

# Consensus Without Consequence

Matthew Weil

*Citizens' assemblies are generating renewed interest as a tool for democratic renewal, but their promise requires honest assessment. While deliberative processes can improve the quality of public input, they consistently leave unresolved the harder challenge of converting consensus recommendations into durable policy outcomes with legislative champions. Carolyn Lukensmeyer's case studies reveal a common pattern: citizens' assemblies function best not as alternatives to representative institutions but as complements to them. Attempts to circumvent legislatures risk sidelining the very actors responsible for implementation. Scaling these models nationally compounds challenges of representativeness and political complexity. Democratic renewal depends not on expanding citizen input alone but on building better pathways from deliberation to decision to implementation within existing governing structures.*

It is a familiar refrain in modern political debate to hear diametrically opposed groups claim to speak for *We the People*. In an era of sharply divided parties, maximalist rhetoric, and institutions that often appear stuck in place, Carolyn Lukensmeyer is right to diagnose a crisis of democratic responsiveness. Americans feel disconnected from the decisions that shape their lives, and that perception is not without basis. While Lukensmeyer's analysis is sound, her proposed remedy of national citizens' assemblies risks misidentifying the system's core constraint. Attempts to circumvent governing institutions (even if they might retain the power for an up or down vote at the end of the process) will struggle to produce durable outcomes, especially at the federal level because the difficult step of garnering legislators' input will have been sidestepped. Policymakers must feel they have skin in the game to incentivize their ongoing support, which is essential to the successful implementation of any policy.

The trust gap between governing institutions and their constituents is real and well-documented. Citizens increasingly doubt that their voices matter in policymaking, and that skepticism deepens as one moves from local government to Congress. Yet it is a mistake to conclude that American democracy primarily suffers from a lack of public input. Americans are highly engaged in politics, participate in frequent elections, and have numerous avenues to petition government. The deeper problem is not input but conversion to policy success. The system struggles to translate competing preferences into decisions that can be enacted, implemented,

and protected. Put differently, the challenge is not hearing from “We the People” but building consensus around solutions when preferences do not overlap.

Lukensmeyer’s case studies show that citizens’ assemblies, broadly defined, can improve the quality of democratic input. Structured deliberation, especially when supported by skilled facilitation and/or technology, can help participants weigh trade-offs and move beyond the limitations of traditional public debate. But the same cases also reveal a significant limitation. Citizens’ assemblies do not resolve the institutional constraints that block action. In fact, they replicate them. Questions of representativeness, information access, and long-term accountability do not disappear when policy development or authority is temporarily shifted to a smaller group of citizens as opposed to elected legislatures.

The strongest evidence in Lukensmeyer’s essay shows that citizens’ assemblies are effective at structured participation but less effective at governance. The Engaged California initiative, launched in response to the 2025 Southern California wildfires, shows that large-scale citizen input can be gathered and synthesized in ways that go well beyond traditional hearings. Tens of thousands of participants contributed ideas for rebuilding their communities, and the process clearly produced more deliberative input than static public comments ever could. But the same initiative also struggled with representativeness, even after repeated efforts to broaden participation. More important, the connection between citizens’ input and concrete policy outcomes remains unclear. California is struggling to rebuild. Engaged California produced a listening tour, but the policymakers still need to decide.

Bowling Green, Kentucky, offers a more compelling example of what citizen engagement can achieve. Facing rapid projected growth, local leaders engaged roughly 10 percent of the population in shaping a long-term vision through the BG2050 initiative. The process combined face-to-face trust-building with digital participation and AI-assisted synthesis of thousands of ideas. As Lukensmeyer notes, this approach produced a nuanced and widely supported vision for the community’s future.

But even here, the limits are clear. BG2050 did not create binding policy. It produced a strategic roadmap that local officials are now implementing through existing institutions. That is no small accomplishment. It reflects real alignment between citizen input and policymaker action, and the assembly work may have given the policymakers the political cover or will to make more difficult choices. However, the process worked only because it fed into established governance structures, not because it replaced them. There was no automatic mechanism to ensure implementation. Elected officials keep discretion over which elements to adopt, how quickly to act, and how to allocate resources. BG2050 is best understood not as a citizens’ assembly exercising authority but as a politically useful source of input that improved decision-making within traditional institutions. And because local governments often struggle to garner public input, that has real value.

The Fort Collins, Colorado, case, which Lukensmeyer presents as a breakthrough moment for deliberative democracy, warrants closer scrutiny. A randomly selected citizens' assembly developed a multiuse plan for the redevelopment of the Hughes Stadium site, which the city council then placed on the ballot to compete with a single-use alternative proposal from one of the initial interest groups. As Lukensmeyer notes, this was the first time in the United States that the recommendations of a citizens' assembly was subject to a direct public vote. And voters approved the assembly-backed plan by a large margin. Lukensmeyer interprets this outcome as evidence that the broader public validated the deliberative process itself.

That conclusion is plausible but not necessarily without question. Voters were presented with two competing visions: a multiuse plan and a single-use alternative. It is entirely possible, and in many ways more likely, that voters evaluated the substance of the proposals rather than the process that generated them. The ballot language of the successful multiuse initiative did not ask voters to endorse deliberative democracy as a method, though it did refer to a "civic assembly," which was left undefined. It asked them to choose between policy options. The fact that a majority preferred the multiuse approach tells us something about land-use preferences in Fort Collins. It tells us less about broader support for the citizens' assembly deliberative process.

The design of the assembly raises additional questions. By relying on sortition, the process intentionally excluded many of the individuals and groups with the strongest interests in the outcome. This may have reduced conflict within the assembly itself, but it did not eliminate those interests from the broader political system. They reemerged in the initiative process, in which interested actors mobilized to advance an alternative proposal. Legislatures working efficiently should be able to engage directly with competing interests, not sidestep them. Citizens' assemblies can produce consensus among those less invested in the issue, but that consensus may reflect the structure of the process rather than an optimal policy outcome. Direct democracy that doesn't include those most interested seems less a success than presented.

A common pattern emerges from these case studies. Citizens' assemblies can generate thoughtful recommendations and, in some cases, broad public engagement. But they leave unresolved the hardest question of all: How do the recommendations they generate move from deliberation to decision to implementation? Lukensmeyer acknowledges the importance of accountability and follow-through. Someone must own the recommendation, advocate for it within government, secure funding, and manage implementation over time. Those responsibilities will never fall to the citizens' assembly. They fall to policymaking institutions and ultimately civil servants who must be involved throughout the policy process, not just at the end of it.

This connection between deliberation, decision, and implementation becomes even more tenuous in Lukensmeyer's argument for scaling deliberative democracy to the national level. The success of local and state-level experiments does not prove that similar models will function effectively in a national context. Two challenges become exponentially more difficult at scale: representativeness and policy complexity.

Representativeness is difficult even in small settings. California's experience shows that participation disparities persist despite deliberate and persistent outreach. At the national level, constructing a body that credibly reflects the demographic, geographic, and political diversity of the United States would be extraordinarily complex. These challenges mirror existing debates about representation in Congress itself. Many Americans already feel there is unfairness built into the makeup of the Senate, and the legitimacy of the House is under attack due to successive rounds of partisan gerrymandering. There is every reason to believe that a national citizens' assembly would face similar tensions.

Policy and political complexity also increase dramatically at the federal level. Local land-use decisions, as in the Fort Collins case, often allow for compromise solutions that incorporate multiple interests. National policy questions are more likely to involve tradeoffs shaped by deeply held ideological commitments. These are not problems that can be resolved through short-term deliberation. They require sustained engagement, technical expertise, and ongoing negotiation. Even with all three, success is never assured. For the same reasons that cities and states often appear more capable of governing than federal bodies – namely, their relative insulation from nationalized and polarized politics – local citizens' assemblies likely appear more capable of generating compromise. But this also suggests that national citizens' assemblies are likely to be stymied by that same polarization that defines our current political era.

Lukensmeyer proposes that a national citizens' assembly could convey recommendations directly to the floor of Congress, potentially bypassing the regular order. This suggestion undervalues the role that committees play in Congress. Committees are the venues where policy is refined, tradeoffs are negotiated, and coalitions are assembled. They perform significant refinement of legislation through hearings and markups on issues ready for political movement. This frustrating step in the legislative process is essential for members of Congress to identify what collection of policy options has enough votes to pass as an entire package. Bypassing committees would not empower citizens. It would weaken the very mechanisms through which policy becomes viable and durable solutions can form.

What ultimately distinguishes citizens' assemblies from the institutions we already have? Elected legislatures are themselves a form of citizens' assembly. Members of Congress and state legislatures are chosen by voters, must stand for reelection, and bear responsibility for the outcomes of their decisions. Citizens'

assemblies are advisory. They generate ideas but do not bear the consequences of implementation.

None of this is to suggest that citizens' assemblies lack value. On the contrary, Lukensmeyer is right to emphasize the importance of creating opportunities for citizens to engage more deeply with policy questions. Deliberative processes can provide policymakers with the best information about public preferences and build public legitimacy for the hardest decisions. The case studies she presents illustrate these benefits clearly. But their success depends on integration with existing institutions, not separation from them.

A more realistic path forward would treat citizens' assemblies as complements to representative government rather than alternatives. They can be embedded in prelegislative processes and used to surface areas of consensus. There could be ways to have policymakers participate alongside citizens, ensuring that deliberation is informed by both public input and practical political constraints. In that way, citizens' assemblies would enhance governance by improving the inputs into policymaking while elected officials keep responsibility for making and implementing decisions.

The risk in overextending the promise of citizens' assemblies is that they deepen frustration among the most committed citizens. If citizens invest time and effort into participatory processes only to see their recommendations ignored or diluted, trust in institutions may erode further. Participation without results is damaging too.

Lukensmeyer is right to argue that democratic renewal requires more meaningful engagement between citizens and their government. But engagement alone is not enough. The central challenge facing American democracy is not the absence of public input but the difficulty of converting that input into action. That's where we need to focus reform efforts.

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