

# How to design deliberative democratic assemblies in an inclusive way: a recommendation for policy-makers

*When faced with political deadlock, many campaigners suggest employing democratic innovations like citizens' assemblies, in which a group of citizens come together to deliberate and make direct policy recommendations. If the role of these new democratic institutions is to grow within the UK political system, it is crucial to make them more inclusive and sensitive to intersectionality, argues **Marta Wojciechowska**. The key is not to employ single or 'one-off' acts of inclusion but rather to promote the leadership of disempowered people and to diversify the contexts in which democratic innovations take place.*



Picture: [Gerd Altmann](#) from [Pixabay](#)

Democratic innovations are sometimes seen as a panacea for difficult decision-making. Indeed, the literature argues that deferring decision-making to groups of citizens on controversial policy-issues increases legitimacy of the results, while practitioners often point to examples like [Ireland's Citizens' Assemblies](#) on constitutional matters as a model to follow. Democratic innovations refer to special institutions that complement existing representative institutions, and there exist two broad types. The first is a popular assembly which provides space for a group of selected citizens to meet and to engage in decision-making on public policy issues, for example a citizens' assembly, such as one that was organised by UCL's Constitution Unit on [Brexit](#), or [Participatory Budgeting](#). The second type of innovation refers to 'mini-publics' which aim to recreate the demographic characteristics of the general public on a scale that is small enough for the group to engage in high-quality deliberation, for example [Deliberative Polling](#). Both types have been successfully employed in the UK.

Often, the rationale for creating such democratic innovations is to include citizens who experience structural barriers in accessing more traditional political forums. Frequently, this means including women, people with disabilities, members of minorities, or people from underprivileged backgrounds. Relevant institutional design can attract the participation of members of these groups, make their voice heard, compensate for lack of resources and provide a safe space for developing their claims. Inclusion is a fundamental value for many democratic scholars since any arrangement that does not enable all its members to influence the decision-making process fails to be democratic. However, inclusion can also have an instrumental role during decision-making on difficult, controversial matters. It increases the scope of viewpoints during the process and can make the final decision more acceptable to all.

Are current democratic innovations successful in the inclusion of members of disempowered groups? In a recently published [article](#) I look at these institutions from the perspective of intersectionality. Proponents of [intersectionality](#) argue that single categories of identity are insufficient to analyse and address the oppression faced by members of disempowered groups. Members of disempowered groups face oppression from multiple sources of disadvantage, which are greater than the sum of their parts. A clear example of such a group would be black women, who experience marginalisation based on both gender and ethnic background. Well-designed democratic forums, responsive to the intersectionality perspective, should be capable of addressing multiple and intersecting sources of identity-based oppression.

However, from the perspective of intersectionality, current deliberative democratic innovations appear as quite exclusive. They usually focus on one, separate identity category at a time. Furthermore, some democratic innovations are even identity-blind in their selection of participants – by, for example, relying on self-selection or random selection when recruiting participants. Research shows that self-selection results in over-representation of some groups, while random selection can lead to missing out whole segments of society.

Such a narrow focus of democratic innovations means that these institutions, created with inclusion in mind, are exclusive towards those who suffer oppression or marginalisation, not due to one source of oppression but several of them. The current design of democratic innovations excludes those who identify themselves on a dynamic identity spectrum (like non-binary gender). It is problematic since members of these groups often experience stark discrimination and injustice. Furthermore, when deciding on controversial issues, inclusion of members of disempowered groups can provide perspectives dissimilar to any other and can change existing decision-making dynamics.

This exclusionary nature of democratic innovations does not mean they should not be employed in current policy or decision-making. It is possible to adjust their design and practice to be inclusive towards members of the most disempowered groups. The first step is to make organisers more sensitive to the issues of intersectionality, increasing the agency of members of those groups within these events, and by diversifying contexts in which these events are organised (more detailed recommendations are available [here](#)). The relevant adjustment should start by targeting members of disempowered groups directly and inviting them to engage in leadership positions when organising such democratic events, such as in management, active facilitation and moderation, mentorship and research guidance roles. However, what starts as a top-down initiative by democratic professionals can facilitate broader democratic change. Experiences of the grassroots movements and bottom-up activism show that leadership of those at the intersection of disempowered identities can in turn facilitate broader mobilisation within their groups and can attract others.

Hence, in a time of polarisation when there are controversial decisions which could benefit from incorporating public forums of deliberation, my recommendation for policy-makers is: to innovate, but remember to do so in an inclusive, intersectional way.

*This article gives the views of the author, and not the position Democratic Audit. It draws on the author's article '[Towards Intersectional Democratic Innovations](#)', published in Political Studies.*

---

## About the author

**Marta Wojciechowska** is a Fellow at LSE100, London School of Economics. Her research deals with issues of inclusion and application of democracy to new types of polities, beyond the nation-state.

---

## Similar Posts

- [Deliberative democracy could be used to combat fake news – but only if it operates offline](#)
- [NHS Citizen and what it tells us about designing democratic innovations as deliberative systems](#)
- [Improving access to information and restoring the public's faith in democracy through deliberative institutions](#)
- [The Brexit Factor: how a citizens' assembly on Brexit could learn from reality TV](#)
- [The Irish Citizens' Assembly on the 8th Amendment is a model for participatory democracy, which other democratic countries should follow](#)