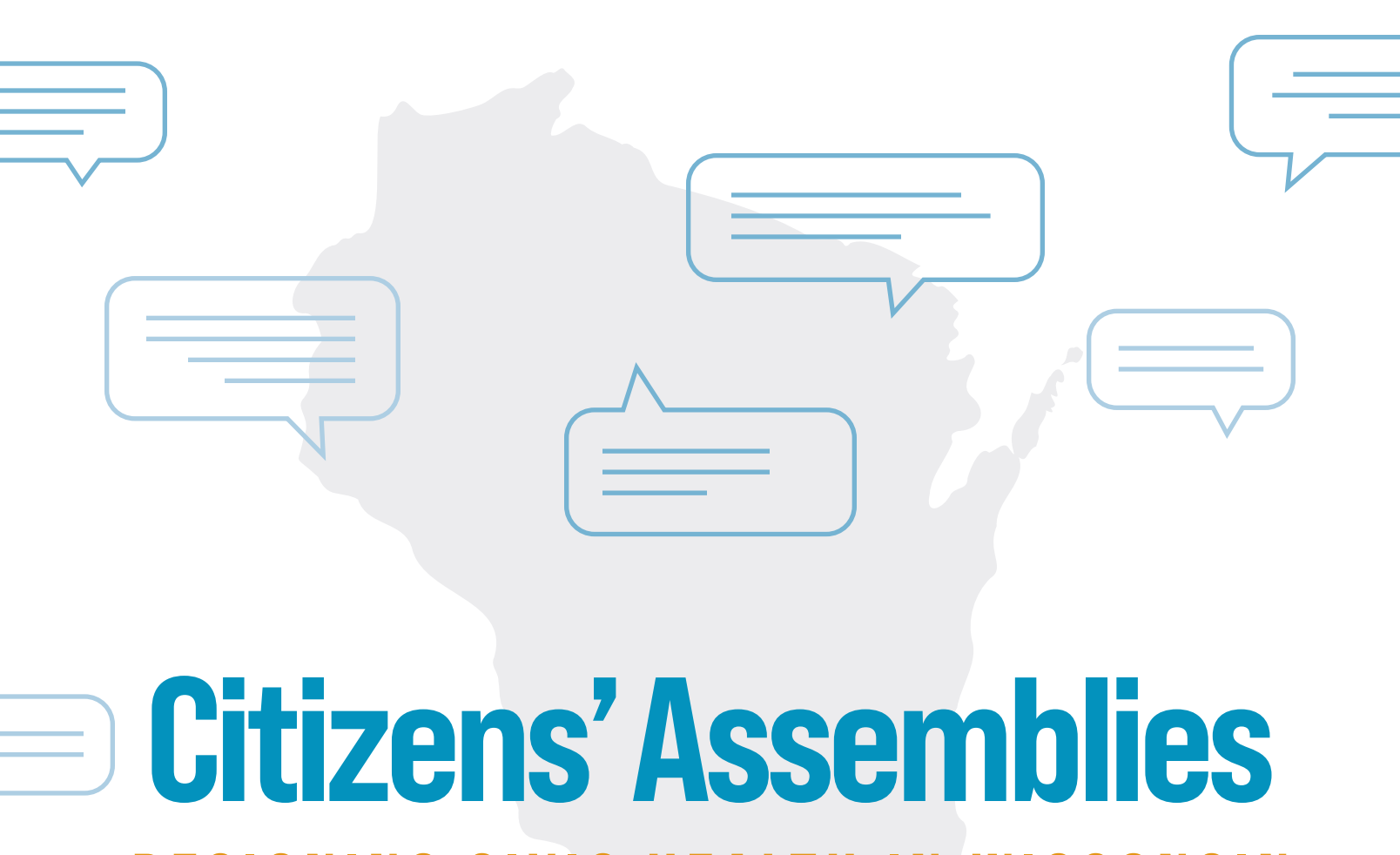




Citizens' Assemblies

DESIGNING CIVIC HEALTH IN WISCONSIN

By Amber Wichowsky, Associate Professor of Public Affairs, UW-Madison, and Leadership Wisconsin Chair, UW-Madison Extension

Across the country, local governments are grappling with growing challenges to civil discourse, civic engagement and public trust. Elected officials and residents alike report difficulty hearing one another. Nearly nine in 10 municipal officials say civil discourse has declined during their time in office.¹ One-third of Americans believe local officials don't care about the people they represent.² In recent years, we have been inundated with viral news stories about public disruptions at council and board meetings as residents voice frustration at not being heard. You may have experienced this in county government.

What's more, it's hard to bring disparate voices together as more Americans withdraw from local civic life. Today, fewer people belong to groups, volunteer in their communities, spend time with their neighbors, or attend local meetings or events. Declines are most pronounced



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among those without college degrees. Online, the angriest or most extreme posts are the ones that go viral, further distorting public discourse.

► Citizens' assemblies: A new way to focus the discussion

In response to these challenges, some local governments are experimenting with new forms of public engagement to counter

polarization, rebuild trust and address growing social isolation. Citizens' assemblies are one such approach.

Citizens' assemblies, sometimes called civic or community assemblies, are structured public forums that convene a randomly selected, broadly representative group of residents to learn, deliberate and make recommendations on a specific public issue or proposal. While they hark back to ancient Greece, citizens' assemblies have reemerged in recent years as a way



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to engage communities in shared problem-solving on complex challenges, from affordable housing to artificial intelligence.

Assemblies typically involve 30 to 150 participants and combine expert presentations with facilitated small-group discussions in which participants assess evidence, weigh trade-offs, consider differing perspectives, and explore possible solutions. Participants then reconvene to refine, draft and vote on recommendations that are forwarded to a governmental sponsor, such as a county board of supervisors, for consideration.

Assembly members are selected through a two-step process designed to broaden inclusion. Invitations explaining the assembly's purpose and how participants will be compensated for their time and effort are first sent to community members (or a random sample of community members). Those who express interest are entered into a lottery. Sortition, or selection by lot, increases the likelihood that the assembly will include a wider range of perspectives and experiences.

Although dialogue is important, it's not just talk. Participants respond to a specific question that addresses the core of an important issue and involves trade-offs and compromise.

For example, Lexington, Kentucky, used a citizens' assembly to ask participants whether compensation for city council members should be changed. Boulder, Colorado, used a community assembly to identify locations and approaches for implementing 15-minute neighborhoods, an urban planning model intended to allow residents to access what they need in daily life within a 15-minute walk or bike ride. Snohomish County, Washington, is using a civic assembly to set rules for AI use in government. Connecticut has just launched one of the first statewide, state-endorsed citizens' assemblies to consider whether to change how it pays for and delivers local services.

Unlike many public meetings, citizens' assemblies are designed to foster learning, reflection and collaborative decision-making. Participants receive briefing materials and hear from presenters who inform the deliberations.

Yet, as Hélène Landemore, a leading scholar of deliberative democracy and chair of Connecticut's Citizens' Assembly on Property Taxes, explains, experts are "on tap, not on top."

In some assemblies, participants even help select speakers or experts. Rather than relying on the standard Q&A format that often follows presentations, participants may interview presenters in small groups to deepen their understanding of the issue, explore trade-offs and brainstorm possible solutions. Participants have time to learn about the issue and discuss it together. They then draft and vote on recommendations that are presented directly to decision-makers, who may respond, implement an idea or submit proposals to voters.

► **The benefits of citizens' assemblies**

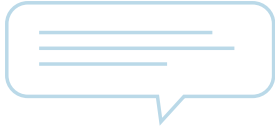
Research has shown that citizens' assemblies increase knowledge, efficacy, civic engagement, openness to divergent views and social trust. There is also evidence that they can reduce polarization, strengthen communities' capacity to address shared public problems and generate actionable policy recommendations. This kind of civic capacity contributes to a community's overall quality of life.

Although more than 700 citizens' assemblies have been convened over the past two decades, they remain relatively new to the United States. Efforts to adapt this model are underway in Wisconsin.

In May 2025, Eau Claire County's Department of Human Services and the Eau Claire City-County Health Department sponsored a citizens' assembly on homelessness, facilitated by UW-Madison's La Follette School of Public Affairs and Division of Extension. Twenty-one participants, representing a cross-section of residents, deliberated on how the county could better engage residents as it develops a plan to make homelessness rare, brief and nonrecurring.

The assembly produced 10 recommendations that have informed the work of Eau Claire's new Housing Our Neighbors Collaborative and the development of a comprehensive community plan to address homelessness. As Angela Stokes, assistant director of human services in Eau Claire County, noted, the process provided "an

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invaluable platform” for engaging the community. Participants also gave the assembly high marks, with 85% evaluating the process as collaborative, genuine and worthwhile. Nine out of 10 would recommend citizens’ assemblies to other local governments.

This year, the La Follette School and Extension are partnering with Leadership Wisconsin to expand this model. Leadership Wisconsin is a nonprofit dedicated to building a stronger Wisconsin by increasing leadership capacity. Its Community Leadership 2.0 program helps participants develop advanced leadership skills by focusing on a single statewide issue as a “learning lab.”

In 2026, the Community Leadership 2.0 cohort is exploring Wisconsin’s housing needs and will co-design and facilitate several community assemblies on the issue across the state. The La Follette School and Extension will provide research and facilitation support and conduct evaluations of the effort. In 2027, the plan is to convene sponsors, facilitators, and participants, along with other state and local officials, to

further reflect on the assemblies’ recommendations and the effectiveness of this deliberative engagement method.

There are many ways to strengthen civic health in Wisconsin. Citizens’ assemblies offer a promising way for communities to collaborate on complex public issues. Local governments across the country, including in Wisconsin, are demonstrating how to design for social connection, civic engagement and renewed public trust. If you’re interested in hosting a citizens’ assembly in your community, contact your Extension Community Development educator or visit go.wisc.edu/citizens-assemblies for more resources. ■

Amber Wichowsky is an associate professor of public affairs at UW–Madison and the Leadership Wisconsin chair for the Division of Extension. Her research explores how individuals and communities engage contentious and complex public issues and the social and institutional contexts that shape their civic engagement. Wichowsky holds a Ph.D. in political science from UW–Madison. She is the co-author of “The Economic Other: Inequality in the American Political Imagination,” among other articles and research reports.

1. National League of Cities, “We the Cities: Bridging our Divides,” 2026, nlc.org/initiative/we-the-cities-bridging-our-divides.
2. Pew Research Center, “Why Americans Don’t Fully Trust Many Who Hold Positions of Power and Responsibility,” Sept. 19, 2019, pewrsr.ch/4v8UWL6.

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