



The People's House Mini-publics for individual Members of Parliament and their electorates

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Introduction

Our democracy faces the significant risk of crisis due to a lack of trust in governments and institutions, and an increasingly polarised community.

The combination of these phenomena is making substantial reform to public policy very difficult and creating substantial risks to our system of democracy.

Giving citizens a way into the political process through large-scale collective engagement methods offered by deliberative engagement offers a way forward. However, in Australia, to date, those whose job it is to hear the voices of citizens, have to various extents failed to use deliberative methods.¹ There are several issues underpinning this failure including, a lack of understanding and knowledge of engagement practice, philosophical perspectives on representative democracy and bureaucratic structural constraints.

We know that both everyday Australians and our politicians want to address the problems of polarisation and distrust—enabling reform—however, they have very different perspectives on ‘how’ to do it.

One solution that knits the needs and interests of Australian citizens and politicians is to apply the principles of deliberative engagement within our system of representative democracy, providing local members with a new approach that aids how they represent their communities and providing citizens with genuine and meaningful ways to participate between elections.

By creating local deliberative forums (“Voices of ... Forums”) elected members can better understand the place where their diverse communities can deliberate and agree on the way forward, providing the local members with important intelligence about how to meet their communities’ diverse needs.

Method Overview

People’s House Methods (“Voices of ... Forums”) are small-scale mini-publics designed to support Members of Parliament to represent their electorates.

As a mini-public, they have all the features you would expect a mini-public to have:

- random selection and stratification of participants for the Forum from within the electorate;



1. *How Australian Federal Politicians would like to reform our democracy* <https://www.democracy2025.gov.au/documents/Democracy2025-report5.pdf>

- deliberative facilitation;
- balanced evidence and information provided in a variety of formats including the ability to 'question' experts and decision-makers and the ability to choose what information they need;
- time to deliberate with other participants and individual reflection time commensurate with the nature of the question being asked and the expected level of advice from the group;
- group deliberation and consensus-making;
- clear upfront, published and promoted commitment from the MP to act within their power;
- opportunities for all constituents to learn, engage and get involved with the work of the

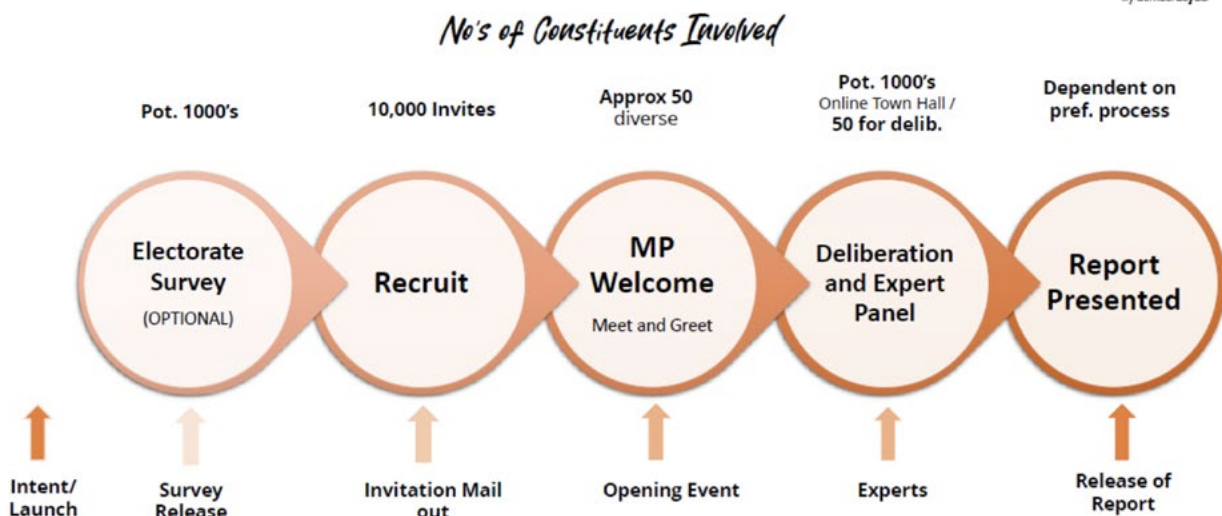
Forum through pre-surveys, idea generation and live online 'town hall' style evidence sessions with experts.

The topics explored by the Forums can be selected by the local member, or by their communities, or a combination of both. There is the option to have a 'pre-forum' process involving all interested members of the public in helping to choose the topic for deliberation.

Participants are generally volunteers, because if the local member is using their parliamentary communications budgets to fund the process they are not allowed to pay participants for their involvement—even as an honorarium.

A generalised process looks as follows

Advisory House Process





Benefits

Using deliberative methods such as that proposed through People's House has the following benefits and opportunities for the local Member of Parliament and to democracy more generally:

Benefits specific to the MP

- Enables the MP to genuinely fulfil their role of 'representing their community' by enabling them to understand what the diversity of their community wants.
- Better enabling the MP to hear from their electorate on policy issues (particularly people they don't normally hear from). MPs report that their relationship using existing tools is very 'transactional' not policy focussed. Consequently, MPs mainly hear from those with vested interests on policy.
- Improved relationship between the MP and their electorate—demonstrating to the community that their MP wants to listen to them and that they are being open with them about the challenges and opportunities.
- Builds an MP's profile in the electorate.
- An opportunity to build trust in the community.
- Improved respect for the role and work of MPs – *"Very enjoyable, ... I gained greater respect for the work and workload of MPs and Ministers."* – Participant

For the Canberra Forum – Member for Canberra Alicia Payne had 10 + significant and positive media events about her process including interviews and Opinion pieces.

Benefits to democracy

- Improved civic understanding by the public.
- Raises diverse voices within the democracy – *"I recall Alicia's opening statement that she hears only from interest groups who have a policy to sell, not from regular citizens who have a more balanced slate of interests and priorities - hearing more from the latter can only add maturity to our polity."* – Participant
- Improves political agency - *"I have started to realise my own ability to have an advocacy role at a higher level - that I am less inhibited by the compelling narrative that using your voice is not even worth it."* – Participant
- Capacity to build community cohesion – address division on key issues in the community, improving the resilience of the community.



It's been a great experience and I think that it really shows that it's very difficult to put your hands on ... what democracy looks like. And when you think about elections... or listen to the debates around elections, it seems far away. And it's not until you bring a whole group of people into the room together that you actually start interacting with the ideas, the diversity of ideas ... and how you think that the world can be changed."

Participant, The Canberra Forum 2023

In addition, we think this work has potential important side benefits to the field of deliberative democracy; if we can give MPs positive deliberative experiences in their electorates, we will be building their understanding, skills and likely support for hosting deliberative when in government.

Risks

The Forums do not provide a holistic understanding of what the whole community within a level of government think on an issue, but what an electorate—a subset of that community thinks or wants.

So, Governments would need to look across electorates to understand what the community as a whole thinks. However, whilst this is a 'disadvantage', this is also the point, as this is how our representative system of democracy works. We have local representatives in Parliament, and it is their legislated responsibility to represent the views of their electorates. So, this process reinforces and supports the integrity of that system.

Of course, it relies on the MP using the work of the forum to help fulfil their representative role.

Some MPs may feel conflicted, as whilst their primary and legislated role is to represent their electorates, in practice they also have responsibilities to their political party – i.e., to uphold party positions. It is often the case that there are complexities and inherent conflicts in executive roles. So perhaps not a surprise that MPs would face similar complexities; they need to represent the views of their electorates within a system that also expects them to endorse the views of the party. Having said this, this is possible and there are systems in place to enable it. In Australia, there are platforms within the parties for MPs to vocalise the views of their electorates and there are other opportunities as well. MPs can advocate on behalf of their electorates directly to Ministers, including leaders or Ministers at other levels of government. Members of Parliament can also speak on behalf of their electorates in Parliament and at times parties allow 'conscience votes' allowing MPs to vote in line with their electorates on the floor of Parliament. In theory, some parties (the Liberal Party of Australia for example) allow MPs to maintain their position within the party, but to vote against the party on the floor of Parliament. MPs can also use their leadership roles to activate their citizens, bringing people and organisations together to act on the electorate's behalf.



Examples and Evidence

To date, three deliberative processes using slightly different methodologies, but all underpinned by sortition, balanced evidence and information, and independent facilitation have been implemented in Australia. The three examples were conducted for different parties: Labor, Liberal and Independent (Teal).

Requirements for success

These processes have similar requirements for success to other effective deliberative processes, they are:

- Diverse participation – random selection and stratification.
- Skilled independent facilitators who can support a group to come to a consensus.
- Clear, published and promoted commitments from the Member of Parliament.
- Balanced information and evidence from a range of sources.
- Sufficient time that accounts for the scope of the question and decision being made by the Forum.
- Flexibility in the process because the nature of the question being asked by the MPs will differ, flexibility in approach is needed to ensure that sufficient time is provided and that the methodology is appropriate.


Addressing Critiques

We have heard two main criticisms of the approach: that it lacks influence and that it can't be undertaken at 'scale'.

Influence

Members of Parliament are not able to implement or 'decide' to implement the sort of recommendations that we commonly expect out of deliberative processes such as creating new policies or investing in projects. Hence, many will consider that influence is too limited and impact negligible. However, we believe this view is limited for the following reasons:

- a. **It overstates the impact of government-sponsored deliberations.** It is often the case, even where governments or public decision-makers commission deliberative processes, that they don't 'implement' what the deliberative group decides. It is often even difficult to get a commitment from them to do so, and understandably so, as there are a number of constraints on even governments acting without additional process.
- b. **Change is almost always iterative.** The voice of one group often isn't enough to make change happen, but it contributes to public debate and potential momentum for future change.
- c. **Narrow scope.** You can have a considerable impact on people and our society without it resulting in a changed policy, program, or investment. Building civic participation skills, building relationships between people, as well as between citizens and their leaders and raising citizen voices within our democracy, are all very important impacts with significant benefits for the participants and for democracy. Whilst more difficult to measure



and not immediately obvious, these impacts do matter and arguably may be more important than a 'one-off' change to policy.

- d. **MPs are not powerless.** The actions of individual MPs won't be at the scale of investment or policy change, but instead at the level of advocacy, activation, support and promotion. This work is central to change. It is also important that citizens understand the scope at which their MP can act, the role they play in a democracy, and that they consider their recommendations with this role in mind. Deliberative groups are able to consider this context and tailor their recommendations accordingly.

Scale

Some will argue that the process doesn't sufficiently allow large-scale public conversations and hence won't 'reach' enough people. However, the process allows for both broad-scale and whole of population conversations and enables those conversations to feed into a representative sample of the community to enable consensus to be found.

A perpetual challenge that we are focussed on is cost. We want MPs to run these processes at scale, so our focus is on how can we make these processes as cost-effective as possible, without compromising quality.

Questions for more research

We are interested in learning more about the extent to which running these processes builds trust in MPs, democratic institutions, and democracy, in the broader electorate and among MPs (not necessarily just the people or MPs participating). We are also interested in how improvements in trust compare to other tools that MPs use.

We know and can demonstrate that the deliberative process can address divisions between members of the deliberative group, but how do people outside the deliberative group feel about a final decision that the deliberative group finds agreement on? Are they more or less likely to agree with where the deliberative group lands, than the ideas being proposed to solve the problem before deliberation?



References

- Democracy Co. 2023. *The future of representative democracy* in [this link](#)