

# The Irish Citizens' Assembly on the 8th Amendment is a model for participatory democracy, which other democratic countries should follow

*Ireland's referendum to repeal the 8th Amendment of its constitution, and so liberalise the country's abortion laws, was preceded by a Citizens' Assembly which recommended these reforms. This form of democratic participation, which crucially was state funded and informed the Irish government's approach, is a model for producing better democratic decision making, argues Jack Bridgewater.*



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On 25 May, Ireland voted, by referendum, to repeal the 8th Amendment of its constitution and permit the Oireachtas (parliament) to legalise abortion. Much of the focus, rightly, is on the result and its impact on the country. The procedure itself however, has prompted less discussion – at least in the UK. This is unfortunate. The Irish Citizens' Assembly, which was established in 2016, helped to shape the proposed changes and gauge public reaction to the referendum. It is a progressive piece of democratic apparatus and its success should inspire democracies across the globe to adopt it, or something similar.

## Reconceptualising democracy

In his book [Against Elections: The Case for Democracy](#), David van Reybrouck argues that democracies are failing because of their overreliance on elections. Voters have become fatigued with the theatre and empty promises, and elections now cause more problems than they solve. So, what do we replace them with? Van Reybrouck is in favour of sortitions. These assemblies of individuals have their roots in Athenian democracy and use random sampling to select a collection of individuals who are representative of the wider population. They meet up, deliberate and vote on the issues put to them. Much has been [written](#) on the use of sortitions to aid democratic debate, so here I will just discuss recent evidence.

There have been several [experiments](#) to test the effects of this type of deliberative democracy on attitude formation. The case for sortitions is overwhelmingly positive. The aim is to aid deliberation under the best possible circumstances. The practice not only ensures that all participants are informed, but also works to moderate the views of opposing groups towards each other. A recent [study](#) from Northern Ireland, for example, showed that after discussing the future of local schools, Protestants and Catholics came to see each other as more trustworthy and discussants felt more positively about inter-community relations.

Although the deliberation is useful, it is the conclusions reached that are of most importance. [Moderated deliberation](#) tends to enable the assembly to reach decisions collectively that are more attractive to the entire group. These conclusions cannot be judged in terms of 'right' and 'wrong', but they can be judged in terms of consistency. [Studies](#) show that conclusions tend to be internally consistent and reflect the priorities of the individuals present.

So, discussing contentious issues has benefits for those involved, both in terms of informing and clarifying their views and increasing their tolerance of those with opposing views. This leads the group to compromise in a way that better represents the individuals involved, [referred](#) to as 'single-peakedness' whereby an individual understands how a group decision relates to their individual preferences. However, we are a very long way from adopting sortitions as a way of directly legislating. Even if we are not on this path, and elections are here to stay, what can sortitions add to our current democratic process?

## The Irish case

To explore this further it is useful to examine the recent Irish referendum as an example. The Irish Citizen's Assembly comprises of 99 individuals and 1 chairperson. They meet for several sessions to discuss a pre-determined topic. One of the main aspects that sets the Irish assembly apart from most others, is that it is state funded. There have been equivalent [assemblies](#) in the UK, but they are funded by research centres. The ultimate role of the Irish Assembly is to advise the Oireachtas, for which an advisory group assists them in preparing their recommendations.

In the case of the referendum on the 8th Amendment, the assembly met over a period of [five weekends](#) and heard from 40 experts in medicine, law and ethics. Through this process, those citizens, representing the broadest possible cross-section of the Irish public (broader than you are likely to find in any elected legislative in the world) developed a detailed knowledge of this one issue, and its specific consequences for the future of the country. This truly is deliberation under the best possible circumstances.

Although the polls going into the referendum on 25 May had showed a lead for yes, they had been narrowing in the run up to voting day. Many expected the result to be close and assumed the final votes from the Citizens' Assembly were overly liberal compared to the median position in Ireland. However, the assembly had accurately captured public response to the referendum, almost a year before it happened.

## Why it matters

Compare this to the UK's referendum on its membership of the EU. The UK has no constitutional outline as to when referendums can be called, and the outcome did not mandate the government to enact the results in any specific predetermined way. David Cameron called the referendum without serious public consultation beforehand, meaning there was no understanding of whether there was widespread desire for the referendum, or what preferences were for after the vote. This reduces legitimacy and increases aggravation on both sides of the debate.

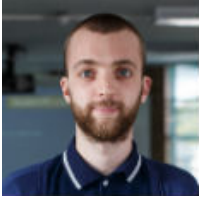
Serious consultation, via sortitions, would have increased our knowledge of public preferences about the EU. Was this an issue that public wanted a referendum on for example, and if they did want one, what questions would have most accurately captured their preferences? Equally, knowing that there was this system in place beforehand would have placated the fears of politicians and the public, as we would have had a better understanding of our democratic choices, rather than having to project our own individual preferences onto the result.

The success of the Irish case should be seen as a model for both the UK and the rest of the democratic world. This is an idea that requires public funding and should not just rely on research interests. It is potentially vital for the future of democracy.

*This post represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit.*

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### About the author



**Jack Bridgewater** is a PhD candidate in Comparative Politics at the University of Kent. He runs the podcast '[How to Win Arguments with Numbers](#)' and his research focuses on voter attitudes towards party leaders. He tweets at [@JLBridgewater](#).

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