

Citizens' involvement in government decision-making: An overview

Finn Shewell, Committee Member at Trust Democracy, offers an introduction to the main methods of deliberative democracy and its evolving place in Aotearoa New Zealand.



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Democratic governments have long grappled with a fundamental tension: how can they involve citizens in public decisions as much as possible without sacrificing efficiency, expertise, or coherence? In recent decades, a growing body of scholarship and practice has formed around deliberative democracy as a potential solution. This approach offers structured processes through which ordinary people engage effectively with complex policy questions, moving beyond the simple act of casting a ballot.

What is deliberative democracy?

Deliberative democracy refers to forms of collective decision-making that emphasise broad ability to participate, informed reasoning, considered dialogue, and mutual respect among participants. It is based on the idea that citizens, when provided with balanced information, adequate time, and a structured environment, are capable of navigating even the most contested policy terrain. Deliberation can take many forms; here we introduce three widely adopted methods, each with distinct benefits.

Citizens' assemblies (and similar methods such as Citizens' juries) gather a randomly selected, demographically representative group. Participants deliberate on a defined question over several sessions. Random selection – often termed sortition – is central to their legitimacy. It ensures that ordinary people, not just professional advocates, are heard. These assemblies receive expert testimony, engage in facilitated discussion, and produce

recommendations capable of garnering cross-bench support.

Participatory budgeting allocates a portion of a public budget to direct citizen determination. Originating in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 1989, it has since spread to thousands of jurisdictions globally. Participants deliberate over community needs and vote on preferred expenditures, integrating decision-making authority – rather than mere consultation – into the process.

Digital deliberation encompasses a range of online platforms and tools designed to facilitate structured public dialogue at scale. Platforms such as **Polis have demonstrated** that digital environments can support genuine deliberation when carefully designed to surface areas of agreement, rather than amplify polarisation.

The global context

Interest in deliberative democracy has grown substantially since the early 2000s. The **OECD** (2020) has documented over 700 deliberative processes across its member countries between 1986 and 2019, with a marked acceleration in the final decade of that period, characterising this as a potential **“deliberative wave”**.

France offers some of the most compelling recent examples. Following the *gilets jaunes* crisis, President Macron convened the Citizens' Convention for Climate (2019–2020), in which 150 randomly selected citizens produced 149 policy proposals, **146 of which were subsequently transmitted to Parliament**.



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More recently, the Paris City Council passed legislation drafted directly by a citizens' assembly – a historic step in which citizen participation translated into binding law.

The spread of these practices reflects a growing recognition that representative democracy alone is insufficient to address complex challenges that cut across conventional partisan lines.

Deliberative democracy in Aotearoa New Zealand

Our country's engagement with deliberative methods has a longer history than is commonly acknowledged. **Wright, Buklijas, and Rashbrooke** (2024) identify at least 15 processes that display the critical elements of deliberative democracy prior to the current period of renewed interest.

2025 marked a significant acceleration. As Wright (2025) documents, five citizens' assemblies were organised across the country to address substantive local questions. One assembly in Auckland, facilitated across three Saturdays with 40 randomly selected residents, produced recommendations that all carried supermajority support; described by Simon Wilson as proof that **"the future of democracy works"**.

At the national level, however, deliberative methods have yet to gain comparable traction. Trust Democracy (2025) is concerned that the current government has relied heavily on parliamentary urgency for important laws with limited public input, undermining these broader principles.

Implications for public sector practice

For public sector professionals, the deliberative turn presents both opportunities and challenges. These methods are not a substitute for representative democracy or expert policymaking, but they should instead serve as powerful complements – particularly when issues are technically complex, politically contentious, values-laden and contested, or require a level of community trust that conventional consultation cannot generate.

The evidence from both international and domestic experience suggests that when designed with care, citizens' participation methods meaningfully improve policy quality, strengthen institutional legitimacy, and deepen citizens' own investment in democratic life. As Trust Democracy (2025) observes, more than 8 per cent of participants in France's Citizens' Convention for Climate subsequently stood for elected office: a striking indicator that deliberative participation can renew, rather

than replace, the broader democratic ecosystem.

The spring issue of *Public Sector* journal will examine the practical implementations of these approaches for public servants in Aotearoa.

Finn Shewell is a Wellington-based facilitator, community organiser, and advocate for deliberative democracy. He serves on the committee of Trust Democracy, supports the Wellbeing Economy Alliance in their participatory approaches work, and works to educate both the public and publicly elected on the benefits of deliberative approaches. Finn has moderated digital deliberation sessions for Auckland City Council and led co-design processes for organisations across Aotearoa. He holds a BA in Psychology and Marketing from the University of Otago and currently works as Improvement Manager at Whānau Āwhina Plunket, where he applies participatory principles to organisational change.