

# Mini-publics, opportunities and challenges. The cases of Belgium and Ireland

## *Minipúblicos, oportunidades y desafíos. Los casos de Bélgica e Irlanda*



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### **Abstract:**

In recent years, both public institutions and sectors of civil society have used so-called “mini-publics” to combat citizens’ growing apathy towards politics. This paper analyses and explores the opportunities and challenges presented by this way of understanding citizen participation, in which ICT has played a major role. Two specific experiences have been compared: the G1000 in Belgium and the Citizens’ Assemblies in Ireland. Even though the political implementation of the consensual conclusions after the deliberative process ultimately depends on a specific commitment on the part of public institutions, these experiments are helping to introduce new ways of conceiving democratic legitimacy in political discourse.

### **Keywords:**

Democracy; deliberation; political participation; democratic reform.

### **Resumen:**

*En los últimos años, tanto las instituciones públicas como los sectores de la sociedad civil han utilizado los llamados “minipúblicos” para combatir la creciente apatía de los ciudadanos hacia la política. El presente artículo analiza y explora las oportunidades y desafíos que ofrece esta forma de entender la participación ciudadana, en los cuales las TICs han jugado un papel relevante. Para ello se comparan dos experiencias concretas: el G1000 en Bélgica y las Asambleas Ciudadanas en Irlanda. Pese a que la implementación política de las decisiones consensuadas tras el proceso deliberativo obedece, en última instancia, a un compromiso concreto por parte de las instituciones públicas; estos experimentos están ayudando a insertar nuevas formas de concebir la legitimidad democrática en el lenguaje político.*

### **Palabras clave:**

*Democracia; deliberación; participación política; reforma democrática.*

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## 1. Introduction

Several theoretical currents have emerged since the seventies arguing for greater participation by citizens in public affairs (Macpherson, 1982). Within this academic debate, the theory of deliberative democracy came to be seen in the nineties as one of the better options for reducing distances between public institutions and civil society. It is not a question of a school of thought which aspires to eliminate the principles of the representative system nor is it synonymous with direct democracy, rather it defends the position that the legitimacy of democratic decisions should not be based on the simple aggregation of citizens' individual preferences, but through a civil society committed to "informed debate, the public use of reason and the impartial search for the truth" (Held, 2007, p. 333). Being such a heterogeneous school of thought, it is no easy task to present a unified position, particularly as regards its institutional design (Bächtiger, Andre et al., 2018). But there can be no doubt that all see deliberation as having a central place in the democratic process.

Deliberative democracy has been accused of creating insurmountable tension between theory and practice due to the complexity of its proposals or its high degree of abstraction. Despite such criticism, empirical studies have been growing in number in many and varied contexts and with different objectives, often limited to local affairs, such as the democratic decentralisation in Kerala (Heller & Thomas Isaac, 2003) or participative budgets (Romero Algora, 2021). In recent decades the formula of "deliberative mini-publics" (hereinafter DMP) has been increasingly common as a means to reconnect civil society with politics. Of particular note is its use in consultation regarding constitutional reform (Suiter & Reuchamps, 2016), largely thanks to the opportunities offered by new technologies, leading to some being studied as examples of cyber democracy (Tejedor & Paget, 2016).

Taking Smith & Setälä's definition (2018), we are dealing with "a space, within which a diverse body of citizens who would not otherwise interact is randomly selected to reason together about a matter of public interest" (p. 300). It is deliberative in that the participants are committed to reaching consensus on conclusions following an open and informed debate on a specific question. Moreover, being made up of a limited but representative percentage of the population selected through a draw as opposed to a vote to choose representatives, it is hoped that inclusion and equity can be achieved. The use of a draw is due to the supposition that each individual is sufficiently able to decide on important questions with adequate information available. Therefore, it can be assumed that, under adequate conditions, the result of the assembly's deliberations will reflect the voice of all citizens, had they had the chance to participate in the process (Fishkin, 2009).

Many defend this mechanism, whether it be to utilise it as a consultative organ or to introduce it as an institution with a capacity for political decision, even assuming some of the competences of a legislative assembly (Sintomer, 2017; Van Reybrouck, 2017). Various models have been drawn up over the years, depending on the context and objectives: citizen juries, planning cells, consensus conferences, deliberative polls... being differentiated by the number of members and by the objectives pursued, however, all of them focus their attention on draws and deliberation (Setälä, 2021).

The early years of the XXI century saw the beginning of highly ambitious deliberative processes, such as the Citizens' Assemblies in British Columbia and Ontario (Canada) in 2004 and 2006, respectively, and since then these assemblies have experienced considerable growth: such as the civic forum on electoral reform in the Low Countries in 2006, the Constituent Assembly in Iceland from 2010-2012, the French Citizens' Convention on the Climate in 2019, etc (OECD, 2020).

In parallel to such processes, new technologies have opened up new possibilities for participation in the *res publica*. The utilisation of terms such as *e-Democracy* or *e-Participation* is increasingly common in referring to the use of information and communication technology (ICT) when creating horizontal spaces in which citizens can find alternative channels for collective reflection. Digital technology allows greater access to resources which were difficult to obtain in the past, along with greater connectivity between people, who otherwise could never have been in contact with each other. It represents a chance to expand the horizons of how we understand our role as citizens and to move beyond traditional political participation as represented by the ballot box.

The Network's potential has not gone unnoticed by the advocates of a deliberative model of democracy, and, whilst it is true that there is great diversity of positions among them, in general there are reasons for taking a positive view of such potential (Chambers & Gastil, 2021). Particularly regarding DMP, ICT represents a reduction in the restrictions on participation, such as time or access to information. Moreover, they also permit a broadening of the field of action for social movements, as the population "identifies and makes their objectives known, requests and encourages support, organises and communicates information and instructions, recruits, and raises funds" (Sampedro, Sánchez & Poletti, 2013, p. 108); all of which contributes to an "empowerment process for citizens based on the inherent and extended complexity of social cooperation, by redefining the forms of wealth generation focused on immaterial work" (Sierra, 2021, p. 342). They therefore gain greater autonomy relative to traditional political parties and the media.

Despite the advantages mentioned above, when speaking of the relationship between democracy and ICT, it is important to bear in mind one prior consideration: new technologies are an instrument, not an end in themselves. The results of their application to the democratic process will depend, ultimately, on the part played by the actors involved in the network and their technological possibilities. Questions regarding forms of participation, the political agenda, objectives set out, the actors' values or the procedure applied will determine how digital democracy takes shape. These models may help to solve some of the traditional challenges faced by the democratic system, but may give rise to others. Thus, it is wise to be prudent in their use and critical of their fruits (Candón-Mena, 2018).

Neither are DMP free from criticism. Some see this model as a form of deliberative elitism (Pourtois, 2013). Lafont (2015) maintains that DMP could have an effect contrary to that desired: to reduce the democratic legitimacy of the deliberation. If legitimacy depends on the process within an assembly chosen by a draw, the risk is being run of creating a non-democratic scenario, in which civil society would depend on that agreed by a minority, denying the public sphere its chance to experience a truly participative process. In addition to this criticism, Böker (2017) points out that many models of mini-publics, such as juries and deliberative fora, are often instruments overseen by the administration, and therefore eliminate the emancipatory opportunities for citizens. Such observations warn us of the importance of the who, how and why in a DMP.

Camarellas (2021), aware that these apparent structural weaknesses may never be completely remedied, offers some minimal criteria for these processes to be considered legitimately democratic: descriptive representation (the random sample must statistically represent society), face-to-face deliberation (everyone must have the same opportunities to participate) and direct participation by the citizens in decision-taking. Nevertheless, the author recognises, as does Böker, that even when meeting these requisites, interference by the Government of the moment will always be a potential risk for the legitimacy of the process.

## 2. Methodology & objectives

To be able to examine whether DMP can become mechanisms of democratic reform, this paper will conduct a comparative case study with a descriptive and interpretative focus as its principal methodology. This qualitative approach is considered pertinent as, according to Goodrick (2014) “comparative case studies involve the analysis and synthesis of the similarities, differences and patterns across two or more cases that share a common focus or goal” (p. 1), which allows a sensitive approximation to the diversity of contexts. Applying this methodology, the objective of the paper is to present a critical approach to DMP initiatives which have taken place in Belgium and Ireland since 2010, to their interest in improving democratic politics, and to analyse the tools which have allowed the diffusion, performance, and impact of these initiatives. There are three reasons for such interest in the experiences in these countries:

- Both arose as a response to various political and economic crises towards the end of the first decade of the XXI century.
- The two countries have been pioneers in both the drawing up and the methodology of reform processes as well as in the use of ICT for their diffusion and application.
- They represent two different ways of understanding the relationship between public deliberation and political institutions, as while one excludes any interference in the process by the State (Belgium), the other seeks its involvement (Ireland).

The study has gathered qualitative information on these experiences of DMP: official documents published by the organisers, data extracted from the official webs of the events, observations and impressions of academics who followed the process closely, and several sources which reflect the impact and continuity of such initiatives. All this in order to achieve the proposed objectives.

Having said this, the following pages will compare the origin, development and singularities of two practical cases: the Belgian G1000 and the Irish Citizens’ Assemblies. Following this, there is a reflection on the similarities and differences between the two, as well as their limits and opportunities, looking closely at questions such as the relationship between DMP and public institutions, and the utility of ICT in guaranteeing quality and inclusive deliberation.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. *Belgium & Ireland, two examples of deliberative mini-publics*

Jon Elster (1995) identified up to seven waves of constitutional creation between the XVIII and XX centuries. Each wave occurred in very different contexts and periods, but one can extract from them at least three common elements: 1) almost all arose as a response to a socio-economic crisis, a revolution or as the product of regime collapse. 2) their creation involved prior deliberation by political elites. 3) Passion tends to impose itself on reason in turbulent circumstances.

Just as with many of their predecessors, the two cases studied came about due to contemporary crises. In particular, due to the 2007 financial crisis and the corresponding political fallout. However, unlike previous waves, the current tendency places citizens at the heart of the process, with the idea that they should participate, to a greater or lesser degree, in the drafting of the laws which they will be obliged to obey, if these are to enjoy real legitimacy (Habermas, 1998). The mini-publics would thus fulfil the function of a deliberative assembly, able to produce politically legitimate results. Although the Irish Constitutional Convention is an example of a constitutional mini-public, it is not exactly so in the case of Belgium. Nonetheless, it is included here as, despite the spirit of G1000 not being to reform the Constitution, it did inspire a general debate into the nature of democracy in Belgium. Furthermore, its influence has gone beyond its frontiers, which has turned it into “an experiment in deliberative democracy with potential for political and constitutional transformation” (Suiter & Reuchamps, 2016, p. 5).

##### 3.1.1. *G1000 in Belgium*

Caluwaerts & Reuchamps (2014a) describe Belgium as a deeply divided society, its public sphere being so balkanised as to make public debate all but impossible. It is a country where each linguistic group finds itself in a separate sphere, along with notable economic and political divisions between the Flanders Region (home to the Flemish community) and Walloon Region (where the French-speaking community resides).

Political tensions peaked in 2007, when the country went six months without forming a government due to the Francophone and Flemish parties' inability to reach agreement on state reforms, which included a redistribution of competences for the two linguistic communities. Finally, a five-party government was formed with the promise of new institutional and economic reforms. However, this fragile alliance lasted little time. The June 13, 2010, Legislative Elections did not produce the desired results and Belgium again found itself without a government, this time for a year and a half.

It was in this climate of uncertainty that a group of Belgian citizens from different social groups (academics, lawyers, activists, artists, etc.) started a project called “G1000”. Representing the group's generalised frustration, David Van Reybrouck, a Flemish writer, and Paul Hermant, a journalist, presented a manifesto on 11 of June, 2011, in which they advocated a democratic renewal which further developed deliberative values:

The Belgian crisis is not just a crisis for Belgium; it is also a crisis for democracy. The current standstill is by no means simply a question of tension between linguistic communities (...) If democracy is no longer facilitated by elections, or even hindered by them, then citizens must help to find democratic alternatives (...) Deliberative democracy could well be the democracy of the future. It is a perfect match for the era of user-generated content and Web 2.0. It harnesses the wisdom of the crowd. It is the Wikipedia of politics. It realises that not all knowledge of the future of a society has to come from the top. The reason for that is simple: there is no top anymore. There are different branches of knowledge. A society is a network. The masses today may know more than the elite (Derenne et al., 2011).

The activists' intention was to create an assembly where ordinary citizens could meet and deliberate on matters of great social interest. The initiative soon caught the attention of the major Belgian media (Mouton, 2011; Goethals, 2011). The aspiration was to take deliberative democracy up to the next level, far from academic abstractions, and trusting that united citizens would together adopt a common-sense viewpoint. Moreover, both the media and the social networks offered a range of options for diffusion. In budgetary terms, G1000 aspired to belong to the citizens, so all costs were covered by crowdfunding. Any donation of at least 1 euro was accepted, but it was agreed as a limit that no one could provide more than 5% of the total estimated budget. Apart from that, any company, association, or government was invited to contribute (Jacquet & Reuchamps, 2018).

Thus, the old representative system could benefit from a deliberative injection from below respecting the principals of diversity, inclusion, and independence. With this idea, the project was carried out in three phases<sup>1</sup>:

*First phase:* Public agenda. That consisted of an open process with the objective of defining the agenda for the citizens' summit in phase 2. In early July 2011 a large consultation was organised utilising the G1000 web site. Anyone could post up to five questions or issues that they wished the summit to consider. This phase showed a great variety of options. The web page was particularly user-friendly, with a high degree of security and adapted to mobile devices (Tejedor & Paget, 2016, p. 117).

All participants, whether they had presented an idea or not, could also vote on the proposals of others, which permitted the hierarchisation of the ideas. A total of six thousand people participated in the process. As most proposals appeared on the list several times, the ideas were later grouped to make a top twenty-five, by the number of times they appeared and the rating they received from other participants. These top 25 issues were again posted online in October 2011, and, with the media's collaboration in transmitting the information, all the nation's citizens were invited to vote for their three favourite subjects for the G1000 summit. In the end, the chosen three were: social security, the financial crisis, and immigration. IP addresses were verified to prevent mass voting by any individual or group.

*Second phase:* Civic Summit. The second part of the project consisted of a citizen deliberation process, G1000 itself. As the task was so complicated, the services of an independent agency, called *GFK Significant*, were contracted to contact participants, generating random phone numbers on landlines and mobiles so as to reach 99% of the Belgian population. This random

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1 The official web (<http://g1000.org>) contains detailed information on the process, as well as its results. Available in Dutch, French, German and English.

selection invited a thousand citizens to participate in a deliberative event in Brussels (491 people finally attended)<sup>2</sup>. Not only were calls generated, but follow-up visits were organised (with the participants' permission) to clarify any doubts and to give the process a human face. The random selection was carried out in line with a diversity control allowing for sex, language, region and age. Finally, the 11th of November 2011 was chosen for the participants to sit down at a hundred tables and prepare to reflect, debate and discuss their positions on the three subjects on the agenda. The discussion at each table was chaired by experienced volunteers who received adequate instructions during the weeks prior to the event. Furthermore, thirty tables at G1000 were bi-lingual, with a translator assigned to each of them.

The Brussels event was held in parallel with another two projects: called *G-Offs* and *G-Homes*.

The *G-Offs* were local debate groups all over the country interested in following the Civic Summit via streaming and discussing the same subjects amongst themselves. Any reflections and recommendations arising from these groups after their deliberative process were communicated electronically to the main assembly, further feeding the debate. A total of 356 individuals participated in the *G-Offs*. Social security was the preferred topic of 123 participants; wealth distribution in times of crisis was debated by 136 participants, and immigration by 244 (Reuchamps, Min et al., 2017, p. 34)

Apart from these person-to-person debates, the organisers sought to extend participation with online discussion. *G-Homes* was organised employing the *synthetron* software system, This was a free online discussion program for citizens who did not come out of the draw but wished to participate. 718 citizens are known to have taken part from their own computers. As they registered directly in *synthetron*, little relevant data is known about these participants, except that 70% of them were male and 30% female, moreover, only 15% of the total were under 35 years of age. Every participant in *G-Home* was placed randomly at a four-person virtual table to deliberate. The particularity of these virtual debates is that, due to their nature, they did not take place at the same time as the other two platforms, which complicated their following the main assembly. On the other hand, to enrich the deliberations, one table's ideas were transmitted virtually to another, in order to circulate the greatest possible number of ideas (ibidem, p. 35).

*Third phase: Citizens' Forum.* This was an event designed to prepare specific proposals based on the ideas agreed superficially in the previous phase, rather like a town hall meeting. Thus, this third phase of G1000, called G32, took the form of a series of meetings over three weekends in which 32 participants discussed how to draw up a specific report. The 32 citizens were chosen at random from the group of 491 in the earlier phase, those who agreed to take part in the *G-Offs* or *G-Home* were also considered as potential participants for G32, which required a significant commitment over the three weekends. This deliberative design was far more intensive and asked much more of the moderators, as the participants had greater control of the process itself. In fact, the citizens led the choice of the specific questions, the choice of experts and, especially, which decisions they passed on to the public debate.

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2 Finally, 30% abandoned the experiment. The other 70% presented themselves without financial compensation, except for transport costs.

One of the prior conditions which the organisers wanted everyone to be clear about was the need to recognise the legitimacy of everyone's point of view (in order to agree with someone's ideas, it is first necessary to hold an open conversation with that individual). There was no kind of predetermined result, nor preferences for any particular proposal. G1000's function was to be that of a mere procedure for people to promote new ideas. Each one of the subjects chosen for deliberation was presented in an independent round. The rounds started with two experts (one French and one Dutch) in order to familiarize the listeners with the material in question, providing diagnosis and possible solutions. The conferences having concluded, there were several phases of interaction which switched from the deliberations between the citizens to moments in the sessions when the participants conversed in pairs; in others, everyone shared a single space.

The experiment's results were published in a document of over a hundred pages, in which a series of recommendations were presented concerning the questions established in the first phase (G1000, 2012).

### 3.1.2. *The Irish assemblies*

When the worldwide economic crisis broke in 2007, the fall in economic output in the Republic of Ireland caused an unemployment crisis and the end to the Celtic Tiger's period of growth. At the same time, massive corruption cases began to appear in the media, bringing to light "a hazardous symbiotic relationship between three actors: the State, bankers, and construction companies" (Seijas, 2012, p. 414). The most visible political consequence of these issues was the rapid loss of citizens' trust in the government and in its ability to take effective decisions. More and more citizens spoke of the need for more democratic institutional reform where the people had greater room for manoeuvre.

This pressure for renewal coming from civil society made the main political parties add a series of proposals to their electoral manifestos for future constitutional reform. Finally, following the 2011 General Election, a coalition government was formed consisting of *Fine Gael* (of a Christian-democrat leaning) and the Labour Party, with a common program, which, among other points, included the establishment of a Constituent Convention to consider comprehensive constitutional reform which reviewed the electoral system, a possible reduction of the Presidential mandate, a disposal for same-sex marriage, amending the clause on women in the home and encouraging greater female participation in public life, eliminating references to blasphemy from the Constitution, the possible reduction in voting age and other constitutional amendments that might be recommended by the Convention (Programme for Government 2011-2016, 2011). However, the program established by the government contained some imprecision concerning the future "Constituent Convention", such as its composition or how binding any decisions taken by the assembly would be.

Faced with concern that the new government's promises would be watered down over time, as had happened so many times before, a group of researchers linked to the Political Studies Association of Ireland created the We The Citizens initiative. The initiative would strive to bring together a pilot assembly with the objective of "getting away from debates on the nature of the reforms that could or should be implemented, to focus on how the reforms could be processed, that is, to demonstrate the virtue of deliberative approaches" (Farrell, O'Maley & Suiter, 2013, p. 102). To this end, and with the sponsorship of the Atlantic Philanthropies foundation, seven participative events took place between May and June 2011 in some of the



Republic's main cities. 120 people attended in Kilkenny, 115 in Cork, 85 in Galway, 110 in Blanchardstown, 118 in Tallaght, 75 in Letterkenny and finally 65 in Athlone. Most attendees registered online before the event. The events' objective was to compile information to draw up an agenda of matters for debate in the future pilot assembly.

To ensure the events had the widest possible diffusion, adverts were taken out in local media, the organisers gave several radio interviews and word of mouth was decisive in spreading the news. But the most important communication tool, according to the organisers, was the web site set up ([www.wethecitizens.ie](http://www.wethecitizens.ie)). Through the web citizens obtained all the necessary information about the initiative, how to put their names down for events and how to participate in the online forum to share their concerns with their fellow citizens. The day the web was launched, Facebook and Twitter accounts were also set up. A sign of the success was that the tag *#citizens* was a trend that day and the Facebook account was extremely busy throughout the whole of the process (We The Citizens, 2011, p. 38). "Speak Up for Ireland" was chosen as the initiative's slogan. Each session was completely open to the public, with no other purpose than to debate for a few hours what the Ireland of the future should be like. The citizens used the meetings to show a number of recurring concerns, such as the role of members of parliament, electoral reform, or budget cuts due to the economic crisis, worries that served as a basis for a pilot citizens' assembly set for the end of June.

The polling firm *Ipsos MRBI* helped to gather a representative sample of a hundred people, who met for a weekend in Dublin to deliberate on the principal themes present in the previous events. The fruits of the deliberations from this pilot assembly were presented in a report which advocated the need for a constitutional assembly to reform the Irish political system (We The Citizens, 2011). Said report was not intended to be a packet of measures, but as a way of exerting pressure and of presenting the Irish government with a reasonable methodology for a future Constitutional Convention.

Finally, aware that civil society was not willing to forget their electoral promises, in July, 2012, Parliament (Oireachtas) finally passed the calling of a Convention on the Constitution, in order for the citizens to present their recommendations on the following subjects: (1) reduce the presidential term to five years and bring it into step with local and European elections; (2) reduce voting age to 17; (3) a review of the electoral system; (4) grant citizens residing outside the State the right to vote in presidential elections in Irish embassies, or by other means; (5) a disposal for same-sex marriage; (6) modify the clause on women's role in the home and encourage their participation in public life; (7) increase women's participation in politics; (8) eliminate the offence of blasphemy from the Constitution; and (9) once the previous reports were finalised, consider other pertinent recommended constitutional reforms (Oireachtas, 2012)

The first meeting of the Constitutional Convention took place on January 26, 2013. The assembly was composed of 100 members: 66 citizens chosen by draw, 33 parliamentarians and a president to direct the process, respecting representativity in terms of age and sex. The Convention met over ten weekends, for a day and a half each time. The working dynamic was based on a protocol of inclusive participation, organising the tables in such a manner that they held at least eight citizens and two or three politicians. A coordinator guided each group's activities, helped by an assistant in charge of writing down the debate. Each subject debated was previously introduced by a group of experts, who strove to ensure that all points of view on the matter were presented fairly to the members of the Convention (Seijas, 2016).

The Convention had to function transparently in all the plenary sessions, therefore they were broadcast live on the website <http://www.constitutionalconvention.ie/> (over one hundred hours streaming the ten meetings). All documentation and the transcriptions made are freely available there. During the event there were over 350,000 visits to the website from 144 countries, and regional meetings were held at nine sites around the country to listen to what the public had to say about constitutional change. This shows once again the efficacy of ICT in the selection, performance, and transparency of the process.

The results of the Convention's work were set out in nine reports. Eight concerning the subjects proposed by the government and the last one on two matters introduced by the Convention itself (Constitutional Convention, 2014). Of the 38 recommendations formulated by the Constitutional Convention, 18 called for constitutional changes. The impact of these recommendations was limited by the right of the politicians to accept them or not, but they were, in any case, obliged to reply. Among the ideas proposed by the Convention which involved modifying the Constitution, only two ended up in a referendum: that which would modify Article 41 of the Constitution, relative to the introduction of matrimony between persons of the same sex; and Article 12, which would establish a reduction in the minimum age to be eligible to be Head of State, from 35 to 21 years of age. The other subjects were rejected, classified as being low priorities for the Government or sent back to a Parliamentary commission (Seijas, 2018).

The Convention was a success. Its holding was a demonstration that such assemblies could have a place under contemporary conditions. Such was its popularity that, after the 2016 elections, the Government committed itself to repeating the formula, but with some modifications, such as renaming the Constitutional Convention as the "Citizens' Assembly" and this time without politicians' participation in the process, and although tasked with only a limited number of subjects, these questions were not limited to those directly related to the Constitution (Programme for Government, 2016). The inaugural meeting was on the 15th of October 2016 with a deliberative dynamic with almost the same structure and procedures as the Convention, although this time the Assembly had 99 members randomly chosen instead of the 66 from the previous occasion. At Parliament's suggestion, the Assembly debated matters as important as the aging population, referenda, climate change and abortion. The new assembly was another success, and it would seem that, far from being an anecdotal episode, the practice is establishing itself in Irish political life.

#### **4. Discussion**

So, how are such events to be evaluated? Are they useful experiments for the empowerment of citizens in the XXI century? What can contemporary democracies learn from them? Many, though not all, theorists of deliberative democracy give a positive evaluation to the legitimacy of DMP, a relatively recent phenomenon in western democracies (Camarelles, 2021). With the examples presented in this paper, hopefully a small contribution has been made to the debate as well as a critical evaluation of their contribution. The following is a presentation of some points concerning these initiatives that may be worthy of consideration.

*Similarities.* DMP seem to support Jon Elster's statement (1995) that constitutional reform movements tend to appear at moments of political, economic or social crisis (sometimes all three at once). Both the Belgian and the Irish initiatives arose from the recognition that the democratic system was defective and that an urgent response was called for. However, Gargarella (2019, p. 35) suggests that DMP of recent decades refute one of Elster's thesis, that referring to the fact that at times of political or economic turbulence, passion overcomes reason. Rather, it can be seen that these situations of indignation can be channelled towards calm and rational discussion. The response found was to grant citizens the instruments needed for their voices to be heard. Therefore, we are dealing with two phenomena orchestrated by civil society, hand-in-hand with academics and activists, with the objective of influencing public policy in their respective countries.

The two cases also represent a useful illustration of how to implement inclusive deliberative processes in complex political contexts. A draw favours participation and equality of opportunity among the population. The method seeks to increase democratic legitimacy by introducing a representative part of the population controlled for sex, age, geography, language, etc. In this sense DMP have helped to give visibility to groups of people whose representation in traditional political institutions is often questioned. In fact, comparative analysis of these experiences allows us to see that the inclusion of a plurality of citizens in these spaces makes it possible to study questions normally excluded from public debate by the political authorities (such as abortion, economic development or electoral reform). From this point of view, a refinement of the method of the draw could enhance fair and democratic representation.

Belgium and Ireland were innovative examples of the utilization of ICT for deliberative assemblies. Digital spaces were designed as a way to stimulate information reception and encourage participation (both in person and online). The transparency of the process was guaranteed by the continuous publication of its activities on social networks, posting the times of the meetings and live broadcasting the sessions. One can perceive their clear intent to build digital communication networks as the chief means of access to information and the formation of public opinion. The objective was not to transform society, but rather improve democracy by helping citizens to participate in a rational process of universalist character. That is why it is typical that DMP are presented as "non-ideological and decline to define themselves in political terms (García Guitián, 2016, p. 182), conceiving their activity as management of public affairs rather than a conflictive competition for power. An element which is highly criticised by other authors who see in this discourse a dangerous negation of precisely that which characterises politics: its inevitable antagonism (Mouffe, 2011).

*Differences.* Perhaps the first major differences we should point out here between G1000 and the Irish assemblies is their approach to institutions. The Belgian organisers "explicitly sought to avoid any political or institutional ties and focused far more on guaranteeing the greatest possible representativity and high-quality deliberation, instead of producing a strong political result" (Jacquet et al., 2016, p. 53). However, the Irish activists sought from the first to offer useful frameworks and procedures to demonstrate to their political class that not only was the implementation of deliberative processes in democratic reforms something desirable, but effective as well. Because of this, as G1000 was not connected to any State institution, the assembly's final recommendations carried practically no weight at all in the short term; this was not the case with the Constitutional Convention, which, thanks to the media, political and social support it received has managed

to introduce itself into the political institutions, and its decisions, although consultive, took on a binding character through referenda.

As opposed to excessive optimism about the use of ICT in mechanisms of institutional participation using digital means, DMP seem to show that the network, by itself, is unable to guarantee the procedural conditions that would permit the building of a deliberative public sphere. It is true that new technologies have contributed to a more plural discourse in the political arena, and that their development provides new ways to produce and transmit information. However, in the assembly debates studied, the use of ICT never substituted the face-to-face meeting when agreeing recommendations among citizens, in fact, we find notable strategic differences between the two experiences concerning their role in the process. In the case of Ireland, both the We The Citizens initiative and the Constitutional Convention saw new technologies largely fulfil an instrumental function: publicity, online registering, information about meetings, publication of documents, streaming of debates, and transparency, among others. Apart from those persons directly involved in the deliberations, the rest of the population had no space available to participate or propose ideas or concerns to the assembly, placing all the weight of the deliberations on the shoulders of the participants chosen by draw. The Belgian use of new technologies was very similar to that in Ireland, in this case again ICT had promotional and communicational functions both before and after the event, however, unlike Ireland, the deliberative phases of G1000 included the participation of individuals outside the civic summit, the *G-Homes* and *G-Offs*. Their members were supporters who had not been selected in the draw, but to whom the organisers decided to offer an opportunity to collaborate. Apart from participating in their own debates, they had an opportunity to pass their reflections on to the assembly to enrich its dialogue. This made them more than mere receivers of information; they were also its authors. Moreover, in the project's third phase, they were potential candidates for the G32, tasked with debating and drawing up the final report. Although the definitive decisions were decided at a physical summit, G1000 aspired to include the greatest possible number of citizens (some 1,565), employing all the technological instruments to hand, making it a worldwide reference for deliberative cyber democracy (Tejedor & Paget, 2016). These cases demonstrate that the importance of ICT in the configuration of participative processes lies not its utilisation, but in its focus.

*Impact.* G1000 showed itself to be one of the most attractive and innovative initiatives of recent years. However, the most relevant aspect for the purposes of this paper is its political impact. As previously mentioned, due to its not being connected to any State institution, the assembly's final recommendations had no short-term weight at all in the process of formulating public policy. That leaves G1000 as a symbolic initiative, although that does not mean that it did not wield certain influence. The experiment has been imitated in other countries, such as Spain (Navarro, 2017) or the Netherlands (Michels & Binnema, 2018). Its prestige in Belgium encouraged several political parties of varying hues to promote participative mechanisms, whether by means of participative budgets or political procedures that included a draw (Reuchamps et al., 2017). In that sense, G1000's greatest success so far may be found in Belgium's German-speaking Community. In 2019, the East Belgian parliament (the Ostbelgien in German) decided to set up a permanent Citizen's Council and a temporary Citizen's Assembly. The twenty-four members of the Citizen's Council, who are changed every eighteen months, have the duty to decide the size, duration, and means of bringing together a Citizen's Assembly, chosen by draw, to deal with a specific subject of general

interest. After meeting for a number of weekends, the Assembly presents its recommendations to Parliament, although these are not legally binding, the Constitution granting all power to Parliament (OIDP, s.f.).

The Citizens' Assemblies in Ireland, did indeed have greater consequences, gradually becoming something integrated into national political institutions. Three more have been convoked to date. A new Citizens' Assembly was called in 2021, asked to deal with gender equality. That assembly looked at questions such as economic dynamics prejudicial to women, equality of opportunity for leadership in companies and political organisations, and examined a citizen's responsibilities in and out of the home. Following the deliberations, 45 recommendations were drawn up, Parliament not yet having given its opinion on them (The Citizens' Assembly, 2021). Two new Citizens' Assemblies have recently been held: one concerning the loss of biodiversity and the other a local one for County Dublin. Both held their inaugural meeting in April 2022 (The Citizens' Assembly, 2022a). In that sense the social networks, such as Twitter (The Citizens' Assembly, 2022b), are playing an important role in attracting volunteers and keeping the people informed.

*Criticism.* Despite the innovation of these initiatives, none are free of certain difficulties that must be considered. In the Belgian case, a few days were not enough to deal with such complex questions in sufficient depth, there were even moments in which the process was barely comprehensible for the participants. Moreover, the top 25 itself was chosen by aggregative instruments, voted for online instead of being deliberated, to then be placed in order behind the scenes without any type of external participation, robbing the process of transparency. As regards the experts, most of them clearly had a leaning towards the left of the political spectrum, which introduces a tinge of bias into the instruction given to the public on the subjects (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2014b). Furthermore, any decision agreed in a DMP "should always be submitted to those who did not participate" (Dryzek, 2001, p. 654). If the final product is not backed in some form by the rest of the population, the whole process loses part of its legitimacy. G1000 did not include mechanisms to measure the project's degree of popular support once it was completed, something they tried to resolve with opinion polls. The result of said polls reflects that several of the economic recommendations, such as tax cuts or on the flexibility of the labour market had wide support; but those relating to non-discrimination or minimum income had little popular backing (Reuchamps et al., 2017, p. 66).

Nor did the Citizens' Assemblies in Ireland escape criticism. Courant (2021) highlights four major limitations to be borne in mind, mostly regarding procedure:

1. Once the process was institutionalised, politicians took control, which left space for arbitrary decisions and the instrumentalization of the initiative. It is the political class which decides on questions as fundamental as who, what, when and how, as well as having the final word on what to do with the recommendations. Something that goes against the whole spirit of deliberative democracy.
2. The agenda was established from top to bottom, thus considerably reducing the public's participation as there is less room for deciding which matters are to be considered.

3. Most of the decisions taken by the organisers were taken behind closed doors, few citizens participating in the meetings of the directors. That led to the use of a highly restricted protocol, and rules which were occasionally quite opaque, and which sometimes created a climate of tension during the deliberations. Moreover, there is little room for debate between the attendees at the meetings.
4. It is not clear that the assembly's deliberations have real influence on the votes of the rest of the population. Despite the Irish voting in favour of the legalisation of same-sex marriage, they rejected the reduction of the minimum age to become President. This would suppose the possible refutation of one of the theses about DMP, as it is based on the premise that a small sample of citizens under certain conditions would reproduce the behaviour of society as a whole. A feature that would also seem to be reflected in the opinion polls conducted after G1000 in Belgium.

Of the four points, the chief criticism lies in the merely consultative character, lacking real power to impose or pressure the political establishment, who have reserved for themselves the final say on calling a referendum or not. Carolan (2015) makes a similar criticism, despite recognising the positive aspects of the Convention, he does not hesitate to point out some problematic aspects during the process: the lack of transparency of some of the stages and inadequate attention paid to the risks of bias and manipulation.

## 5. Conclusions

Despite the promise of these initiatives and their significant growth in recent decades, they remain isolated experiences, without real weight in the vast majority of current political systems. DMP have not yet shown themselves to be definitive instruments for achieving more participative democracies, nor that they can overcome the contradictions and limitations mentioned herein. As has been demonstrated, the cases of Belgium and Ireland suffer a series of problems. The hardest to solve is that of connecting the processes to the political sphere, at the same time as formally empowering citizens in decision-taking. It is still a task pending for the advocates of DMP to create the foundations that would harmoniously combine the quality of deliberation with major political impact, or they are condemned to be mechanisms instrumentalized by the elites, as Böker said (2017).

Analysis of the impact of ICT seems to point to the need to approach its use from a focus which seeks to balance prudence with ambition. Thusly, one avoids falling into excessively optimistic expectations which do not correspond with reality. Introducing new forms of participation thanks to the internet is not enough to rouse the public's civic spirit, that will ultimately depend on the commitment and strategies of its promoters when transmitting and developing a project that excites the population. Future research could perhaps place greater weight on the interactions mediated by ICT between citizens and institutions, in order to evaluate their influence on contemporary democracies more precisely, as suggested by García Guitián (2016). Although, as that author points out, such a labour presupposes a determined way of conceiving the democratic system, on which there is no consensus, even amongst deliberative authors.

It is also important to point out that there is no single criterion on DMP for processes of democratic renewal. One of the lessons to be taken from the cases analysed herein is that each of these initiatives is suited to the political and economic realities in which they take place and the interests at play. In any case, it is not enough just to add deliberative content to public policy, but one must seek a systematic methodology able to adapt itself over time as new practices arise and new settings appear.

Nonetheless, despite the criticism that can be made of these DMP, there is reason to think that deliberative processes are evolving. The progress of ICT, especially the versatility offered by social networks, supposes a notable push for such initiatives. In fact, both cases can be seen as “successes” in different aspects, given that, directly or indirectly, they are contributing to putting deliberative processes in institutions, and not only that, but they have also gained legitimacy by better representing democratic discourse. The East Belgian Citizens’ Council and the successive Irish assemblies indicate there is good reason for optimism. That is thanks to the work of the activists and organisations of civil society, without whom the implementation of these mechanisms would not have been possible. Collective articulation shows itself once again to be an essential element in the development of democracy, which without reinforcement, runs the risk of serious regression. Major steps have been taken in this regard, but it remains to be seen if deliberative democracy is condemned to disillusion or whether, on the contrary, it will be transformed into an authentic reform of our political systems.

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