

Institution: University College London		
Unit of Assessment: 19 Politics and International Studies		
Title of case study: Enabling and Grounding the Growth of Citizens' Assemblies in the UK		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: September 2015–2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Alan Renwick	Associate Professor	September 2015–present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: September 2015–December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Dr Alan Renwick's research at the UCL Constitution Unit has underpinned a rapid growth in the use of citizens' assemblies (CAs) at all levels of government throughout the UK, thereby deepening democratic practice and strengthening debate around key policy issues. Renwick's research findings have given policymakers confidence that such assemblies can operate effectively and deliver valuable outputs, even on contentious matters, contributing to a wave of CAs since 2018. This work has also enabled evidence-based judgements on when CAs may <i>not</i> be appropriate. In addition, his findings have helped the development of a distinctive UK model for how CAs are run and their members recruited. Democratic processes have therefore been enriched, and key policy debates – most notably on climate change – have been enhanced.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Widespread concern about the state of democratic discourse and engagement around the world has spurred growing interest in more deliberative methods of conducting politics, such as citizens' assemblies (CAs). A CA is a group of 50–200 members of the public who meet to learn about an issue, discuss it in depth, draw conclusions, and report recommendations to decision-makers. The first took place in Canada in 2005. The model has spread, most notably to Ireland, where CAs helped unlock public discussion on the contested issues of same-sex marriage and abortion. This led to referendums in 2015 and 2018 that were widely viewed as notable for their considered tone.</p> <p>Renwick's research examines whether CAs can operate successfully in the UK, the contexts in which they can be effective, and how they are best conducted. This has involved three main projects to date. In 2015, he was a Co-Investigator in the ESRC-funded 'Democracy Matters (DM): A Constitutional Assembly for the UK – A Comparative Study and Pilot Project', which organised two pilot local CAs, in South Yorkshire and Hampshire/Solent, to explore public attitudes to regional devolution. In 2017, he was Principal Investigator for a much larger ESRC-funded project, to run the first ever UK-wide CA: the 'Citizens' Assembly on Brexit' (CAB). In 2017–19, he was PI for an international comparative study, 'Improving Discourse During Election and Referendum Campaigns', which examined ways of improving information and discourse in election and referendum campaigns. The research included detailed analysis of the use of CAs for this purpose in Canada, the United States, and Ireland.</p> <p>The first two projects assessed the efficacy of the CA model in different UK contexts – focusing on representativeness of members and quality of discussions – and experimented with a range of CA design elements [R1/R2/R5]. The first project also compared this evidence with materials from traditional public consultations [R4]. The third project combined original media analysis and extensive collation of existing research to gauge the impact of CAs on referendum debates [R3/R6].</p> <p>Principal findings relate to both the <i>use</i> and the <i>design</i> of CAs. On use:</p>		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. CAs are feasible in the UK at local and national levels: they can generate inclusive and considered deliberation and reasoned conclusions. Furthermore, CAs can run effectively even amidst high polarisation – as was true of Brexit in 2017. Quality of discussions was gauged through participant surveys, interviews, and analysis of CAB transcripts, and results were strongly positive [R1/R2/R5]. 2. CAs enable both wider and deeper forms of citizen engagement in policymaking processes than do the consultation methods more commonly used by public authorities in the UK [R4]. 		

3. CAs can improve information and discourse in referendums, but such benefits are not guaranteed [R3/R6]. Comparison across Canada, the United States, and Ireland found positive but varied effects: public debate improved only where awareness of CAs was high.

On design:

4. Recruitment to a CA needs to stratify not just for socio-demographics, as long accepted, but also for attitudes on the topic under consideration. Analysis of the CAB recruitment data showed that Remain voters were slightly more likely to accept an invitation to participate than Leave voters, and that representativeness therefore required attitudinal stratification [R2/R5].
5. CAs should be designed and led by professional facilitators to ensure that the quality of the process is upheld. The quality of discussions was found to be higher in the CAB than in the DM assemblies, which the research concluded reflected the use of professionals [R1/R2/R5].

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

R1. Flinders, M., Ghose, K., Jennings, W., Molloy, E., Prosser, B., Renwick, A., Smith, G., and Spada, P. (2016). *Democracy Matters: Lessons from the 2015 Citizens' Assemblies on English Devolution*. London: Constitution Unit. 78 pp. [Detailed research report from prize-winning ESRC-funded research project (i)] <http://bit.ly/DemocracyMattersProject>

R2. Renwick, A., Allan, S., Jennings, W., McKee, R., Russell, M., and Smith, G. (2017). *A Considered Public Voice on Brexit: The Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Brexit*. London: Constitution Unit. 86 pp. [Detailed research report from ESRC-funded research project (ii)] <http://bit.ly/CitizensAssemblyBrexit>

R3. Renwick, A., and Palese, M. (2019). *Doing Democracy Better: How Can Information and Discourse in Election and Referendum Campaigns in the UK Be Improved?* London: Constitution Unit. 300 pp. [Detailed research report from grant-funded research project (iii)] <http://bit.ly/ImprovingDiscourse>

R4. Prosser, B., Renwick, A., Giovannini, A., Sandford, M., Flinders, M., Jennings, W., Smith, G., Spada, P., Stoker, G., and Ghose, K. (2017). 'Citizen Participation and Changing Governance: Cases of Devolution in England'. *Policy & Politics* 45(2), 251–69. [Peer-reviewed journal article from prize-winning ESRC-funded project (i)] <http://bit.ly/CitizenParticipationGovernance>

R5. Renwick, A., Allan, S., Jennings, W., McKee, R., Russell, M., and Smith, G. (2018). 'What kind of Brexit do voters want? Lessons from the Citizens' Assembly on Brexit'. *Political Quarterly* 89(4), 649–58. [Article in widely read journal, from ESRC-funded project (ii)] <http://bit.ly/WhatKindOfBrexitDoVotersWant>

R6. Renwick, A., Palese, M., and Sargeant, J. (2020). 'Information in Referendum Campaigns: How Can It Be Improved?' *Representation* 56(4), 521–37. [Peer-reviewed journal article from grant-funded research project (iii)] <http://bit.ly/InformationInReferendums>

Grants

- i. ESRC, 'Democracy Matters: A Constitutional Assembly for the UK – A Comparative Study and Pilot Project', ESRC Urgency Grant ES/N006216/1, awarded to Matthew Flinders (University of Sheffield) (Renwick co-I), GBP160,487, 01/09/2015 to 31/08/2016. Won the Political Studies Association's 2016 Democratic Innovation Award for its 'innovative and deliberative' approach and its 'potential for shaping future democratic reforms and the devolution of power at local and regional levels'.
- ii. ESRC, 'Citizens' Assembly on Brexit', UK in a Changing Europe programme, ES/R000867/1, awarded to Alan Renwick (PI), GBP239,877, 01/04/2017 to 31/12/2017.
- iii. McDougall Trust, Improving Discourse During Election and Referendum Campaigns, awarded to Alan Renwick (PI), GBP70,393, 01/04/2017 to 30/04/2019.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Small-scale deliberative forums known as citizens' juries gained prominence in the UK in the early 2000s, but fell from favour after 2010. Citizens' assemblies (CAs) are larger and more ambitious, seeking not only to improve processes of public consultation, but also to deepen democratic practice and deliver a wider educative dividend. Renwick's research on CAs has had three key impacts: underpinning a rapid growth in the use of CAs in the UK since 2017; enabling informed discussion of when CAs may not be appropriate; and shaping the design of CAs in the UK. His research has thereby helped both to deepen democratic practice and to enrich key policy debates.

Underpinning growth in the use of citizens' assemblies in the UK

The core impact of the Democracy Matters (DM) assemblies and Citizens' Assembly on Brexit (CAB) is that their success has facilitated rapid growth in the CA model across the UK. Renwick's research helped underpin these developments by raising awareness of the model, demonstrating that successful CAs were possible in the UK, even in a difficult political context [R1/R2/R5], and showing the value of CAs over traditional forms of public consultation [R4]. The UK's first official CAs (i.e., CAs commissioned by public bodies) were held in 2018. By the end of 2020, two CAs had been commissioned by the UK Parliament (on social care and climate change), two by the Scottish government (on Scotland's future and climate change), and one by the Welsh Parliament (on methods of public engagement). A UK government scheme – the Innovation in Democracy Programme – enabled 3 local authorities to hold CAs in 2019, and at least 10 further local authorities have held CAs of their own, on topics including climate change, hate crime, and urban regeneration [A¹]. In Northern Ireland, the agreement restoring devolved government in January 2020 proposed to convene one CA per year [A²]. Labour, the Liberal Democrats, and the Green Party all made specific pledges on CAs for the first time in their 2019 manifestos [A³]. References to CAs in UK media have risen from an average of 31 per year in the period 2010–15 to 509 in 2018, 4345 in 2019, and (despite Covid-19) 1627 in 2020 [B²]. This mechanism for enabling thoughtful public participation in policymaking has thus moved to the mainstream.

The charity Involve has been contracted to design and deliver many of the UK's CAs, including the CAB. In October 2020, Involve's Director, who has been deeply involved in discussions with parliamentarians and civil society actors considering CAs throughout the UK, said:

it is unlikely that the two select committees of the House of Commons would have decided to commission the UK Parliament's first citizens' assembly, the Citizens' Assembly on Social Care (CASC) in 2018, had it not been for CAB. CAB demonstrated that the expertise to run such assemblies existed in the UK and showed that they could be run successfully in the UK on controversial issues. [C]

In particular, the CAB:

provided the first evidence that assembly members' demographic, attitudinal and geographical characteristics did not affect the amount of time they spoke for at an assembly. This is an issue that is often raised by decision-makers – including those who commissioned CASC – and we have used these research findings to help to give them confidence that citizens' assemblies are not dominated by those with already 'loud voices' in society. [C]

The senior parliamentary official responsible for the UK Parliament's Climate Assembly UK, held in 2020, writes of the CAB, 'The fact that a reasonable set of recommendations emerged from that project provided Committee Chairs with confidence that the complex and controversial subject of climate change could also be tackled successfully' [D⁵]. The civil servant who conceived of and ran the UK government's Innovation in Democracy Programme, says of the DM assemblies and the CAB, 'These examples of citizens' assemblies were the first of their kind in the UK and paved the way for the government to trial citizens' assemblies through the Innovation in Democracy Programme.' [E] The Electoral Reform Society (ERS), a delivery partner for both DM and the CAB, used the evidence from these projects to promote CAs with politicians and officials. The Senior Director for ERS Scotland, says, 'I am confident that the Citizens Assemblies in Scotland would not have taken place without this important action research to give confidence that the process had been tried successfully in the UK.' [F]

The awareness created by the CAB is illustrated by references to the CAB itself on the public record: e.g. 10 mentions in parliamentary plenary debates [G¹], 25 mentions in leading media outlets [B¹], and multiple citations in papers by both the Commons and Lords libraries [G²]. Renwick also presented the findings in oral evidence to three parliamentary select committees: the House of Lords EU Committee and both the House of Commons Exiting the EU and Home Affairs committees [G³]. The CAB has been explicitly mentioned seven times in the *Guardian/Observer* as well as the *Financial Times*, *i*, *New Statesman*, *National*, and *Scotsman*, extending the reach of the research to an audience of over 6,700,000 [B¹]. Renwick discussed the lessons of the CAB for the use of CAs on BBC Radio 4's *Analysis* programme on 4 March 2019 [B³].

Enabling informed discussion of when a citizens' assembly may not be appropriate

Informed decision-making on when *not* to deploy the CA model is also essential. Renwick advised parliamentarians in 2019 on whether to seek a CA as a means of resolving the then Brexit impasse. Writing in the *National*, for example, senior SNP MP Joanna Cherry said of the CAB, 'its success has led to successive calls from across the political divide for a Citizens' Assembly to solve the Brexit deadlock' [B¹]. Renwick's research indicated that such a CA could work well despite the polarised context [R2/R5] and could help inform any subsequent referendum debate [R3/R6], *but only if there were time and political space to design it well* [R1/R2/R5]. These discussions led to the conclusion that a CA would not be feasible, and it was not pursued.

The Director of Compass, who convened many of the key discussions, writes, 'the evidence from the 2017 Citizens' Assembly on Brexit was of central importance in shaping discussions in Parliament and beyond about whether to push for an assembly in 2019, and in influencing the final decision that was reached' [H]. Similarly, Yvette Cooper, a senior MP involved in these discussions, writes, 'In the end, it was not possible to convene a citizens' assembly in the time available. The expert evidence and advice that Dr Renwick and his colleagues provided, based on the experience of the Citizens' Assembly on Brexit, was invaluable in reaching that conclusion.'

[I]

Influencing the design of citizens' assemblies in the UK

Renwick's work has influenced the design of the UK's official CAs. He has been a member of the advisory panels for the UK parliament's Climate Assembly UK, the UK government's Innovation in Democracy Programme, the Scottish government's Citizens' Assembly of Scotland, and the Oxford Citizens' Assembly [A¹], bringing his expertise to bear on, e.g., the design of deliberative sessions and balanced evidential input. The Secretary to the Citizens' Assembly of Scotland says Renwick's 'insights and commitment have been hugely significant in shaping both the policy approach and delivery of the Assembly' [J].

A distinctive UK model of CAs has developed, shaped by Renwick's research. This diverges from practice elsewhere in two main ways. First, the members of all the large-scale official CAs in the UK have been selected using *attitudinal stratification*: they are chosen to reflect the make-up of the population not just in socio-demographics (as happens in CAs worldwide), but also in political attitudes. This approach was first piloted in the CAB and found to be necessary for representativeness and therefore legitimacy [R1/R2/R5]. Given the adversarial nature of British politics, it has been adopted as standard practice: e.g., the Citizens' Assembly on Social Care stratified in terms of preferences on the size of the state, and the Citizens' Assembly of Scotland on attitudes towards Scottish independence and Brexit [A¹]. Commentary on the assemblies routinely cites the importance of this adjustment to the traditional model for the legitimacy of CAs in the UK. On the Climate Assembly, for example, a *Guardian* editorial said, 'Significantly, the group was chosen to be representative of the public – 17% of participants were climate sceptics'. After setting out the approach to stratification, senior MP Rachel Reeves emphasised, 'In short, this is not a bunch of climate activists talking to each other.' [B⁴]. The parliamentary official responsible for Climate Assembly UK writes, 'Being able to repeat in our comms that the Assembly included a representative sample of climate sceptics was invaluable in winning over our political doubters, of which there were quite a few at the outset'. [D⁵]

Second, whereas major CAs in other countries have been led by a prominent independent chair, assemblies in the UK are led instead by a *professional facilitator*. This approach was first adopted in the CAB, and helped to ensure that experienced experts in deliberation led the process [R2/R5]. All of the UK's official CAs have followed the same practice (or, in Scotland, shared functions between professional facilitators and 'convenors') [A¹]. The UK government's Innovation in Democracy Programme (IiDP), for example, writes:

As a member of the Innovation in Democracy Advisory Board, Dr. Renwick offered invaluable guidance and support to the programme. For example, due [to] his input and the learning from the Constitution Unit's work, we adopted the approach to use professional delivery organisations to design and facilitate the IiDP citizens' assemblies. [E]

The Secretary to the Citizens' Assembly of Scotland writes that he was referred to the CAB 'by a wide range of international experts as a recent exemplar', adding:

The elements of the initiative most often referred to and which proved most instructive were the use of expert and independent facilitators, the recruitment of members for political and demographic balance and the quality and accessibility of evidence. All of these are central to our Assembly and we drew heavily on this case study in determining the approach in Scotland. [J]

Conclusion: changing democracy and policy

Building on Renwick's research, CAs are thus deepening core democratic practice in all parts of the UK. The Director of Involve, writes, 'These citizens' assemblies represent an important shift in democratic practice in the UK, with the public being involved in much deeper and more sophisticated ways on complex and challenging public policy questions. ... CAB has laid the ground for this shift in democratic practice to emerge and flourish in the UK.' [C]

CAs are also changing major policy debates. This impact reaches across issues as diverse as hate crime, urban regeneration, and Scotland's future governance, but is most notable on climate change. Speaking at the launch of Climate Assembly UK's report in September 2020, the cabinet minister with responsibility for tackling climate change and President of the COP26 UN climate change conference, Alok Sharma MP, said 'this report will help to shape the work that we in government are doing over the next critical 14 months' in the lead up to COP26 [D¹]. At the same event, all six chairs of the commissioning parliamentary select committees confirmed they would build the Assembly's findings into their inquiries. Presenting the report later that day in the House of Commons, the responsible committee chair, Darren Jones MP, announced 'a high-level inquiry into the findings of this groundbreaking report', which, inter alia, would 'review, on a regular basis, the Government's engagement and interaction with the findings of the assembly and progress in implementing its proposals' [D²]. In December 2020, the government's advisory Committee on Climate Change (CCC) published its *Sixth Carbon Budget*, and cited the Climate Assembly 64 times. It drew extensively on the Assembly's recommendations regarding both the speed and the modalities of the UK's transition to net zero carbon emissions: CCC Deputy Chair Baroness Brown said, 'we've based our advice very, very strongly on the outputs from the Climate Assembly' [D⁴]. It also emphasised the value of the CA model to climate policymaking: 'More than ever before, future emissions reductions will require *people* to be actively involved....The experience of the UK Climate Assembly shows that if people understand what is needed and why, if they have options and can be involved in decision-making processes, they will support the transition to Net Zero.' [D³]. On one of the most fundamental policy challenges of our age, the spread of CAs is thus having a major effect.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- A. Evidence on the incidence of citizens' assemblies: 1. list of CAs in the UK, with supporting documentation; 2. *New Decade, New Approach* (Northern Ireland agreement), January 2020; 3. 2019 general election manifesto commitments.
- B. Compendium of media reports: 1. Reporting on the CAB; 2. Mentions of CAs in the UK since 2010; 3. BBC Radio 4 *Analysis*, 3 March 2019; 4. Reporting on Climate Assembly UK.
- C. Testimonial statement: Director, The Involve Foundation.
- D. Materials relating to Climate Assembly UK: 1. Climate Assembly UK report launch event; 2. Parliamentary debate on the report of Climate Assembly UK; 3. Committee on Climate Change report; 4. Comments by Baroness Brown on the report of the Committee on Climate Change; 5. Testimonial statement: Parliamentary Director, Climate Assembly UK.
- E. Testimonial statement: Former Head of Community Action and Giving, DCMS (lead for the Innovation in Democracy Programme).
- F. Testimonial statement: Senior Director, Electoral Reform Society Scotland.
- G. Compendium of UK parliamentary records: 1. Plenary mentions of the CAB; 2. Other parliamentary papers relating to the CAB; 3. Committee appearances relating to the CAB.
- H. Testimonial statement: Director, Compass.
- I. Testimonial statement: Rt Hon. Yvette Cooper, MP for Normanton, Pontefract, and Castleford.
- J. Testimonial statement: Secretary to the Citizens' Assembly of Scotland and former Deputy Director and Head of Constitution and UK Relations, Scottish Government.