

David M. Farrell, Jane Suiter, *Reimagining Democracy: Lessons in Deliberative Democracy from the Irish Front Line*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2019, pp. 64.

Two renowned Irish political scientists, David M. Farrell and Jane Suiter, have joined efforts, resulting in the book under review. This is not the authors' only joint publication. They have been collaborating for a long time, addressing, for example, the topic of deliberative mini-publics, in which they both specialize, but exploring it from a different perspective.¹ The book under review is focused on deliberative democracy. The authors, having practical experience as well as an academic background, complement each other perfectly in the text.

¹ Farrell et al. (2020); Lynch et al. (2017); Farrell, Suiter, Clodagh (2017); Elkin et al. (2017); Farrell, Suiter (2016); Suiter, Farrell, O'Malley (2016); Farrell, O'Malley, Suiter (2013); Suiter, Farrell (2011).

Professor David M. Farrell is a specialist in the study of representation, elections, parties, and deliberative mini-publics. He is the author of numerous monographs published in prestigious publishing houses.² His current work is focused primarily on deliberative mini-publics. To date, he has advised and/or researched six government-led deliberative mini-public processes in Ireland, the UK, and Belgium. Professor Farrell is affiliated with University College Dublin, where he has held prestigious positions such as Head of the School of Politics and International Relations (2010–2013 and 2016–2021). He has worked with eminent universities from around the world, such as University of Manchester, Australian National University, Harvard University, University of Mannheim, and University of California Irvine. He is also active in international academic organisations: the Political Studies Association of Ireland and the Royal Irish Academy. In 2021 he was elected President of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR). Professor Farrell was the recipient of the 2019 Irish Research Council ‘Researcher of the Year – Impact Award’ for making a highly significant contribution in his field beyond academia’.

Professor Jane Suiter is director of the Institute for Future Media, Democracy and Society in the School of Communications in Dublin City University. Her research focus is on the information environment in the public sphere and in particular on scaling up deliberation and tackling disinformation. Suiter coordinates prestigious international projects: she is a principal investigator (PI) on H2020 ICT28 Provenance, a multimillion-euro interdisciplinary project to combat disinformation, and on JOLT, a Marie-Skłodowska-Curie ETN focused on harnessing digital technologies in communication. Professor Suiter has been involved in organising citizens’ assemblies in Ireland, including: the Irish Citizens’ Assembly on gender equality (2020–2021), the Irish Citizen Assembly (2016–2018), and the Irish Constitutional Convention (2012–2014); and is a founder member of We the Citizens (2011) – Ireland’s first deliberative experiment. She is a member of the Stewarding Group on the Scottish Citizens’ Assembly and the OECD’s FutureDemocracy network. She was awarded the prestigious title of the Irish Research Council’s Researcher of the Year in 2020.

The book was written in the form of an academic essay and is a ‘pocket’ edition. It is written in simple and understandable language. This formula was chosen by the authors because it allows an important message to be delivered and addressed not only to the academy but to policy practitioners as well. This purpose is also expressed in the title itself: *Lessons from the front line*. In their book, the authors address the theme of deliberative democracy, based on a lesson they personally participated in. They were at the heart of the events they describe. That is why they look at these phenomena not only from an academic and research perspective but also analyse them from the perspective of practitioners. They thus become political scientists immersed in their subject of research. The experience described by Farrell and Suiter is an unprecedented example of the influence of academia (a group of political scientists concerned about the country’s situation) on public policy, the shape of the most important piece of legislation – the constitution, and, more broadly, the country’s entire political system.

Although the book is only 64 pages long, in 2019 it won the prestigious Laurence and Lynne Brown Democracy Medal,³ awarded annually by the McCourtney Institute for Democracy (The Pennsylvania State University). The book was appreciated because it is truly unique. It is not its form that determines this uniqueness, but mainly the deliberative processes it explains. The authors share not only the technical details of the processes carried out but also their emotions, fears and hopes. All this is done in an atmosphere of remarkable sincerity, without pathos, lecturing or boasting. The choice of this book is therefore not accidental, and although it is not ‘new’ to

² *The Oxford Handbook of Irish Politics* (co-edited, Oxford University Press, 2021); *Deliberative Mini-Publics: Core Design Features* (co-authored, Bristol University Press, 2021) and 20 other books (authored/edited) including the award-winning *Political Parties and Democratic Linkage: How Parties Organize Democracy*, published by Oxford University Press in 2011.

³ <<https://democracy.psu.edu/research/brown-democracy-medal/>>

the publishing market, the topics it addresses are very up-to-date, both globally and in Poland.⁴ At the current time, too, a wave of crisis is sweeping through our countries (Europe and worldwide as well) from the declining external security situation to inflation and the radicalization of the political scene. The last decade described in the book has been a textbook education in the practice of deliberation for Ireland and its citizens. Deliberative processes seem to be an excellent opportunity for a wide range of regular ordinary people to express their views and opinions on matters of national importance, which can then be passed on to decision-makers for consideration. This puts citizens at the centre of decision-making processes and gives them back the subjectivity they have lost in recent years as political elites have become increasingly distanced from the electorate. Ireland is an excellent example of a country where these processes have become an important part of the political system (although they have not yet entered it in a formalized way).

The deliberative processes implemented in Ireland took the form of citizens' assemblies, which are one form of deliberative mini-publics. They represent a relatively new⁵ and innovative way of enabling citizens to actively participate in decisions that are important to them.⁶ In deliberative processes, randomly selected citizens obtain knowledge and evidence, then discuss with the support of professional and independent facilitators, and finally adopt recommendations that are forwarded to decision-makers at the appropriate level. Through such a pathway, it is possible to collectively develop reasonable and fair solutions to specific public problems; even highly controversial ones that professional politicians try to avoid as much as possible. In Ireland, these were: abortion, climate change, the ageing population, gender equality, referenda, etc.

The text of the book consists of an introduction (including background), two parts, and a future-oriented conclusion.

The authors do not start with descriptions of their success, just the opposite. In reading the introduction, we become participants in the processes described, feeling as if we, along with Suiter and Farrell, were anxiously and impatiently awaiting the participants of the first, experimental assembly. It was a rainy Friday evening in May 2011 in a hotel that was not the organizers' 'first choice', but unfortunately it turned out that Neil Diamond would be playing in the city at the same time and the surrounding hotels no longer had rooms available. The professors, who had stepped out from behind their desks and books to personally organize the first such event in the country, were waiting at the reception of a hotel on the outskirts of the city for 150 participants, but only 100 arrived. Fortunately, that was how many constituted the critical mass for the citizens' assembly to proceed at all. It is a powerful introduction that makes us leave aside other matters that have been preoccupying us 'by the way' and let ourselves be completely absorbed by the book we have just started reading.

In the background, we get to know how it all started. In 2009, as a massive crisis swept through Ireland, political scientists from Irish universities, affiliated with the Irish Political Science Association and led by Farrell and Suiter, decided to work together to find proposals to respond to the ongoing crisis. The situation in the country was very difficult. Unemployment was rising and polls indicated that confidence in the government had fallen from 46% to 10% in one year! This was one of the lowest among (then) the 29 EU countries (pp. 3–4). The 2011 elections (early elections held as a result of the dissolution of parliament) were the most dramatic in the country's history: voters felt let down by politicians and politics in general. The consequences are well-known, affecting not only Ireland but also other countries: a decline in voter turnout and extreme changes in voters' political preferences, with a bias towards radical wings. Although it must be acknowledged that Ireland has not experienced as significant a turn to the radical or extreme as has been the case in other countries. The main issue in Ireland at

⁴ Just as an aside, I would point out that also in Poland, efforts have been made to hold citizen assemblies. The seven largest Polish cities have organized a total of nine assemblies in the years 2016–2022. However, these have only been implemented at a local level and, for the time being, there is no sign of the government wishing to capitalize on them.

⁵ The first three experimental citizens' assemblies – dedicated to electoral reform – were held in British Columbia (Canada) in 2004, Ontario (Canada) in 2006–2007 and the Netherlands in 2006. Fournier et al. (2011).

⁶ Boulianne (2018): 119–136; Jäske (2019): 603–630; Pow (2021).

this time was the financial crises and the hardships brought on by that, as well as austerity. Ireland was on this gloomy path, leading inevitably to conflict, economic crisis, and polarization of views in society. The ambition of the initiators of the undertaking was to work towards systemic change in politics and, more broadly, in Irish public life. This group, made up of individuals with very diverse political views, was on a mission to inspire politicians to engage in debate with the public, to include citizens in decision-making processes, and to put citizens at the centre of the public agenda. Researchers with experience in successful citizens' assemblies in other countries were invited to collaborate. This is how a working group was formed, whose work and commitment resulted in the organization of Ireland's first-ever citizens' assembly in 2011 as part of the We the Citizens project.

In the first section of the first part, we discover what the We the Citizens project was and how it was carried out. They share with us the formal and technical details of the project, including some methodological remarks. The We the Citizens project was a social enterprise, carried out by researchers and non-governmental forces, without support from public money. Its originators applied for funding from Atlantic Philanthropies, which agreed to fund it in full. The aim of the project was to encourage citizen interest in involvement in national politics. The project, which started on 12 April 2011 and ran until the end of 2011, consisted of two phases: a broad public consultation and a citizens' assembly. And so began the Irish deliberation journey, which fortunately did not end after a successful experiment, but continues and develops to this day. In the book, however, the authors do not just stop at discussing their research (although this forms the core of the publication), but also try to follow the scientific path. By way of example, the following internationally respected authors in this field cite a definition of deliberative democracy (pp. 12–13): the 'process of reaching reasoned agreement among free and equal citizens, ensuring that they have an opportunity to express their views and preferences and justify their decisions within a deliberative process for the purpose of reaching conclusions that are collectively binding'.⁷ However, to return to the earlier rhetoric and to further emphasize the practical side of the publication, the authors also include media snapshots. These are contributions from participants in the assembly, who share their reflections. One of the participants expresses a view/feeling that could be considered symbolic in the context of deliberative democracy processes (especially if they are still only insular, experimental projects in some parts of the world): 'I said to myself that it is better to light one candle than curse the darkness' (p. 20). I feel that the choice of this particular speech was a shot in the arm.

The next section of this part is concerned with a discussion of the following two deliberative processes that were organized by the government in response to the success of the We the Citizens project. It is about The Irish Constitutional Convention (2013–2014), which aimed to involve citizens in the preparation the extremely controversial amendments to the Constitution, as well as The Irish Citizens Assembly (2016–2018), followed by public opinion worldwide due to the subject of abortion being addressed. All three processes were initiated in Ireland in response to the crisis, consequently leading to fundamental social and political change in the country. The focus of the deliberative processes carried out in Ireland was, in each case, on issues that clearly divide society, introducing a so-called 'state of disagreement'.⁸ According to this concept, deliberative assemblies should lean into controversial topics that reveal either strong divisions in public opinion or a high degree of citizen indecision on an issue. In Ireland, these were issues of worldview and touched on fundamental religious and moral values, such as the decriminalization of abortion, the crime of blasphemy, the role of women in the family, and marriage equality regardless of gender. The processes that have been initiated have succeeded, despite initial fears, and have indeed put citizens in the spotlight.

The last excerpt from the first part is dedicated to an overview of other deliberative processes around the world (pp. 33–37). The authors briefly characterize, for example, the *Ostbelgien Model*.⁹ They also refer to the cases of France, Spain, Canada, and the UK. These references are

⁷ Bohman, Rehg (1997): 321; Gutmann, Thompson (2007): 7.

⁸ Thompson (2008): 502.

⁹ In 2019, a permanent Citizens' Council was established in Ostbelgien (German for Eastern Belgium, the German-speaking community of the country) to constitute the third fundamental

very important because they help to place the considerations in their proper context. At the same time, it must be emphasized that each case is different, each is unique, and behind each there are different factors of success or failure – which the authors seem to understand perfectly. Looking through this information from the world one would like to say: more! But on the other hand, the book would no longer have its specific, light-hearted style but would become another academic monograph, scaring off public policy practitioners and decision-makers.

The second part provides guidance on how to design a citizens' assembly properly: what to look out for, what is important, and what is crucial (pp. 38–53). The authors attempt to identify the six core features of the citizens' assembly: (1) the way in which members are selected (random selection and descriptive representation¹⁰), (2) the process's organization and leadership, (3) information and education of members, (4) manner of discussion, (5) ways to engage the wider public, and (6) recommendations and their follow-up. In this section of the book, the authors skim through the subjectively selected categories, doing so very briefly. I consider the categories chosen in this way to mostly cover the most important key organizational framework of the deliberative process. Analysing the framework of deliberative processes thus constructed, one must conclude that deliberative processes should not only be seen as a formula, method, or specific tool for co-decision in politics. They are first and foremost a dynamic decision-making process, conducted in a transparent, open and inclusive manner. As such, they are – in the authors' and my own view – a successful attempt to address many of the procedural and practical shortcomings of representative democracy.

While there is no summary in the conclusion of the book (there cannot be one as the book is not over-written) there is instead something more important – a perspective on the future. It speaks volumes that the authors not only believe that the involvement of ordinary people in meaningful democracy is possible, but that they have seen it with their own eyes (p. 56). The authors realize that deliberative processes are expected to have the power to restore a more direct role for citizens in shaping public decisions.¹¹

However, after having read this book I wonder whether this will be the case in reality and whether they will also carry out this mission effectively when the excitement about their *experimental* nature subsides. It should not be forgotten that they remain still 'under construction'. I see here an analogy with what Michael Saward writes about democracy in general: 'If democracy were a building, the "under construction" sign would never be removed.'¹² Saward notes that democracy is not constant, but rather the opposite. It has been constructed and deconstructed, debated, affirmed and questioned, supplemented and revised for centuries. The process is still ongoing, and the democracy *under construction* is losing or gaining ground, depending on the context: geographical and historical, as well as economic, political, and social. No particular model or incarnation of it can therefore be treated as the right one. No interpretation of democracy is a finite and closed project. It still faces new and often unexpected challenges. And again and again, it must provide answers to the questions that arise. Depending on key variables – such as the political, historical, economic, social, and cultural context – democracy provides varied answers to the same questions. The same is true of deliberative democracy, which – although it is only one strand of democratic theory – also faces these challenges and, in responding to them, changes its shape. In turn, along with it, its institutions, including the citizens' assemblies discussed in the book, are taking shape.

Deliberative processes can be effective and successful in times of crisis, uncertainty and change, as they have been in Ireland, and can truly put citizens at the heart of the process. They *can*, but they *don't have to*. In another place and time or in another context, they may fail. Many people and many factors are responsible for their success: they are a joint effort between politicians and citizens. But they are certainly an example that cynicism and the lack of rational, evidence-based discussion in politics can be overcome. Even in this role alone, they are an important

democratic institution together with the Parliament and the Executive. Niessen, Reuchamps (2022): 135–153.

¹⁰ Farrell, Stone (2020): 228–246; Podgórska-Rykała (2022).

¹¹ OECD (2020).

¹² Saward (2003): VII.

value, because they fit in with the conviction expressed by a participant at the assembly that it is better to light one candle than just complain about the darkness.

I recommend both the book and the approach to modelling and implementing social innovations. They can become an inspiration to many and completely, unexpectedly change something that seemed to be set in stone.

In conclusion, what I appreciate most about the reviewed book is that it is very concise and written in clear language. Each page is used to the maximum, accommodating a lot of content and precisely chosen themes. Although written by world-class scholars, it is neither too scientific nor merely another handbook. What I particularly value is that the authors construct their reflections based on a set of details (not general data) that we do not read in official reports, so the book is compatible with them and, like a puzzle, completes the whole picture of sources. This makes Ireland an even more interesting case study and encourages researchers from all over the world to reach out.

Finally, I would like to write about the fact that the book, because of the theme taken up by the authors, 'does not grow old'. Deliberative democracy is a new strand of democratic theory and all the research that is carried out within this strand is a new brick of the whole emerging construction. At the same time, it must be remembered that the success of deliberative processes cannot be measured with the end of the process. Further steps taken by the decision-makers must also be monitored. In this context, there are also a number of weaknesses associated with deliberative processes that have been overlooked in the book. One that has been observed (in retrospect) in Ireland in particular is what is known as cherry picking, whereby those in power select recommendations that fit with their pre-conceived visions and ignore, postpone or even refuse to deal with topics that do not fit with them, are inconvenient, or simply do not seem important enough at the time. In order to protect oneself from these kinds of dangers, it is necessary to meticulously plan the next path of recommendations. Once they have been prepared by the assembly, they cannot go into a vacuum. What happens to them next? Who, how and when should they be considered? Although in Ireland the pathway is meticulously laid out and the recommendations go to the politicians, for several issues no real decisions have been made to date.

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<https://doi.org/10.14746/rpeis.2022.84.4.16>