

Strengthening democracy in Albania through applying Deliberative and Direct Democracy

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Deliberative democracy and direct democracy are important tools to develop democracy. Several Council of Europe (CoE) member states have implemented elements of both deliberative and direct democracy, and their experiences illustrate how starting with deliberative processes can enhance the quality and effectiveness of subsequent direct democratic practices.

Here are a few examples from some CoE member states:

1. Ireland

Ireland introduced deliberative democracy first, followed by direct democracy mechanisms such as referendums on socially significant issues.

Ireland established a Citizens' Assembly in 2016, a deliberative body that brought together a representative group of citizens to discuss more complex issues. Participants engaged in structured, facilitated dialogue, hearing from experts, and various stakeholders.

The deliberations led to informed recommendations, which were then put to national referendums. In both cases, the referendums passed with significant public support. The Citizens' Assembly created a foundation of informed public discussion, which made the referendums more meaningful and reflective of societal values.

By beginning with deliberative processes, Ireland was able to engage citizens in deep, balanced discussions, leading to informed public support for complex policy changes. This model has been praised internationally as an example of how deliberative democracy can prepare citizens for direct democratic decisions, especially in the case of sensitive topics.

2. Denmark

Denmark has an history of engaging citizens in deliberative processes before implementing direct democratic measures.

The country uses "Consensus Conferences" and citizen panels, where representative groups are brought together to deliberate on issues such as environmental policy and biotechnology. These discussions help to build public understanding and consensus on policies, which are sometimes followed by referendums or legislative decisions reflecting the outcomes.

By prioritizing deliberation first, Denmark has developed a strong culture of civic engagement, where citizens feel informed and empowered to participate in both deliberative forums and referendums. This has contributed to high public trust in government decisions and a stable democratic system.

Denmark's model demonstrates that when citizens are first involved in structured deliberation, they are more likely to make informed and balanced decisions in direct democratic processes.

3. Switzerland

Switzerland provides an interesting example as it has long been known for its direct democracy but has recently integrated more deliberative elements to enhance the quality of public debate.

While Switzerland's direct democratic system allows citizens to vote on a wide range of issues via referendums, the country has faced challenges with populist outcomes on complex issues. To address this, Switzerland has started incorporating more deliberative forums and public consultations, aiming to create spaces for citizens to discuss and understand issues deeply before voting.

By adding deliberative elements, Switzerland aims to reduce reactionary voting and ensure that citizens are better informed about the implications of their decisions. This combined approach helps to mitigate the risks associated with direct democracy alone, particularly for complex issues.

This example suggests that even in established direct democracies, adding deliberative processes can improve decision quality and public satisfaction with democratic outcomes.

4. Germany

Germany, although primarily a representative democracy, has integrated deliberative practices such as citizen dialogues and assemblies on issues like climate policy and digital transformation.

The German government regularly organizes "Bürger dialog" (Citizen Dialogue) initiatives, where citizens discuss policies and provide recommendations. These dialogues create a foundation of public understanding and engagement on key issues, which sometimes influence national policy or precede referendums at the federal level.

These deliberative forums have successfully increased public support and understanding of policies. They have also helped bridge gaps between government decisions and public expectations, laying the groundwork for any future direct democracy measures.

Germany's model shows how deliberative democracy can build public trust and engagement, supporting the notion that countries without established direct democracy traditions can benefit from deliberative processes as a foundation.

These examples indicate that starting with deliberative processes generally enhances public understanding, reduces reactionary voting, and strengthens democratic engagement. Countries like Ireland and Denmark illustrate how deliberative democracy

fosters a culture of dialogue, preparing citizens to make informed decisions when direct democratic measures are introduced. In countries with complex societal issues, this approach minimizes the risk of populism and promotes stability, supporting the conclusion that beginning with deliberative democracy is often more efficient for countries like Albania that is relatively new to democratic participation.

Based on the different experiences of different member countries of CoE what experience would be more recommended for Albania looking to introduce or strengthen democratic practices:

In the Irish case is often considered a more recommended approach than Switzerland's for such countries, particularly because it offers a structured path to integrating complex deliberation with citizen engagement before implementing direct voting. The key reasons why Ireland's approach may be more effective for Albania that has a limited experience in democratic practices are:

1. Structured deliberative foundation

The Citizens' Assembly model in Ireland involves a carefully structured and facilitated process where a representative group of citizens receives expert information, hears diverse perspectives, and engages in thorough dialogue. This approach builds a strong foundation for understanding complex issues, which is then followed by referendums. In Switzerland, direct democracy has been long-standing, with citizens able to initiate referendums and votes on a wide array of issues. While there is some deliberation, it is not as deeply structured or uniformly applied as in Ireland's Citizens' Assemblies. This can lead to decisions being made more impulsively or influenced by populist sentiments, especially highly sensitive or complex issues.

The Irish approach provides a "filtering" step through deliberation before voting, which can lead to more informed and balanced outcomes, particularly on controversial or complex issues.

2. Mitigating populist risks

By using a deliberative process with balanced, fact-based input from experts and stakeholders, Ireland's approach reduces the likelihood of populist-driven decisions in referendums. The Citizens' Assembly model enables citizens to engage deeply with evidence and varied viewpoints, which is essential in countering simplified or emotional narratives.

Direct democracy in Switzerland allows for quick public decisions but has occasionally led to outcomes driven by populist concerns, especially on issues like immigration and social policies. Without a preliminary deliberative step, direct democracy alone can make

countries vulnerable to populist or reactionary decision-making.

Ireland's model helps prevent populist outcomes by grounding decision-making in a more measured, deliberative process, making it potentially more suitable for countries transitioning to democratic systems.

3. Enhanced public education and trust

The Citizens' Assembly model builds public knowledge and trust by involving citizens in understanding complex issues. Participants become informed advocates, and the transparent process can increase public trust in the outcomes, as citizens see their peers' informed input reflected in final decisions.

Switzerland's established direct democracy fosters strong citizen participation, but without structured deliberation, it doesn't always provide the same level of educational depth on each issue. Direct votes may reflect citizens' immediate preferences without a deep understanding of all implications, especially nuanced policies.

Ireland's method encourages a deeper level of public engagement and learning, which can foster long-term trust in democratic institutions. This is particularly important in countries with less experience in democratic decision-making like Albania.

4. Scalability for new democracies

The deliberative model is highly adaptable and scalable, making it feasible for countries that might not yet have a robust tradition of public referendums or democratic processes. Ireland's structured and guided Citizens' Assemblies provide a clear framework for organizing public input on complex issues.

The Swiss model works well in a country with a strong historical commitment to direct democracy and high civic education, what is not the case of Albania that's why it can be challenging. Introducing direct democracy without structured deliberation may lead to uninformed decisions, instability, or populist outcomes.

Ireland's approach is easier to implement for new or transitioning democracies in countries like Albania, providing a clear path to include citizens without risking uninformed decisions. For countries with limited democratic experience, a deliberative foundation can build civic capacity in a manageable, step-by-step way.

Summary

Ireland's case is seen as more adaptable and safer for Albania which is still new to democratic practices because it builds a culture of dialogue, enhances civic education, and reduces the risks of populism, all before transitioning to direct decision-making.

Switzerland's approach, while successful in its context, assumes a high level of existing civic engagement, which is not the case of Albania, and can lead to quick but potentially uninformed or divisive decisions. Therefore, for Albania that is aiming to strengthen her democratic systems, Ireland's deliberative first approach provides a more sustainable and informed pathway and so would be the recommended approach to be taken.