How to get people to talk to one another again? Citizens’ assemblies

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How can we restore civil dialogue in the nation?
A Q&A with Jane Mansbridge

In this new series, the Gazette asks Harvard experts for concrete solutions to complex problems. Jane Mansbridge, Adams Professor of Political Leadership and Democratic Values Emerita at the Harvard Kennedy School, is the author of “Beyond Adversary Democracy.” Her current work revolves around representation, democratic deliberation, and everyday activism.

GAZETTE: How might we get citizens who are so polarized to listen to one another?

MANSBRIDGE: One proven practice is the technique of citizens’ assemblies or deliberative polls. These are groups of citizens drawn randomly, through a democratic lottery, from a particular population. It could be an entire country, a state, a city, or even a neighborhood, from which you bring together a group of citizens to talk about an issue that is of concern to their community. For this technique to be successful, the group has to be random, meaning that you have to have good representation from everyone, not just the white retirees who don’t have much to do and would love to come to this sort of thing. To get a random group, you ought to able to pay the participants because you want to be able to get the poor, the less educated, and people who, for one reason or another, would not give up a weekend otherwise to come together with other citizens to deliberate about some major issue.

GAZETTE: How do we know these assemblies foster civil dialogue?

MANSBRIDGE: Let’s take the deliberative polling organized by the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford that I’ve worked with, in informal ways, for a couple of decades. If you look at those gatherings, one important way to get citizens to listen to one another comes from their design, in which they alternate small groups of 12 or so people, randomly drawn from the random selection, with larger assemblies, in which the citizens ask questions to experts. One of the tasks they have in their small group is not only to deliberate about the issues, but to design questions they want to ask the experts. As it happens, the project of asking a common question becomes a task that binds citizens together across the lines of difference.

GAZETTE: Have you participated in a citizens’ assembly? What was it like?

MANSBRIDGE: I attended the deliberative polling “America in One Room” in September
2019. In our group of 12, we had some very right-wing Trump supporters and very left-wing folks from the East Coast. But the process of coming together to work on a question allowed each group to build a sense of a common purpose. I remember that people in my group were almost doing high fives as they were agreeing on the questions and the wordings. Another thing that happens in a small group is that you can speak from personal experience in a way that is direct, unpretentious, and not preachy or ideological, which can be a very powerful way to break down barriers. The third thing that happens is that sometimes people begin to change their minds publicly in the group. This has ripple effects because when people see others open to change, they too become more willing to be more open to taking in new arguments. The fourth thing is that because everyone is working with the same background materials, they come to agree on the same facts. Those background materials are very important because they’re balanced and provide far more information to people than what they might have gotten through their own networks or news bubbles. That’s a big intellectual breakthrough in the polarization dynamic. Agreeing on the same facts is rare on some issues today. The process of citizens’ assemblies gives people a common basis of facts to work from. And the last thing is that people are just registering their opinion; they’re not voting, as in a town meeting.

It’s extremely impressive to go to a citizens’ assembly and interact with people you would never have bumped into in the course of your everyday life. You get an emotional sense of effective democracy. Everybody gets the feeling that they’re doing something somewhat historic, extremely unusual, and worthy because it’s very expensive to conduct, both in time and money. The seriousness of the endeavor opens people’s minds and allows them to think differently from the way they think in their normal, dismissive, everyday way.
**GAZETTE:** Do politicians play any role in citizens’ assemblies?

**MANSBRIDGE:** This is a quite contested and discussed topic in the community of people working with these groups. The theory from the beginning was “This is citizens only” and “Keep politicians out.” In Iceland, they completely excluded the politicians. In Ireland, a hybrid citizens’ assembly in 2012 on marriage equality and some other issues included one-third politicians. That assembly’s positive vote led to a referendum on same-sex marriage, which led to its legalization in Ireland. The citizens’ assembly led to a referendum on abortion, which led to the legalization of abortion in Ireland. One of the interesting things the organizers found was that politicians were actually rather deferential to the process; instead of pushing their agendas in an aggressive way, they often kept quiet and listened to the citizens.

**GAZETTE:** What are the mechanisms by which these assemblies can be structured?

**MANSBRIDGE:** The basic structure is usually an alternation between small groups and plenary assemblies, with plenary assemblies being more the kind of listening and questioning
experts thing. But they can take quite different formats. For example, the standard format, if you can afford it, would be a weekend. If you can’t afford a weekend, then it could be a day; you really shouldn’t take less than that.

In Britain, the Citizens’ Assembly on Brexit was designed to have one weekend that was informational, followed by a three-week break, and then another weekend that was more deliberation. The important thing about the Brexit citizens’ assembly was that some citizens learned about an EU rule that was not enforced in Britain. The rule said that if an EU citizen had been in an EU country other than their country of origin for more than three months without getting a job, they could be deported.

After the first weekend, some citizens in the assembly wanted Britain to stay in the EU but with this three-month rule and asked the organizers to include that option on the second weekend. That option garnered the support of the majority. It’s conceivable that had there been a second referendum on Brexit worded to include the three-month rule, the choice of “remain” could have won. That might have been enough, before Britain polarized. But after the first referendum, Britain polarized tremendously, relatively quickly.

**GAZETTE:** Besides Britain and Ireland, which other modern democracies are implementing these assemblies?

**MANSBRIDGE:** Right now, many countries, including Colombia, France, and Germany, along with Ireland, Britain, and Iceland. Belgium is doing some of the most innovative work in a small section of Belgium, the German-speaking Community, or East Belgium, where they’ve created a permanent citizens’ assembly, which includes a citizens’ council, drawn randomly from the citizens’ assembly, which sets the agenda. They have not met yet because of COVID; they’ve put it to the side until the pandemic is over. But the idea is that the Citizens’ Council will call citizens’ assemblies, and the Parliament will be responsible for either implementing the recommendations of the citizens’ assemblies or giving public justification for why they’re not implementing those recommendations. That’s in the law now.

Mongolia has also written this into its constitution as a requirement for constitutional amendments; a citizens’ assembly, designed as a deliberative poll, has to approve them. In the deliberative poll they held in Mongolia, they had 85 percent participation, which is extraordinary. People came in from the outer steppes, some on their horses, to be part of it. It was a major event for the whole country. Colombia is doing something called itinerant citizens’ assembly in Bogota. The idea is the first citizens’ assembly will set an agenda, and the second will deliberate on the basis of that agenda and will make recommendations that the City Council is required to either implement or give reasons for public justification as to why not. And then the third citizens’ assembly will look back and evaluate what has been
GAZETTE: What do these citizens’ assemblies say about the legitimacy of democracy?

MANSBRIDGE: In the work that I do, I stress the fact that we’re going to need more and more government coercion as we go forward as a more and more interdependent society. Our structures of democracy, which basically evolved in the 18th century, are not sufficient to carry the load of the government coercion that we now need. We need much more robust democratic mechanisms than what we have. The structure of elections gives you a clear majority that is legitimate, in almost every case, but it’s not sufficient. If we think about climate change and the tremendous burdens we need to take on to reduce global warming, it’s clear that the world is not ready to take on those burdens and that our democracies don’t have the capacity to create legitimate decisions on that scale yet. We need to have supplements to democracy.

GAZETTE: Citizens’ assemblies seem to help revitalize democracy, but they’re not new. Can you talk about their origins?

MANSBRIDGE: Ancient Athens had assemblies in which free Athenian men would get together to discuss and vote on matters of importance. The open-door assembly was supplemented by mechanisms of random selection, and the Greeks had a little machine called a *kleroterion* to choose the citizens through lottery. In a way, citizens’ assemblies are a revival of an ancient practice — in Aristotle’s view, the quintessential democratic practice.

GAZETTE: What are the obstacles to adopting citizens’ assemblies in the U.S.?

MANSBRIDGE: There are many obstacles. We’re very much in the experimental stages. It behooves human beings not to jump into big changes in democracy without having experimented quite a bit and having learned the appropriate lessons from that experimentation. Another obstacle is that at the moment, most citizens don’t understand the concept of representation by random selection. They understand that it’s fair to distribute a prize by lottery or a burden, like the draft, by lottery. But the idea of how you would be represented by people chosen randomly is not something that most people understand in their gut.

I advocate, for the sake of experimentation, that public high schools could have first a student government elected in the fall semester, and then in the spring semester, one chosen by lottery, and find out how the two work. Now that might not be a good experiment because
some adolescents might act out and not take being chosen by the lottery seriously, but if it
did work, it would allow us to see the difference between an elected group and a randomly
chosen group. And it would get people used to the idea of being represented through random
selection. The other obstacle is that citizens’ assemblies are expensive because you have to
coax the people to come and pay a stipend, transportation, child care, etc. These assemblies
require giving up some time, because it takes time for citizens to become informed enough to
deliberate in depth.

**GAZETTE:** How can citizens’ assemblies help reduce polarization in society?

**MANSBRIDGE:** The citizens’ assembly on Brexit I described came up with the idea of not
leaving the European Union but putting in this three-month rule; that’s a non-polarizing
move that recognizes the genuine grievances of some people who were worried about
immigrants taking their jobs. That’s one of the roles a citizens’ assembly can play. Getting
citizens to listen to one another and see other people’s points of views can help society be
less polarized. It’s not a panacea, but it’s a step to restore civil dialogue.

I believe that citizens’ assemblies can make a difference on polarized issues. I would
recommend that citizens’ assemblies be advisory for quite a while until we understand their
dynamics, but they carry with them a great deal of legitimacy, and that that’s tremendously
important now as the legitimacy of democracy is plummeting across the world.

*This interview has been condensed and edited for length and clarity.*