

## Citizens' Councils: What are they, and why are they so popular in Austria?

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### ***What is the question?***

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) recently published “Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave”, a report featuring a “short list” of 12 deliberative processes, some of which are quite familiar to deliberative democracy practitioners, others less so. Number six on the list is the Citizens' Council, a participatory process used in Austria and Germany to obtain considered public input on public policy issues that is “designed to address community issues in a quick and inexpensive manner, strengthening community ties along the way” (OECD, 2020, p. 48). The process was institutionalized in 2013 as a regularly recurring element of the workings of the Vorarlberg State government in Austria (p. 138.) This raises several questions: what is a Citizens' Council, what's different about it, and why is it so popular in German-speaking countries?

### ***What are the usual answers?***

Before the State government in Vorarlberg had started to work with the Citizens' Council model, they had already explored a number of different participatory approaches. For example, they had successfully experimented with Citizens' Juries and Planning Cells. However, for a frugal, rural State, these approaches proved to be too costly to use in an ongoing way (Hellrigl, 2012).

### ***Beyond the usual approaches***

In 2005, Manfred Hellrigl, former director of what is now the “Büro für Freiwilliges Engagement und Beteiligung” ([Office for Voluntary Engagement and Participation](#)), attended a workshop on Dynamic Facilitation where he learned about Jim Rough's Wisdom Council format. Hellrigl was pleased to find it as powerful yet significantly more cost effective than approaches he had used previously. The Büro began to use the “Bürgerrat” [Citizens' Council] approach at municipal and regional levels throughout the State (Hellrigl, 2012). It did so with some significant modifications including the addition of some stratified sampling, a concise initial briefing, the use of the World Café format for the public meeting with the larger community at the conclusion of the Council, and the addition of a Respondents Group.

The Büro hosted the first State-wide Citizens' Council in 2011, and by mid-2014, they had successfully conducted 32 Citizens' Councils at municipal, regional, and State-wide levels. Councils have been held on diverse topics, including quality of life issues such as retaining youth in rural communities, support for aging populations, improving downtown areas, and creating policies that are child-friendly and family-friendly. Councils have also been used to address sustainability issues such as improving transportation systems and increasing regional energy autonomy (Büro für Zukunftsfragen, 2014).

The positive experiences of local government and citizens with this process led to an amendment to the State Constitution in 2013, institutionalizing the Citizens' Councils on a State-wide level. In addition to the commitment to host a yearly Council on a topic that the state government or the state parliament deems relevant, there is also an option where

community members can initiate a Council process on a topic of their choice, by gathering 1,000 signatures (OECD, 2020).

Meanwhile, the model has spread to other nearby regions in Central Europe. In 2016, the Citizens' Council model was used by the German Federal Ministry for the Environment (BMUB) for their Integrated Environmental Plan 2030 (IUP). For this project, they organized six Citizens' Councils in six major cities in Germany (Rausch, 2016).

### ***What is a Citizens' Council?***

In brief, a larger pool of community members (400-600) is chosen by lot using a mathematically random process. The Council is sponsored by a local municipality, region, or state. The sponsoring agency sends out a carefully-worded formal invitation to the people who have been randomly chosen, to see whether they would be willing to participate in a one-and-a-half day facilitated gathering that culminates in a presentation at a public event. From those who accept the invitation, stratified sampling is used to select a group of 12 to 15. If there are many submissions, or if it is a particularly significant issue, two Councils of 15 people each are formed. After the formation of the Council(s), the task for participants is to arrive at a consensus statement on the chosen policy area.

The core methodology used to support Council participants in their work is Dynamic Facilitation (OECD, 2020, p. 49) a distinctive facilitation approach that tends to evoke openness, inclusion, and creative solutions by generating a psychologically safe and productive environment for engaging creatively with differences. In the initial stages of the process, participants speak directly to the facilitators, rather than to one another (Asenbaum, 2016; Haderlapp & Trattnigg, 2014; Participedia, n.d.). The facilitators invite participants to expand upon their initial statements, reflect back to check their understanding, and harvest each contribution onto four charts: Solutions, Concerns (with respect to already-proposed Solutions); Data (including context and perspectives); and Problem-Statements (Zubizarreta, 2006, 2014.)

After an extended period in which the initial perspectives that participants are bringing with them have been "downloaded" and offered a hearing, and where the differences in the room have also been welcomed and heard in depth, participants are asked to indicate which of the contributions that have emerged, could be the basis for beginning to give form to the common ground that has been unearthed through the process.

Once the Council has completed its work, participants share their findings at a Citizens' Café, an open public meeting hosted using the [World Café method](#). After hearing the recommendations of the Citizens' Council, participants at the Citizens' Café have the opportunity to explore their own responses, first in small tables, then as a large group. Administrators from the sponsoring agencies are present at the Citizens' Café, where they hear the Council's recommendations, as well as the public response to these recommendations. Also at the Citizens' Café, a Responders Group is constituted that will meet monthly to monitor and support the implementation of some or all of the recommendations. In six months, this small follow-up group will respond back to the larger community on the progress that has been made on implementing their recommendations (Toth, 2017; Hellrigl & Lederer, 2014).

### ***What can we learn from the Citizens' Councils?***

1. *There is a wide-spread hunger for authentic communication on societal issues.*

Participants in Citizens' Councils frequently mention how meaningful they have found the experience, commenting specifically on how motivated and engaged they have become, how much learning has taken place, and how much valuable information and perspectives their fellow citizens have been able to contribute. They especially appreciate the opportunity to be deeply heard, the creative energy of the process, and the value of having a diverse group of participants (Büro für Zukunftsfragen, 2014).

*2. The energy and excitement of a Citizens' Council can be contagious.*

As described above, Council members share their findings along with the stories of how they arrived at common ground, at a public Citizens' Café that takes place shortly after the conclusion of the Council. The Cafés generally range in attendance from 50 to 150 people, and are publicized by the sponsors of the Council. Event organizers report that community members who attend the Cafés are usually inspired by the work of their fellow citizens, as evidenced by their public comments and responses during the large-group portion of the Café following both the initial presentation as well as the small-group conversations at various tables.

Beyond the Council and the Café, there is a larger community that also needs to be informed of the work that has taken place. This occurs through a variety of means, depending on the sponsoring organization, and is an area where more work and more research is needed. In order to further increase community participation, the Büro is currently experimenting with an online platform where others can also add comments in response to the work that the Council has done.

*3. Strong feedback loops and close links to implementation are key*

As described above, there is a strong feedback loop built into the process through the Responders Group. This attention to communicating the outcomes of the public's input to the policy process goes a long way toward ensuring its success.

*4. Different levels of participation can still be valuable*

In the OECD report, the first four models (Citizens' Assemblies, Citizens' Juries, Consensus Conferences, and Planning Cells) are categorized as "informed citizen recommendations on policy questions"; they all require between three to 18 days of in-person deliberation. In contrast, the next five models (G1000, Citizens' Councils, Citizens' Dialogues, Deliberative Polls, and WWViews) are categorized as "citizen opinion on policy questions", as they generally involve between one-to-two days of deliberation. The Citizens' Council model is an example of how, when done well, even a less intensive format can produce useful results.

***The benefits of Citizens' Councils***

The Büro's ["Interim Report"](#), published in 2014 and referenced above, includes the perspective of policy-makers, state and local administrators, and Council participants; it also includes both supportive and critical perspectives from academic experts. Policy-makers mention how, due to the random selection or "civic lottery" nature of the process, the Councils do *not* become the mouthpiece for special interest groups, but instead speak for a broad and diverse public which is otherwise silent. Administrators mention their relief that "The fear of long wish lists to Santa Claus has not been realized. Instead, constructive proposals predominate, and essential things are named in ways that are completely self-critical, realistic and responsible." (p. 6)

For their part, community members mention their appreciation for the opportunity to discover their shared ability to develop new and creative results, especially on difficult topics. Overall, Citizens' Councils are seen as making a significant contribution to a new political culture of cooperation where people listen to each other attentively and where a diversity of perspectives is seen as enriching rather than as a source of heated arguments or division.

### ***Limitations of Citizens' Councils***

While the use of Citizens' Councils has created an ongoing culture of participation in Vorarlberg, developing a new political culture takes time. It also requires repeated instances of participation that are accompanied by integrity and follow-up. In the words of Manfred Hellrigl, the former director of the Büro: "In order for these methods to be used successfully, they also need certain conditions, such as an honest interest on the part of policy-makers [...] along with the real willingness to engage in open-ended processes. Do we really want to know what community members think? What moves them? Are we open and willing to endure hearing other perspectives? Are we ready to learn and to develop further our own point of view?"

Those are the kinds of questions that elected officials and public administrators could ask themselves if they wish to make good use of this powerful and cost-effective approach. Otherwise, if Citizens' Councils are used simply as inexpensive participatory window-dressing, there is a significant risk of increasing public cynicism from lack of follow-through. Also, Citizens' Councils are *not* the best option for a highly technical issue that would require a more in-depth learning phase and a longer process. Likewise, in a situation that requires much larger numbers of deliberating participants in order to ensure public legitimacy, a Citizens' Assembly would be a more appropriate choice.

Lastly, more research is needed. Citizens' Councils have continued to spread in Austria and Germany; as of this writing in 2020, there are estimated to have been more than a hundred instances in all (personal communication, Martina Handler). Yet despite their growing use in practice, research in this area is still scant (for some valuable initial efforts, see Toth, 2017 and Asenbaum, 2016.)

### ***How might this approach be used in other countries?***

In addition to experimenting wholesale with Citizens' Councils, there is also another possibility: adopting some of their key elements. For example, Dynamic Facilitation, the "operating system" of the Citizens' Councils, is an open-source process that is best suited for a small group of 15 or so. Thus, it can be useful for the small-group portion of a Citizens' Assembly; Marcin Gerwin (2018, p. 69) recommends it for just this purpose.

It is also worth noting that Citizens' Councils can be part of a broader range of processes used within a given region to support a larger "deliberative system". That is indeed how they are used in Vorarlberg, where the Büro is a proponent of [Art of Hosting](#), a participatory approach to facilitating dialogue and deliberation (Quick & Sandfort, 2014). The Büro also hosts regular public [Pro-Action Cafés](#) in Bregenz, the capital of Vorarlberg, as a way to support social capital and creative collaboration in the community.

Regardless of what approach we take to deliberative democracy, it is worthwhile to share the knowledge we gain from our various experiments, so that we can all continue to learn from each other. That is why some of our efforts over the years have focused on translating

various resources from German to English, so that news about the good work the folks in Vorarlberg have been doing, can continue to inspire others around the world.

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