

emad
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Backgrounder on citizens' assemblies

What is a citizens' assembly?

A citizens' assembly is "an independent, non-partisan assembly of citizens" that is convened to deliberate on complex issues of significant importance in society. They are made up of citizens that are randomly selected from the population in such a way as to be broadly representative of society (e.g. they are typically balanced across genders, geographic region, indigenous representation, and other factors). This group of citizens examines issues by learning from experts, engaging the public, deliberating and discussing, and making collective decisions on the matter, including issuing recommendations to government.

How large are citizens' assemblies?

Membership in citizens' assemblies has typically ranged from 100 to 200 citizens, though due to our size and population, a smaller assembly might suffice. This ensures an appropriately representative cross section of society is included, while keeping the group small enough to have manageable deliberations.

Who is eligible to be a member of a citizens' assembly?

Typically all eligible voters are eligible to be selected as a member of citizens' assemblies, though elected officials and a few other people are normally excluded. A non-partisan chair (e.g. former judge, academic, etc.) is appointed by government to facilitate the assembly's work.

Where have citizens' assemblies been used?

The first citizens' assembly was created in British Columbia in 2004 where it was used as a way to examine the issue of electoral reform. Assemblies based on the BC model were subsequently used to tackle electoral reform in Ontario and internationally (e.g. Netherlands). The citizens' assembly model is currently being used in Ireland to work on a range of issues of national importance, including abortion rights, aging population, fixed-date elections, referendum laws, and climate change.

For more information on these examples see the additional resources at the end of this document.

How much do CAs cost?

Political commitment and financial support from government is critical to the success of citizens' assemblies. This generally would include a small number of staff and financial resources to cover the costs for members to participate (e.g. travel and accommodations; some provide honorariums).

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Example total budgets for citizens' assemblies

BC Citizens' Assembly (2004): \$5.5 million

Ireland's Citizens' Assembly: Approximately €1.3 million (to end of 2017)

For comparison, costs to run referendums in BC and Ireland have typically been about 5 to 10 times more than these citizens' assemblies. Based on the \$640,000 cost incurred to run the 2016 Plebiscite on Electoral Reform on PEI, we can assume a rough cost estimate for a PEI citizens' assembly in the range of \$250,000 to \$500,000 (per year).

Additional resources:

BC Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform (2004)

<https://citizensassembly.arts.ubc.ca/>

Ontario Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform (2006)

<http://www.citizensassembly.gov.on.ca/en-CA/About.html>

Ireland's Citizens' Assembly (2016-present)

<https://www.citizensassembly.ie/en/Home/>

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