

# How mini-publics work

A mini-public refers to citizens assemblies and juries and comprises five stages<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Planning and recruitment

**Stewarding Committee:** usually a Stewarding Committee (aka Oversight Committee) oversees the process to ensure its quality and fairness. For instance, in the Canadian Citizens' Assemblies on Electoral Reform, the Committee included academics and public figures from a range of backgrounds and opposing views. Often, mini-publics (citizens assemblies, panels and juries) deal with divisive topics, and thus their legitimacy and impact hinge on the buy-in from a range of voices across divides –as well as the public standing of their guarantors, stewards and funders.

**Recruiting members of the assembly (or jury/panel)** is done through a process called 'stratified random sortition' (aka 'democratic lottery'), a sampling technique used to select a group of participants that reflect the demographic makeup of a target population (a town, a city, region or country). There is now free software such as [Panelot](#) which automates this process. The [Sortition Foundation](#) can also do this for you at a cost.

## 2. Learning phase

Participants are supported to learn about the topic from diverse perspectives. This can be done by combining time for individual learning (e.g. citizens receive background information packs agreed by the Stewarding Committee), with time for group learning. During the latter, they are exposed to a range of evidence, views and testimonies covering the topic from various angles. Depending on the topic, this may include experts, officials, politicians, activists and stakeholder representatives of various sorts (e.g. business, third sector, local communities).

Participants are empowered to interrogate these 'witnesses', and sometimes to choose them from a list of speakers prepared by the Stewarding Committee –who oversees that the mini-public is exposed to a balanced range of evidence and views.

## 3. Deliberative phase

Aided by impartial facilitators, participants then engage in small group face-to-face deliberation where they reconsider their initial ideas on the topic in the light of the

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<sup>1</sup> See 'Forms of Mini-publics' <https://www.newdemocracy.com.au/2017/05/08/forms-of-mini-publics/> by Dr Oliver Escobar, a lecturer at University of Edinburgh and co-director of What Works Scotland.

evidence and testimonies from the learning phase, but also with respect to the arguments and experiences of their fellow deliberators.

## 4. Decision making phase

The learning and deliberative work from previous stages enables participants to engage in considered judgement and informed decision-making<sup>2</sup>. Depending on the topic, and the type of mini-public, this may lead to a particular recommendation/set of recommendations or decision, which must be articulated through reasoned arguments in the final report or statement. That is the case in consensus-oriented mini-publics such as Citizens' Juries –which, like court juries, respond to a 'charge'– as well as Consensus Conferences and Citizens' Assemblies.

In research-focussed mini-publics, such as Deliberative Polls, the aim is not to reach consensus, but to measure through pre- and post- surveys how citizens' preferences may change through learning and deliberation.

## 5. Media campaign and follow up

The focus in this stage is impact. Ideally, the mini-public has already been in the 'public eye' from its inception. One way to ensure impact is to involve key public figures and broadcasters in the process and Stewarding Committee. In this final stage, the outcomes and outputs of the mini-public are shared through all relevant networks, thus informing broader public deliberation and decision-making.

## Links to supporting documents and case studies

See the Sortition Assembly [short simple guide](#) to running a citizens assembly  
They also have a set of case studies.

### National Citizens Assemblies

[Citizens Assembly on Brexit](#). A project by UCL Constitution Unit

### Irish National Citizens Assembly on Abortion

[Irish National Citizens Assembly on Abortion: How 99 strangers in a Dublin hotel broke Ireland's abortion deadlock](#). Article in The Guardian 8 Mar 2018

[If only Brexit had been run like Ireland's referendum. Article in The Guardian](#). Article in The Guardian 29 May 2018

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<sup>2</sup> See 'Deliberation' a research note by New Democracy

[https://newdemocracy.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/docs\\_researchnotes\\_2017\\_March\\_nDF\\_RN\\_20170322\\_Deliberation.pdf](https://newdemocracy.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/docs_researchnotes_2017_March_nDF_RN_20170322_Deliberation.pdf)