Reimagining Democracy

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Part I

The Irish Front Line

Clearing the Path for a Nationwide Mini-Public

As early as 2009, members of the political science departments of Irish universities, including ourselves, had set up a working group under the aegis of the Political Studies Association of Ireland. Our primary mission was to respond to the ongoing crisis and to the increasingly vocal debate over the need for changes to the political system and wider public life. The group—of no uniform ideological bent—did not always agree on the nature of reforms needed, but we all agreed on the importance of informed debate.

The group implemented a series of initiatives involving various teams of political scientists who worked together with a broader set of colleagues. In the years that followed, the
resulting Irish Citizens Assembly project was involved with three key events: a 2011 experimental and pilot study known as “We the Citizens,” the 2012–2014 Convention on the Constitution, and the 2016–2018 Irish Citizens Assembly—each building on previous successes.

Our first steps on this long journey were twofold: (1) we focused on promoting the kinds of systemic political reform that would increase the government’s responsiveness, openness, and accountability, and (2) we set out a process designed to increase the opportunities for regular people to be listened to.

The first approach was aimed at supercharging the political reform debate in the February 2011 election. It was one thing to have the entire country griping about the government, but it was another to get people talking about pragmatic improvements. Our goals depended not only on the political science community but also on activists, web designers, and data analysts because our efforts relied heavily on op-eds and online measures. One of these was the relaunching of a blog (Politicalreform.ie) dedicated to examining specific policy failures and offering solutions. Another site important in the heat of the 2011 general elections was Reformcard.com, an online measurement tool that ranked each party based on the quality of their proposals for political reform. Reformcard.com provided twenty-five proposals for political forum aimed at transforming the political system and making it fit for the twenty-first century. We judged
each party’s reform policies in five broad areas of the political system—legislative, electoral, open government, local government, and public services—using five indicators for each area. In total, each party was scored on twenty-five aspects of political reform and was graded out of a maximum of one hundred for the effectiveness of their proposals. This was a tool designed to help voters decide, but extensive media coverage demanded that the parties take it seriously. As a result, every party included an extensive section on political reform within their 2011 election manifestos.

The second initiative focused on the process of reform, on proposing bottom-up, citizen-oriented approaches centered on the use of deliberative forums. Along with colleagues Elaine Byrne and Eoin O’Malley, we submitted a proposal to Atlantic Philanthropies for a project relating to deliberative democracy that would be transparent, independent, and objective. We proposed to call it We the Citizens. We the Citizens was organized with the support of the Irish Universities Association, the representative body for the seven Irish universities. The idea behind this deliberative approach was the professional and personal conviction that it could help citizens recapture trust in their political process. Through it, citizens could join the decision-making process—not as elected officials, but simply as engaged, everyday voters—and act as a bridge between the people and their politicians, reconciling a democratic deficit that had been feeding so much bitterness.
Our group had seen promising results in other countries around the world. For instance, Canada had used citizens assemblies to deliberate on reforming the electoral systems in British Columbia (2004) and Ontario (2007), as had the Netherlands (2006). And, of course, these citizens’ assemblies were just one form of a “deliberative mini-public”; others have included the citizens’ juries that originated in the US in the 1970s, the Danish consensus conferences that date from the 1980s, German planning cells that date from the 1970s, or James Fishkin’s deliberative polls that originated in the 1990s. All share the use of small groups of randomly selected citizens, operating according to deliberative principles (including facilitated small-group discussions) and tasked with considering one or a number of important policy, institutional, or constitutional reform issues. The citizens’ assemblies are generally seen as the superior form of a deliberative mini-public because they are large (generally including one hundred or more citizens), operate over a long period (thus allowing time for more detailed discussions), and their outcomes lead to referendums involving the wider body of citizens in a nation-state.

In other words, political scientists like us already knew the benefits: assemblies involve rational, reasoned discussion with a cross-section of an entire population, and they use various methods of inquiry such as directly questioning experts. The process is not adversarial, although disagreement is inevitable and valued because it allows space for an
inclusive process of dialogue and discussion. It promotes creativity and tends to build consensus rather than separating people into winning and losing sides—but there is no requirement of unanimity. Deliberative processes are not meant to replace representative or direct democracy, but to enhance and support it. We were hopeful, and indeed, the ideal held some appeal with the general public.

Of course, such a proposal also had many detractors. Some argued that “we already have a citizens’ assembly; it’s called the parliament!” Others wondered aloud about the abilities of “ordinary citizens” to have the capacity or the time to deal with complicated topics—the implication being that politics is too complicated for the average citizen and that matters of importance are better left in the hands of professional politicians. We profoundly disagreed with both charges.

At its heart, We the Citizens was a research project designed to test these worries and to establish whether more deliberative mechanisms for citizen involvement would have a positive effect on democracy. We the Citizens was a two-phased project designed to add impetus to these commitments. For the first phase, we held a series of public meetings in seven different locations around the country. These provided an opportunity for people to share ideas and concerns that could feed into the eventual national Citizens’ Assembly. They also served as awareness-raising exercises in cities and towns around the country, supporting our first initiative of raising public awareness of the possibility for greater citizen
involvement in our country’s democracy. Discussion reinforced that while this was the worst economic recession in Irish history, it was not the first. The diagnosis was a malfunctioning political system: criticisms pointed out that it was mired in the pork barrel, lacked accountability, and was run by politicians distant from the people. What was most revealing from these public meetings was a sheer hunger for reflective dialogue. Our worries about these meetings running out of control proved unfounded. What became quickly apparent was that people were prepared to park their anger at the door and enter the room to talk, not fight.

In the meantime, the country elected new leaders in February 2011. The two main political parties which formed the resulting Irish government committed to various forms of citizen or constitutional assemblies in their election manifestos—thanks, in part, to our activities during that campaign to promote discussion of bottom-up approaches to political reform. The parties that formed a new government after that election promised to establish a “constitutional convention” that would include citizens as members, but they were vague on the details. The principal mission of We the Citizens, therefore, was to help guide the government on how to do this, ensuring that the parties fulfilled their campaign promises.

The second phase of We the Citizens was about forming, at last, the Citizens’ Assembly. Crucially, it would be the pilot program for others to come.
Anatomy of a First Assembly

At the heart of our project—in 2011 and today—is the idea that politicians must be prepared to listen to the people, to believe that the people can be trusted with decisions, to weigh up evidence, and to come to conclusions that are in society’s best interest. Basic enough, right? In the traditional understanding of representative democracy, the people would simply elect politicians to represent their interest: they had the opportunity to “kick the rascals out.” But in an increasingly fragmented and globalized world, this model is under strain: voters feel increasingly detached and national governments appear less in control of events. This often leads to a gap between the elites and the people, a gap which can then be harnessed by populist and other actors seeking to exploit human vulnerability when trust is in decline.

What Is Deliberative Democracy?

Academic definition: Deliberative democracy can be defined as “a process of reaching reasoned agreement among free and equal citizens, ensuring that they have an opportunity to express their views and preferences and justify their decisions within a deliberative process for the purpose of reaching conclusions that are collectively binding.”
We can trace the roots of deliberative democracy back to Aristotle and Ancient Greece, where all citizens in the demos came together in the public square to debate and to decide on the issues of the day. The German philosopher Jurgen Habermas—and indeed many others—have refined it and there are variations in interpretation. What is common to all conceptions is that those involved must deliberate, based on evidence, before voting. Thus the debate should be informed and balanced by evidence from all sides of an argument; it should be civil and repetitive, such that all points of view held by significant portions of the population should be repeated for all to hear.

For us, a citizens’ assembly offers a means to reduce the risks to that traditional, democratic model. The simple idea is to bolster representative democracy through adding a deliberative element: a forum where people of different persuasions can come together to listen to one another. The goal is to become informed, understand, and to come to conclusions—in essence combining deliberative with representative democracy in order to strengthen democracy overall.

With all this in mind, our first assembly in 2011 relied on a randomly selected cross section of Irish society. This randomness was important. That rainy June weekend, the group who turned up at a South Dublin hotel to deliberate included students and the curious, young and old, men and women,
but mainly those taken from a group of 1,242 people randomly polled. Members had not attended the regional events and were not representing any area or group. The only selection criterion, other than that they be part of the original survey group, was that the overall group be as representative as possible of the Irish population. While nobody was asked to state their occupation, it was evident that the mix of people who attended included employers, the unemployed, public and private sector workers, students, small-businesspeople, and also people who worked in the home. The ages ranged from approximately fifteen to eighty. Among them was one older lady who had never voted in her life and was thrilled that someone wanted her opinion.

Our hotel and the weather may not have been ideal, but it turned out that the location for the Citizens’ Assembly the next day was perfect. We convened in Dublin’s city center at the Great Hall of the Royal Hospital Kilmainham, a beautifully restored seventeenth-century structure whose grandeur invoked something of our lofty hopes for the project. The Citizens’ Assembly members were bussed in from the hotel (a job in itself to round up everyone on time). On arrival, and after a short interlude for a group photograph, members were seated at round tables of eight, each having a facilitator and notetaker, with paper tablecloths and markers to give everyone an opportunity to write down their own unmediated thoughts and comments. The meeting started with a short video that had been produced overnight by the project’s
cameraman. Unknown to us he had approached each member as they arrived in the hotel and got their permission to take a few photos, splicing them together to produce a short but wonderful video that served beautifully to introduce the members to each other. The reaction was electric: no one in the room could be in any doubt that they were at the start of an important moment, and furthermore, that their presence was valued.

The agenda was set on the basis of the issues raised in the regional events that had been held around the country in May and early June 2011. Over the next two days, the members were asked to deliberate on a number of political reform questions relating to representation and on divisive topics of interest to Irish citizens at the time—the appropriate balance between taxation and spending, property taxes, water charges, sale of state assets, and student fees.

The session started with a brief presentation by one or more experts, summarizing the key arguments that were set out in the briefing documents circulated the evening before. The purpose of the briefing documents and the expert panel was to provide the participants with the background information they needed to have an informed discussion.

Next, they were given an opportunity to deliberate among themselves, with the experts available to answer questions of detail or fact. This was followed by a plenary session in which all members were invited to comment on their initial sets of recommendations—this was done via roaming mikes.
In most cases, the tables nominated a spokesperson to share the table’s recommendations with the assembly, though there were also individual contributions. Initially, the reticence to speak up was evident, but as the day progressed and members grew in confidence, the problem became one of how to keep to time.

The Citizens’ Assembly members were then given another opportunity to deliberate in small groups to finalize and word their recommendations; in all instances, each table was dealing with the same issue simultaneously. As the session drew to a close, they were asked to propose recommendations about the issue at hand and these were gathered in for each table. Once the recommendations had been collated, a ballot paper was produced and the Citizens’ Assembly members were given an opportunity to vote on their recommendations.

Inevitably, the agenda item that proved most difficult to come to a resolution on was the economy—the final matter discussed on Sunday morning. Emotions ran high, at least in some of the tables. As one member commented afterwards: “One of the issues that came up on our table is that we feel there’s an elephant in the room here, and that is the debts that we owe the banks and the fact that a bank like Anglo Irish—a speculative investment bank—was underwritten by the state. And we’re talking about a third of national debt has gone to pay off these debts which should not be the responsibility of the Irish citizens, and I feel that this is one of the biggest
issues facing the country right now.” Views were so strong on this agenda item—not surprising given the dire state of the Irish economy at the time—that it resulted in a large ballot paper with more than one hundred recommendations. It is important to note, however, that at this pilot assembly, the voting was not a core element of the scientific process. The We the Citizens team chose to add in a ballot at the end of each session to give the participants in the pilot assembly some sense of completing a process. In a real citizens’ assembly (such as the two Irish processes that followed), the recommendations would be sent back time and time again to the participants for further deliberation and refining.

Ultimately, the general tone of the debates was constructive, with participants listening to each other’s views and giving one another the opportunity to speak, even when their views were very different. The groups made good use of the experts, asking them to clarify specific points and to provide international or best-practice examples when, for instance, there was a disagreement on which the group was stuck. As one would expect, some groups were more talkative than others. There were a small number of instances where a very strong personality dominated the discussion, though generally this tended not to happen, as the facilitators were able to manage the dynamic and keep some balance in terms of contribution within the groups. In general, people were satisfied with the agenda and how the discussions were moderated.
The value of our pilot Citizens’ Assembly held in June 2011 cannot be overestimated. The concerns we had on that rainy night at the start of the weekend were wiped away: one hundred citizens had turned up and stayed the course. They listened to the experts, engaged in respectful and informed dialogue, and formed clear conclusions about the matters they had discussed. And crucially for our purposes, our surveys of them produced the sorts of findings that we had expected to find. The survey data demonstrated that when compared to their starting position (i.e., before their involvement in the Citizens’ Assembly) and also when compared with a sample of citizens who had not participated in the process, our participants showed greater interest in politics, and they become more willing to discuss and become more involved in politics going forward.\textsuperscript{10}

Encouragingly, at the end of the process, our participants also felt more positive about the ability of ordinary people to influence politics. We observed large shifts in the opinions of Citizens’ Assembly members after they had deliberated on economic issues such as taxation, spending, and the sale of state assets. These opinion shifts were statistically significant and distinctly different from those of the various control groups that were built into the political science experiment that was at the heart of the We the Citizens project. In other words, we emerged confident that the changes we observed were not random or a result of chance: it was the participation in the Citizens’ Assembly that had caused these
positive changes. In short, we had clear, formidable evidence that participation in a citizens’ assembly produces better-informed and more satisfied citizens—in Ireland and (as existing research shows) elsewhere, too.

Reception

A single assembly, of course, is not enough to influence one nation’s public sentiment, let alone change the world. A week after our first event concluded, a special program ran in the primetime evening slot on the national broadcaster, RTÉ. This program was the result of intense prior discussions we had with senior RTÉ executives when we launched our We the Citizens project; we’d built in a budget line item to bring a large portion of our Citizens’ Assembly members back to Dublin for this live program. The voices of these randomly selected citizens were overwhelmingly in favor of the process—but, at least initially, we were met with a cynical response from many journalists and politicians.

Prime-Time Special on the Citizens’ Assembly,
RTÉ Television, July 4, 2011

“I know I had the vote, but I didn’t feel that I had a voice.”
—Annette Ferguson, Blackrock, County Louth
“I’m just a Regular-John Citizen, but like multiples of thousands of John and Joan Citizens over the last decade and a half, I have become very disillusioned with the disconnect that has developed between the body politic and the people who are there that are meant to represent us. So when I found the opportunity to join the Citizens’ Assembly, I said to myself that it is better to light one candle than curse the darkness. It may or may not prove to be influential in the end, but it is better to do something than nothing at all, and I think that this organization could be a very useful adjunct to the status-quo body politic in this country. If they listen to us, perhaps we can fill the middle ground between the top and the bottom, which is very, very badly needed.”

—P. J. Walsh, Ballymahon, County Longford

“I think it is very important to have elected people make the executive decisions, but I felt the [Citizens’ Assembly] was a very good way of listening to the ordinary people—not people who have set up blogs or are in pressure groups. One thing that we found was that what everybody wanted was for politicians to sort out the system, not somebody’s medical card.”

—Tom Cavanagh, Shankill, County Dublin

Yet we, like the assembly members, were optimistic. The experiment had demonstrated that Irish people, even those
randomly selected, could be trusted to deliberate, to come to views based on evidence, and to trust one another and the system more. The resulting report was presented to the leaders of every political party in Ireland in a series of bilateral meetings. Examining the report, senior politicians could see that this was indeed a possible way forward to rebuild trust. Some still expressed a degree of skepticism about the scope or full potential of an initiative like this in “the real world,” but most expressed at least a willingness to give it a go—and particularly so for the leaders of the two parties in government.

As a result, in November of that same year, the Convention on the Constitution was announced. It was to consider a wide range of measures (reviewed below) and to include both regular citizens and politicians. The time for real citizen participation in Ireland had begun.

The Citizens’ Assembly project now moved to its next phase—supporting the work of a real-world deliberative mini-public. But these were still nervous times for us. Standing in the rain on that wet Friday night, we’d worried about whether our weekend-long experiment would work. Now that the process was being taken up by government to be launched on a grand scale, our worry was whether it would go to plan: Would all the political parties cooperate? Would the civil servants put in charge of running the process keep to the “deliberative democracy” script? Would the citizens engage and stay the course? Would the media provide fair
(or indeed, any) coverage? Would the process produce reasonable and credible outcomes? And what would happen to those outcomes once the process had completed its work?

We the Citizens had been created to make substantive changes in the nation’s political process. The next chapter, then, involves the 2012–2014 Convention on the Constitution—which built on the success and new credibility of our pilot Citizens’ Assembly, but in this instance, its mission was to discuss the foundational document of our republic. As we shall see below, this convention was responsible for the progressive reforms unveiled to the world a few years later, and also showcased another method of forming such an assembly—a hybrid composed of both citizens and politicians.

A Hybrid Model: Citizens and Politicians

In late 2012, the Irish government established the Convention on the Constitution, which followed many of the organizational features and procedures spearheaded by We the Citizens. Specifically, it once again included randomly selected citizen members and followed carefully facilitated and informed small-group discussions. It met for fourteen months between December 2012 and February 2014.

One clear difference with the We the Citizens process was that the membership of the convention comprised sixty-six citizens selected randomly from the greater population by
a market research company but also thirty-three legislators from the Irish parliament nominated by their respective parties, including representatives from the political parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly. The hundredth member was the chair, Tom Arnold, a respected individual from the charity sector.\textsuperscript{11} We formed the core of the Academic and Legal Support Group for the Convention; joining us were two other political scientists—Eoin O’Malley (who had worked with us on the We the Citizens project) and Clodagh Harris—and a practicing lawyer, Lia O’Hegarty.\textsuperscript{12} The secretariat reserved space for a series of weekends in a seaside hotel near Dublin, one with very good Wi-Fi, for deliberation.

Onlookers were wary of the politicians’ involvement. After all, politicians are professional communicators and are, on average, better educated than the average citizen. There were prominent journalists who penned op-eds expressing concerns that the politicians might dominate the discussion and deliberations. We will address this in more detail in just a moment, but suffice to say here, the organizers (ourselves included) shared this concern and measures were taken to prevent it, not least of all through the use of trained facilitators to ensure that all members had an equal voice in discussions. In addition, the chair established a set of principles by which the convention should operate, and he repeatedly reminded members of these principles and included them in his introduction to each of the reports. The key mantras
were (1) openness and transparency (2) fairness (3) equality of voice, and (4) collegiality.\textsuperscript{13}

In the lead-up to the opening meeting, political, academic, and media circles expressed skepticism about the convention. Some critics judged its agenda as too narrow. Others questioned whether the proposed model of deliberative democracy, involving randomly selected citizens and politicians, would even work. In addition, people doubted whether the government would take the exercise seriously, notwithstanding a commitment to provide a response to each recommendation within four months and set a time frame for recommendations that should go to referendum. As we shall see, in most respects, these criticisms proved unfounded.

The convention was tasked by the government with considering some eight topics:

- the term of the Irish presidency;
- whether to reduce the voting age for citizens;
- electoral reform;
- the right for citizens outside the state to vote in presidential elections;
- marriage equality;
- the role of women in the constitution;
- the participation of women in politics and public life; and
- blasphemy.
In addition, the convention added a few more items to its agenda: parliamentary reform and whether to insert a clause on economic, social, and cultural rights into our constitution. It’s worth pausing a moment to appreciate the breadth and progressivism of some of these issues—not just in Ireland but in other countries around the world. Regular Irish citizens were being entrusted with deliberating on key issues such as marriage equality, the role of women, and voting rights.

The convention met over ten weekends for day-and-a-half sessions; arriving on Friday evening and departing by lunchtime on Sunday. Each meeting had three components: (1) presentation by experts of papers that had been circulated in advance; (2) debate between groups advocating on either side of an issue; and (3) roundtable discussions involving facilitators and notetakers. On Sunday morning, the members considered again the discussions of the previous day and voted on a ballot paper that reflected the details of the debate.

A good example of how this process operated is the weekend-long discussion on marriage equality in April 2013. The courts’ interpretation of the Irish constitution was that it prevented the state from legislating for full gay marriage. The convention, therefore, was asked to consider the question of whether there should be a referendum to change the constitution to allow for marriage equality. The convention members received expert testimony (including documentation circulated in advance) from senior and respected constitutional
lawyers (or “senior counsel”), academic lawyers, and child psychologists. There were also presentations by advocates on either side of the argument—included in the mix were a Catholic bishop and the children of same-sex couples.

The discussion of this topic included some truly memorable moments, such as toward the end of the weekend when one of the citizen members, who had not spoken before, stood up to make a personal statement. He spoke clearly but with some emotion: it was obvious to all in the room that he wanted to make a strong point. A kind of electric potential charged the air as everyone seemed to sense the nature of what he was about to say. He had been abused as a small child, he said, and the experience had affected his attitudes toward gay people. Here, in this room, he felt it was important to declare his view: he had no problem at all with the proposal for gay marriage. The hair rose on the backs of our necks. Applause broke out. Members rose to their feet, clapping.

The room was full throughout the weekend with journalists and other observers; although all of these were present only for the plenary discussion and were asked to leave while the small roundtable discussions were underway. Indeed, there were more people than could be accommodated in the room, and as a result, an overflow room had to be arranged with live streaming. The topic #marref trended on Twitter throughout the weekend.

After two days of intense discussion, the recommendation was clear: the members voted by an overwhelming majority
(79 percent in favor) that there should be a referendum on marriage equality. In addition, they voted (again by a large majority) in favor of legislation to clarify the issues of parentage, guardianship, and the upbringing of children by same-sex couples.

The reaction to the vote was immediate and loud. Cheering could be heard from the corridors outside the room, and there followed a night of celebrating in the gay bars across Ireland. This was seen as a seminal moment in the long campaign for gay rights in Ireland and internationally. It is generally accepted that it finally persuaded an otherwise socially conservative prime minister to accept and embrace the call for marriage equality to the extent that he went on to play a prominent role in the referendum campaign that followed.

Marriage equality was approved at a referendum on May 22, 2015, by 62 percent of voters on a turnout of 61 percent. Thus, Ireland became the first country in the world to approve marriage equality through a people’s vote rather than by court decision or parliamentary (or congressional) act.

In total, the convention made forty-three recommendations, eighteen of which would require constitutional amendment by a referendum. To date, there have been three such referenda, two successful (on marriage equality in 2015 and blasphemy in 2018) and one not (on reducing the age requirement of presidential candidates). There have also been extensive parliamentary reforms, and further reforms are promised or are still being considered.
The fact that the convention catalyzed such important changes—especially the hugely successful referendum on marriage equality—makes Ireland a world first. The previous real-world examples of deliberation on a larger scale (the citizens’ assemblies of British Columbia, Ontario, and the Netherlands) proved unsuccessful in terms of policy outcomes. One major reason for this was a disconnect between the citizen members and the wider political class who were excluded from the deliberative process and who therefore neither paid much heed to it nor supported its outcomes. In fact, some felt that a factor behind the success of the Irish assembly was its mixed membership, sixty-six randomly selected citizens working side by-side with thirty-three professional politicians, with the latter anchoring the process in the political system, making it more likely that the convention’s recommendations would receive a fair hearing. One question, then, is whether politicians undermined the mini-public design of the convention by overwhelming the voices of ordinary citizens, at a cost to the deliberative process. However, in the detailed research that we have been able to carry out—based on extensive survey data gathered from the convention members—we find no evidence that politicians dominated the discussions. There is evidence of a slight liberal bias among the politician membership, but this had little effect on the outcomes.15

The lessons for the Irish political class were clear. A well-run citizens’ assembly or convention can deliver a balanced, informed debate.
A third model for Ireland’s democratic mini-publics is centered on a major plank of social and moral policy that had long needed a resolution: Ireland’s constitutional ban on abortion. This is the issue that bedeviled successive Irish governments ever since the early 1980s, when a referendum was passed (in 1983) to insert an abortion ban into the constitution. The prevailing Catholic-oriented orthodoxies ensured that little could be done to resolve the issue. The success of the 2015 marriage equality referendum showed the potential of deliberative democracy to help ease the way for resolving difficult and emotive issues. Could it also help solve the decades-long problem of Ireland’s abortion ban?

In the run-up to the 2016 election, pressure was mounting on politicians to tackle Ireland’s abortion laws. Yet, the prevailing conservative orthodoxy was still present despite opinion polling that indicated strong support to remove the constitutional ban on abortion. By 2013, some 68 percent of voters were in favor of a referendum to make an exception for cases of rape or where the fetus will not be born alive, according to MRBI polls in *The Irish Times*. The death of a young mother was heavily publicized, and the UN Human Rights Committee found that Ireland’s law prohibiting and criminalizing abortion violated women’s human rights.
Yet, the issue was so polarizing and campaigners so vitriolic that politicians balked at taking action. Therefore, the outgoing government in 2015 proposed putting this divisive issue to the people in a citizens’ assembly. The final push arrived when an independent (i.e., non-party) legislator in the parliament made it a condition of her joining the coalition government in 2016.

The assembly was mandated to look not only at abortion, but at climate change, fixed-term parliaments, and the “the manner in which referenda are held” (i.e., should we hold “super-referendum days,” whereby a significant number of referenda are voted on in the same day). Nevertheless, all eyes were focused on abortion.

This was the first topic that the assembly dealt with. Their work covered a five-month period from late 2016 and included five meetings and plenty of reading material to wade through. As in the previous process, the members heard from a mix of experts—constitutional lawyers, healthcare practitioners, and ethicists—and campaigners advocating for each side of the issue. They also heard harrowing personal testimonies from women who either had an abortion or who decided not to.

A secret-ballot vote was held at the end of the process with the members voting overwhelmingly to replace the article with a new provision explicitly authorizing the Irish parliament to legislate for abortion and, of great surprise to watching pundits, for a very substantial liberalization of
the abortion provision. Indeed, the degree of liberalization proposed attracted considerable journalistic comment. As one journalist remarked: “The results were more liberal than most would have imagined likely.” Another referred to the vote as a “landmark call.” An editorial in *The Irish Times* praised the Citizens’ Assembly for performing “an important service in setting out a bold agenda for reform of our abortion laws.”

The assembly report was submitted to the Irish parliament, which convened a special committee to consider it in detail. That committee in turn recommended a referendum and legislation to liberalize Ireland’s abortion rules, a move then endorsed by the parliament. The referendum was held on May 25, 2018 with a near-record turnout of 64 percent. The electorate voted to repeal the 8th Amendment by a majority of 66 percent to 34 percent, a result noted for its similarity to that of the Citizens’ Assembly vote.

It’s worth underscoring that the Citizens’ Assembly was composed solely of ordinary citizens; politicians were not involved due to the divisiveness of the topic. However, parliament was invested in the assembly: recall that parliament chose to convene it in the first place, and after the assembly delivered its report, a special parliamentary committee was waiting to discuss the report and its recommendations. Thus, a direct line still connected the assembly and the larger political system. As the convention had shown, this line matters—if politicians are involved in a process, they’re more likely to
feel invested in it, and thereby respect their responsibility to bring the assembly’s work to a public vote.

As we have seen, the Citizens’ Assembly followed in the wake of an earlier deliberative mini-public, the Constitutional Convention. And like its predecessor, it represented an important stage in the process leading up to the calling of a national referendum and also in its successful passage. Ireland, therefore, not only stands out internationally as the first country in the world to hold two constitutional mini-publics in quick succession, but also as a world leader in the linking of deliberative democracy (mini-publics) and direct democracy (referenda).

This speaks to a wider debate in the academic literature about how deliberation may not occur in isolation, but rather as part of the wider political system. How this might operate in practice is still being discussed, but the Irish case suggests one route whereby a citizens’ assembly helps inform a wider debate in society that leads to a national referendum about an important constitutional reform. In this way, citizens’ assemblies can perform a discursive role, bringing the focus of referendum debates onto arguments that have been deliberatively scrutinized.

The 2016–2018 Irish Citizens’ Assembly, like the Irish Convention on the Constitution before it, provides an instance of how deliberation can be inserted into the referendum process in a meaningful way. They illustrate powerful real-world examples of the potential “systemization” of deliberation.
Conclusion of Part I: Global Successes and Other Models

Deliberation and mini-publics are gaining currency beyond Ireland. Some of the resulting changes we’ve shown so far are specific to our country—for example, the inclusion of marriage equality and abortion within the constitution. But the value of the process, as we will show, is that facilitated mini-public debates bring people together during a time when political rhetoric is otherwise trying to tear them apart.

The assemblies in Ireland variously tackled topics as diverse as aging, climate change, and electoral reform. They brought people to at least a shared understanding of the problem, even if their solutions remain different. And as we’ve seen in this section, the forms of deliberative democracy have varied even across Ireland’s recent attempts, each with their unique successes. Additionally, we can expand our survey to see even more examples of deliberative democracy tackling previously intractable issues. Nations and cities around the world—from Latin America to Europe and Africa—are seeking to embed deliberative democracy within their political systems. Here are some examples:

- **The Brexit debate in the United Kingdom.** The Citizens’ Assembly on Brexit was held over two weekends in September 2017. It brought together fifty randomly selected
citizens who reflected the diversity of the UK electorate. This was an opportunity for a diverse group of voters with differing viewpoints to learn about the issues of trade and migration from a variety of experts and politicians, deliberate with one another, and come to recommendations on the form that Brexit should take. The assembly was organized by an independent group of academics and civil society organizations. It revealed a much more nuanced picture of public opinion than many had come to expect. “Remainers” and “Leavers” engaged in detailed, reflective, and informed discussions about what the UK’s post-Brexit relations with the European Union should be. Their discourse provided evidence that despite chaos at the Houses of Parliament in Westminster, citizens are willing and able to learn about, deliberate over, and come to subtle and well-considered recommendations on highly complicated and controversial policy issues. Although various leading politicians talked up the “no deal” option and stressed the overriding importance of strong control over immigration—the citizens’ assembly arrived at a set of recommendations that ran counter to those position. To date, the British government has not accepted the calls for a government-sponsored citizens’ assembly, but there are growing calls from politicians across all parties, and (at this writing) it cannot be ruled out in the future. If citizens can do this on an issue as divisive as Brexit, we strongly believe that citizens’ assemblies
and other deliberative processes can be used on a range of challenging political and constitutional issues.

- **The German-speaking parliament of East Belgium.** The “Ostbelgien Model” is a permanent and institutionalized citizen council set up by the government and parliament of the German-speaking region of Belgium. In 2018 and 2019, the Belgian G1000 convened a group of experts (including one of us) to help design a model for citizen participation in policy making. The mandate was to include the types of features we’ve discussed here: deliberative processes and random selection. Starting in September 2019, a fixed citizen council will set the agenda for one to three citizens’ assemblies every year. These assemblies will come up with recommendations for regional policy, and parliament is required to respond.

- **France.** Le Grand Débat National was announced by the French president Emmanuel Macron as a response to the Yellow Vests movement and was launched in January 2019. It centered around four themes: ecological transition, taxation, organization of the state, and democracy and citizenship. It was made up a combination of regional meetings of self-selected groups in town halls often hosted by local mayors or even individual citizens. In addition, there were multiple opportunities to submit ideas—through mobile desks in train stations, for example, as well as online. Finally, there were randomly selected citizen assemblies in each of the French regions and five
overseas territories. It is still too early to tell what the result will be, and most reforms will require parliamentary approval or trade-offs.

• **Madrid, Spain.** Observatorio de la Ciudad, run by ParticipaLab, is an institutionalized body composed of forty-nine randomly selected participants. They rotate every year after eight sessions of work. Their main task is to review proposals coming from the popular civic-engagement website, Decide Madrid. They write a short report for every proposal before sending it to the public in the form of a referendum. They work under a deliberative dynamic with facilitation. This is a project from the city council, but ParticipaLab has been helping to inspire, design, and calibrate every detail. The Observatorio was preceded by the G1000 Madrid.

• **Toronto, Canada.** Here we see one of the few examples in the world of a long-standing residents panel advising a municipal government. The Toronto Planning Review Panel, run by MASS LBP ("MASS Led by People"), provides a representative, community-centric voice to the city’s planning division, complementing the work of other advisory bodies. It is made up of thirty-two randomly selected residents from across Toronto who meet regularly over the course of two years. Since its creation in 2015, the TPRP has influenced dozens of projects of strategic city-wide importance and is rapidly becoming an important part of the city’s planning, design, policies, and projects.
We invite you to imagine the sort of intractable issues that might be tackled in your home city or country. If you are reading this in the United States, for instance, deliberative democracy might provide a means to discuss the pros and cons of amending the constitution to reform the electoral college. It might debate gun control laws or environmental standards. Or it might help a city decide the best way to police its streets or manage gentrification.

Citizens’ assemblies and other forms of deliberative mini-publics are not a magical cure for all that ails a contemporary democracy. Well-organized deliberation, however, engages ordinary citizens in an unbiased, comprehensive dialogue. This engagement is an antidote to cynicism and political resentment—and in today’s polarized world, it may provide an answer to populism and the accompanying growing distrust of elites, which has been especially poisonous in the body politic. Imagine demonstrating a different possibility, however. Imagine a political system that brings citizens into the room and allows them the space, time, and supports to deliberate and produce recommendations. Imagine the elite listening to those voices, and the trust resulting from being seen to do so.

In Ireland, we were fortunate to see this imagined future become a reality. In the next part of this essay, we will discuss the fundamentals of making it a reality in other democracies, too.