

Opinion **The FT View**

Deliberative democracy is just what politics needs

Measures such as citizens assemblies can combat rising polarisation

THE EDITORIAL BOARD



A citizens' assembly in Ireland in 2016. Abortion and equal marriage were discussed in the public forums before referendums on the issues © PA

The editorial board YESTERDAY

Here is an inconvenient fact for those who stand up for liberal democracy against its [powerful detractors](#): it works best where it is least needed. As societies grow more polarised, democratic agreement has never been so much in demand. Yet only in historic crises have institutions been harder pressed to do their job.

Divisive developments — such as the Brexit referendum in the UK, migration in many countries, and the effects of globalisation almost everywhere — have pitted groups against each other with such vehemence as to tear away the trust and empathy a democracy requires. An epidemic of fake news, and the connivance of some politicians with the fallacy that facts matter less than perception and partisanship, are making things much worse. In such conditions, a referendum can be toxic.

When polarised opinion turns democratic norms into a source of paralysis, too many voters are driven to strongmen who have no use for such principles other than as a veneer to decorate their grab for power. But democracy is not helpless. Institutions struggling with polarisation must innovate. To stay true to their democratic justification, they should adapt in the direction of a better exercise of reasoned disagreement — never a silencing of it.

There is a case for making democracy more deliberative, not just within the political class but among citizens at large. In the UK Conservative Party leadership race, the candidate Rory Stewart proposed citizens' assemblies — deliberative groups made up to be representative of the electorate at large — to decide the right form of Brexit. He was mocked by Dominic Raab who absurdly likened them to the puppet legislature set up by Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro to justify holding on to the presidency beyond the end of his mandate. Mr Raab [was wrong](#) and Mr Stewart was right.

The idea that democracy is about more than voting has an illustrious pedigree. The core of the deliberative democracy tradition — a respectable [academic research programme](#) as well as a reform movement — is that democratic citizens better fulfil their role as the ultimate source of sovereignty when they inform themselves and elaborate their views in the presence of their peers.

While discussion among like-minded people has been shown to shift people towards more extreme opinions, structured deliberation with people one disagrees with has a much more salutary effect.

Consider the evidence from “deliberative polls”. These resemble ordinary opinion polls in selecting a random, representative section of society to ask about their views. Unlike normal polls, the deliberative approach gathers the polled individuals for sessions where they discuss the questions at hand with one another and experts share facts.

It turns out that debating controversial, complicated policy issues with a fellow citizen who disagrees can be a transformative experience capable of shifting opinions in a more open-minded and accepting direction. Particularly impressive are the [deliberative exercises](#) ahead of Ireland's referendums on equal marriage and abortion, which raised the level of debate and helped reconcile minorities with the majority choice.

In the UK, by contrast, the parliament-commissioned [citizen's assembly on social care](#), where each participant spent 28 hours deliberating, has largely been ignored. A country priding itself on combining the best of past traditions with a forward-looking attitude can do better. Britain, and other democracies, should welcome citizens' assemblies with open arms.