



# Small country, big innovation: The Irish Citizens' Assembly

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*What it's all about*

# The Irish Citizens' Assembly 2016 – 2018: a trailblazer for deliberative democracy

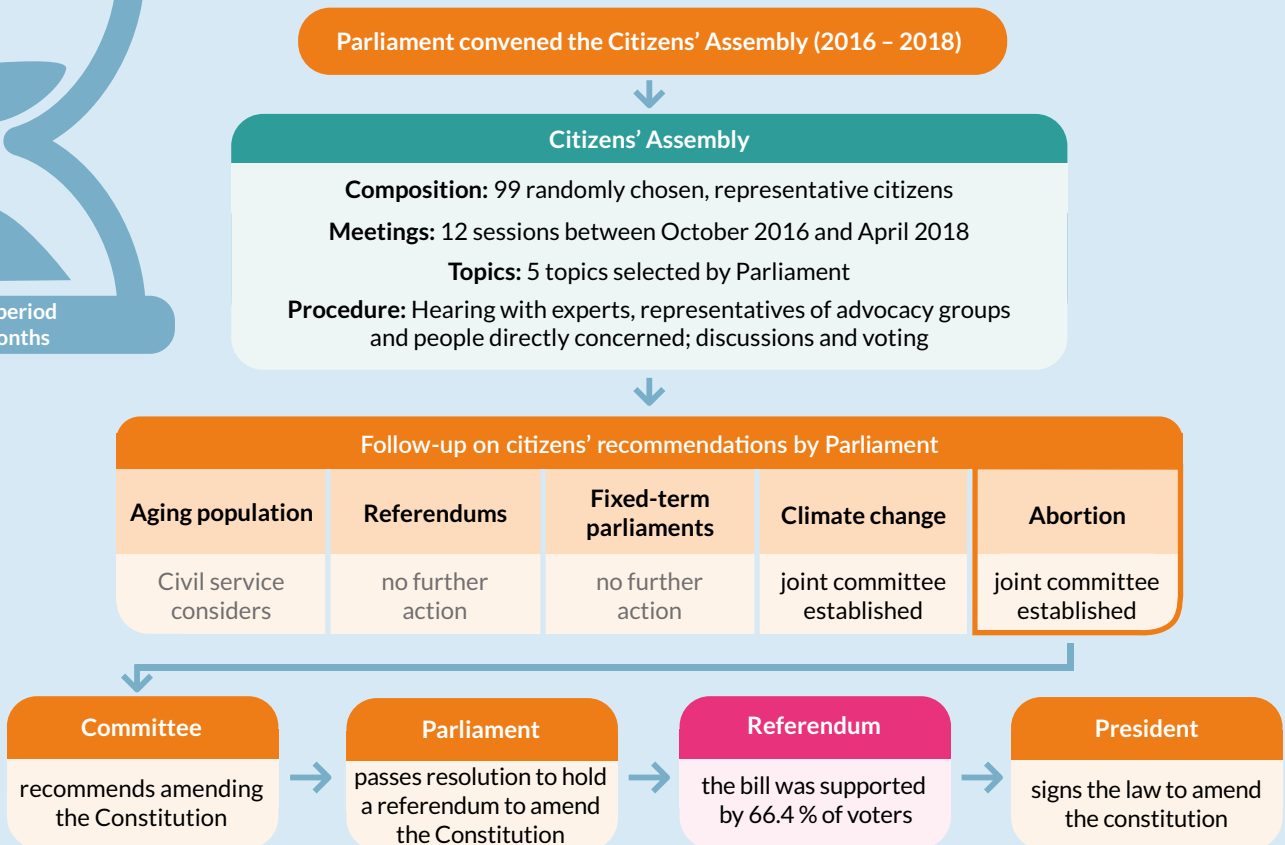


Ireland has set an example for democratic innovation. As the Irish Citizens' Assembly shows, representative democracy can be reinvigorated, especially if citizens get more chance of a say in politics. Following a referendum held in May 2018, Ireland changed its constitution and, consequently, its abortion laws. This process was initiated by the Citizens' Assembly. During the assembly 99 randomly chosen citizens met on altogether 12 weekends over a period of 19 months. They listened to experts, debated, collectively shared ideas and came up with several political proposals. One of these was to reform the country's abortion laws.

As Ireland proves, different forms of democracy can complement each other. The government initiated the Citizens' Assembly. Parliament discussed the results. A referendum involved all of the country's citizens. The combination of representative democracy with deliberative and direct democracy strengthens democracy as a whole.



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*How it works*



## The Irish Citizens' Assembly 2016 – 2018

**The Citizens' Assembly discussed** abortion, aging population, climate change, referendums, fixed-term parliaments

**Participants developed recommendations** on all the themes

The Assembly met on altogether **20 days**

High public awareness and over **13 500** further public submissions

Cost: **1.5 million euros.**  
No remuneration for participants

Government and parliament **acted quickly on the abortion issue and climate change**, but no reaction to the other three topics



**More than 66 %** of the Irish people voted in favour of changing the abortion law and the constitution followed the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly

**High degree of satisfaction** among participants. Yet also a high turnover of participants, mainly due to the lack of honorarium

Sessions of the Citizens' Assembly were **live-streamed** on the internet

**Guiding principles** for all the sessions: openness, fairness, equality, efficiency, respect and collegiality

## shortcut Good to know

### Diversity and deliberation: How the first Assembly worked

Members of the Citizens' Assembly were randomly chosen. They were broadly representative of society, to include age, gender, social class and regional spread. The names of members were posted on the Assembly's website. People from advocacy groups were excluded from membership of the Assembly. The Assembly followed the idea and method of deliberative democracy. Its members met in a Dublin hotel where they sat at round tables of seven to eight people. Each table also included a trained facilitator and a note-taker. The facilitator ensured that discussions kept to the point and were respectful, and that each member had an equal opportunity to speak. The table allocations rotated on all weekends so that members mixed around. A steering group made up of selected members

and supported by an expert advisory group decided on the itinerary of the meetings (see Farrell et.al.). These usually consisted of the following activities:

- » Presentations by legal, ethical and medical experts between 15 and 30 minutes. Briefing papers were circulated days in advance.
- » Short presentations by advocacy groups and, in certain cases (when discussing abortion), personal testimonials by a number of women.
- » Question and answer sessions.
- » Small-group round table facilitated discussions in closed sessions.
- » Private reflective moments.



#### The Citizens' Assembly 2016 – 2018 covered multiple issues

The abortion topic was discussed on five weekends. Members heard from 40 experts in medicine, law and ethics. They listened to six women affected by the Eighth Amendment (which covers access to abortion), and from 17 deeply involved lobby groups. By the end, they had acquired an 'almost uniquely comprehensive understanding' of abortion, said the chairperson of the Assembly, Ms Justice Laffoy. They emphatically rejected (87.3 per cent) the Eighth Amendment. 64 per cent voted even for abortion 'without restriction as to reason' for up to 12 weeks (Irish Times, 27.5.2018).

# One big step for democracy – two for Ireland

In almost no time at all, Ireland has taken two socio-political quantum leaps. In 2015 the country legalised marriage for all following an earlier iteration of the assembly, the Constitutional Convention. Then in May 2018 the abortion law was reformed through the Citizens' Assembly and a referendum. For decades Irish politics had shirked reform. Calls to liberalise abortion legislation were deemed a career killer for conservative-leaning politicians.

The courage showed by Irish politicians in launching the Citizens' Assembly and embracing greater democratic innovation has paid off. Many observers at first suspected the Assembly might be a tactical manoeuvre aimed once again at stalling the abortion issue. But the opposite was true. Until then, the debate had been marred by the aggressive mood stoked by warring lobby groups. While the intense and earnest deliberations among Assembly participants didn't take the emotionality out of all the discussions, it did show that even the most controversial issues can be tackled in deliberative processes.

With the Citizens' Assembly, Ireland has become a world leader in the linking of representative democracy (parliament), deliberative democracy (mini-publics) and direct democracy (referendums). Everyone is involved. The power of parliament and government, the classical organs of representative democracy, is not diminished. Quite the contrary, through the Citizens' Assembly 2016 to 2018 they actually gain greater political authority and legitimacy in the eyes of the country's citizens.

The Irish Citizens' Assembly is a trailblazer  
for participatory democracy.  
No other country has combined  
representative, direct and deliberative  
forms of democracy so well.



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**More on the subject**

**Deliberation in Ireland –  
not an isolated case**

There was a successful precedent: the Irish Constitutional Convention (2012–14), comprising 33 members of parliament, 66 randomly chosen Irish citizens and a chairperson. In 2015 the convention resulted in a referendum on the constitution and the legalisation of same-sex marriages. This was the start of deliberative democracy in Ireland.

**What next?**

Thanks to the innovative participation of its citizens, Ireland has resolved two major social conflicts at once. Following this success, a new Citizens' Assembly started in February 2020. In it, 99 new randomly selected citizens consider the issue of gender equality in areas such as pay, leadership or care.

**Sources and further reading**

Farrell, D. M., Suiter, J., & Harris, C. (2019). 'Systematizing' constitutional deliberation: the 2016–18 citizens' assembly in Ireland.

A survey article describing the origins, the workings and the impact of the Citizens' Assembly 2016 to 2018.



**www.citizensassembly.ie**  
Information on the Assembly's work, all official documents, all meeting contents and summaries of further submissions.

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# Future of Democracy



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