROADMAP FOR THE NYC CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY

1.

Extinction Rebellion NYC presses the New York City Council to authorize a Citizen's Assembly on Climate and Ecological Justice through advocacy and protest.

2.

New York City Council passes a bill creating the CA and commits to act on its recommendations.

3.

XR NYC helps the Council adopt standards guaranteeing representativeness, impartiality, and inclusivity in all CA proceedings.

4.

The Council holds preliminary conversations with potential managers of the overall process (experienced organizers of participatory democracy initiatives worldwide).

5.

Informed by these talks, the Council establishes a budget and overall framework, issues Request For Proposals, and selects lead independent manager for CA process.

6.

XR stands ready to assist the Council in securing foundation funding as a means of cost-sharing.

7.

The independent manager organizes selection of CA members by lottery, starting with mass mailing of the invitation to large numbers of NYC residents, using the US Post Office master address list.

8.

Responses are sorted by the demographic categories needed to produce a final assembly fully representative of the city and its people.

9.

Invitations, always determined by lottery, go to enough people in each category so that the final composition is a snapshot of NYC.

10.

Personal contact is made with invitees to ensure they fully understand what is being asked of them and to maximize chances they will agree to participate.

11.

Pool of those ready to serve is narrowed step-by-step via lottery to create the final panel.

12.

The CA meets for an introductory session: the participants are oriented to the overall process, greeted by Council members, and begin to get to know each other.

13.

Expert facilitators support all meetings of the CA, helping members draw on best practices such as establishing a level playing-field and encouraging the most constructive group dynamics.

14.

The CA meets during a series of weekends (in all likelihood), over a span lasting 3-6 months. Periodically they take weekends off.

15.

The sequence of their work follows a well-established trajectory:

- **Informational/educational briefings** by climate scientists and related experts on the nature and dimensions of the crisis as it pertains to NYC and its environs; an obvious foundational presenter could be the New York City Panel on Climate Change (NPCC).
- **Testimony/presentations** by a wide array of groups active in identifying ways to address the climate emergency: elected representatives, government agencies, universities and environmental think tanks, environmental and social justice groups, etc.
- **Testimony/presentations** by ‘rightsholders’ representing those most impacted by the crisis: frontline and disadvantaged communities, people of color and poor households, workers faced with job loss as the energy economy transforms.
- **Extensive public consultation**, with Assembly members holding public hearings or hosting on-line forums for their locality, where they report on the progress of the CA and receive input from fellow citizens.
- **Deliberation** among the CA members early in the process to help with digestion of educational input and to build listening and interactive skills of members; **deliberation** on recommendations in earnest after the testimony/presentation/public consultation phase is done.

16.

To adequately address the scope and complexity of the climate crisis, the CA is divided into sub-groups to focus on particular areas, for example: sea level rise; transportation; energy efficiency in the built environment; transition to low and no-emission energy.

17.

Maximum advantage is taken of advances in digital communication technology and group decision-making software to support all of the CA’s work.

18.

The CA issues its recommendations, with wide dissemination via all forms of media.

19.

The Council takes up the recommendations for adoption or puts them to the general public as ballot referenda.

20.

Extinction Rebellion NYC, along with all interested New Yorkers, monitors the overall process against the standards adopted by the Council, but otherwise has no special role or influence.

21.

All parties now know what the city’s people think needs to be done to create an equitable, carbon-neutral future!



5.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



5

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. How are the members of a Citizens' Assembly selected?

The selection process is designed to recruit a representative sample of the city. A large number of households are chosen by lottery—for example, selected randomly from the address files maintained by the US Post Office—and sent a questionnaire structured to include key demographic factors that will ensure a group that is fully representative, such as race, sex, age, ethnicity, and income level. Randomly selected mobile and landline phone numbers are another way to generate a lottery pool. Based on the answers, and follow-up interviews where needed, invitations are made to respondents drawn by lot from pools created to capture each key demographic.

If a fully representative Citizens' Assembly were to be convened in New York City today, over two-thirds of its members would be people of color. Half of its members would come from households earning less than \$61,000 a year. Almost half (49.1%) would speak a language other than English at home. Only a body looking like this—a group not dominated by the people who usually decide—is capable of crafting a fair and equitable way forward.

2. Why is it important for participants to be selected by lottery?

Selection by lottery ensures that the people making up the Citizens' Assembly will mirror the diversity of our city along lines such as gender, race, age, and socioeconomic status. This will create

a fairer and more inclusive deliberative process and bring all the diversity of life experiences and perspectives in New York City to the table.

3. Does a CA exclude New Yorkers who are not documented?

Absolutely not. Neither XR NYC nor any proponents of Citizens' Assemblies advocate for excluding members of our community because of their citizenship status. In this context, "citizen" means a resident or inhabitant of a community. All members of the community should be able to have their voices heard and will be eligible for selection.

In responding to suggestions for avoiding the term "citizen," because it is so highly politicized, an early champion of deliberative and participatory democracy put it this way: "...bowing to political correctness in this instance also means giving up core concepts and roles that are central to democracy. At a very fundamental level, a "citizen" is a person who feels, and is willing to act on, a sense of responsibility for the common good and the advancement of [their community]."

4. How is equal access ensured for those selected to the Assembly?

Every effort is made to ensure that extenuating circumstances do not prevent any individual from participating in a Citizens' Assembly. As with jury duty, participants in a Citizens' Assembly are usually paid for their time. Not only is it fair to compensate individuals for what is demanding and challenging work, payment also ensures that socioeconomic status creates no barrier to participation. The Assembly's budget also needs to cover childcare, senior care, travel costs, and any other expense hurdle that might prevent any New Yorker from taking part.

5. Why not have a town hall or assembly open to any resident?

Open assemblies are powerful and commendable tools through which citizens can make their voices heard. However, on a high stakes and complex topic, it is more compelling to reach policy recommendations through a Citizen's Assembly than an open assembly, for several reasons.

First, open assemblies often attract people with the loudest voices, most partisan views, and strongest opinions. Conclusions reached by an open assembly cannot reasonably be expected to represent the views of the community at large.

Second, by using a democratic lottery to select participants, a Citizens' Assembly protects against the threat of subversion of the process by "astroturf" campaigns (campaigns meant to mimic grassroots activism), special interest groups, lobbyists, etc.

Third, a Citizens' Assembly is a carefully designed and structured process that unfolds across several stages, and often over a more extended period of time. This allows participants to learn about an extraordinarily complex issue from experts, sit with its implications, and dialogue with a broad array of other citizens before coming to a set of conclusions and recommendations. None of this is possible in a conventional town hall meeting.

6. How do participants get the information they need to address such a large and multi-faceted challenge?

Members of a Citizens' Assembly go through a carefully designed and structured process that unfolds over multiple stages. They learn about the dimensions and implications of the climate crisis from briefing materials and presentations prepared by leading academic researchers and scientific experts who are charged to offer the fullest and most balanced presentation possible. They also hear from a full array of interested parties—politicians, civil society groups, social movement advocates, business and labor organizations, and other voices with a stake in the outcome. Participants will have the opportunity to question all presenters and the public at large, and can request any additional information or testimony they feel necessary to aid their decision-making process.

7. I've never heard of a Citizens' Assembly. Does this approach have a track record and is it a legitimate way to make decisions?

The Sortition Foundation, a leading practitioner in the field of participatory democracy, has identified 123 Citizen's Assemblies occurring worldwide since 2000. These assemblies have covered a breadth of topics, from the meaning and impact of internet use in Brazil to mental healthcare in Canada to issues of gender in Malawi, and proven to be a valuable tool in breaking through political gridlock and coming to a consensus around normally divisive topics. In June of this year,

in its report on Reinventing Democracy for the 21st Century, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences recommends experimenting with Citizens' Assemblies at the national level in the U.S. as a way "to enable the public to interact directly with Congress."¹²

“For Congress to become a truly responsive institution, the House of Representatives must engage directly with the people. Just as constituents of individual districts should, through deliberation, inform the decision-making of their individual members, representative samples of America come together collectively to deliberate about issues of national importance and submit their recommendations to Congress. These representative groups of citizens are known as “Citizens’ Assemblies.”¹³”

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in its June 2020 report, *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions*, describes a “deliberative wave” of innovative processes building globally since the 1980s and bringing everyday citizens directly into decision-making about public policy. It identifies 282 instances of their use, in OECD countries, between 1986 and 2019.¹⁴

“Public authorities from all levels of government increasingly turn to Citizens’ Assemblies, Juries, Panels, and other representative deliberative processes to tackle complex policy problems ranging from climate change to infrastructure investment decisions . . . This “deliberative wave” has been building since the 1980s, gaining momentum since around 2010 . . . There is a need for new ways to find common ground and take action. This is particularly true for issues that are values-based, require trade-offs, and demand long-term solutions. The OECD has collected evidence and data that support the idea that citizen participation in public decision making can deliver better policies, strengthen democracy, and build trust.”¹⁵”

8. How is the integrity of the Assembly protected?

All aspects of organizing and managing a CA are handled by an independent organization with experience and expertise in deliberative and participatory democratic processes like this one. They will have taken no position themselves on best approaches to addressing the climate crisis. Neither the sponsoring governmental body nor advocacy groups like XR NYC have any direct role in conducting and implementing the Assembly. And the entire process is made as transparent as possible, with full disclosure of how members are chosen and unfettered access to the Assembly's briefing materials. Many recent CAs have live-streamed their public sessions.

Another possible check to maintain the CA's integrity is to create an oversight or advisory panel, typically including members with reputations for probity and dedication to the public interest, along with respected experts from academia and research institutions. Such a panel can also be organized by inviting balanced representation among groups that have shown a sustained interest in advocating for solutions to the problems being addressed. A third possibility is to have an additional representative panel of citizens chosen by lottery to serve solely as an oversight body.



Safeguards at the French Climate Assembly included: guarantors who oversaw the convention's impartiality and protection from interest groups; a group of 14 experts selected for their neutrality who advised members of the Convention; the restriction of contact between Convention members and external actors during the sessions; and rules for broader public consultation allowing only one contribution per participant and excluding online debate to lower risks of influence from organized lobbyists.¹⁶ At the UK Assembly, expert leads with support from advisory and academic panels have also ensured that information provided to the country's Climate Assembly was balanced, accurate, and comprehensive.¹⁷

9. Are everyday people up to the task of finding solutions to complex policy problems?

Emphatically, yes. As long as citizens are provided with a sufficient amount of time, quality information from a diverse group of experts, and the ability to carry out their work in a constructive environment, they are able to analyze and come up with quality recommendations on any complex set of issues. We know this because these processes have been extremely effective for several decades all over the world.

The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform was convened to examine the electoral system and suggest, if necessary, an alternative system, which would then be put to the voters of BC. Understanding and considering the implications of different electoral systems is a highly technical and complex challenge. Nevertheless, the citizen participants proved themselves fully competent and the process was a resounding success. As described by Dr. Jack Blaney, chair of the BC Assembly, "The members of the Citizens' Assembly demonstrated how extraordinary ordinary citizens are when given an important task and the resources and independence to do it right. Over the eleven-month course of the Assembly, only one of 161 members withdrew and attendance was close to perfect. Their great and lasting achievement is the birth of a new tool for democratic governance."¹⁸



In France, an internal online platform for participants allowed continuous information sharing and discussion. Other resources included: a synthesis of the scientific literature and existing French legislation; hearings led by experts; a synthesis of online contributions from the broader French public; advice from an expert support group; and quick feedback from fact-checkers. A Public Law Committee of legal experts helped turn Assembly recommendations into draft legal form to be used for referendum, legislative, or regulatory purposes.¹⁹

10. How does a Citizens' Assembly's decision-making differ from conventional politics?

Decision-making in a Citizens' Assembly differs in several ways from conventional political processes. First, it is holistic. A Citizens' Assembly enables participants to engage with and reflect the complexities and difficulties of the real world, emerging with informed, reasoned, and intersectional recommendations. This is in sharp contrast to the binary decision-choice typically offered citizens in a voting booth or when responding to an opinion poll.

Second, a Citizens' Assembly promotes group decision-making. The outcomes of a well-run Citizens' Assembly are built by the group and are a product of the mutual influence members have with each other, very different from a simple aggregation of their individual attitudes and preferences. Again, this differs from the solitary and often partisan ways in which peoples' preferences are solicited today. Moreover, Citizens' Assemblies bring in a diverse and representative set of voices that are often lacking in traditional political settings, not only creating a more just process, but also a richer one.

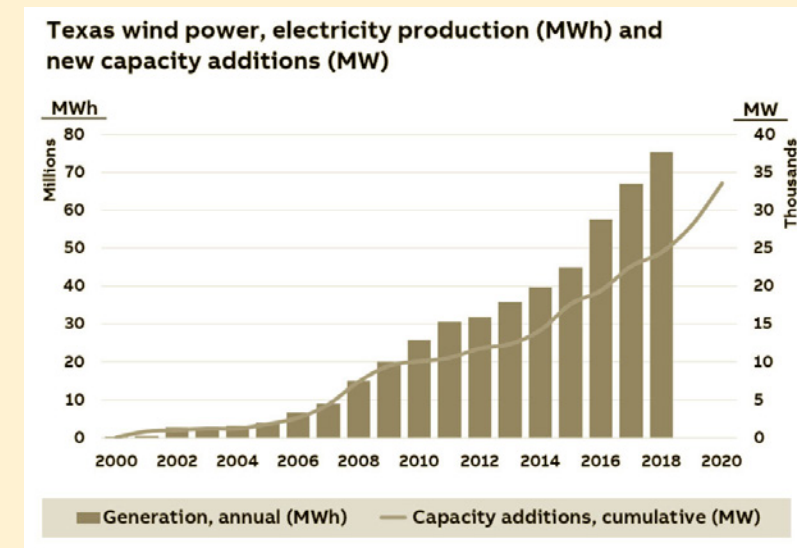
Finally, a Citizens' Assembly promotes long-term thinking by removing some of the negative incentives created by our normal political process. Unlike conventional office-holders, Assembly members need not worry about which way the political winds are blowing, or about how their decisions will affect campaign donations or their personal political advancement.

11. Is collaboration possible between Assembly members already locked into partisan views?

Reports from participants and findings from researchers offer striking evidence of the degree to which members' positions are influenced and changed by the views of other members throughout the Assembly process. Individuals in methodical deliberative democracy spaces, when asked to engage with urgent concerns affecting them personally, soon put aside their partisan affiliations and political identifications. Through sustained contact over time, and with the help of expert facilitators, CA members are able to get to know and understand each other and build relationships that otherwise would rarely develop among people who are very different in their life experience and fundamental outlook. The outcomes of a well-run Citizens' Assembly are built by the group and are a product of the mutual influence members have with each other. The results are very different from a simple aggregation of individual attitudes and preferences.

In Texas, between 1996 and 1998, the Center for Deliberative Democracy and Texas Electric Utilities convened a series of Deliberative Polls®, a process using many of the same principles as CAs, to consider Texas's energy future. During this public consultation, participants were polled before the assembly began and re-polled after the assembly's completion. Across the board, even in the most Republican areas of the state, learning and deliberating during the assembly resulted in stark opinion shifts in favor of renewable energy production, with the percentage of those willing to pay something extra for increased use of wind or solar power jumping from 52% to 84%.

"The switch in support for conservation and renewable energy was just dramatic," Pat Wood, Public Utility Commissioner, recalled. "It really opened my eyes." Large investments in wind energy have been made in West Texas as a direct result of these deliberative consultations. Texas is now the largest wind producing state in the US; if Texas were a country, it's production of wind energy would rank fifth highest in the world.²⁰



12. Can a Citizens' Assembly work with a politically polarizing issue like climate change?

Yes. In fact, because a Citizens' Assembly fosters meaningful deliberation among people from all walks of life, it is a process that has proven especially well-suited for finding ways to move forward on seemingly intractable issues. Indeed, Assemblies have often been turned to when other means of bridging strong differences have been exhausted.

The Irish Citizens' Assembly was established in 2016 to consider several political issues. One of the topics under debate was the country's strict abortion laws, a particularly fraught issue in the largely Catholic country. Media and government figures expressed cynicism that the Assembly could tackle such a polarizing subject. According to one participant, however, the Citizens' Assembly "gave me the language and skills to have difficult discussions. In a room of 100 people, only a handful ever tried to create division or build walls among us." After weeks of deliberation, the Assembly made recommendations to Parliament, which included calling for unrestricted access to abortion. The subsequent referendum backed up their decision, with a 66% majority voting to repeal the Eighth Amendment to the Irish Constitution, which had made abortion illegal.²¹



13. How about the rest of the city's residents? Do they play any role?

Citizens' Assemblies can involve the broader public in multiple ways. During the phase of the Assembly when the selected participants learn about the issues, all New Yorkers should be able to submit comments detailing their opinions and concerns. Later in the process, Assembly members can host consultation hearings and online forums for their districts and neighborhoods. All briefing and educational materials prepared for Assembly members will be publicly available, and all presentations can be live-streamed and available as recordings so all can watch the process unfold. The Assembly's final report containing its recommendations and rationale would be made widely available

to the public. Assembly recommendations that are not directly adopted by the City Council or city government can be put to the wider public via a general referendum.

In the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, the Assembly held 50 public hearings throughout British Columbia in which local residents could express their thoughts so that Assembly members could achieve an understanding of local issues and concerns. There was also an online forum through which all citizens could submit comments.²²

14. What about environmental justice?

Poor people, people of color, and residents of particular neighborhoods are impacted or threatened more than others. Could they have more of a say? Some participatory processes like these have chosen to over-sample (include higher than proportional representation of) people considered to be "rightsholders." Who actually gets selected still depends on the chance of the draw, but the pool they are drawn from contains larger numbers from a designated segment(s) of the population.



A 5,000-person assembly, convened to review plans for the memorial and the rebuilding of the WTC a year after the 9-11 attack, chose to augment the number of participants from families of first responders who had died in rescue efforts and from households living in Lower Manhattan neighborhoods. Their contribution to the deliberations was seen as especially compelling.

The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform was established in 2004 to investigate and recommend changes to improve the electoral system of British Columbia, Canada. 161 participants were selected through random selection and an additional two indigenous residents were selected through recruitment, to ensure that indigenous voices were represented at the Assembly.²³

15. Doesn't NYC have existing plans concerning climate change? Why aren't they enough?

The City does have a general plan, but it consists only of generalized goals and objectives, and many are behind schedule. In 2007, the City released a report called PlaNYC which outlined New York City's future through a series of goals and commitments on a wide range of subjects including land, transportation, and climate change.²⁴ In 2011, the City released an updated version under the same name.²⁵ In 2015, the City renamed the report OneNYC, and continued to address the same general topics of sustainability, economic growth, and resiliency, though with a heightened focus on equity.

The most recent version, released in April 2019, is called OneNYC 2050 and commits the city to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050, outlining 30 initiatives the city can undertake to meet those targets.²⁶ What remains missing, however, is a comprehensive, linked set of commitments which are embraced by everyday New Yorkers, touch all relevant aspects of life in the city, and match the transformative vision called for in the Emergency Declaration. Without such a citizen-endorsed roadmap, our normal political system will be unable to move decisively. The perceived price of getting out front and recommending the drastic changes required will seem too great to people who wish to be re-elected.

Without this leadership by ordinary citizens, even the many praiseworthy recommendations of environmentally-focused advocacy organizations risk getting caught up in lengthy contests of which proposals are the best and should have priority, and debates about whether such drastic actions will ever be tolerated by the public. It is not hard to see the potential for drawn-out timelines and lengthy debate, along with compromises that water-down and cripple even the best ideas.

16. Shouldn't we leave policy making to elected leaders? Why rely on a CA?

CAs are particularly valuable for situations where it is difficult for politicians to find a way forward because there is no solution that doesn't have some negative impact on people's lives, and difficult tradeoffs are necessary. In this sense, the CA provides "cover" for both elected officials and for the wide array of public-spirited climate advocates, providing a single touchstone for what the people want and will agree to. Far from viewing a CA as an abdication of duty by elected officials, the public sees it as an endorsement of the value of citizen input and an honoring of democratic ideals. Elected officials who have turned to an assembly format to address the most intractable issues

routinely acknowledge that the citizens' recommendations provide them with the keys to move past policy gridlock.

Irish assemblies on abortion and same-sex marriage made it possible for the country to break a multi-year parliamentary deadlock that the regular political process couldn't resolve.^{27, 28}

The Citizens' Assembly on Social Care in the UK highlights another kind of benefit—an Assembly's ability to lay the ground for achieving a political consensus. The chair of the Parliamentary Committee that authorized this CA reported that its recommendations were so solid that they allowed the multi-party Committee to reach a unanimous decision on what legislation to put forward.²⁹



17. What is the right size for New York City's Assembly on Climate and Ecological Justice?

XR NYC believes the Citizens' Assembly on Climate and Ecological Justice should have 500 members. Here are our reasons:

- A group of this size will have essential "face validity": 500 participants will be seen as big enough to be truly representative of such a large and diverse city, and while a statistician might be able to show that a smaller group is "representative," a 100-person assembly will not inspire the same conviction that all voices have been heard.
- The subject is complex, and the Assembly will need to work in subgroups to give in-depth attention to different aspects of the emergency: sea-level rise, energy efficiency and building retrofitting, transition from fossil fuels and expansion of renewables, transportation, etc. Ten subgroups with 50 members each will be needed to cover this broad territory.
- A group this size, with an unprecedented, weighty public assignment, will be newsworthy and attract enormous ongoing media attention, important both to establishing legitimacy of the results and to deepening the broader public's understanding of what is at stake.

18. Are there any legal limitations on the City Council's ability to convene a CA?

City Council has the ability to establish a CA and to provide the funds required to run it. The Council would create the Assembly by passing a bill requiring that it be convened. The bill would also describe the purpose, scope, task, and duration of the CA. It is likely that the law would be an unconsolidated one, which is most commonly used when the bill is meant to have a one-time effect or to apply for a limited time. Unconsolidated laws require a single report, a single plan, or a task force or advisory board to meet for a finite period of time and then dissolve. The Citizens' Assembly would not implicate NY's Open Meetings Law, as it would be legally considered an advisory body.

Regarding what the City Council can commit to in terms of the Assembly's recommendations, the Council can agree to take up its recommendations promptly and give them serious consideration for legislative action (and even agree to pay particular attention to those approved by a two-thirds majority of members). Council members can also promise to report back to the citizenry their reasons for embracing, modifying, or rejecting each of the recommendations.

In terms of jurisdictional issues, many of the actions that will be required in a comprehensive climate plan (e.g., energy supply) are outside of the city's control and rest at the state level. Ideally, the CA we are demanding should be authorized by the legislative and executive bodies of both city and state. We would welcome such an outcome, but think the complexities of organizing such unprecedented joint sponsorship would unacceptably lengthen the time required to empanel an assembly and get its results.

We believe, however, that NYC's prominence in the state, and its standing as one of the foremost cities of the nation, make the creation of an Assembly at the city level the most potent and immediate step we can take to meet this emergency. We see no reason that the Assembly cannot also recommend and demand steps at the state, regional, and national level, and we believe that such a body can have powerful influence at multiple levels. No such Assembly in any other location aside from the nation's capital will get the attention and have the impact on public awareness and understanding that this one will.

19. What is XR NYC's role in establishing a Citizens' Assembly?

XR's role in establishing a Citizens' Assembly is to spread awareness, build public support, and make sure it happens. XR will play no part in the selection of Assembly members, or its organization and implementation, which will be handled by independent, impartial third-party organizations experienced in this work. As the Citizens' Assembly is planned and put on, however, XR will continue to monitor the process—as all citizens are entitled to—and bring any shortcomings to the attention of the Council and public. XR NYC will advocate for all of the Assembly's recommendations, based on the fact that they would represent the considered will of a thoroughly representative set of New Yorkers and are the results of a fully democratic process in action.

*In France, the Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat is a recently completed national Citizens' Assembly commissioned by President Emmanuel Macron to answer the question, "How to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in France by at least 40% (in relations to 1990 levels) by 2030, in the spirit of social justice?" Though the 150 person Assembly was convened in response to pressure from several organizations, including *Democratie Ouverte* and *Gilets Citoyens*, and a collection of individuals and organizations including the *Yellow Vests* and other social and ecological movements, these groups were not involved in the Assembly's design and moderation. Instead, this process was led by two independent organizations with prior experience in organizing and facilitating large scale deliberative democratic processes: *Missions Publiques* and *Res Publica*.³⁰*



20. How much will it cost?

The cost will depend on a number of factors, most notably the size of the assembly and its duration. The average cost of Citizens' Assemblies studied by the OECD in its comprehensive 2020 study came to roughly 1.8m Euros, or roughly 2m dollars at the current exchange rate.³¹ It should be noted that an Assembly large enough to embrace and reflect the full diversity of NYC would be larger than the average studied, so costs here would likely be in the higher range. It is also the case that the OECD assemblies all met in person. To the extent that a NYC assembly would occur partly or entirely virtually, this would clearly impact costs.

The accompanying table identifies the basic categories of costs involved. Practitioners experienced in mounting deliberative and participatory processes are in the best position to estimate costs for each of these components and to advise on length and scheduling of components.

Ultimately, the dollar cost must be weighed against the potential benefits. If a CA informs and aids in a comprehensive NYC response to the climate emergency, then it will have mitigated costs in lives, human suffering, and physical and economic damage, all for a tiny fraction of the amount that NYC has already pledged towards climate emergency response.



Camden Citizens' Assembly on the Climate Crisis - 2019

Major Cost Elements of a Citizens' Assembly

<i>Retaining independent contractor(s)</i>	Managing the overall design and conduct of the Assembly
<i>Identifying participants</i>	Designing and conducting the democratic lottery
<i>Facilitation</i>	Planning and conducting plenary sessions; facilitating multiple small group work sessions
<i>Managing and responding to media</i>	Ensuring appropriate access and coverage to maximize public awareness and access; widely and consistently communicating both process and results
<i>Participant stipends and expenses</i>	Compensating Assembly members and reimbursing travel, child, and elder care expenses incurred by members; supporting costs of members' digital access
<i>Governance/oversight group</i>	Expenses associated with the governance / oversight group
<i>Technical and logistical support costs</i>	Facilitating internal communications and virtual work options; computers, keypads, internet and other electronic support systems
<i>Venue</i>	Renting Assembly meeting space (if free space is not available); paying costs for catering, cleaning, special equipment, and security

6.

BASIC STANDARDS FOR A CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY IN NYC





BASIC STANDARDS FOR A CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY IN NYC

Extinction Rebellion calls on the Citizens' Assembly on Climate and Ecological Justice to implement these standards *as a minimum*.³²

1. Random selection of participants

All members of a Citizens' Assembly are selected by lot. Ideally, every resident at or above the age of eligibility to take part in a Citizens' Assembly would receive an invitation to participate. In a city the size of New York this is not practical, but initial invitations should go to a very large group—as many as 100,000 or 200,000 New Yorkers.

2. Demographic representation

The composition of the Citizens' Assembly must broadly match the city's demographic profile. The following criteria should be used to ensure demographic and attitudinal representativeness: age, gender, race and ethnicity, borough and neighborhood of residence, socio-economic status, occupation, educational background, current views and attitudes regarding the climate crisis and climate justice. The aim is to create a small-scale replica—a mini-public—that “looks and feels like us.” The size of the group should allow for inclusion of a wide diversity of views. A stipend and expense reimbursement should be provided to all participants to help create a level economic playing field for participation.

3. Assembly size

The Assembly in NYC must be large enough to leave no doubt that it is a fully representative sample of the city's people. The complexity of the climate emergency will require organizing the assembly into subgroups, each developing a deep understanding of one aspect of the crisis. We therefore believe the NYC Assembly should consist of 500 residents.

4. Independent organization and management

The Citizens' Assembly must be run by an independent set of coordinators and managers that are not part of government. These should be people with depth of experience in organizing such large-scale participatory and deliberative processes. They are responsible for preparing the process of random selection, developing the agenda, and inviting experts and facilitators. The coordinators must be impartial and not direct stakeholders.

5. Assembly authority to help organize its own agenda

Beyond the presenters identified by the manager-coordinators, the Assembly can invite additional experts of their own choosing. Expert input can be provided in the form of an in-person presentation, a live stream, a recording, a written submission, or another method.

6. Inclusion of the widest possible range of perspectives

If there are diverse solutions and perspectives on a subject, all of them should be presented by experts during the educational phase of the Citizens' Assembly. A method of combining perspectives due to limited time or other practical considerations may be applied. Presentations may take the form of a speech in person, a live stream, a recording, a written report, etc.

7. Hearing from stakeholders and rightsholders

Any organization, group, or institution whose area of work and expertise is related to the Assembly's mandate should have the right to present its views. The role of the process managers is to define the stakeholder and rightsholder criteria; they do not make a selection. If time is limited and there is a large number of rightsholders, a method may be used to select some to represent those with similar perspectives.

8. Deliberation

Discussions that include listening to others mindfully, engaging civilly, and weighing options are the key elements of a Citizens' Assembly. The program should involve discussions in small groups and plenary sessions, and should be run by skilled facilitators in order to maximize opportunities for all Assembly members to speak and to be heard.

9. Openness

All members of the community should be able to provide input to the Citizens' Assembly in the form of comments, proposals, or suggestions. The broadest possible involvement of New York City's population should be sought via text-based polling and other similar methodologies.

10. Sufficient time for reflection

Time for reflection is necessary to making thorough and considered decisions. The Citizens' Assembly should be able to prolong its meetings—both length and number—if it sees a compelling need to do so.

11. Impact

The follow-up to the Citizens' Assembly's recommendations should be established at the outset. Ideally, recommendations that receive the support of the Citizens' Assembly above an agreed-on threshold should be guaranteed serious review and consideration for implementation.

12. Transparency

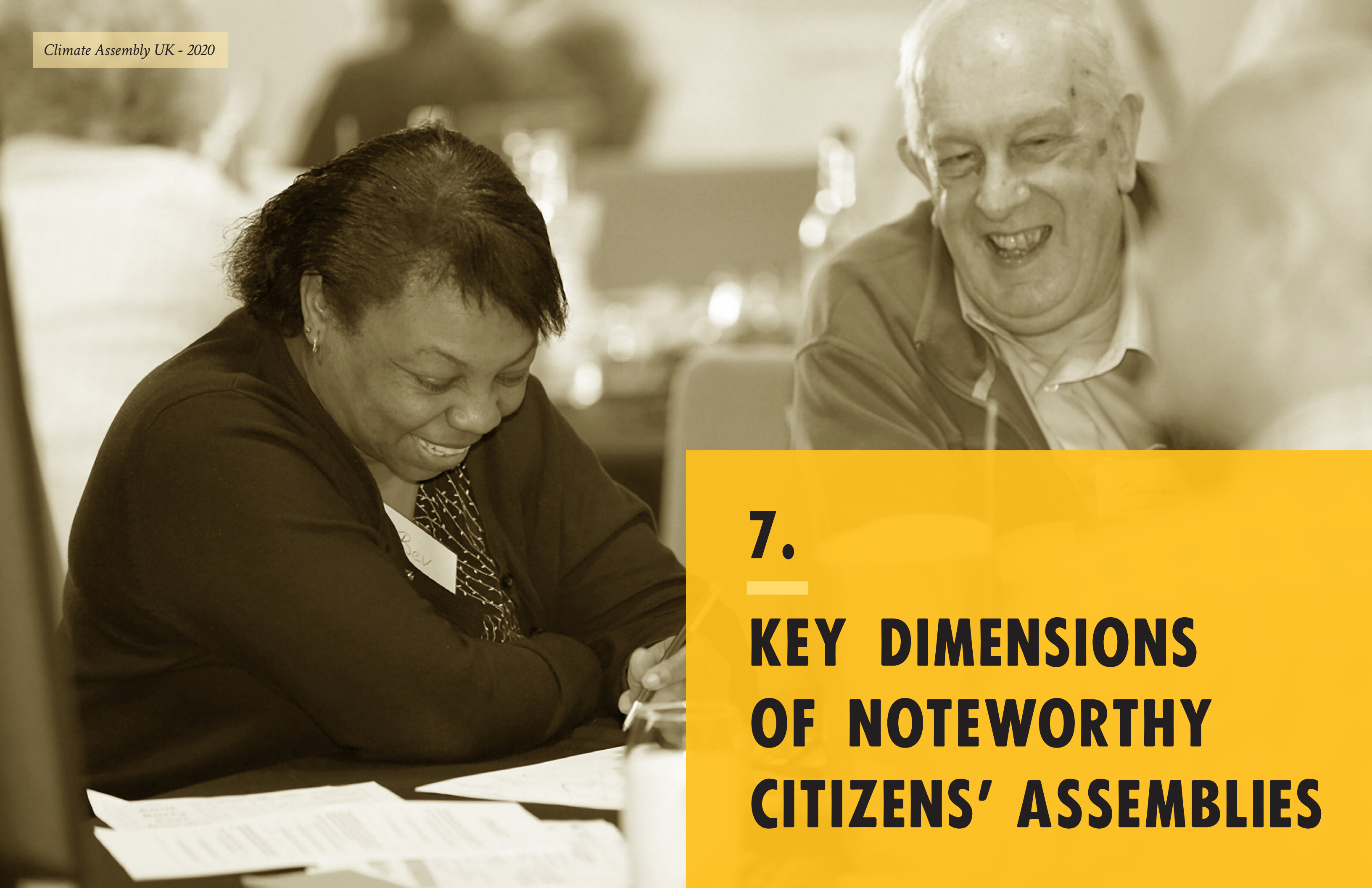
All presentations during the educational, plenary phase should be transmitted live and recorded. All materials presented to the Citizens' Assembly should be made available online. Clear information about how the Citizens' Assembly's recommendations will be implemented should be provided online and updated as actions occur. A report presenting details of methodology used for organizing the Assembly should be provided by the process managers.

13. Visibility

A Citizens' Assembly is an important event in the life of a community and citizens should be informed that it is happening and given information about how they can get involved. The Assembly should be widely publicized before it is formed, while it is in session, and when the results of its work are available.



National Assembly for Wales Citizens' Assembly - 2019



7.

KEY DIMENSIONS OF NOTEWORTHY CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES

7

KEY DIMENSIONS OF NOTEWORTHY CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES...

Name	# Members	Duration	Cost	Funding source	Mandate	Outcome
<i>British Columbia: CA on Electoral Reform</i>	161	10 months (January-November 2004)	5.5m CAD	public	To assess different models for electing members of the Legislative Assembly and to recommend whether the current system for provincial elections should be retained or whether a new model should be adopted.	The CA recommended the adoption of a new voting system, which they called "BC-STV." BC-STV is a single transferable vote system which is easy to use and gives more power to voters. BC-STV was brought to referendum.
<i>France: Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat</i>	150	7 weekends (October 2019- May 2020)	€5.3m	public	How to achieve a 40% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 (compared to 1990) in a spirit of social justice.	Measures to be submitted to a referendum or to a vote in Parliament or to be directly implemented by executive authority.
<i>Ireland: Citizens' Assembly 2016- 2018</i>	100	12 weekends (October 2016- April 2018)	€2.35m	public	To make recommendations on: the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, how to best respond to the challenges and opportunities of an aging population, fixed term parliaments, the manner in which referenda are held, and how the state can make Ireland a leader in tackling climate change.	Reports and recommendations were submitted to the Houses of the Oireachtas for further debate by elected representatives. Assembly recommendations resulted in a referendum which overthrew Ireland's Eighth Amendment, legalizing abortion.
<i>UK: Climate Assembly UK</i>	110	6 weekends (January-May 2020)	£520,000	private and public	How the United Kingdom can meet its legally binding target of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.	The outcomes will be presented to six select committees. The committees will use them as a basis for detailed work on implementing the Assembly's recommendations, which will also be debated in the House of Commons.

...AND EXAMPLES OF OTHER DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES

Texas Wind

As regulated monopoly companies, Texas electric utility companies are required to incorporate public feedback into their energy option preferences. Between 1996 and 1998, eight electric utility companies used Deliberative Polling®, a process using many of the same principles as Citizens' Assemblies, to gauge a representative and informed sample of consumers' energy preferences. This process demonstrated that Texans wanted renewable energy and were willing to spend more on utility bills for renewables. These results shifted the buying preferences of utility companies in the state, and Texas is now the largest wind energy producer in the United States.

Listening to the City (New York)

Close to 5,000 New Yorkers participated in this one-day forum to review the official plans for rebuilding Ground Zero and creating an appropriate memorial one year after the attack on the World Trade Center. Due to extensive community outreach, the demographics in the room closely matched those of the City. The event followed the "21st Century Town Hall" model and had many similarities to a Citizens' Assembly. As a direct result of participants' negative review of the plans, and building on their collective recommendations for an improved approach, the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation scrapped its own plans and announced a worldwide design competition for the area. The outcomes include the current memorial, a major new transportation center integrating multiple subway lines, and a master plan for redevelopment, each created by architects and planners with international reputations.

Rural Climate Dialogues State Convening - 2016



“ I have to admit when I came here when people talked about climate [change] I thought ‘oh, come on’ – did I ever learn a lot. I am grateful. ”

— Stevens County Climate Dialogue Participant

Rural Climate Dialogues

The Rural Climate Dialogues were conducted in Stevens, Winona, and Itasca Counties in Minnesota from 2014-2016. The dialogues followed a Citizens Jury approach, whereby a representative group of 15-18 people were selected for each dialogue. Over three days, participants learned about, discussed, and developed recommendations to address the many challenges posed by climate change. Each Rural Climate Dialogue produced an action plan for how its community should respond to the threat of climate change. Across counties, a shared priority was strengthening connections between state and local action. In response, the Jefferson Center organized a two-day convening of selected rural representatives with state policy makers and agency staff and nonprofit organizations.

CASE STUDY: FRENCH CLIMATE ASSEMBLY



CASE STUDY

France: Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat

Introduction

In April 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron commissioned the Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat to answer the question: “How to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in France by at least 40% (in relation to 1990’s levels) by 2030, in the spirit of social justice?”³³ President Macron committed to present recommendations from the Convention with “no filter” and enact said recommendations either through national referendum, parliamentary vote, or as direct executive orders.³⁴ President Macron’s commitment to translating the Assembly’s recommendations into policy outcomes, as well as the large scale at which it was conducted, gave this Assembly more potential power than any other in modern history.³⁵

Background

In 2018, Yellow Vest (Gilets Jaunes) protests disrupted everyday life throughout France. These protests originated in response to a planned eco-tax on fuel, which would have disproportionately affected lower and middle income residents who live outside of urban centers.³⁶ In an effort to quell protests and forge national unity, President Emmanuel Macron launched a two-month Great Debate in January 2019, for citizens to discuss energy transition, taxation and public spending, democracy and citizenship, and the state and public services. This process included over 10,000 local meetings, 21 local Citizens’ Assemblies, and nearly two million online contributions. In April 2019, President Macron announced the establishment of a national Citizens’ Assembly to translate deliberative processes about climate into climate policy.



Design

The Assembly was designed and moderated by two independent consultancy firms, Missions Publiques and Res Publica. Plenary discussions (large discussions involving all Assembly participants) were hosted by four co-lead facilitators, and smaller breakout conversations were self-facilitated in groups that averaged six people. Breakout conversations explored the tasks at hand and developed outcomes.

The Assembly members split their time between plenary discussions and group work. The 150 participants were divided into five groups of 30 people to cover five major themes: transportation, food, consumption, work and production, and housing. The selection of citizens into groups was done by lot in order to prevent bias.

Much of the Convention was broadcast live online. French citizens were able to contribute their own proposals for consideration at the Assembly via an online platform called Contribuez,³⁷ which was managed by Open Source Politics using an open-source software called Decidim. The website was accessible to anyone with an email address. Open Source Politics produced three contribution summaries during the Convention. These summaries were approved by the Governance Committee, taken into consideration by the Assembly participants, and made available to the general public online.³⁸

The Assembly was overseen by a Governance Committee, which oversaw the design and running of the Convention, as well as media outreach. It was composed of 15 members from different sectors: three climate experts, three participative democracy experts, four social and economic sector experts, two appointees by the Minister of Ecological and Inclusive Transition, and two Convention participants who rotated out after each session.

The committee had three additional members, two acting as co-presidents, and one who served as a reporter.³⁹ These three individuals were nominated by the President of the Conseil Économique Social et Environmental (CESE), the President of the National Assembly, and the President of the Senate.

A sixth group was established, at the request of citizens, to look at overarching topics connecting the five themes. These topics included: the financing of measures, communication, engagement, education and training, constitutional reform, energy production and consumption, protection of the natural environment and biodiversity.⁴⁰ This sixth group was ultimately found to be too involved, given the time and resource constraints of the Assembly, and was suspended by the Governance Committee. It was decided that topics from the sixth committee would be dealt with via different mechanisms.



Logistics

The Assembly convened over the course of 7 weekends between October 2019 and April 2020. This timeline includes an additional weekend, which Convention members requested.⁴¹ Each weekend spanned over two and half days, starting on Friday at 1pm and finishing Sunday at 4pm. This equated to a total of 17.5 days of attendance (plus additional time for travel).⁴² Additionally, a Convention member's work was not limited to the time spent at the Assembly. Work between sessions was optional but included webinars, meetings with local elected representatives, research, and media interviews.

Due to COVID-19, the Convention's last in-person meeting was postponed indefinitely. Online meetings were conducted to discuss the ways COVID-19 had affected both the ecological crisis and the Assembly's proposals.



Budget

€4m of public funding was allocated to the Conseil Économique Social et Environmental (CESE) to run the Convention. This budget encompassed costs for all of the assembly: transportation, accommodation, catering, financial compensation for participants, sortition, process design and delivery, and experts' input. Assembly participants were compensated for their time (€86.04 per day), loss of earnings for people who usually work on weekends (€10.03 per hour), and childcare (€18 per hour).

Sortition Process

150 citizens were selected by sortition to create a representative sample of the French population. The 6 selection criteria were: gender (51% women and 49% men), age (beginning at age 16, proportional to the current population pyramid), education (six different qualification levels), socio-professional categories, type of territory (urban, suburban, rural), and geographic area (according to population size). Ethnicity was not a selection criteria in the sortition process because in France it is illegal to classify people by ethnicity or ask census questions on race.⁴³

The sortition process was carried out by the independent polling company Harris Interactive. They randomly selected 255,000 phone numbers in August 2019, and proceeded to make phone calls that ultimately established a sample of 150 citizens representative of the French population. 40 citizens were selected to stand by as substitutes, some of whom were utilized. The cost of the sortition process was €280,000.

Support for Participants

A wide range of experts were selected to present at the first Convention session. These advisors included a paleo-climatologist, the minister for the ecological and inclusive transition, the CEO of Paris' largest airport, an economist, an environmental engineer, a state councillor, a trade union representative, and more. Assembly participants were encouraged to suggest additional experts they were interested in hearing from so that those experts could be invited to future sessions. A support group of 14 climate experts called Groupe D'appui was formed to advise the members of the Convention on potential paths for and contents of the proposals. Fact checkers were also available throughout the Assembly to answer participant questions.

Additionally, a Legal Committee was formed to assist participants in turning proposed measures into texts suitable for referendum, legislative, or regulatory purposes.

Outcome

In response to COVID-19, Assembly participants organized online and delivered 50 recommendations to the French government for an ecologically responsible COVID-19 recovery plan. Participants also released a statement declaring that while the government invests in economic recovery, it is necessary to invest in socially just climate solutions which simultaneously contribute to a reduction of greenhouse emissions, take into consideration vulnerable populations, and emphasize collective well-being.

On June 21, the Assembly completed their nine months of work and released 99 additional recommendations, for a total of 149 measures. The proposals focused on five main topics—transportation, land consumption, housing, work/production, food—and offered comprehensive plans for France to reduce emissions while prioritizing climate justice. The support for the proposed measures was overwhelmingly high among Assembly participants, with the average

support around 90%. The vast majority of the measures are now in the hands of elected representatives to be translated into legislation. However, the Assembly also called for three of the measures to be put to referendum: two are constitutional changes and one establishes the crime of ecocide in the French penal code.

When addressing the Assembly in June of 2020, President Macron chose to retain 146 of the 149 proposals made by the convention. President Macron also told Convention members that he saw the Citizens' Assembly as a tremendous success in consensus building and decision making and that he plans to hold more Citizens' Assemblies in France.

The members of the Assembly have established a charity, called "The 150," in order to keep in touch, monitor the future of their proposals, talk about the work of the Convention with the public and political and economic actors, and share their experience in citizen participation. The 150 also established a website which tracks the Assembly's submitted proposals and their outcomes.



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With love and rage,

The XR NYC Citizens’ Assembly Team
*April Goldberg, Archie Kinnane, Bob Kolodny,
 Theo Miller, Bug Nichols, Isadora Nogueira*



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About Extinction Rebellion

Extinction Rebellion is a global, non-partisan climate justice movement using nonviolent direct action to pressure governments to act now to address the climate and ecological emergency and listen to the people's call for a just, livable future.



“Our experience over the last 12 years has shown that the problem isn’t that we’ve been asking too much of people, but that we are asking far too little.”

— **Peter MacLeod**, *Mass LBP (Canada)*

“We talk about liberal-this conservative-that, republicans-this democrats-that, at the end of the day we are our government. We are the ones responsible for making these decisions . . . I’m thrilled and honored to be a part of a process that reminds me why this grand [democratic] experiment continues.”

— **Participant**, *Rural Climate Dialogues (Minnesota)*

“There’s no yelling here. No rhetorical histrionics. None of the ritualistic exchange of positions already long decided. The citizens don’t have a party telling them the stance they need to take. Contributions to discussion are more likely to end in a question mark than an exclamation point. But unlike in parliament, where the questions are often rhetorical, the ones here are sincere. They’re not a trick used to attack a political opponent, but rather an instrument on the path to understanding.”

— **Bastian Berbner**, *“The Other Guy and Me” (on the 2016 Irish Citizens’ Assembly)*

“The [UK Climate Assembly] report shatters the illusion that ordinary people will not accept stronger climate policies and are incapable of making difficult decisions about our collective future.”

— **Graham Smith**, *author of Deliberative Democracy and the Environment*

“All around the vast room, you heard citizens saying politely to others, “What do you think?” And then listening—actually listening—to the replies. In this room, “I” had given way to “we.” Yes, the assembly was boring to look at, too serious, too grave, too well-mannered for standard TV presentation. And it was absolutely thrilling . . . At this forum, no uniformed killers in sunglasses stood along the perimeter of the room, ordering votes with a nod of the head . . . There were no party votes, or even party lines. These were Americans having their say about the future.”

— **Pete Hamill**, *NY Daily News, reporting on “Listening to the City”*

“If you give people responsibility, they will act responsibly.”

— **Brett Hennig**, *Sortition Foundation (UK)*

