

Submission – Inquiry into civics education, engagement, and participation in Australia.

We thank the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters for this opportunity to contribute to the inquiry into civics education, engagement, and participation in Australia.

We recommend:

- (1) **The establishment of a *Democratic Action Fund* to support lifelong experiential learning that doesn't end at high school.**
- (2) **The use of *Information Assemblies* to support the trust in and quality of information during election campaigns.**

Rationale

A *Democratic Action Fund* would support communities to experiment and 'learn by doing' through innovative democratic processes deployed within their local community organisations (sports clubs, schools, community groups). By being relevant to people's daily lives, they will build deeper understanding of democratic principles and new approaches and gain an experiential understanding of public and community decision-making. This form of learning can best address the growing detachment from public institutions and democratic politics. We suggest to the Committee that this is the more valuable form of civics education.

The learning experiences that stay with us far beyond our schooling are often experiential. We should leverage this and provide opportunities for people to experience public and community decision-making in environments that explore and experiment with new democratic methods. These opportunities should extend beyond civics education in school and into all types of community decision-making. Comparatively small amounts of funding, coupled with the provision of simple explanatory documentation regarding democratic alternatives could cost-effectively re-engage communities with thinking about improving and protecting our democracy.

Information Assemblies describes a deliberative democracy mechanism (refer to Appendix A) that assists voters in understanding the legitimacy of information about policy matters by giving everyday people like themselves an institution within which they get the best democratic opportunity to deeply engage with contested information and then share what they learn with the wider community. The impact of artificial intelligence, foreign interference, social media, and mis- and disinformation all rely on short attention spans (fooling all of the people some of the time) but do not survive in ~40hr deliberative environments. This is a key mechanism for governments and the community to prevent or limit inaccurate or false information influencing electoral outcomes.

Evidence shows that trust between experts and the broader public is fragmenting. This risks infecting trust in the operation of our democratic processes. To maintain this trust, we should look to new processes that foster connections between experts and the public in deliberative environments. These processes take advantage of people's latent trust in 'someone like me' to build broader public trust in common ground decisions supported by experts and public decision-makers. They can be used to support existing institutions as a complementary mechanism to safeguard against the challenges posed by low-cost deliberate misinformation.

A key common element is the application of critical thinking—formats that go beyond public opinion (manipulable) and deliver informed public judgment (robust).

Truth decay

Our belief in things we cannot personally verify relies on trust. People need to trust that experts will tell the truth, and they need to trust the connections between themselves and experts. If these connections are broken, our shared understanding of reality becomes fragile. The RAND initiative describes this phenomenon as [“truth decay”](#). To reverse this, we must rebuild trust networks between lay people and experts.

These connections exist because our increasingly complex social and technological world necessitates a division of labour between those who have expertise in a domain and those of us who can get by simply by trusting that those with expertise know what they’re doing.

Consider this when driving to work in the morning. You know that your car has an internal combustion engine or maybe even an electric battery, it’s a mode of transportation and has many moving parts. Those with expertise in vehicle manufacturing and mechanics will have specialist knowledge that guarantees the design and maintenance of your car. They can tell what and when parts need servicing. The rest of us need to trust that they know what they’re doing, and that we can take them at their word.

This division of labour applies to all kinds of empirical knowledge concerning things as diverse as the unemployment rate, gold quality, the number of nuclear missiles in a country’s arsenal and the path of a total solar eclipse.

Two origins of misinformation

A major source of misinformation is bad actors intending to lower the informational ‘common denominator’ of rival societies. Where, in the past, propaganda sought to convey or inflate their domestic excellence, those resources are now turned toward showcasing or fuelling weakness abroad. It’s important that we build social resilience to these attempts.

But, as Dan Kahan, a Professor of Law and Professor of Psychology at Yale, notes, [“Misinformation is not something that happens to the mass public but rather something that its members are complicit in producing.”](#)

Unless we address issues of polarisation and institutional trust, we’ll make little headway against an endless supply of alluring fabrications (further fuelled by developments in AI).

In a paper titled [Partisan Bias in Factual Beliefs about Politics](#), John Bullock led a team that found sizable differences in how Democrats and Republicans thought about politicised topics, like the number of casualties in the Iraq War. However, when paying respondents to be accurate, which included rewarding “don’t know” responses over wrong ones, differences in views were cut by 80 per cent. This supports the distinction between factual beliefs we hold and use to navigate the world and symbolic beliefs which largely serve social ends. *Information Assemblies* follow this same incentive-driven logic.

Bullock’s research raises the question of whether the act of voting is enough of a “cost” to bridge the difference between symbolic beliefs and factual beliefs. For a small sample of citizens brought together in an Information Assembly we change this ‘cost’ equation sufficiently for them to prefer factual information (as they would be asked to publicly stand behind it). If that group connects with the wider population then a new source of trusted information enters the public sphere.

Adam J. Berinsky in [“Political Rumors: Why We Accept Misinformation and How to Fight It”](#) (Princeton) writes that “few scholars have established a direct causal link” between rumours and real-world outcomes (such as voting). Sander van der Linden, a social psychology professor at Cambridge says that “contrary to much of the commentary you may find in the popular media, scientists have been extremely sceptical.”

This is not something that we should leave to chance. We should take concrete actions that seek to rebuild institutional trust and social buy-in to the importance of our democratic systems before voting becomes a feature of symbolic beliefs.

What can be done?

The situation is challenging. Our current institutions can't fact-check their way out of truth decay or symbolic beliefs. If a media or government source is distrusted, its fact-checkers will be contaminated by the same distrust (witness the failures of universities to position themselves as credible fact checkers). Social media platforms face a wave of low-cost AI-generated content intended to mislead or fabricate and zero feasible ways to fact-check at the required scale.

Democratic Action Funds: Civics Education as Life-Long Experiential Learning (notionally \$10m pa)

One approach is to support and fund community groups and organisations to learn from and experiment with democratic methods in their local contexts. This would establish learning-by-doing experiences that build community and a familiarity with the challenges of public decision-making. This should be done through the establishment of a *Democratic Action Fund* whose role would be to provide small grants and informational support to enable local communities, schools, and sporting clubs (or even local government) to try new democratic methods that build inclusion and familiarity with public decision-making.

Parliament or AEC Pilot an Information Assembly (approx. cost \$1m per instance)

Another approach is to invest in citizen deliberation such as in the form of citizens' assemblies.

This approach recreates the division of labour discussed above between experts who provide guidance and nonexperts who tackle the values-based trade-offs within policy options or information systems. It also re-establishes the truth networks that we rely upon but instead of repeatedly insisting on elite-public connections they build public-public connections through the 'people like me' test.

Citizens' assemblies are populated by a representative mix of everyday people chosen by lottery in such a way that they descriptively represent the wider population on a few key demographic criteria (age, gender, education, location and home ownership). This ensures that those not taking part can relate to those doing the labour (learning from experts, finding common ground, making recommendations), and rebuilding the trust network essential to combating misinformation.

In Ireland, citizens' assemblies have led to a series of constitutional amendments on a range of complex and divisive issues, including abortion and marriage equality. In Germany, citizens' assemblies have made actionable recommendations on national nutrition programs and transportation plans. In France, a recent citizens' assembly made recommendations on voluntary assisted dying and end-of-life care.

Picture such a process

An Information Assembly would bring together ~50 everyday Australians, chosen by democratic lottery to be representative of all parts of Australia, all walks of life, ages, backgrounds, and lifestyles, being brought together in person and online over several weekends to find common ground on answers to the question:

What do all Australians need to know about [issue]?

e.g. What do all Australians need to know about the proposed Voice to Parliament?

They would then have an ongoing role in adjudicating on questions of misinformation and disinformation on a particular topic, supporting the work of the Electoral Commission during a set period.

They would be provided with time and information to learn about the challenges posed to the fair operation of our electoral system and the range of information sources on any given issue. They would learn from Members of Parliament, political party officials, unions, stakeholders, academics, researchers, and the wider community and play an ongoing role in safeguarding against misinformation.

We are happy to respond to your questions and appear before the Committee if requested. We appreciate your time considering this submission.

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Appendix. A. Key Principles of Deliberative Democracy

It is naturally difficult for large groups of people to find agreement on complex decisions. The OECD recommends a set of *principles* that make group decision-making easier. These principles improve the deliberative quality of group work by creating an environment for the consideration of the broadest range of sources while giving participants time, and an equal share of voice and authority.

These seven principles underpin the growing wave of deliberative democracy processes around the globe:

1. **A clear remit:** A clear, plain-language challenge or question should be asked of the group. It should be a neutrally phrased question that explains the task, shares the problem, and provides a strong platform for discussion about priorities and trade-offs. The question will determine the scope of the process, setting the boundaries for what the group is considering.
2. **Diverse information:** Participants should have access to a wide range of transparently sourced, relevant, and accessible evidence and expertise, and can request additional information. Citizens should spend extensive time asking questions and identifying sources they trust for the information they need.
3. **Democratic lottery:** A stratified random sample of the community should be recruited through a democratic lottery. Simple demographic filters (age, gender, education, location) can be used to help stratify this sample to reflect the entire population. Most engagement by governments does not enable a representative cross-section of the community to be heard, instead, incentives to participate are often geared toward those with the most acute interest. The combination of random selection and a meaningful opportunity to influence a decision attracts people from all walks of life.
4. **Adequate time:** These processes develop participants' thinking on a complex issue by giving them multiple opportunities to question experts, learn from one another and find agreement on trusted sources of information. As deliberation requires adequate time for participants to learn, weigh evidence, and develop collective recommendations, the more time they are provided, the more thorough their consideration of the issue.
5. **Influence:** It is important to be clear about what impact the work of everyday citizens will have. The convening authority should publicly commit to responding to or acting on recommendations promptly. A meaningful opportunity to influence a decision must be demonstrated to participants before they commit their time.
6. **Dialogue and deliberation, not debate:** Group deliberation entails finding common ground; this requires careful and active listening, weighing, and considering multiple perspectives, every participant having an opportunity to speak, a mix of formats, and *skilled facilitation*. The task for the group is to find common ground on answers to the question, this emphasises the avoidance of simple majorities and challenges them with finding where they can agree.
7. **A free response:** A group should not be asked merely to (critically) review a government or parliamentary reform proposal. Instead, group members should be given a 'blank page' to provide their own set of recommendations with a rationale and supporting evidence that emerges from their shared learning.

Appendix. B. Why consider citizens' assemblies and deliberative democracy?

Across the globe, public authorities are increasingly using these representative deliberative processes to involve citizens more directly in solving some of the most pressing policy challenges. These processes give enough time and information to a group of randomly selected everyday people and facilitate their deliberation on an issue that leads to finding common ground on a set of recommendations.

Australia has been a pioneering, global leader in the development of this practice. OECD research¹ documents more than 48 examples of deliberative engagement practice here in Australia matched only by Germany. This suggests a national capacity to learn from experience and institutionalise these processes. The Victorian Government recently included mandatory deliberative engagement practice for local councils in its [Local Government Act 2020](#) (s55, g). The Western Australian Government's Local Government Act Review Panel also recommended in its [final report](#) the "mandate [of] deliberative community engagement in the preparation of both Community Strategies and Council Plans." (s37, d, iv).

[Evidence collected by the OECD](#)² and existing research in the field of deliberative democracy points to five key reasons why representative deliberative processes can help lead to better public decisions and enhance trust:

1. **Better policy outcomes because deliberation results in considered public judgements rather than off-the-cuff public opinions.** Most public participation exercises are *not* designed to be representative or collaborative. Consequently, they can be adversarial – a chance to air grievances rather than find solutions or common ground. Deliberative processes create spaces for learning, deliberation, and the development of informed recommendations, which are of greater use to policy and decision-makers.
2. **Greater legitimacy to make hard choices.** These processes help policymakers to better understand public priorities, and the values and reasons behind them, and to identify where consensus is and is not feasible. Evidence suggests that they are particularly useful in situations where there is a need to overcome political deadlock or make difficult trade-off decisions.
3. **Enhance public trust in government and democratic institutions by giving citizens an effective role in public decision-making.** People are more likely to trust a decision that has been influenced by the considered judgement of everyday people than one made solely by elected MPs.
4. **Make governance more inclusive by opening the door to a much more diverse group of people.** Deliberative processes, with their use of democratic lotteries and stratified sampling, bring in people proportionate to their presence in society, making the group visibly representative in terms of age, gender, disability, education, and job type.
5. **Help counteract polarisation and disinformation.** Empirical research has shown that echo chambers that focus on culture, identity reaffirmation, and polarisation do not survive in deliberative conditions, even in groups of like-minded people.

¹ OECD (2020), *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/339306da-en>.

² Ibid.

Appendix. C. Background on constitutional reform and referendums in Ireland

In 2012, Ireland established a Convention on the Constitution by [resolution of both Houses of the Oireachtas](#). Its task was to consider several possible changes to the Constitution and make recommendations. The Resolution committed the Government to respond to each recommendation made by the Convention. It was comprised of 99 members, 66 of which were everyday Irish citizens chosen by democratic lottery, and 33 of which were Members of Parliament.

The Convention met over 18 months between 2012 and 2014. It discussed 10 issues in all. Several of its recommendations resulted in amendments to the Constitution made through referenda.

The Constitutional Convention used the model of deliberative democracy, in which citizens participate meaningfully in decision-making. This involves:

- A democratic lottery of ordinary citizens, who are provided with a range of information
- Expert presentations from speakers, some nominated by citizens themselves
- Facilitated small-group discussions to avoid groupthink and grandstanding
- Plenty of time to consider all the perspectives on an issue
- An emphasis on working to find common ground positions with people different to your 'bubble' rather than it being an individualised activity
- Recommendations fed into the political process are written entirely by citizens

We ask the Committee to especially note that the Convention considered the provision for same-sex marriage which required amending the Constitution by referendum. The Convention recommended such an amendment and the subsequent referendum on this proposal passed on 22 May 2015, and the [Thirty-fourth Amendment of the Constitution \(Marriage Equality\) Act 2015](#) was signed into law on 29 August 2015. **This made Ireland the first country in the world to legislate for same-sex marriage in a traditionally socially conservative country through a process that required constitutional amendment by referendum.**

| Note: We have no policy view on any issue – these examples are used to demonstrate their clear political difficulty.

Arguably, the provision for same-sex marriage would not have been put to the Irish people during the socially conservative *Fine Gael* government's tenure if not for the clear recommendation of the Convention. Including representatives of all the parties in the deliberations (33 political members came from all the parties) ensured a high degree of cross-party consensus in favour of the process — both in favour of the referendum and in favour of the Convention.

In 2016, following the success of the Convention on the Constitution, both Houses of the Oireachtas established what is known as [The Citizens' Assembly](#). The Resolution asked the Citizens' Assembly to consider several matters including the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution which prohibited abortion.

The Assembly was composed of a chairperson, appointed by the government, and 99 ordinary citizens '[randomly selected so as to be broadly representative of Irish society](#)' in terms of age, gender, social class, and regional spread.

The assembly deliberated on the Eighth Amendment throughout five sessions from November 2016 until April 2017. Members were given information on the topic, heard from 25 experts, and received 12,000 submissions from members of the public and interest groups.

The Assembly members overwhelmingly agreed that the constitutional provision on abortion was unfit for purpose and that its article should not be retained in full ([87% of members](#) agreed). The Assembly members also made a [series of recommendations](#) about what the legislation should cover and about the term limits that should apply.

As per its terms of reference, the Assembly submitted its recommendations and [final report](#) to the Oireachtas in June 2017. The Assembly's findings were reviewed by the Joint Committee of both Houses of the Oireachtas, which agreed with the need to remove the article, but advocated a [simple repeal](#) (without inserting a new provision in the Constitution). The [final Referendum Bill](#), however, accorded with the 'repeal and replace' recommendations made by the Assembly.

The Citizens' Assembly results initially faced criticism. Some commentators felt that they didn't represent the views of the public. [Opinion polls](#) at the time certainly showed a different picture. An Irish Times/Ipsos MRBI poll in May 2017 found just 23% of the public in favour of legalising abortion in all circumstances. However, once the public had had a chance to consider the matter more deeply during the referendum campaign, the results were strikingly like that of the Assembly. In the Assembly, 64% voted in favour of "terminations without restrictions". In the referendum, 66.4% voted in favour of repealing the eighth amendment, effectively legalising abortion in Ireland.

That the referendum result so closely reflects that of the Citizens' Assembly shows that the Assembly was more aligned with the national consciousness than some had thought. Notably, in exit polls approximately 40% of voters could name recommendations and insights emerging from the Citizens' Assembly process, demonstrating that it connected with the wider population.

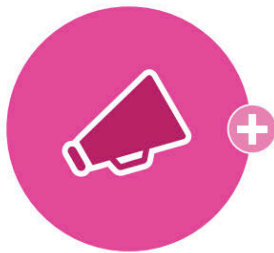
Appendix D. Evidence of positive social impacts on people who participant in deliberative democracy

Research shows that those people who participate in deliberative democracy processes demonstrate an enhanced sense of civic engagement, empowerment, informed decision-making, social cohesion and networking, personal growth and skills development and overall trust in democratic processes.

An Australian example of this research is the report "[Deliberation and Democratic Trust: Measuring participant change across 10 Victorian councils](#)" by MosaicLab, Australian community engagement and facilitation specialists. The summary is included here:

PARTICIPANT CHANGE

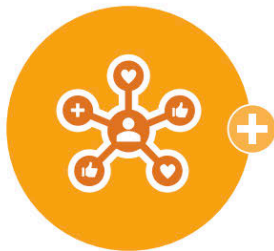
Pre-deliberation and post-deliberation survey response comparison.



377%

GROWTH in the number of participants who said they would be involved or highly involved in civic affairs.

(18% of pre-deliberation survey respondents said they had been 'involved' or highly involved' in civic affairs in the past, compared to 86% of respondents who said this in the post-deliberation survey, an increase of 68 percentage points).



220%

GROWTH in the number of participants who said they felt confident or very confident that their recommendations would influence decision making.

(20% of pre-deliberation survey respondents said they had previously been 'confident' or 'very confident' that community input would influence their council's decisions. 64% of post-deliberation respondents said they were 'confident' or 'very confident' that their recommendations would be implemented - a difference of 44 percentage points).



52%

GROWTH in the number of participants who said they felt confident or very confident that their recommendations would be implemented.

(42% of pre-deliberation survey respondents said they were 'confident' or 'very confident' their recommendations would be implemented, compared to 86% of respondents who said this in the post-deliberation survey, an increase of 22 percentage points).



78%

GROWTH in the number of participants who said they believe their their council is fairly or very trustworthy and accountable.

(46% of pre-deliberation survey respondents said they believed their council was 'fairly' or 'very trustworthy and accountable', compared to 82% of respondents who said this in the post-deliberation survey, an increase of 36 percentage points).



225%

GROWTH in the number of participants who said they believed the process was fairly or very collaborative, genuine and worthwhile.

(27% of pre-deliberation survey respondents said they believed past engagement activities run by their council had been 'fairly' or 'very collaborative, genuine and worthwhile', compared to 88% of respondents who said they felt this process was 'fairly' or 'very collaborative, genuine and worthwhile' in the post-deliberation survey, an increase of 61 percentage points).