

Citizens' Assembly in a Box

The accessible tier of the gold standard — one room, one evening, a real question, run in your own name.

What this is: one evening, one real question, the disciplines of a citizens' assembly compressed into a room any host can run this week, in its own name.

The honest floor this kit stands on

The gold standard is a true citizens' assembly: participants selected by lottery, stratified to match the population that's deciding, professionally facilitated, run over several days, briefed with balanced expert material, and connected to a real channel of power. **MASS LBP — a Toronto organization — has run more than fifty of these since 2008**, and every discipline in this kit is borrowed from practice like theirs, not improved on it. If your institution can commission a real one, do that instead — this kit exists for the evenings when that isn't yet possible.

This kit is the honest accessible tier: one room, one evening (2.5 hours), 12 to 30 people — whoever your host institution can actually gather in a night, not a stratified lottery, and not a claim to represent anyone beyond the chairs that are filled. It borrows the assembly's core disciplines — independent inputs first, mixed seating, recorded dissent — without borrowing its representativeness. Say this out loud at the start of the evening, and print it at the top of whatever record you produce: **this evening speaks for the people in this room, never for the ward or the city.**

Kids welcome. Food shared. Nobody pays.

A note to the host: this is your evening, in your room, under your institution's name — nothing behind this kit convenes it, attends it, or shows up to run it. Change anything that doesn't fit your room, and run it this week if you can.

Choosing your question

The whole evening stands or falls on this. The question has to be:

- **Bounded** — small enough that a room can actually get somewhere on it in two rounds of table talk.
- **Genuinely undecided** — not a question your institution has already quietly answered.
- **Actually the room's to influence** — a real decision your host institution or block genuinely faces, with a real person or body on the other end who will receive what the room produces.

Good questions (real, bounded, this room can actually move): - Our BIA has \$40,000 of discretionary streetscape budget left this year — trees, benches, or bike parking? - The community centre has one open Tuesday-evening program slot this fall — a youth drop-in, seniors' fitness, or a newcomer language

circle? - The laneway behind our block is up for a City retrofit and the ward office wants our block's actual preference before the design locks — permeable pavement, a rain garden, or a shared path?

Bad questions (invented, or nobody in the room can touch the outcome): - Should Canada abolish the Senate? — far past anything this room can move, and not this room's to decide. - What does "community" really mean? — not a decision; there's nothing for the room to hand anyone. - Should the City ban cars downtown? — a real question somewhere, but not bounded to anything this host or room actually faces.

Once you've picked the question, name where it's going — a councillor's office, a board, a BIA, your own institution's leadership — before you print a single flyer. The room deserves to know, from minute one, exactly whose hands its evening lands in.

The room — 12 to 30 people, seated on purpose

Small enough that everyone gets real table time, big enough that the room isn't just one clique. Four to six people per table is the workable size — two tables for twelve people, four or five for thirty.

Compose the tables yourself; don't let people compose themselves. Mix age, viewpoint (where you can tell in advance), and background as far as you're able to manage it, and split up people who arrived together — friends included. The reason, in one line: **rooms of the like-minded drift to extremes; mixed rooms drift toward each other — one of the best-documented findings in the study of group decision-making, and most of what follows in this kit exists to protect it.**

Kids welcome the way this kit means it: a corner with paper and something to draw with keeps the room theirs too, and any young person who wants a seat at a table — not the kids' corner — gets one.

The evening — 150 minutes

0:00–0:10 · Welcome, and why these rules. Say what tonight is, name the real question and where the record is going, and explain — a sentence or two each — why cards come before talk, why the tables are mixed on purpose, and why disagreement gets written down instead of voted away. The room deliberates better once it knows why.

0:10–0:25 · The question, and what's known. A short, plain briefing — numbers, a staff report, or two short pieces representing different sides. Information, not argument: never one side's talking points, and never an AI-modeled or AI-generated summary presented as neutral fact. If a human didn't write or gather it, it doesn't go up.

0:25–0:35 · Silent cards. Five minutes: every person writes their own answer, alone, before anyone else's voice can shape it. Then five minutes: the facilitator reads back a sample — anonymous, a genuine spread, not just the loudest cards — so the room hears its own raw, unanchored range before a word of discussion happens. *This is what protects the quiet from the loud.*

0:35–1:05 · First round, tables. Thirty minutes of table discussion on the question, cards already written and read back as the starting material — not a blank-page conversation.

1:05–1:10 · Cross-pollination shuffle. Five minutes: at least half of each table moves to a different table, carrying what their first table found.

1:10–1:40 · Second round, tables. Thirty minutes, now with each table hearing what other tables thought, working toward what they'd actually put on the record.

1:40–2:10 · Building the record, on the wall. Thirty minutes: the whole room, together, builds the three-column record (template below) out loud, one item at a time — the facilitator writes; the room supplies the words.

2:10–2:15 · Harvest. Five minutes: everyone fills in one vision, one complaint, one nomination (template below).

2:15–2:30 · Close: where this goes. Fifteen minutes. Restate, plainly, who receives the record and what happens next — this was named before the evening started, and it gets said again now, out loud, so the room hears its own evening land somewhere real.

The facilitator's card

- **Neutrality.** Whoever holds the pen holds no stated position on tonight's question. If the natural facilitator has a stake in the outcome, they hand the marker to someone who doesn't. The facilitator's job is the room's process — never the room's answer.
 - **The quiet-first rule.** In every round, before moving on, the facilitator asks out loud: "*who hasn't spoken yet?*" Ask it every round, not just once — this single habit is doing more work than any other rule in this kit.
 - **Timekeeping.** A visible clock or a phone timer. Call time out loud at every transition; 150 minutes is a promise to the room, not a suggestion.
 - **Writing the record.** Put up what was said in the words of who said it — never the facilitator's summary of it. When two things disagree, both go up, each in its own words.
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The three-column record

Built together, on the wall, in the room's own words. No forced consensus. No vote to "win."

WHERE WE AGREE

WHERE WE DIVIDE *(both sides, stated fairly)*

WHAT WE'D NEED TO KNOW TO MOVE

Minority positions, in the holder's own words (name only if the holder asks to be named — and anyone under 18 checks with a parent or guardian before choosing to be named):

This record stays with the room, and can also be submitted — in the room's own name, as the room's own statement — through the same link as the harvest, below.

The harvest sheet

One per person, three minutes:

- **VISION** — “Toronto in 2030 should ____”
- **COMPLAINT** — what's broken? (cross-streets optional)
- **NOMINATION** — a neighbourhood superhero: someone doing more than anyone notices

Submit here →



unitetolove.ca/harvest

(paper works the same as the QR code)

If the online form isn't live yet, the paper is the record — nothing is lost.

Only aggregate counts travel beyond the room: how many people, how many harvest items, and the three-column record itself. No names are collected — on the harvest sheet or the wall record — unless a dissenter specifically asks to be named next to their own position.

Translate this kit

Translate this kit — a one-page translation is itself a civic act. Priority languages (per the multilingual program, pending census confirmation): Cantonese, Mandarin, Punjabi, Urdu, Tagalog, Spanish, Tamil, Italian, Portuguese, Korean, Vietnamese, Arabic, Farsi, Bengali. Send translations through the same link.

A free, open kit. Copy it, change it, translate it, make it yours. — unitetolove.ca