

## Including citizens in discussions over constitutional reform

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CULTURAL POLITICAL SOCIAL

### SUMMARY

The genesis of this project was Ireland's 2008/2009 financial and economic meltdown and the resulting anger over failings in our political system. I led a group of political scientists who proposed that citizens should be brought into the heart of debates over constitutional reforms to improve how our representative system of democracy operates. Our modus operandi was to seek to persuade the newly elected government in 2011 to establish a citizens' forum. We established 'We the Citizens', whose year-long activity of work culminated in Ireland's first national citizens' assembly in June 2011. The data analysis underlying the assembly was presented to government, which some months later established the Irish Constitutional Convention (ICC). I was appointed research director with key responsibility to ensure that the ICC followed deliberative practice.

The impact of this group of political scientists was to successfully establish the state's first ever citizen's forum, to bring citizens into the heart of debates over constitutional reforms to improve how our representative system of democracy operates.

### DESCRIPTION

The project is embedded in a growing scholarly interest in the practice of deliberation, which included a series of citizens' assemblies in Canada and the Netherlands in the early 2000s. "Deliberation involves the random selection of ordinary citizens who are provided with objective information, listen to and question the experts, and then engage in facilitated (small group) discussions about policy issues. Their recommendations are then fed into the political process (either by referring back to government and parliament for decision or by referendum of the wider population)."

The Irish Constitutional Convention (ICC) operated over a 14-month period (meeting over the course of 10 weekends) following deliberate practice.

Its 100 members comprised 66 citizens selected by an opinion poll agency, 33 politicians from the Oireachtas and the Northern Ireland Assembly and an independent chair (Tom Arnold) appointed by the government. I served as its Research Director working with a small academic team. The ICC members were surveyed by our team prior to and after each weekend of discussion. This allowed the academic team to gather important data on opinion shifts and measures of deliberative quality.



During the course of these weekend sessions, the groups were asked to consider a series of key questions:

1. Whether to reduce the Irish President's term of office from seven to five years;
2. Whether to reduce the voting age to 17;
3. A review of the Dáil electoral system;
4. Voting rights for the Irish diaspora in presidential elections;
5. Marriage equality;
6. The constitutional clause on the role of women;
7. Increasing the participation of women in politics and public life;
8. Blasphemy in the Constitution.

The ICC members subsequently added two further items to their agenda:

9. Dáil reform;
10. Economic, Social and Cultural rights.



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## DETAILS OF THE IMPACT

Impact occurred in a number of ways, of which the most significant included:

- The successful passage of the marriage equality referendum in summer 2015. It is unlikely the referendum would have been called but for the vital role played by the ICC in 'encouraging' a socially conservative Taoiseach to call it. It is also generally acknowledged that the ICC 'took the politics out of the debate' due to the manner in which representatives of all parties were included in the membership. Furthermore, our analysis of survey data gathered after the referendum vote indicates that knowledge of the ICC was a factor in influencing the Yes vote.
- The ICC made over 40 recommendations for institutional and constitutional reform. The outgoing government accepted 7% of these, and were still considering a further 41% of them; it will be for the incoming government to determine what happens to the latter.
- The very fact that the ICC was established and how it was organised is clearly an impact of our We the Citizens initiative. We had face-to-face meetings with the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and leaders of all the main parties to discuss our findings and provide copies of our [final report](#).
- The outgoing government promised a new 'citizens' forum' to consider the current constitutional ban on abortion. This commitment has now been included in the programme for government of the newly elected government.
- There are also international impacts. To date, I (and other team members) have given talks about the ICC in a number of countries including: Australia, Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Romania, Spain, UK, and USA. The Catalan government are considering this methodology as part of their efforts to promote their separatist agenda in Spain. It is known that senior members of the British Labour party would have proposed a constitutional convention closely modelled on the ICC had they been elected in 2015; to that end, senior academics in the UK are in the process of testing our methodology in a series of British experiments (<http://citizensassembly.co.uk>).
- Finally, there are important academic impacts. Our team surveyed the ICC members throughout the process and we're still in the process of writing up our results and presenting our findings to the wider academic community.

## RESEARCH REFERENCES

### Publications to date

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- <https://politicalreform.ie/2012/06/26/citizens-voices-experiments-in-democratic-renewal-and-reform/>
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### Websites

[www.wethecitizens.ie](http://www.wethecitizens.ie)

[www.constitution.ie](http://www.constitution.ie)

### Funding Secured

- Atlantic Philanthropies, €640K, which facilitated the establishment of **We the Citizens** in 2011