

## **Deliberative Democracy in Action Irish-Style: The 2011 *We The Citizens* Pilot Citizens' Assembly<sup>1</sup>**

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‘A new model of democracy is evolving. The contemporary democratic process requires more of its citizens. It also challenges politicians and bureaucrats to figure out what it means to move past a trustee model of politics without abdicating political leadership. But the result may be a further democratization of advanced industrial democracies, and the betterment of society and politics that this may produce.’

(Dalton, Cain and Scarrow, 2003b: 274)

Ireland is in a moment of crisis, and its political institutions have been found wanting. In the most recent general election of Spring 2011, political reform featured as a dominant theme in the manifestos of all the parties. This was without exception, and with a focus that has never been seen before in Irish electoral history (Suiter and Farrell 2011) – reflecting the dramatic drop by international standards in levels of trust in Irish government (Norris 2011). Also without exception all the parties pushed

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<sup>1</sup> Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the (UK) Political Studies Association annual conference, Belfast, April 3-5 2012, and at departmental seminars at the European University Institute, the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, University College Cork, and University College Dublin. We are grateful to the participants for their feedback and comments. The convention for this project is that the name order on outputs varies, with the first-named author as the principal author. The project was funded by Atlantic Philanthropies. We acknowledge the support of our colleagues, notably: Elaine Byrne, Caroline Erskine and Fiach MacConghail.

an agenda of reform that included the active engagement of citizens – some (Fine Gael most prominently) even talked of the establishment of a citizens’ assembly to review key areas of political reform.

A coalition between Fine Gael and Labour was formed in the light of the election result, which in its Programme for Government promised the establishment of a Constitutional Convention. The details of how this will be constituted are still quite vague, but as the date of its establishment draws near it is apparent that it will have 100 members: 66 ordinary citizens randomly selected, an additional 33 members from the Irish parliament (including two from the Northern Ireland Assembly) and a chairperson. While it might be stretching things to suggest that Ireland is about to take a ‘deliberative turn’ (Dryzek 2000: 1), these are certainly encouraging signs that the political elite are open to the idea of greater citizen involvement in efforts to redesign Ireland’s representative institutions.

This paper reports on the findings of a deliberative polling exercise carried out under the auspices of an organization called *We the Citizens* ([www.wethecitizens.ie](http://www.wethecitizens.ie)) that was launched with some fanfare within weeks of the 2011 election. The rationale for this project was to very deliberately and publicly feed into the political reform agenda, the principal objective being to demonstrate the value of citizen-oriented, deliberative approaches to achieving large scale political reform. In short, this was more than just a research project; it also represented an effort by Irish political science to actively contribute to policy, to demonstrate the ‘relevance’ of the discipline (Peters et al. 2002).<sup>2</sup>

The paper is organized into three sections. We start in the first section with a brief discussion of the role deliberative approaches are playing as part of a fresh wave of democratic transformation. In the second section we describe the practicalities of how the *We the Citizens* project operated both in terms of the lead up to the weekend-long pilot Citizens’ Assembly and also with regard to how the weekend itself was

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<sup>2</sup> The Political Studies Association of Ireland associated itself with the initiative underlying this project. For more on the contributions of Irish political scientists to the debates about political reform, see [www.politicalreform.ie](http://www.politicalreform.ie).

managed. In the third section we set out our research agenda and report on our preliminary findings.

### **Deliberation as a sign of democracy in transformation**

The sense of democratic crisis is not unique to Ireland. A fair deal of pessimism has been expressed generally about the state of democracy today. Evidence seems to be mounting of democracy in trouble, whether it is the fact that less of us bother to vote in elections, to be active members (or even just members) of political parties, to engage in wider civic society, or that more of us feel detached from, unhappy with and mistrustful of the representative institutions of democracy (for a sample, see Dalton and Wattenberg 2000; Mair 2005; Norris 2011; Putnam 2000). Peter Mair perhaps puts it more vividly in evoking notions of democracies being ‘hollowed out’ (2005: 7), no longer fit for purpose.

But for every ying there is a yang, for each bit of evidence suggesting something is wrong there is counter evidence to suggest otherwise. For instance, as Russell Dalton and his colleagues observe: ‘Although electoral participation is generally declining, participation is expanding into new forms of action’ (2003a: 1) as more of us engage in new, less conventional (sometimes even unconventional) forms of political action, as more of us become ‘good’ (Dalton 2009) or even ‘critical’ citizens (Norris 1999), seeking a more active (less passive) role in the political system, prepared to challenge (and thereby engage with) existing systems and norms. What all of this amounts to is evidence of a *behavioural* shift among citizens, to a citizenry that is changing.

At the same time, there is also growing evidence of an *institutional* shift in how democracies operate, in large part in reaction to the growing clamour from citizens. There is no doubt that when it comes to contemporary democratic institutions things are not as they once were. But this is only to be expected ‘when nineteenth-century concepts meet twenty-first century realities’ (Warren: 2001: 226). Institutions must change and are changing with the times (of course, in some cases more quickly than others): ‘a new model of democracy is emerging’ (Dalton et al. 2003b: 274) and not one that is necessarily less democratic, but rather ‘differently democratic’ (Saward: 2008: 283). In a growing number of countries across the Globe the evolving pattern is

one of ‘democratic innovations’ (Smith 2009), of institutions being (re)designed for citizen participation. Dalton and his colleagues (2003a; see also Warren 2003) refer to this as a ‘second wave of democratic reform’, personified by the creation of new institutions and the redesign of existing ones with the principal aim of facilitating greater citizen participation, or as Smith puts it, ‘to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process’ (2009: 1).

[Table 1 about here]

Table 1 illustrates some of the key changes that are associated with this democratic transformation, many of which have been implemented (or at least mooted) in Ireland. Our interest is in the last of these – deliberative approaches to engage with citizens between elections. As implied in the table, these can come in a range of forms – participatory budgeting, consensus conferences, citizens’ juries, deliberative polls, citizens’ assemblies – but what they all share in common is an ambition to allow ordinary citizens to have a say, to ‘speak’ (Fishkin 2009), even to ‘decide’ (Fournier et al. 2011).

The precise details of how the various deliberative approaches operate is beyond the scope of this paper (for more discussion, see Fishkin 2009; Fournier et al, 2011; Smith 2009), but in summary, there are a number of traits that are common to most, as follows:

- The entity (jury, assembly, etc.) is established with a particular purpose in mind;
- It is given a clearly defined agenda;
- It is made clear to its members how their recommendations will be followed up on;
- Its operation is time-delimited; after its work is completed it ceases to exist;
- Its members are selected randomly: they are not elected, nor are they selected to represent different sectors;
- There is an important role for experts, not as participants, but rather as witnesses;

- At the heart of the enterprise is deliberation – ‘the process by which individuals sincerely weigh the merits of competing arguments in discussions together’ (Fishkin 2009: 33).

An important thing to note about deliberative approaches, particularly as applied to debates over political reform, is their dual role in both personifying the *institutional* shift that is at the heart of the democratic transformation and also in facilitating the *behavioural* shift of enabling citizens to be involved in the reform process itself.

### **The *We the Citizens* initiative**

It was this last point that lay at the heart of the *We the Citizens* initiative, a desire to demonstrate to the political establishment that if the reform process is to be meaningful and produce real and sustained change to our representative institutions, it is not just the nature of the change that matters; just as important is how the change will come about. And, in the specifics of the Irish context this is more than just a philosophical point. Given the ‘fixed’ nature of our Constitution, which can only be changed by referendum, the likelihood is high that many of the reforms that will be proposed will have to pass the stern test of public approval – a test that this government has already failed lamentably in its recent loss of a referendum aimed at giving parliamentary committees the power to grill witnesses.<sup>3</sup>

The Irish government has set out in its Programme for Government its key reform proposals (some of which have already been implemented<sup>4</sup>). Irish civil society is replete with groups clamouring for all sorts of additional reforms.<sup>5</sup> *We the Citizens* sought to step outside of the debates over the nature of the reforms that might or should be implemented, and instead to focus on *how* the reforms might be processed – i.e., the aim was to demonstrate the virtue of deliberative approaches by holding our own (pilot) citizens’ assembly.

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://per.gov.ie/research-on-reasons-behind-voter-behaviour-in-the-oireachtas-inquiry-referendum-2011/>

<sup>4</sup> See [http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/eng/Publications/Publications\\_2011/PfG\\_Progress\\_Report\\_Marc\\_h\\_2012.pdf](http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/eng/Publications/Publications_2011/PfG_Progress_Report_Marc_h_2012.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> For a sample of some of the more prominent ones, see <http://www.claimingourfuture.ie/> and <http://www.2nd-republic.ie/site/>

It was decided from the outset of the project that the agenda for the citizens' assembly should be set by Irish citizens, not by the project team. To that end, throughout May and early June 2011 a series of seven regional evening events were held across the country. These were open to all to attend, and without any agenda other than to discuss over a few hours the visions of ordinary citizens of what kind of Ireland they would like for the future. It was the themes emerging from these events that formed the basis for the citizens' assembly (CA) in late June.

As the regional events were drawing to a close, polling was commissioned from the Ipsos/MRBI market research company. This polling served two purposes, both to recruit our 100 CA members<sup>6</sup> and also to measure the opinion of a representative sample of Irish citizens on a range of issues, based closely on the topics that had emerged from our regional events. These broke down to four main sets of issues (with a number of questions relating to each):

- Taxation and spending (various items)
- Educational reform (including a focus on denominational and civics-relation issues)
- The role of TDs
- Political reform generally (e.g. electoral reform, women in politics, freedom of information, youth representation, party funding, size of the Dáil)

The agenda for the CA was determined by the survey responses,<sup>7</sup> resulting in all of Saturday being devoted to political reform-related issues and Sunday morning to taxation vs. spending. Expert witnesses were recruited to draft brief position papers, setting out both sides of the argument in question. These papers were circulated to the CA members in advance.

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<sup>6</sup> We had sought to recruit 150 members not least so as to help in measuring statistically significant affects, but a combination of the timing of the event and the fact that we were clearly a private (and not a government-sponsored) enterprise affected our recruitment.

<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this experiment, and to ensure a 'state of disagreement' (Thompson, 2008: 502), we selected only those items that revealed either strong divisions of opinion or high degrees of undecidedness on the grounds that these were the areas where we were most likely to find change effects.

The CA weekend was organized into three discrete sessions as follows:

- Saturday morning: TDs and their role (discussions about TDs and constituency work, electoral reform and its impact on TDs roles, and the size of the Dáil);
- Saturday afternoon: Who are our politicians (should parties field more women candidates; should there be term limits; should there be external experts in government);
- Sunday morning: In dealing with the economic crisis, should we focus more on tax rises or spending cuts?<sup>8</sup>

The 100 CA members were distributed around the hall in tables of eight, with a trained facilitator and note-taker at each table.<sup>9</sup> At the start of each session the expert witness (one for each of the Saturday sessions, two for the Sunday session) gave a brief presentation summarizing their main points. There then followed an initial period of deliberation at each table, with the experts on hand to provide answers of fact or detail as required. Once these discussions concluded there was a brief round of plenary discussion, the objective being to give CA members an opportunity to hear about the tenor of discussions generally. The tables were then asked to complete another round of deliberations at the end of which they could make a series of recommendations. These were gathered together, and put on a ballot paper for the CA members to vote on.

It should be noted that these recommendations – important, though they were, for ensuring ‘decision-oriented’ deliberation (Thompson, 2008: 502) – were a by-product of this pilot CA. They provided an opportunity for the CA members to have some

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<sup>8</sup> The decision to have a range of themes over the weekend rather than one was guided by advice from our scientific advisory board members. In order to maximize the potential of achieving significant change effects it was felt prudent to hedge our bets by covering more than one theme. In addition to these three themes, the final hour of Saturday afternoon was devoted to a brief discussion over the question of whether the Seanad (Ireland’s upper house) should be reformed or abolished – an issue that is pertinent to current debates but not one that we had survey data to measure anything against.

<sup>9</sup> The modus operandi was ‘café society’. Each table had a paper tablecloth. Colour markers were distributed and the CA members were encouraged to write, doodle, draw, whatever they wished on the tablecloth. The same format had been used for our regional events. The tablecloths were saved and are in the process of being content analyzed for an examination of the unmediated views of CA members.

closure on their deliberations, but in themselves these recommendations were distinct from the deliberative polling underlying the experiment.<sup>10</sup>

### **The deliberative experiment**

A deliberative process such as participation in a citizens' assembly is expected to impact on participants in at least two ways (Fishkin 2009). First, we should see shifts in efficacy and interest, that is in how much trust citizens have in the political process and also in their interest in the political system, and their willingness to get involved in politics.

A second impact is the citizens' attitudes to the topics debated in the deliberative process. There is often a lack of understanding of the difficult choices involved in politics. People may have become less appreciative of the impact certain policy decisions could have on other policy areas. So, not only should citizens who participate in deliberation events become more engaged and more willing to get involved with politics, it is also expected that their level of knowledge will increase and that they will change their minds on issues that they have likely never thought very deeply about prior to participating.

In short, the expectation is that the people who participated in the citizens' assembly should:

1. Have *greater efficacy and interest*; they should feel closer to the political system; they should have more interest in political and policy issues, and they should be more willing to become involved in public debate;
2. Have *opinion shifts*; there should be changes in their opinions (at least in some policy areas) as a result of the deliberative process.

In order to measure these potential changes *We The Citizens* commissioned a large-scale survey from Ipsos/MRBI that followed international best practice in terms of ensuring a nationally representative sample for age, gender and region. The survey

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<sup>10</sup> In any event, because of the decision to break the weekend into a number of themes, there was not sufficient time to allow the CA members to work through the detail of the issues sufficiently so as to produce fine-tuned recommendations. This was the trade-off we faced due to our need to ensure maximum potential for measurable change effects.

asked a large number of questions that were aimed at capturing the relevant effects of deliberation if they exist. Thus there were questions relating to efficacy and attitudes to a range of issues (as discussed above).

[Figure 1 about here]

These questions were asked of a sample of 1,242 people between May and June 2011 (see Figure 1 for details). In the weeks immediately following the citizens' assembly, the CA members were re-interviewed as were 454 of the original sample, 101 of whom had received the same briefing document on the economy that had been given to the CA members. In addition, a fresh sample of 500 respondents was surveyed who had not been surveyed in the first wave of interviews. In all instances, precisely the same survey questions were asked of all the groups.

The purpose of having the group who were sent the briefing document was to separate out the effect of *new information* from the act of deliberation. With this we can determine if people's opinions shifted as a result of the information they were sent or because of the act of deliberation itself.<sup>11</sup> We know of no previous experiment in deliberative democracy that has tried to disentangle these two possible mechanisms for change (see Mutz 2006 for further discussion).

Furthermore the experimental research design allows us to take account of *the impact of being surveyed*. There is a legitimate fear that when you measure something, you affect it. So if a person is surveyed on their political opinions, the mere act of being surveyed makes them more interested in politics, and this could also affect how they behave before being resurveyed. By including a large (500) control sample who are only surveyed once before the CA and then another large sample surveyed once afterwards we can measure the extent to which surveying is causing changes to the respondents' views.

In summary, the expectation is that:

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<sup>11</sup> While we cannot be sure about the extent to which this group of respondents read the briefing document, they knew that they would be re-questioned and so might have had some incentive to read it.

- there will be significant shifts in opinion among the CA participants,
- perhaps also some smaller shifts among those respondents who received the briefing document, and
- little or no change among the other survey respondents.

We can report on the main findings.

### *Efficacy and interest*

The data provide clear evidence that participation in the citizens' assembly had a positive impact on levels of interest in politics and willingness to become more actively involved.

[Figure 2 about here]

Figure 2 summarizes the trends for the CA members, showing greater interest in politics, more willingness to discuss and become more involved in politics and a greater sense of efficacy (more people disagreed with the statement that ordinary people have no influence). Furthermore, all the opinion shifts are statistically significant<sup>12</sup> and are distinctly different from those of the various control groups. In other words, the changes that we observe are not random or a result of chance: it is the participation in the CA that is causing these changes.

[Figure 3 about here]

To give a sense of just how different the trends are for the CA members, Figure 3 reports a 'boxplot' which displays the distribution of answers among the different groups for the statement 'I am very interested in politics', for which the response 1 means very little interest and 7 is a great deal of interest.

This shows that the CA participants were initially much more interested in politics than the general population. This is understandable because although we randomly

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<sup>12</sup> As reported in the table, significance was measured using one-tailed pairwise tests. We used one-tailed tests because we had theoretical expectations of the direction of the change.

sampled people for an invitation to participate, it was likely that the type of person who would accept such an invitation would be different to the average citizen.<sup>13</sup> The CA participants are much more likely to be interested in politics initially, but as the evidence shows the impact of being involved in the citizen's assembly is much greater on this group (it becomes bunched up to the right of the scale) than on any of the other groups. As anticipated, there is also a shift (though a smaller one) among those respondents who received the briefing document. All the other first and second wave respondents barely move.

One of the findings of the Citizens' Assembly was that the members became less likely to disagree that 'people like me have no influence in politics' – in other words, and as predicted, there was an increase in efficacy. It is expected that exposing citizens to each other and to debate would increase efficacy. Underneath this there is some variation as the experience of women was quite different to that of men. Women and men before the CA were broadly similar in their subjective efficacy – that is, the extent to which they felt they could have an impact. Male participants' efficacy fell very slightly, but women became much more likely to disagree with the statement that they have no influence on politics. This would suggest that the deliberative method is one that encourages women's involvement and would support the evidence that women are put off political participation by the adversarial nature of politics. This change is statistically significant.

### ***Tax and spending***

Perhaps the most interesting findings were in the substantive areas of debate over the weekend. We found large effects on the beliefs and attitudes of our CA members when it came to economic attitudes.

One purpose of deliberation is to expose participants to the difficult choices politicians face. The classic question of trade-offs is between tax and spending. Traditionally voters are in favour of spending cuts, but against taxes. To force the issue of thinking in terms of the hard choices between the two, the respondents to the *We the Citizens* surveys were asked where they positioned themselves on a 7-point

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<sup>13</sup> In this context, it is worth noting that no monetary incentives were offered to the participants, other than covering their travel, meal and accommodation costs.

scale on the following statement: ‘the government should increase taxes a little and cut much more on health and social services’.

It was important that the information imparted to the CA members was impartial. To that end the CA members heard from two expert witnesses representing the two sides of this argument – Nat O’Connor, director of the left-leaning think tank TASC and Dr Fergal O’Brien, chief economist of the Irish Business and Employers Confederation. The evidence shows clearly that the CA participants became more willing to accept tax increases. There were shifts of opinion among the various control groups but these were less dramatic, with those respondents who received the briefing document on the economy coming second to the CA participants in terms of the degree of shift.

[Figure 4 about here]

As Figure 4 reveals, the CA members moved to a large extent on every economic question we asked. In all instances these shifts were statistically significant; by contrast, there was hardly any movement over time in our various control groups and any changes that did occur were not significant. When asked about whether they were in favour or opposed to the introduction of a property tax there was a large and significant shift from 40% in favour to 56%. A similar shift took place among the members in their attitude to the introduction of water charges (up from 60% before the CA weekend to 85% afterwards).

The question on the sale of state assets saw the most significant movement of all as a result of the deliberation. Where less than half (48%) of the CA members had been in favour before the weekend, this plummeted to just 10% by the end of the weekend.

### ***Political reform***

There was generally less movement on the batteries of political reform questions. The one issue that saw the most significant shifts was over the amount of time members of parliament (TDs) should devote to local and national issues and to helping constituents sort out their problems.

The number of CA members who thought TDs working on legislation was of great importance moved from 37% to 62%. The numbers thinking that helping constituents was of great importance fell from 34% to under 10%. No such differences were found in the control groups on either issue. The respondents were also asked questions about the amount of time they think TDs should spend on local and national issues. The CA seemed to have an impact in that CA participants shifted in both regards (Figure 5 shows the shift relating to local issues).

[Figure 5 about here]

These findings are in stark contrast to those of the Irish National Election Study (INES) carried out just a few months earlier and using much the same questionnaire design. According to the preliminary findings of the INES (reported in the *Irish Times*)<sup>14</sup> Irish citizens actually want more, not less, local service from their TDs – this despite the fact that local representation by Irish politicians is off the scale when compared with their counterparts elsewhere (e.g., Marsh et al. 2008).

## Conclusion

The findings are conclusive. As a result of their participation in the citizens' assembly weekend, the CA members showed significant shifts of opinion both in terms of feelings of efficacy and interest in politics, and also with regard to key substantive issues in politics. These changes were statistically significant, and were in marked contrast to the trends for our different control groups. In short, what this shows is that deliberation works. When given access to objective information, the opportunity to hear from expert witnesses and the time to debate and deliberate on these issues, citizens do make informed decision

The *We the Citizens* deliberative polling experiment has certainly been successful in research terms. And, while, it might be argued that all we have done is to a large extent replicate findings of previous studies (most notably Fishkin 2009), we would have two responses. First, this study has built in a series of additional control groups – more so than in previous studies – that are allowing us to test the veracity of the

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/ireland/2011/0916/1224304195959.html>

findings (notably by allowing us to control for information and survey effects): we have only just started to scratch the surface of this.

Second, we return to our primary motivation, which was to feed into the public debates over the desire of involving ordinary citizens in the ongoing debates over large-scale political reform in Ireland. Despite the best efforts of ourselves and others to propose deliberative approaches as a suitable methodology in this time of crisis, the common refrain, not least from members of the media commentariat, was generally along the lines of ‘Ireland is different’. The view was that, even though deliberation might be a proven method in other contexts, ‘things work differently here’. The findings reported here demonstrate how wrong the cynics were: deliberation works, and it works in Ireland too.

All that remains is for the government to have the political will to deploy this methodology in their ongoing reform efforts. The findings of the *We the Citizens* research were presented to the deputy prime minister (and leader of the Labour party) in December 2011, and this was followed by a series of meetings and briefings of ministers and senior advisors. The informal feedback indicates that our findings have been ‘taken on board’, not least regarding the proposal to have more citizens involved in the proposed constitutional convention than had been envisaged in the Programme for Government (that had proposed that citizens would comprise just a third of the membership); to randomly selected the citizens; and to exclude experts as members. In addition, the indications are that the modus operandi of the constitutional convention will be along deliberative lines.

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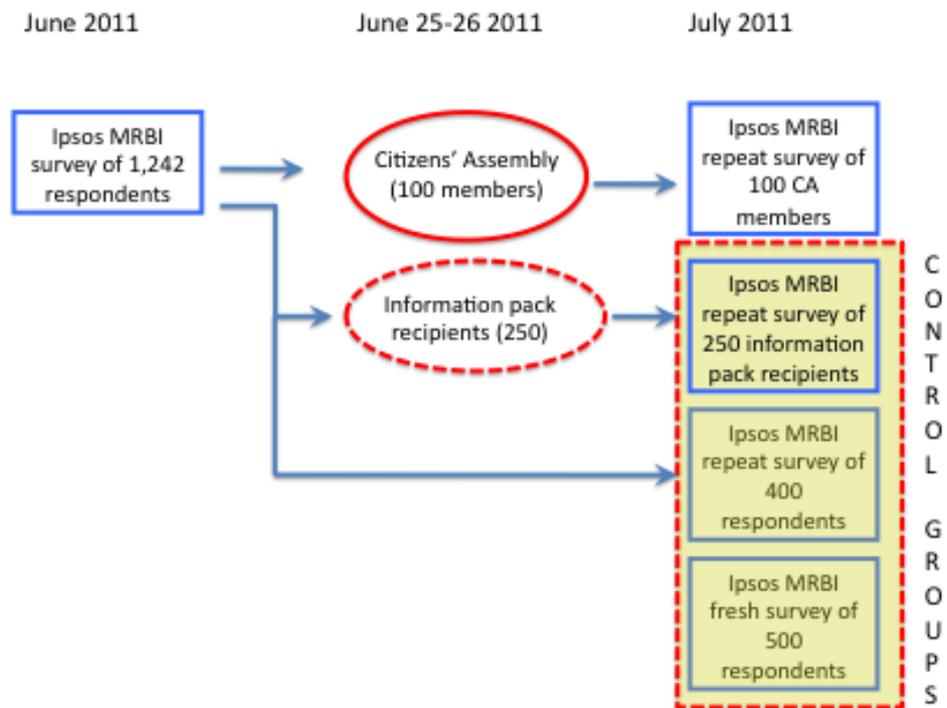
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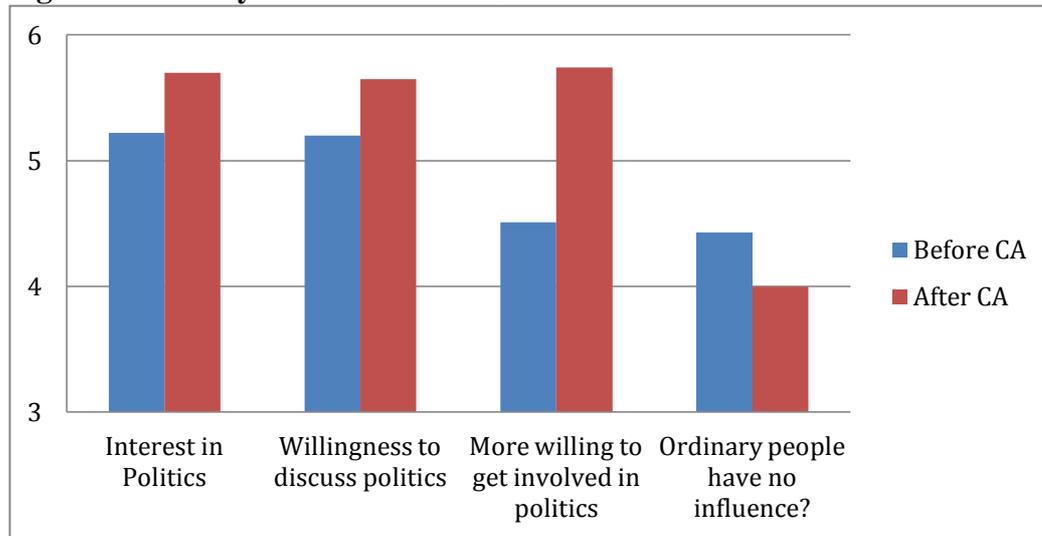
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**Table 1: A new democratic transformation?**

First wave of democratic reform	Second wave of democratic reform
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dahl's 'polyarchy'</li> <li>• Introduction of elections to most offices</li> <li>• Mass suffrage extension</li> <li>• Freedom for all parties to compete in elections</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction of elections for more offices (e.g. elected mayors; regional assemblies)</li> <li>• Greater competition between and within parties</li> <li>• Greater engagement with administrative processes (e.g. Freedom of information)</li> <li>• Greater focus on periods between elections (e.g. Citizens' assemblies, citizens' juries, participatory budgeting)</li> </ul>

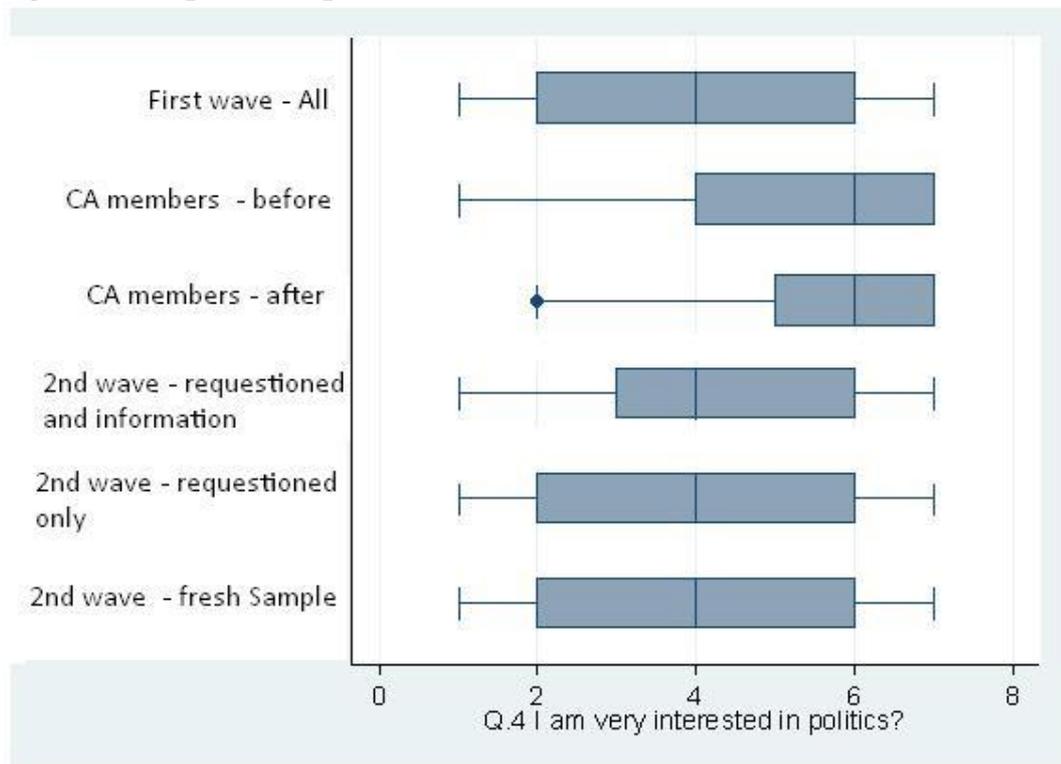
**Figure 1: The We The Citizens deliberative experiment**

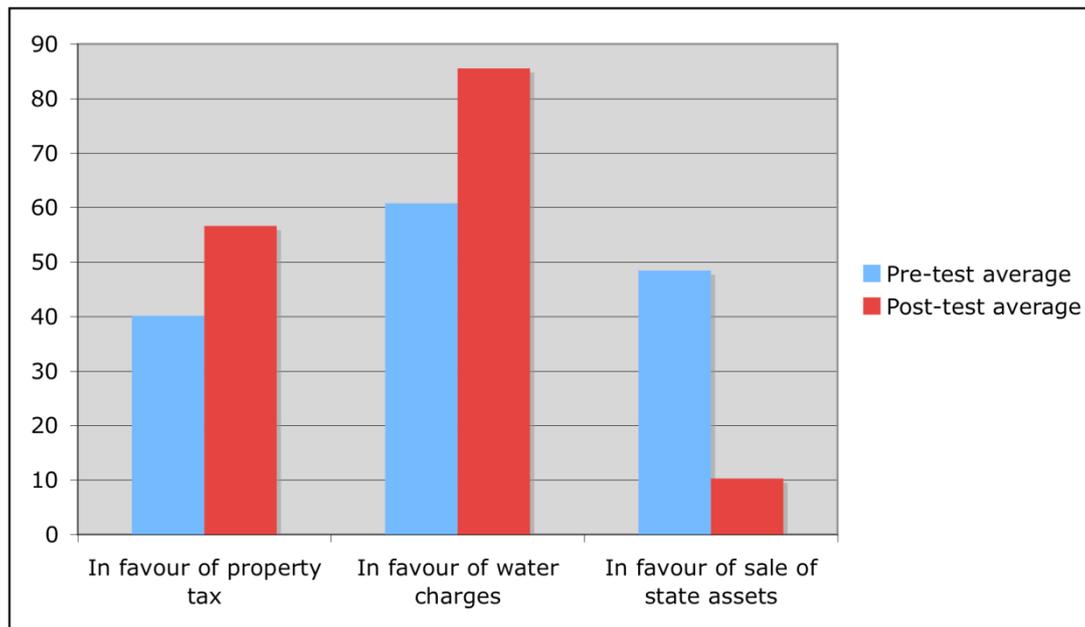


**Figure 2: Efficacy and Interest in Politics**

T-tests (one-tailed pairwise):

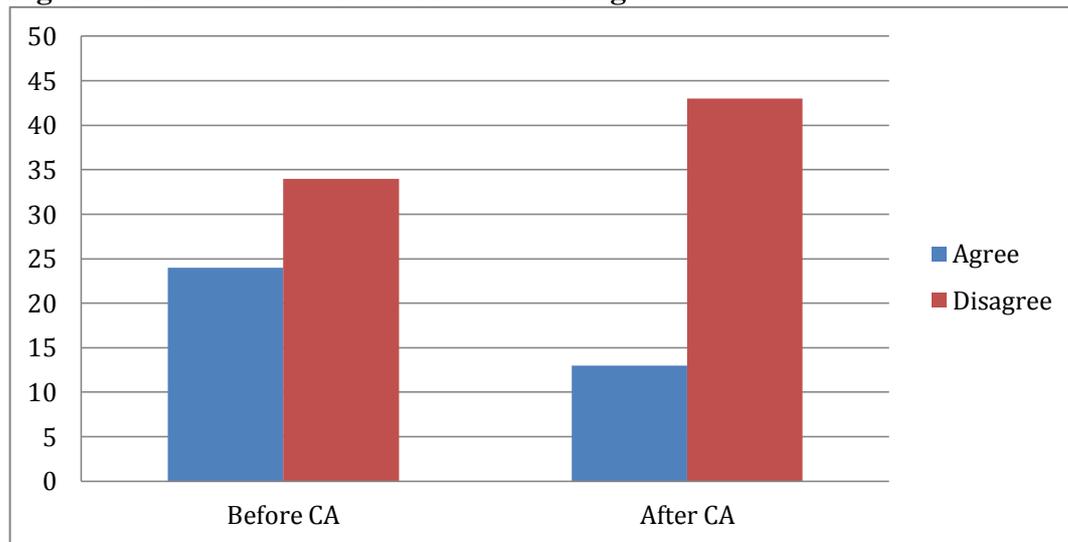
- interest  $p=.0017$  (sig. at the .01 level)
- discuss  $p=.004$  (sig. at the .01 level)
- involved  $p<.001$
- influence  $p=.0487$  (sig. at the .05 level)

**Figure 3: Boxplot of responses to levels of interest**

**Figure 4: Taxation and asset sale options**

T-tests (one-tailed pairwise):

- property  $p=.0007$
- water  $p<.0001$
- assets  $p<.0001$

**Figure 5: Local Service from TDs in a Strength**

T-test (one-tailed pairwise): significantly different at the .05 level