

Strategic Motivations and Normative Objectives: The Rationale Behind Irish Politicians' Support for Citizens' Assemblies

Fionna Saintraint (fionna.saintraint2@mail.dcu.ie)

Jane Suiter (jane.suiter@dcu.ie)

Introduction

Citizens' assemblies (CAs) have gained global popularity as inclusive platforms for citizen engagement in decision-making (see the earlier chapters in this volume). In practice, their political impact has often been described as minimal (Vrydagh 2023), with few state-commissioned CAs resulting in policy or constitutional changes (Minsart & Jacquet 2023). However, Irish CAs have emerged as notable successes, having evolved since their first iteration in 2012.

The Irish CAs were first mooted in the lead-up to the 2011 general elections. Following the fallout of the 2008 recession and amidst debates about the fitness of the existing political system, political parties prioritised political reform in a bid to rebuild trust and connection with an electorate (McCarthy & O'Rourke, 2011; Suiter, Farrell, & Harris, 2016). Central to these proposals were CAs of various hues. The 2011 'earthquake elections' resulted in a Fine Gael-Labour coalition, both parties having promised constitutional reform projects in their manifestos. The Programme for Government (PfG) pledged to establish the Irish Constitutional Convention (ICC), a two-year hybrid deliberative model involving both citizens and politicians, which resulted in ground-breaking reforms such as the legalisation of same-sex marriage (Farrell *et al.*, 2018).

Subsequent Irish coalition governments have all committed to and initiated CAs, though the majority have transitioned away from politician involvement to become forums composed of 99 randomly-selected citizens who meet to deliberate in a facilitated environment to formulate recommendations on specific issues after hearing expert evidence. The nature of the issues covered has ranged from constitutional problems (e.g., the eighth constitutional amendment regarding abortion) to local institutional ones (e.g., the implementation of a directly elected mayor), though most have concerned social concerns of national interest (e.g., gender inequality, climate change, and drug use). These commitments have been increasing, with the 2020 coalition Government committing to four distinct CAs (Government of Ireland, 2020). Having started as an *ad hoc* experiment in response to a widespread social and political crisis and advocated for by academics, Irish CAs have now become an institutionalised part of the policy landscape.

Analysing politicians' rationales in initiating CAs enables us to understand their justification for doing so, which goes beyond mere instrumentalisation for political gain. Irish CAs are inherently political creatures, as they are commissioned by newly-formed coalition Governments in their PfG. Their Terms of Reference (ToR) emanate from the Oireachtas (Parliament) and include clear commitments to receive and address each recommendation. Consequently, politicians and parties hold significant roles in proposing and determining topics, defining the consultation framework, and responding to recommendations. Despite this, there is a notable gap in the academic literature regarding the motivations of political elites in endorsing these processes or implementing recommendations.

By analysing interviews with various Irish political and policymaking figures, this chapter investigates the drivers of Irish politicians' endorsement of these assemblies, their increased prevalence and integration into the institutional landscape, as well as the implementation of their outcomes. It does so by utilising Gherghina and Jacquet's (2022) framework for analysing political parties' strategic motivations and normative objectives in employing deliberative procedures. Overall, we seek to answer the following research question: What motivations and normative objectives factor into

politicians' increasing use of CAs? We will first examine a portion of Gherghina and Jacquet's (2022) theoretical framework, before presenting our methodology, and subsequently exploring politicians' strategic motivations for initiating deliberative processes and their use of recommendations. Finally, we will investigate their normative justifications for engaging in citizen deliberation.

Theoretical Framework

Deliberative processes promote a cooperative model of interactions, which appears contradictory to the logic of partisanship that has made political parties successful (Gherghina & Jacquet, 2022). The features of partisan politics that can benefit candidates during electoral campaigns, such as highlighting differences or avoiding common ground, may ultimately overshadow governance institutions and undermine the deliberative practices which are essential in fostering positive change (Parkinson, 2012). The increase in polarisation and the decline in civility amongst politicians and in the wider information environment discourages citizens from engaging with the content of political debates, leading them instead to resort to partisan cues or drop out of participation altogether (Dryzek et al., 2019). However, political parties can use more deliberative settings within a larger deliberative system (Parkinson, 2012) to respond to certain deficits in their ways of functioning internally (*intra-party*), amongst each other (*inter-party*) and with the citizenry (Gherghina and Jacquet, 2022). Focusing on the immediate values advanced by these processes and the problems they address may offer more practical insights into the rationale of those commissioning them (Lacelle-Webster and Warren, 2023).

In adapting Gherghina and Jacquet's (2022) model, we particularly focus on the second part of the framework, the goals of deliberation (2022, p. 12), to support us in answering our question about the motivations that drive political actors to either partially or fully endorse or reject deliberative procedures. For the first facet of these goals, dubbed 'strategic motivations' by the authors, Gherghina and Jacquet (2022) deploy Strøm's (1990) seminal distinction between vote-seeking, office-seeking, and policy-seeking. To briefly recap, office-seeking parties, by their nature, prioritise gaining and maintaining political power over specific policy proposals. Policy-seeking parties seek to maximise their effect on policy, although in the context of coalitions they also tend to pursue office at least instrumentally given that elective office is taken as a precondition to policy influence (Strøm, 1990). Finally, vote-seeking parties are those which seek to maximise electoral support to control office or obtain policy gains. All parties seek electoral support to some extent, at least instrumentally for office or policy reasons. Vote-seeking parties do not just seek votes; they are *vote maximisers* (Strøm, 1990).

This chapter questions whether CAs present larger office and vote-seeking parties with another route to essentially depoliticise controversial issues. The party system in Ireland strongly incentivises office-seeking behaviour (Marsh and Mitchell, 1999, p. 39), thereby at least instrumentally encouraging vote-seeking behaviour. The Irish system is often characterised as prioritising office-seeking behaviour, followed by votes, then policy, with little conscious trade-off between gaining office and winning votes. Both larger centre-right parties are still characterised as "catch-all" (Mainwaring and McGraw, 2019), though there is some dispute over the extent to which they are office- or vote-seeking. McGraw (2015) suggests that both parties are "ideologically flexible vote-seekers" (see also Mainwaring and McGraw, 2019), competing mainly on salience and emphasising the issues which they believe will be electorally useful. Therefore, they are more likely to have disparate internal opinions and to potentially see CAs as a way to navigate intra-party disagreements. Given their wide social basis for support and competitiveness in every constituency, they have removed controversial topics (e.g., Northern Ireland and abortion) from the realm of party politics through the use of referendums and, arguably, with CAs. There is some debate about the extent to which the smaller Irish parties are policy-seeking more than office-seeking. Mainwaring and McGraw (2019, p. 687) argue that both Labour and the Greens are catchalls and programmatic parties, balancing policy and vote-seeking behaviours. In

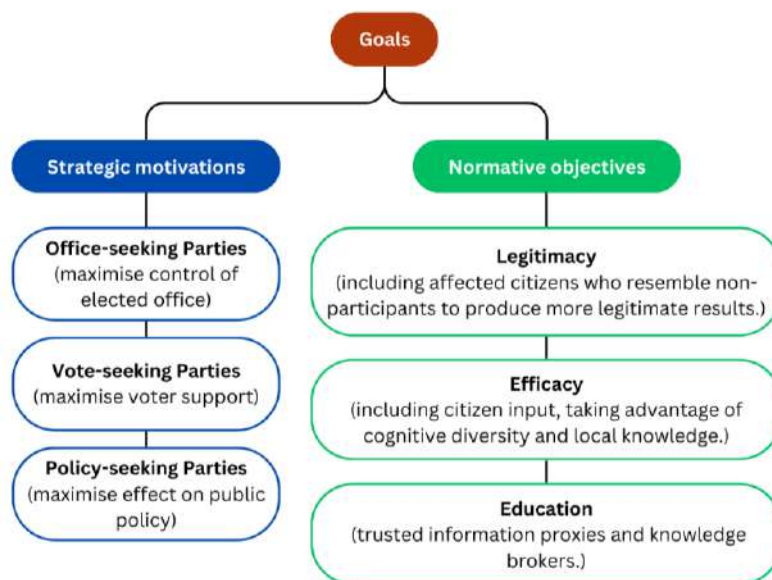
contrast, Sinn Féin was found to be consistent in its policy-seeking profile (Mainwaring and McGraw, 2019).

Our focus is therefore on how CAs fit into the trade-offs between parties' and politicians' office and policy-seeking behaviour in coalition negotiations, with a subsequent reflection on their role across parties' vote-seeking behaviour. Traditionally, the larger party makes the larger policy concessions in coalition negotiations (Green-Pedersen and Little, 2023), allowing smaller parties substantial policy sway. Hence, we might expect the policy preferences of smaller parties to be prioritised as subject matter for CAs in PfGs. Concerning their manifestos, parties are incentivised to showcase their commitment to involving citizens in policy-making by committing to such processes, if these are deemed to resonate with their putative electorates.

Our understanding of politicians' justification for using CAs is further enriched by the second facet of Gherghina and Jacquet's (2022, pp. 12-13) framework, which describes politicians' normative objectives: legitimacy, efficacy, and education. It is reductive to consider the increased use of CAs in Ireland as office and policy-seeking behaviours. This increase is rooted in the normative justifications of the problem politicians are elected to tackle (Lacelle-Webster and Warren, 2023), incentivising the use of CAs as effective tools for resolving these issues. There is agreement among scholars that deliberative democracy focuses on producing legitimate political outcomes (Dryzek *et al.*, 2019), which are those that citizens have a valid reason to endorse or comply with (Fung, 2006, p.70). The perceived legitimacy of CA outcomes is enhanced by including affected citizens (Curato *et al.*, 2021, p. 108), possibly because of the perceived similarity of assembly members to the wider public (Pow *et al.*, 2020, p. 44). CAs can therefore resolve situations where political decisions are seen as unjust, or where the issues under discussion cut across parties and ideologies.

CAs are perceived as producing better political decisions (Reuchamps *et al.*, 2023), and contributing to ongoing public conversations. Their efficacy is heightened by the diversity of citizen members, whose varied perspectives and local insights (Fung, 2006) enhance policy, as citizens possess crucial information and priorities often overlooked by the authorities. Curato and Böker (2016, p. 177) describe CAs as "brokers of knowledge" able to synthesise relevant discourses for the wider public (see also Niemeyer, 2014). This can make them trusted information proxies (Warren and Gastil, 2015) when there is an incentive for citizen reflection, such as an upcoming popular vote (Setälä, 2017).

Figure 1: Theoretical framework



Methodology

This study employs a qualitative analysis of 16 semi-structured interviews and one structured interview conducted between April and June 2023 with elected officials and senior organisers of various assemblies. The political participants were selected randomly from a research sample that included all sitting members of the Oireachtas, with an effort made to strive for equal distribution of gender and weighted distribution of party representatives. The final sample of politicians, recruited via email, is a mix of TDs (MPs) who responded and local councillors with whom we were put in contact. Sinn Féin proved more complicated to contact than other parties, as the authors were required to contact the party's press office to include them in the study. The final sample includes elected members from Fine Gael (3), Fianna Fáil (3), the Green Party (4), Sinn Féin (2), and Labour (1), as well as four senior organisers of previous CAs. Interviews were carried out in person and online, except for one senior TD who responded to questions via email. The individual study participants are anonymised. Participants are assigned the letter 'P' for politicians and 'O' for organisers, followed by a unique randomly-assigned number (from 1 to 17, as per agreement with the institutional F-REC). Though the interviews with organisers are not referred to in this chapter, they provided crucial context to the information provided by the politicians. The disposition of the interviewed politicians is laid out in Table 1, with 'Coalition Government' signifying a party in the 2020-2024 government (Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and the Greens) and 'opposition' signalling a party on the opposition bench (Labour and Sinn Féin). 'National' indicates that the politician is an elected MP. Whether they occupy or have previously occupied a ministerial position is not specified here, to ensure that participants are not identifiable.

Table 1: Participants

Participant	Gender	Position in party (in 2023)	Institutional Level
P1	F	Opposition	National
P2	F	Coalition Government	National
P3	M	Coalition Government	City Councillor
P4	M	Coalition Government	National
P5	M	Coalition Government	National
P7	F	Coalition Government	National
P9	M	Coalition Government	National
P10	M	Coalition Government	National
P11	F	Opposition	National
P12	F	Coalition Government	National
P14	M	Coalition Government	National
P15	M	Opposition	City Councillor
P17	M	Coalition Government	National

The qualitative analysis commenced with a thematic coding of the interviews. A deductive method was initially employed, leveraging the categories from Gherghina and Jacquet's (2022) framework to systematically organise the data. However, it became evident early on that the logic of politicians could not be neatly compartmentalised within these predefined categories, leading to significant overlap. Subsequently, an inductive approach was adopted to allow themes to naturally emerge from the data during a revisit of the interview transcripts. This iterative process integrated the emergent themes with those which we deductively identified, enhancing the comprehensiveness of the analysis. Additionally, a qualitative examination of party manifestos not only aims to discern the prominence accorded to CAs within these policy platforms but also enables us to observe the evolution of CAs' place in party strategies. This analysis provides insights into how parties perceive the utility of CAs in terms of vote aggregation, and how receptive constituents are to these processes. They also shed light on the agendas of the potential CAs to be announced by newly-elected governments.

Irish politicians' strategic motivations in using CAs

CAs have been used by three successive governments on a variety of topics. Each government took a seemingly piecemeal approach to commissioning the process, assimilating lessons learnt from previous CAs into subsequent iterations. The following section explores the political incentives behind the different iterations of Irish CAs from one government to the next. What emerges is a dual strategy to navigate intra- and inter-party conflicts. We seek to demonstrate emerging trends and to explore whether changes depend on the specific nature of the party advocating for the process and its agenda.

Office and policy-seeking motivations

Winning parties must overcome their differences during coalition negotiations to form a government. These negotiations are crucial in navigating inter-party differences and compromising on policy commitments in a PfG. Some policy agreements are made in the course of this process, but CAs also allow some to be deferred concerning particular matters that cannot be resolved during negotiations, or for which their mandate for action is limited.

CAs have been used to bridge inter-party differences, resulting in compromises that have shaped the design and agenda of the processes, enabling smaller parties to push for issues and quelling intra-party differences within larger, more ideologically diverse parties. In 2011, a compromise between Fine Gael's and Labour's competing proposals for political reform resulted in the ICC's hybrid membership (66 citizen members and 33 politicians) and its relatively long list of constitutional issues. This included same-sex marriage, which Labour's leader described as the civil rights issue of the generation (P1). The larger Fine Gael had no agreed position on marriage equality and was divided between progressive-conservative and urban-rural factions (Farrell and Suiter, 2019). In 2016, independent candidate Katherine Zappone's support to form a Fine Gael minority government was conditioned by her campaign commitment to repeal the constitutional abortion ban.

While in opposition, the Greens managed to insert the issue of climate action onto the 2016 Irish Citizens' Assembly's (ICA) agenda with an amendment to the resolution providing for its establishment. This posed challenges for Fine Gael's 2016 coalition amid international pressure to take climate action (Devaney *et al.*, 2018), given the party's reliance on votes from the influential farming sector. Integrating climate change into the ICA's agenda overcame this impasse and resolved intra-party urban-rural divides (P3). In 2020, Fine Gael's coalition talks with the Greens exposed discord over environmental priorities (Devaney *et al.*, 2020). The CA on tackling biodiversity loss (CA_Biodiversity) offered a compromise, allowing Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil to acknowledge the issue (P3; P4; P5) without making firm policy commitments. Participants referred to CAs' potential to 'untangle' divisive or complex issues (P1; P2; P5; P12; P14) and to defuse tensions (P14), with some

noting a change in dynamic in negotiating parties' interactions (P2; P4). Reaching common ground on controversial issues by referring them to Cas and committing to a response to the subsequent reports is preferable to attempting to resolve them amidst post-election rivalry (P10; P14). Additionally, CAs are considered easy to negotiate (P2), further streamlining negotiations.

These advantages were not unanimously perceived, and the process has also been subject to various criticisms. Scholars argue that the ICA allowed the government to sidestep directly revising the law on abortion, enabling them to defer to the will of the assembly instead (McNamara, 2019; Rountree and Curato, 2023). This echoes the views of several participants in this study, who considered the delegation of such important issues an abdication of political responsibility (P2; P4; P5; P10; P14). An Irish Times Editorial (2019) similarly accused politicians of being unable to confront issues without relying "on some outside body to tell them what to do".

Another perspective proposes that CAs provide political cover for politicians who are otherwise hesitant to endorse certain issues independently. This provides political cover and garners support from backbenchers from both across and within parties, who may have previously been apprehensive about openly supporting certain policy issues. It bridges intra-party issues in large parties to gain internal momentum for policy change, while allowing smaller parties to garner cross-party support and advance policy priorities. However, certain politicians from policy-seeking parties are critical of CAs, perceiving them as potential political obstacles due to their pursuit of specific policy commitments. Consequently, they criticise colleagues or the majority for postponing decisions by "kicking the can down the road" (P3; P5; P14; P15).

Vote-seeking motivations

Strøm (1990, p. 573) points out that both office- and policy-seeking behaviours clash with vote maximisation "to the extent that government incumbency is likely to have subsequent electoral costs". To win an election, parties are designed to meet the challenges faced by aspiring politicians under competitive circumstances, one of which is information about the electorate and its preferences.

The increase in references to CAs in Irish manifestos is likely to be due to the results of the abortion referendum, which reinforced the linkage between the citizens and the CA process, with the votes closely mirroring one another (64% of CA members voted in favour of repeal and the final referendum tally was 66.4% in favour of repeal) (Suiter, 2018). In short, the ICA's ambition in decriminalising abortion and replacing the Eighth Amendment was seen as correctly reflecting the mood of the citizenry. This is echoed by the participants of this study, who perceive it as an effective means of gauging public opinion (P1; P4; P5; P15), especially if they are unsure "how society is viewing them at a particular moment in time" (P2).

For much of Irish history, the electorate rewarded consistency at the polls (McCarthy and O'Rourke, 2011). The dealignment and instability of voters' affiliations since 2011 (Gallagher and Marsh, 2016) may have heightened politicians' need to innovate in their approach to the electorate while simultaneously mitigating losses among their loyal bases. This can be seen in the use of the ICC and ICA, ensuring that any call for a constitutional amendment via referendum stemmed from a forum of citizens rather than a typical partisan struggle. Some participants described CAs as useful in deflecting discontent about policies that might not resonate well with loyal voters but which are deemed necessary, as evident in urban-rural intra-party divides, although it is worth noting that they described this behaviour in others rather than tactics that their parties engage in (P3; P4; P14).

Table 2: Mentions of CAs and/or Constitutional Convention in party manifestos (2007 to 2020)

	2007	2011	2016	2020
Fianna Fáil	No mention.	CA on electoral reform (a “public consultation” of “people from all sections of society”) (Fianna Fáil, 2011, p. 30-31).	No mention.	Criticism of Fine Gael's proposed CA on directly elected mayor (“unnecessary delaying tactic”) (Fianna Fáil, 2020, p. 89).
Fine Gael	No mention.	Commitment to establish a consultative CA on electoral reform (Fine Gael, 2011, p. 7).	Commitment to establish a CA (on 5 issues) with response by Oireachtas. Commitment to certain ICC recommendations (Fine Gael, 2016, p. 72, 96-99, 103).	Committed response to CA_Gender recommendations. Commitment to initiate CA on directly elected mayor, with mitigated commitment to plebiscite (Fine Gael, 2020, p. 32, 100).
Labour	No mention.	Call for a Constitutional Convention with mixed membership (politicians, experts and citizens) on electoral reform and draft a new Constitution (including reflecting on the role of women) (Labour, 2011, p. 45-46, 77).	Calls for substantial responses to ICC recommendations and a new Convention (Labour, 2016).	Call for a new ICC (Labour, 2020, p. 12).
Sinn Féin	No mention.	No mention.	Commitment to "a fresh citizens' convention to discuss political reform" (Sinn Féin, 2016, p. 31).	Commitment to a CA “to discuss and plan for Irish Unity” (Sinn Féin, 2020, p. 16).
Green Party	No mention.	Referendum on establishing a CA to draft a new Constitution (40	Call for substantial response to ICC recommendations, a list of referendums	Call for CA on Future of Education, CA on directly elected mayor for Dublin and

		elected members) (Green Party, 2011, p. 13).	from ICC they support and call to reconvene the ICC (Green Party, 2016, p. 44).	CA on local government arrangements in Cork (Green Party, 2020, p. 48, 59).
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Irish politicians' normative objectives in using CAs

CAs can be convened to respond to several issues rooted in a perceived lack of legitimacy, efficacy, or education (Gherghina and Jacquet, 2022). The following section explores how Irish politicians view CAs as contributing to the legitimacy of political decision-making by examining the role they attribute to the process, its position within the decision-making hierarchy, and the rationale they employ for their use of the process and its outcomes. Additionally, it will investigate these politicians' views on whether and how the process either improves or impedes decision-making, as well as their perspective on its contribution to shaping and informing wider public discourse.

Legitimacy

Politicians' appreciation of CAs is related to the latter's perceived problem-solving potential. The ICC was an effort to rebuild a connection between the public and their representatives (Suiter, Farrell, and Harris, 2016). The ICC and the ICA's results demonstrated the process's ability to frame public discourse on highly divisive issues. Some politicians expressed an initial perception of CAs as delaying mechanisms but subsequently recognised their capacity to garner support and solicit citizen input (P3; P4) where there is uncertainty about the public's mood. Among the participants, two viewed the outcomes of the ICC and ICA negatively, and both were very critical of the process (P9; P10), though it is noteworthy that at least one holds views on the fringe of mainstream Irish politics. Intriguingly, our interviews did not reveal that recent CAs sought to bridge distrust between decision-makers and the citizenry, indicating a shift in political leaders' viewpoints since the ICC. Rather than an exercise in deliberative capacity building, the politicians seemed unanimous in their perception of CAs as consultative participation devices to be deployed by politicians when they decided that political decision-making could be enhanced by citizen deliberation and input. This is somewhat in line with some deliberative democrats' perception of these processes as instruments of citizen input and knowledge brokering, but is removed from a systemic perception of deliberative system building that more radical deliberative democrats advocate for.

The legitimacy of Irish CAs as perceived by Irish politicians emanates from its top-down organisation, which follows the traditional hierarchy of representative institutions, giving elected institutions the ultimate authority and singling out elections as the central tool of power delegation. Politicians argue that CAs, as selected and commissioned entities rather than elected ones, lack inherent democratic legitimacy and authority (P2; P3; P4; P12; P14). These attributes are granted to them by politicians, who hold the ultimate political power, as mandated by the electorate. Consequently, they view their prerogative as being to endorse the process design and set the agenda, as well as to re-evaluate the findings presented by members through a Joint Oireachtas Committee. While previous research has shown that perceptions of legitimacy are connected to factors such as tenure in office or political affiliation (Niessen, 2019; Rangoni *et al.*, 2021), our findings indicate a consensus on the structuring of power. The rationale behind this gatekeeping varies according to political orientation or party affiliation. Larger parties are more focused on preserving the traditional power dynamics, emphasising a competence-based hierarchy between elected officials and the electorate (Rangoni *et al.*, 2021), and highlighting the significance of electoral accountability, which CA members lack. They challenge the representativeness of the membership, questioning the exclusion of certain constituencies (P10) or

the inherent bias introduced by the inevitable self-selection among the final respondents (P14). Meanwhile, small parties are primarily concerned with policy matters, showing reluctance to endorse CAs for issues in which they are actively involved, despite evidence suggesting that CAs can enhance the momentum of these issues and break policy deadlocks.

The legitimacy of CAs' outcomes is ambiguous, as politicians' endorsement of CAs hinges on the results they produce, much as public approval does (Pilet *et al.*, 2023). While ultimate authority is reasserted by representatives through the Joint Committee, they imbue any ensuing policy changes or referendums with an additional layer of bottom-up legitimacy. One participant underlined this tension, emphasising that "recommendations can provide a strong mandate to Government on prospective policies" (P1). This duality allows politicians to endorse recommendations, or 'cherry-pick selectively'. In other words, politicians can dismiss recommendations they disagree with while leveraging the normative superiority that CAs lend to the decisions they choose to adopt. However, this tendency to 'cherry-pick' has led to criticism of CAs as being instrumentalised by political elites, with the highly politicised nature of partisan politics leading to the process being associated with the strategic goals of those who initiated them (Setälä, 2017). This is tacitly acknowledged by politicians, who simultaneously praise CAs for their capacity to refine policy while lamenting the challenges that arise when trying to contest their recommendations.

Finally, the process's relevance is pointed to as a factor upholding its legitimacy. This conflates all three dimensions of Gherghina and Jacquet's framework as it refers to both its capacity to meaningfully contribute to policy via high-quality internal deliberation and recommendations (efficacy) as well as its role in enhancing the quality of external deliberation within the wider public discourse on issues (education).

Efficacy and education

CAs are seen as contributing to the efficacy of political decisions, providing alternative perspectives by including affected citizens. This perception of efficacy is very much outcome-contingent, as it rests on politicians' appreciation of the results provided by previous Assemblies. Most participants evaluate CAs' outcomes thus far as positive, having enabled progressive changes to the country's constitution and overcoming political deadlocks. They underline the moral integrity of the members, as well as their capacity for "good" and "sensible, if cautious answers" (P3; P12; P15). They highlight CAs as inclusive, non-partisan deliberative environments (P5; P10; P11; P12; P14; P15), conditions that render the process normatively appealing as opposed to certain deficits of current representative institutions. For instance, they credit the calm and inclusive nature of roundtable discussions for the high-quality internal deliberations (P5; P11; P14). The extended timeframe and the high quality of evidence also stood out in the views expressed as contributing to the high quality of deliberations (P2; P5; P10; P11; P12). Intriguingly, the epistemic benefits of members' cognitive diversity (Setälä, 2017) and the inclusion of local knowledge (Fung, 2006) were only mentioned by one participant (P11). Despite criticisms relating to its representativeness, the process is viewed positively for democratic inclusion (Reuchamps *et al.*, 2023; Setälä, 2017). Only politicians from Sinn Féin raised concerns regarding the inclusivity of selection criteria.

Another benefit is CAs' independence, in that they exist beyond the bounds of the electoral arena and minimise the influence of self-interested representatives (Setälä, 2017). This is seen as positive for deliberations (P5; P10; P11; P12; P14; P15), as arguments are not performative and members are not entrenched in partisan positions, leading to the possibility of genuine shifts in opinions (P2; P3). This also gives politicians a better idea of what change, if any, can be accepted by the wider public. The benefits of CAs' independence are partly assigned to the integrity of previous organisers (P2). However, some scepticism is aimed at the organisational roles; the Chairperson and Secretary are sometimes seen as overly influential (P2; P4; P5), suggesting that an Assembly's capacity to be efficient

or independent is subject to its organisers' integrity. The breadth of the Chair's responsibility highlights their role as an inherent structural limit and potential source of bias in the model.

Politicians vary in their views on how predictable CA outcomes are, and their ability to achieve desired results. Some attribute predictability to evidence from previous CAs which enabled the progressive reform that they had already recommended (P3). Despite some surprise at the ambition of certain recommendations (e.g., those on abortion), politicians generally anticipate the direction of recommendations, which they link to the selection, breadth, and presentation of the topics. Some policy-focused politicians are hesitant to submit their key policies to the scrutiny of CAs (P4; P15). They prefer to push policy through the Oireachtas while in power, rather than potentially delaying it further or appearing to shirk responsibility on central campaign issues. Nevertheless, there is evidence of a genuine interest in enabling citizen input on topics that politicians disagree over, or where an independent perspective is required. This is further upheld by politicians' subsequent selective endorsement of recommendations, a practice which would not be necessary if CAs were performative or merely a facade of democratic engagement used to endorse their pre-existing agendas.

Politicians' principal appreciation of CAs seems to relate to the quality of external deliberation they enable. Their capacity to synthesise evidence and public perspectives on complex issues has pinpointed them as potential knowledge brokers (Curato and Böker, 2016) for both a wider audience and policymakers. CAs can be seen to act as trusted information proxies (Warren and Gastil, 2015), deemed particularly useful in situations where there is an incentive for citizens to reflect on an issue, such as an upcoming popular vote (Setälä, 2017). This was highlighted by a participant who noted the necessity for parties to address all voter concerns before a referendum can succeed, noting that CAs serve to air grievances and offer answers to potential questions which might arise (P2), thus preparing the ground for a more informed voting process and enabling successful policy changes by way of a referendum.

Another indicated that certain CAs had highlighted the need for their parties to use manifestos to go into more detail about certain policy and reform issues (P15). A notable example here is the Sinn Féin manifesto's post-Brexit shift to calling for an all-island CA to discuss and plan for Irish Unity rather than moving straight to a referendum (Sinn Féin, 2020). This potential to raise public awareness is perceived differently amongst the participants, with politicians holding varying views on the popularity and widespread awareness of CAs. Some politicians argue that they should be infrequent to preserve and harness their value, as a decline in attention is accompanied by a perceived reduction in impact and public influence. Consequently, politicians advocate for assemblies that address highly salient national issues, which interest the media and contribute to a broader national conversation. This perspective contrasts with the less prominent, 'cold' subjects put to previous CAs, which may have been the result either of initial distrust of the process, or an attempt to use them to explore topics that are not at the forefront of public discourse.

Conclusion

The examination of Irish CAs reveals their role as consultative, non-empowered participatory bodies that offer a platform for citizen input, and that have the potential to enhance external deliberation-making in Ireland. Through a thematic analysis of interviews with politicians from both government and opposition parties, it is apparent that the strategic motivations behind the utilisation of CAs are deeply intertwined with politicians' normative appreciation of both the process and the problem they wish to solve. During coalition negotiations, party elites engage in a series of strategic and normative trade-offs, a process which seems to be somewhat facilitated by the use of CAs. While all parties acknowledge the value of CAs, there is also unanimous recognition of their consultative role and perceived lack of inherent democratic legitimacy.

Diverse party perspectives shape the chosen approach to political gatekeeping. Office-seeking parties (such as Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil) prioritise traditional power dynamics, viewing CAs as a means to neutralise divisive issues and bridge both inter- and intra-party divides that could hinder coalition formation. Conversely, policy-seeking parties (such as the Greens, Labour, and Sinn Féin) prioritise their policy agendas, acknowledging the potential of CAs in garnering support for salient issues from both the wider public and political backbenchers, while aiming to maintain control over the agenda and recommendations. Despite initial scepticism which saw the process as a delay mechanism, policy-seeking politicians now increasingly recognise the benefits of CAs, particularly following the referendums which resulted from the ICC and ICA. Their increasing presence in party manifestos also demonstrates that although politicians do not perceive them as vote aggregating devices, parties must see some potential to garner voter support in advocating for the process to deal with salient issues, with the exception of Fianna Fáil.

The normative objectives perceived by politicians align closely with the strategic use of CAs, with a consensus across the ideological spectrum on their legitimacy and efficacy. While the cooperative nature of CAs fosters dialogue and consensus-building, their perceived effectiveness is contingent upon the integrity and professionalism of organisers, raising concerns about the potential capture of the process by key figures within the Assembly, such as the Chairperson or the Secretary. Concerns about the influence of experts are also contingent on how predictable politicians believe the results of these processes to be.

The integration of party politics and deliberative democracy has profound implications for the broader field of political theory and practice. Having been historically distinct, the convergence of these domains necessitates a re-evaluation by both party scholars and deliberative democrats. Understanding the reciprocal logic between them becomes imperative to inform future design, to ensure that mechanisms are not exploited for instrumental purposes by political parties. Bridging this gap addresses a longstanding gap in political theory, enriching discussions on governance and civic engagement. Effective integration requires a nuanced understanding of motivations and political logic in order to safeguard against the perils of instrumentalisation.

Finally, this study predates the outcomes of the 2024 Irish referendums on care and gender equality, which were preceded by CAs on similar topics. There was a substantial drop in voter turnout compared to the previous constitutional referendums on same-sex marriage and abortion, with a significant majority rejecting the proposed amendment (Carroll, 2024). Though explanations for this failure are numerous and point in various directions, future research should reassess the findings of this chapter in the light of these referendums, to examine whether the observed patterns persist or undergo significant shifts.

Annex 1: Interview Guide

1. What are the benefits and drawbacks of citizens' assemblies?
2. To what extent do CAs have the capacity to engage with complex and multifaceted issues, and are there any issues that you believe may be beyond their scope of expertise?

3. The Convention included politicians, whereas the Citizens' Assemblies since have not. Do you believe that involving politicians in the process is beneficial, or should it remain exclusively for citizens?
4. What is your perspective on the role of politicians in setting the agenda for citizens' assemblies, and what level of control do you believe they should have over the process?
5. What is the most significant change you have witnessed within your party in response to the Citizens' Assembly or this change in citizen deliberation?
6. What impact has this shift in policy-solving and public deliberation had on the internal dynamics of political parties?
7. How have Citizens' Assemblies influenced your party's manifesto for the upcoming election?
8. Have Citizens' Assemblies altered the way political parties negotiate coalitions?
9. What factors do you consider when deciding whether to support or oppose the use of Citizens' Assemblies in policy-making processes?
10. How should elected representatives approach the recommendations put forth by the Assembly?
11. In your view, what challenges do politicians face when it comes to engaging with citizens' assemblies, and how can these challenges be overcome?
12. How can Citizens' Assemblies assist elected officials in better understanding the needs of their constituents? Do you see them as a means of engaging with voters?
13. How do you envision Citizens' Assemblies fitting into your vision for the future of Ireland?
14. How have past citizens' assemblies changed your perspective on these processes?

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