26

CONSULCON

DAY 3 - 14:30 - Main Stage

Democratizing under Authoritarianism: How California Is Experimenting With Democratic Innovations

KEYNOTE + Q&A

JOE MATHEWS - Democracy Local

Session recap

At a glance

Joe Mathews, a Californian journalist and founder of Democracy Local (CONSUL's newest regional partner), described how he became a democratic practitioner 'against his will' after agreeing, in exchange for support from the Berggruen Institute for his publication, to apply the democratic innovations he had written about to California. The recorded part of his keynote covers the first of three announced topics: the Rewrite LA citizens' assembly on reforming the Los Angeles city charter. He was moving on to California Engage, a statewide digital platform, when the recording stopped.

Key messages

- Los Angeles illustrates why democratic reform is needed: a 15-member council for a city of 4 million, near-unchecked district power, federal prosecutions affecting five of the 15 seats in this decade, and a leaked recording of racist remarks by council members.
- A citizens' assembly can be organised with almost no time or money, but extreme time pressure undermines the learning phase and the quality of recommendations.
- Many foundations that claim to fund democracy only fund elections. The assembly was financed by unconventional, personal connections.
- Practitioners should be willing to name failure: Mathews called his assembly a failure because the council postponed acting on it.
- Even a 'failed' assembly can have lasting impact: it trained facilitators and volunteers and helped trigger new assemblies across California.

Facts, figures and references

- Rewrite LA assembly: budget about USD 200,000; 20,000 households invited by lot; two weekends; nine recommendations.
- Supporters included film director Daniel Kwan and actress Jamie Lee Curtis.
- Delivery partner: Healthy Democracy (Oregon). Polis was used for idea gathering.
- Reference example for a strong learning phase: Setagaya, Tokyo.

Takeaways for the community

- Commissioning bodies should allow realistic timelines, especially for the learning phase of deliberative processes.
- AI-generated briefing material for assemblies requires rigorous fact-checking.
- Honest reporting of failures is valuable for the field and can still produce capacity and momentum.