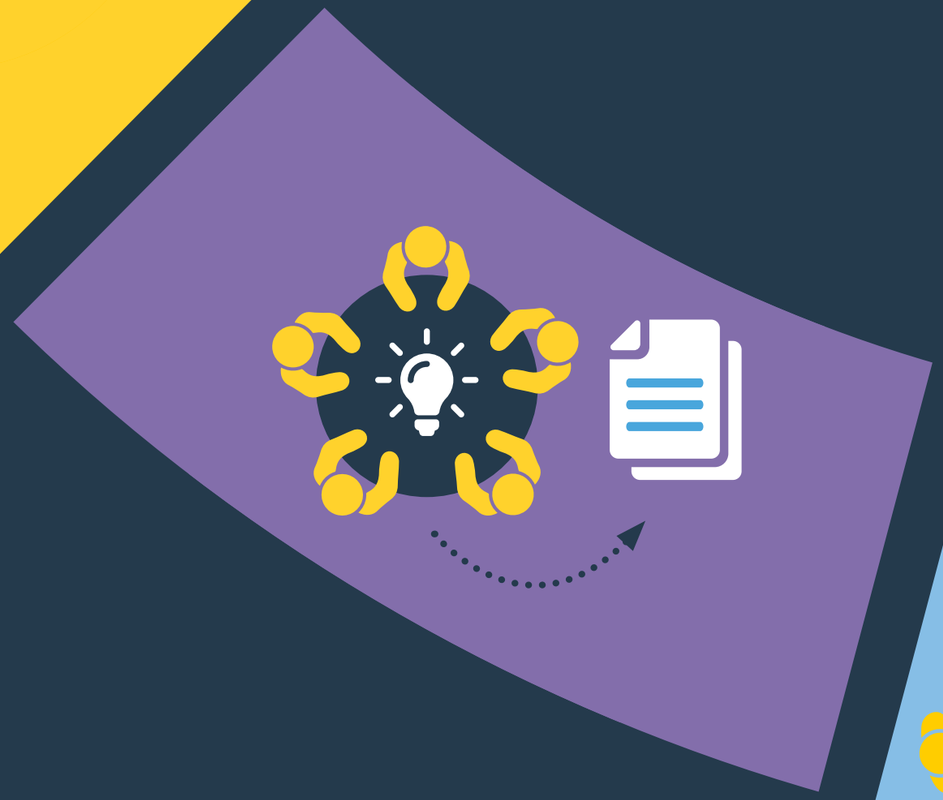
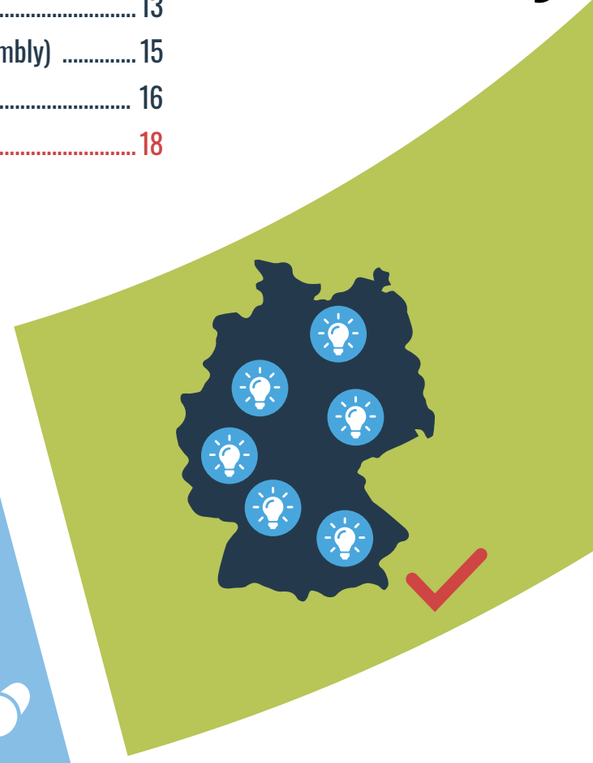
ALLOTTED CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES – HOW AND WHY THEY WORK

BÜRGERRAT
Demokratie





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1. SHAPE POLITICS WITH THE PEOPLE? YES WE CAN!

How do we as a society find ways out of the democratic crisis, the climate crisis, the financial crisis? How can we shape our future, achieve a fair distribution of resources, achieve generational justice...? We need new ways of finding ideas, cooperating in the political arena and working together. In many countries, allotted citizens' committees, also known as Citizens' Councils or Citizens' Assemblies, have already been successfully set up.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ALLOTTED CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES

- "Totally normal people" are selected by **random selection (lottery/sortition).** They develop concrete proposals for previously defined questions or put forward topics for further debate.
- Every person has the chance to become part of such an assembly. This is how **people from different filter bubbles** come together.
- The group is manageably large (often not more than 150 people), but composed in such a way that it represents society.[1]
- The meetings are **professionally organised** and moderated by a trained team of **neutral facilitators.**
- The participants do not have to have any special previous knowledge. Professionally guided discussion and **comprehensibly prepared information by experts** ensure that even complex issues can be dealt with.
- As far as possible, **all interest groups** (related to the topic in question) **are consulted,** e.g. environmental or business associations, churches, scientists or consumer protection groups.
- The public, traditional and, in particular, social media are involved - but the **deliberations** of the allotted group **take place in a safe space.**
- The proposals are accepted by the initiating institution, for example the parliament, the government, or a ministry, and in the ideal case the proposals lead to a decision-making process. They can also be the basis for a referendum or a popular initiative.

ADVANTAGES OF ALLOTTED CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES

- **Time and space for real discussions:** Citizens' Assemblies enable a comprehensive conversation on the social, economic and societal consequences of political measures. Facilitation and experts ensure that facts and concrete arguments take centre stage. In face to face encounters, hate speech and fake news hardly have a chance.
- **Building trust:** The participants get a better understanding of how politics work. Citizens come into contact with politicians and each other beyond filter bubbles and echo chambers.
- **Clarity:** Politicians gain a better understanding of the general public, including what people really think about concrete political measures and how far they will support political decisions.
- **Beyond opinion polls:** Citizens' Assemblies facilitate deepening sound knowledge and personal exchange of views. Instead of a snapshot, they provide well considered conclusions.
- **Involvement of all:** The phenomenon of „social exclusion" in political processes is mitigated, above all through the lottery procedure, but also, for example, through the payment of lost earnings, support with child care and care of relatives, translation and use of clear language.
- **Control of lobbyists:** The procedure is transparent and little susceptible to lobbying influences.
- The results reflect **common sense** and are **perceived as fair by the public.** They are **capable of winning a majority and support Parliament** in its decision-making processes.

Can we „save democracy with sortition", as the German quality newspaper FAZ wrote? [2]
Politicians and citizens of other countries would answer: „Yes, we can!" Worldwide, Assemblies and conferences based on deliberation are successfully applied. They often take place at the local or regional level, but increasingly also in larger contexts. The best-known example of how lot-based citizen participation has successfully linked parliamentary decisions and directly-democratic decisions is found in Ireland.

1 Read more on sortition in chapter 4, step 9.

2 Sebastian Scheffel: Mit dem Losverfahren die Demokratie retten? In: FAZ online, 8.7.19. Abrufbar unter: https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/buergerbeteiligung-mit-dem-losverfahren-die-demokratie-retten-16268760.html

2. WHERE ARE THERE ALREADY EXPERIENCES? – COUNTRY OVERVIEW

In times of crisis, people and societies seem to open up to new paths. In **Ireland** it was the difficult situation after the financial crisis that paved the way for Citizens‘ Assemblies (more in Chapter 5). In **the United Kingdom,** a Citizens‘ Convention is in preparation, passed by Parliament to **strengthen democracy.**[3] In **Germany,** the first nationwide, allotted Citizens‘ Council to find ways out of the democracy crisis has been running since June 2019.[4]

In particular the climate crisis is positively crying out for new forms of participation. It is no coincidence that Extinction Rebellion (the civil disobedience movement that has arisen in the face of the climate crisis and species extinction) names citizen councils as one of three demands on the climate issue and has published its own guidelines[5] on the subject. In the meantime, the **United Kingdom** has reacted: Six committees of the British Parliament have announced an lot-based **assembly on climate protection** for autumn 2019. At the regional level too, several citizens‘ councils are running on the climate issue in the UK.

In **France,** President Emmanuel Macron announced a **national Citizens‘ Climate Assembly,** which is to meet until January 2020. Over six long weekends within four months, 150 participants elected by lot are to propose measures to contain the climate crisis. According to Macron, these proposals should be implemented as far as possible, possibly even put to an referendum. The impetus for this came from the people. What all these procedures have in common is that they focus on direct dialogue with and between citizens as a signpost out of a crisis.

MORE SUCCESS STORIES:

Canada/British Columbia: In 2004, a Citizens‘ Assembly on **electoral law reform** took place in the Canadian province of British Columbia. This was one of the first Citizens‘ Councils and a model for other processes.[6] 160 people, including at least one woman and one man from each electoral district, met every other weekend over about ten months. The electoral system they developed was approved by 93 percent of the participants and by the majority of the population.

Belgium/East Belgium: After the 2010 elections, Belgium was without a government for a one-and-a-half years as a result of the fragmented party landscape. The G1000 initiative emerged from civil society as a **reaction to the party crisis.** It consisted of an online public consultation, a one-day conference of 704 people and a smaller meeting of 32 people over several weekends. Both bodies represented a cross-section of the population. The G1000 helped deliberative democracy break through in Belgium and led, among other things, to the permanent Citizens‘ Council in the region of East Belgium, that has taken up its work since 2019.[7] The members, chosen by lotand active for 18 months, lay out political issues and ensure that recommendations are delivered to parliament.

> *“The members of the Citizens’ Assembly [...] demonstrated how extraordinary ordinary citizens are when given an important task and the resources and independence to do it right.”*
>
> **Jack Blaney, Chair of the British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform**

> *“I was in parliament the night MPs from all six parties moved past ideological differences to endorse the bill. It was a courageous move, a sign to other politicians—who tend to see their voters as a threat rather than a resource—that citizens should be trusted, not feared, or “spun.”*
>
> **David Van Reybrouck, Co-organiser of the Belgian Citizens’ Panel, Belgium, talking about the new citizens’ assemblies in Eastern Belgium**

> *“If we were following the logic of [the reality TV show] Big Brother, we’d gradually eliminate the people who got on our nerves. But here, we don’t. We have to stick together and we have to show that you can achieve things when you work together.”*
>
> **Pierre, Member of the Citizens’ Panel, Belgium**

Australia: In 2016, two citizens‘ councils convened over a proposal from a government commission on the storage and disposal of radioactive waste from other countries. The first „jury“ included 50 participants and prepared a second 350-strong meeting. Both bodies were drawn from the Australian Post database and reflected the composition of the population by age group, gender, place of residence and land ownership. The second jury drew up a report - the economic considerations behind the government commission‘s proposal were judged to be unconvincing and the proposal was therefore rejected.

3 Citizens' Convention in UK Democracy. A User's Manual. Draft for consultation.
4 www.buergerrat.de
5 The Extinction Rebellion Guide to Citizens' Assemblies.
6 https://citizensassembly.arts.ubc.ca/

7 https://www.buergerdialog.be/

3. WHO IS INVOLVED? – ROLES AND TASKS[8]

First of all: A citizens‘ council is an organisational challenge and requires financial and personnel resources, especially when it takes place at state or federal level. Neutral process facilitators with experience in organising, structuring and moderating should play a central role. Irrespective of the topic and environment in which the process takes place, there are some basic elements:

- **Allotted citizens:** Unlike in Athenian democracy, where the basic idea of sortition goes back to, today we have the desire to represent society as a whole. The participants are therefore assembled as representatively as possible. It is important that participation should also be possible and attractive for people who are otherwise disconnected from politics. (More on this in Chapter 4).
- **Coordination-team:** This group is made up of the initiating group and neutral process organising institutes. It involves experts and as many relevant interest groups as possible. The coordination team can be supplemented by allotted citizens.
- **Initiators and donors:** Some Citizens‘ Assemblies are directly initiated by politicians and financed by the public sector. Sometimes politicians take up the idea of a citizens‘ council later. In Ireland, for example, the initiative „We the citizens“ (see more below) gave the impetus for the following Citizens‘ Assemblies. In such cases, the start-up financing can come from civil society, e.g. through donations or contributions to the initiating organisations. The organising group should seek close political ties from the outset, otherwise the citizens‘ recommendations will have no recipient. Public involvement in financing at a later stage is conceivable and desirable.
- **Facilitation-team:** This team develops the concrete implementation concept and process design for the Citizens‘ Council. It carries out the random selection. Professional facilitators are part of each Citizens‘ Council. They ensure that everyone has a say, that the discussion is fair and in an appropriate tone, that the time frame is adhered to, and that tangible results are produced. The facilitators are neutral with regard to the issues discussed.
- **Expert Round:** A mixture of experts and representatives of interest groups provide the assembly with knowledge from their respective perspectives. They are invited by the coordination team. Contributions can take the form, for example, of a talk, a discussion round, or a film/audio recording. Participants have the opportunity for response questions and discussion with the experts.
- **Advisory Board (optional):** The Advisory Board advises on the selection of experts and ensures that balanced and comprehensive background information is available to the citizens. It consists of, for example, scientists, supplemented by persons with special knowledge on a subject, or representatives of civil society organisations. The Advisory Council ensures that the Citizens‘ Council is non-partisan. It should take care to disseminate the recommendations of the Assembly within its own networks and promote their implementation.

- **Evaluation group (optional):** This group monitors the process without being involved. It is conceivable to commission a university to carry out the evaluation. However, the group can also be made up of a variety of members, e.g. citizens, government representatives, representatives of interest groups, academics and practitioners.

8 The following two chapters are based on „The Extinction Rebellion Guide to Citizens‘ Assemblies“. Thank you for this valuable compilation.

4. WHAT HAPPENS WHEN? – PLANNING AND PROCESS

When politicians or an administration start Citizens‘ Assemblies, there is usually a call for tenders. If councils are initiated by civil society, the following steps are sensible:

- **Step 1: Form a coordination team.** The possible influence of the initiators should be balanced by neutral process managers.
- **Step 2: Clarify contracting authorities and financing.** It is sensible for the initiators to involve, for example, political representatives, industry associations, and environmental associations.
- **Step 3: Prepare the topic or set the theme with the help of the citizens.** The formulation of the question is usually determined by the initiators in cooperation with the contracting authorities. It will often be necessary to carry out preliminary research in order to compile the prevailing political circumstances, state of research, and practical experience, and to locate the experts and stakeholders in this field.
- **Step 4: Organise the facts.** The coordination team prepares the facts together with experts and possibly with the advisory board. The aim is to determine which individual issues the allotted citizens are to discuss and decide on, and what information they need for this. It might be helpful, for example, to divide a major topic (climate crisis) into sub-themes (energy, heating, transport, agriculture…) and to further develop individual questions in every sub-theme.
- **Step 5: Assemble an evaluation group.**
- **Step 6: Process design.** The design is primarily carried out by the facilitation-team. These components are important:
  - **Define formats:** The team develops the detailed concept and defines key points, such as the number of participants, duration, moderation methodology, the way in which the question is dealt with, etc.
  - **Learning/being informed:** The participants receive basic information on the issue.
  - **Consultation:** Participants receive input from experts and stakeholders.
  - **Deliberation/discussion:** Discussion and consultation in small groups and in plenary sessions (all allotted citizens together).
  - **Decision:** Step by step distillation of what has been discussed and voting on particular recommendations. Development of recommendations and drawing up of a report.
- **Step 7: Random selection of participants/Sortition.** In Germany it is possible to access the municipal registers of residents. The selection of the municipalities and the drawing from their population registers are computer-aided. The coordination team writes to those selected by lot, explains the process, and the terms (e.g. assumption of costs). Those who wish to participate fill out a registration form, which also includes socio-demographic criteria. Based on this information, the facilitation-team examines the balanced composition of the respondents with regard to gender, regional origin, migration background, age and educational level. If necessary, other randomly selected people will be contacted until the participants reflect society well. This means that many more people have to be approached than ultimately participate [more than 4,000 people were contacted for the German Bürgerrat Demokratie (Citizens‘ Council on Democracy) to put together a group of 160].
- **Step 8: Invite experts and representatives of interest groups.**
- **Step 9: Create information material.**
- **Step 10: Conduct the assembly.** The allotted citizens usually meet several times over several days at an easily accessible location, sometimes over longer periods. The meetings have a fixed start and end point and the composition of the participants remains the same. Presentations/speeches from the information and consultation phase will be published (possibly also live-streamed). The media attend the process. The small group discussions take place in a safe space, i.e. without media, stakeholders, etc. The results are summarised in a report by the process facilitation-team.
- **Step 11: Delivering the recommendations to the responsible political authorities.** Ideally, it is already clear before the process begins how and when the government/parliament/competent body will react to the recommendations. It is helpful to settle: Is there a parliamentary debate or even a referendum on the proposals of the Citizens‘ Council? In what timeframe will policy react to the proposals? Does acceptance/rejection have to be justified?

5. EXAMPLE IN PRACTICE: CITIZENS‘ ASSEMBLY IN IRELAND

In preparation for the Citizens‘ Assembly on Democracy in Germany, a group of democracy activists, politicians, and participation experts embarked on a study trip to Ireland at the beginning of 2019, to meet with the former Prime Minister, members of parliament, and people from academia, from NGOs and, of course, from the citizenry. These are the main findings:

HISTORY

The initial impulse came from the civil society initiative „We the citizens“, which reacted to the disenchantment with politics accompanying the financial and economic crisis: In a self-organized citizens‘ assembly in 2011, randomly selected participants discussed important political issues. It was a great success: Following the assembly participants showed more political interest, greater willingness to discuss and engage politically - and their confidence in their own political influence had grown. This convinced the government to use the citizens‘ assembly in an “official” capacity.

> *“If you’re cynical about a politician’s ability to [...] pass legislation [and] there’s an issue that’s burning to your society in general — have an assembly.”*
>
> **David Keogh, member of the Citizens’ Assembly on Abortion, Ireland**

The **Citizens‘ Assembly** of 2016, which consisted entirely of citizens, was preceded by a **Constitutional Convention** with politicians and citizens, set up by the government, which met from 2012 to 2014. It consisted of 66 people from the population and 33 people from politics. Ten topics were dealt with. For most of these topics a weekend was planned, for more controversial issues like gay marriage two weekends. The participants drew up more than 40 recommendations and submitted them to parliament. They discussed issues such as the role of women and the lowering of the voting age (read more below). As a result, political confidence in the new instrument had grown to such an extent that, from 2016 onwards, only allotted citizens belonged in the assembly, which is reflected in the name „Citizens‘ Assembly“.

COMMISSIONED BY POLITICIANS

One of the success factors of the Irish assemblies was their close link to politics: after the Citizens‘ Assembly had already been a topic in the 2016 election campaign, the new government and both chambers of parliament agreed to convoke it.
Parliamentary agreements for the Citizens‘ Assembly:

- The Assembly will examine the following constitutionally relevant topics: Abortion (Eight Amendment), the challenge of an ageing society, the conduct of referendums, term limits for parliamentarians, strategies for dealing with climate change.
- 99 participants will be randomly selected to provide a representative picture of Irish society.
- The government appoints the chairperson.
- The Assembly itself sets the rules for its meetings.
- The Assembly makes recommendations to Parliament within one year of its first meeting.
- A group of experts will lend support to the Assembly in acquiring information and deliberating.
- The Assembly draws up recommendations, submits them to both chambers of parliament, and they, in turn, set up a committee to prepare the recommendations for debate in parliament.
- On request, the Assembly can obtain statements from interest groups and/or experts.
- The simple majority of the votes of all present at the Assembly decides. In a stalemate situation, the Chair decides.
- The government gives feedback to the parliamentary chambers on each recommendation of the Assembly. If a recommendation is accepted, the government sets the timeframe within which a referendum must be held.

PROCESS

The selection of the participating citizens was carried out by a polling firm. In order to persuade people to participate, members of the organisation team travelled throughout the country to personally address people for the Citizens‘ Assembly.

Within one year, 100 allotted participants from all corners of the country came together on twelve weekends. At the conference venue, the Grandhotel of a coastal town 20 kilometres north of Dublin, experts and scientists provided them with comprehensive information on the topics to be dealt with. In the case of abortion, for example, affected women, doctors, representatives of the Catholic Church and employees of NGOs had their say. The „input“ was published online so that the whole population could understand on what basis the Citizens‘ Assembly deliberated.

Participants sat in groups of six at round tables. The deliberations themselves took place without media presence. At each table there was one facilitator and one assistant who took the minutes. At the end of the discussion, the decisive questions were jointly formulated in the plenum and voted on by secret ballot. The government decided over which proposals from the Assembly to take to a referendum vote – because in Ireland constitutional amendments must be handled by referendum.

The Irish Citizens' Assembly delivered forty political recommendations, eighteen of which were constitutional amendments, to the Parliament and government. The government announced three referenda, in addition to the above mentioned "marriage for all" and abortion, the so called "blasphemy paragraph" was also considered by vote – and abolished.

"It's not just a particular type of people that have gone to college. You get to hear what the ordinary people, the people that it affects on the ground, [...] feel about something—what they would like to change about it."

Noreen O'Flynn, member of the Citizens' Assembly on Abortion, Ireland

"There just seems to be a political disconnect all over the Western World. [Citizens' assemblies are] a new layer of democracy. We probably put a couple of hundred hours of total time into it; [...] we're probably the best informed amateurs in the country on this topic at the moment."

John Long, member of the Citizens' Assembly on Abortion, Ireland

"Our citizens call the Irish Constitution: Our book. That is because they have voted on every constitutional change."

Enda Kenny, former Irish Prime Minister

RESULTS (CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION AND CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY)

(As of August 2019)

THEMA	NUMBER OF PROPOSALS	GOVERNMENT REACTION	WHAT HAS HAPPEND SO FAR
reduction of presidential term from 7 to 5 years	3	government accepted two recommendations and rejected one	in May 2015 rejected by referendum
reduce voting age	1	Government accepted recommendation	referendum promised in 2015; likely to come in the next 18 months
role of women in home/public life	2	ministerial task force considered options; government favoured simple removal of clause	referendum still pending
increasing women's participation in politics	3	ministerial task force to investigate further	open
same-sex marriage	2	government agreed to referendum and supporting legislation	referendum passed May 2015
electoral system	10	5 recommendations were rejected; government promised to establish an electoral commission to address 4 of the remaining recommendations.	consultations on electoral commission are still running
voting rights for Irish living abroad in presidential elections	1	ministerial task force considered options	referendum promised within a year
removing the article on blasphemy	2	government agreed to referendum	referendum passed October 2018
parliamentary reform	12	no formal response from government	most of the recommendations were implemented in June 2016
economic, social and cultural rights	2	government rejected recommendations	no outcome
abortion	3	government agreed to referendum	referendum passed May 2018

> *“Hardly anyone in politics had considered these liberal proposals capable of winning a majority. It turned out that the population was more courageous. Without the citizens‘ assemblies, the referendums would not have been held at all, because the parliament would hardly have been able to reach an agreement.”*

Roman Huber, Board Member More Democracy, on the experiences during the Ireland-trip

> *“The Citizens’ Assembly showed that if you structure the debate around information, discussion, questions and answers, and allow citizens to really thrash things out with expert advice, very often people will shift their positions.”*

Sadhbh O Neill, an expert adviser to the Citizens’ Assembly on Climate Change, Ireland

ESPECIALLY CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

From the results prepared by the Constitutional Convention and the Citizens‘ Assembly, especially on the highly controversial issues, international observers were as positively surprised as the Irish Parliament itself.

By far the most heated topics were same-sex marriage and a new abortion law. Both recommendations of the assemblies were first adopted by Parliament and then approved by referendum. The fact that both issues would result in a constitutional amendment greatly enhanced the discussion process. Significantly more people were interested, participated in the discussion and made online submissions.

The results proved all fears about the “backwardness” of the population untrue.

CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION	CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY
marriage equality/same sex marriage, May 2015	Abortion, May 2018
turnout 60,5 %	turnout 64,1 %
yes-votes: 62,1 %	yes-votes: 66,4 %
no-votes: 37,9 %	no-votes: 33,6%

Previously, Ireland had one of the most rigid abortion regimes in the world; even after rape, an abortion was not allowed. Many were therefore carried out „secretly“ in England.

Polls about the referendum on abortion demonstrate that the previous Citizens‘ Assembly had a major impact on voting results: 66 percent of voters knew that the referendum questions were based on proposals from the assembly. 70 percent knew about the random selection and 76 percent knew that experts made available information to the assembly. On this basis, most voters apparently trusted that the proposals of the Citizens‘ Assembly were in the general interest.

6. RESEARCH PROVES: IT WORKS!

Deliberative democracy works and leads to solid and satisfying political results – this can be scientifically demonstrable.

Some important findings from research on deliberative procedures are:

- Even people who do not relate to party politics or associations can be politically integrated with the help of Citizens‘ Assemblies.
- “Normal people” are quite capable of making competent decisions if they are provided with balanced information and comprehensibly prepared knowledge and if the process is professionally facilitated.
- The influence of elites and lobby groups can be recognised and even curbed within the framework of such participatory processes.
- Deliberative processes ensure that extreme positions can be balanced, and in the ideal case, even social divides overcome.
- Deliberative processes ultimately lead to decisions being well-considered, well-reflected and relatively free of contradictions. They thus stand in contrast to „populist“ contexts, where it is simply a matter of asserting one‘s own position, where genuine encounters and joint problem solving play no role.

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