

## Citizens' Assembly on Democratic Reform in Germany

### 1. The Idea

Inspired by the positive experience of the randomly-selected citizens' assembly in Ireland, Mehr Demokratie and the Schöpflin Foundation, together with the independent institutes for process support, nexus and IFOK, are organizing a "Citizens' Assembly for Democracy" in 2019. We want this project, which is unique at the German federal level, to develop proposals to strengthen and further develop our democracy in close connection with the political sphere.

The recommendations of the citizens' assembly are to be submitted to the commission of experts on democracy and to the Bundestag for further consultation.

### 2. Background

A growing number of citizens in western democracies are losing faith in the democratic system. In a representative survey conducted in 2018, only around two-thirds of voters in Germany stated that they considered democracy to be the best form of government. In eastern Germany, satisfaction with this form of government drops to only 42% of respondents. There are clear differences in system trust between the supporters of the CDU/CSU, SPD and Greens (78% - 85% satisfaction) and the other parties (Left 65%, FDP 52% and AfD 30%).<sup>1</sup>

The loss of confidence among younger generations is particularly critical. Democratic fatigue does not only affect socially disadvantaged or less educated people<sup>2</sup>.

How can the dissatisfaction with politics and democracy in Germany be overcome? How can trust in the system be restored? The federal government has taken up this question in the coalition agreement:

*"We will set up a commission of experts to develop proposals as to whether and in what form our proven parliamentary representative democracy can be supplemented by further elements of civic participation and direct democracy. In addition, proposals for strengthening democratic processes are to be developed."*

We are convinced that citizens must also be involved in answering these questions. For this reason, a citizens' assembly is to work in parallel with the commission of

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<sup>1</sup> Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach: FAZ Monatsbericht 1/2019, zdf Politbarometer Juli 2018. Nach einer Forsa-Umfrage im Auftrag des *stern* vom November 2018 glaubt eine Mehrheit nicht, dass in Deutschland Demokratie herrscht. Zu einem ähnlichen Ergebnis kommt auch das Umfrage-Institut Civey am 4.3.2019.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/sites/default/files/Foa%26Mounk-27-3.pdf>;  
<http://regierungsforschung.de/die-soziale-schieflage-der-wahlbeteiligung-demokratie-der-bessergestellten-die-soziale-schieflage-der-wahlbeteiligung-teil-25/>

experts to draw up recommendations to supplement parliamentary representative democracy and thus develop proposals to strengthen democracy. The results will be submitted as recommendations to the commission of experts and to the Bundestag.

### **3. The Irish Model**

In Ireland, social issues have been dealt with by randomly-selected citizens' assemblies since 2012. In the most recent process, 99 citizens representing the electorate in terms of age, region and gender were randomly selected on behalf of the parliament.

One of the most highly contested issues that was recently discussed was the reform of the restrictive abortion law in Catholic Ireland. Across five weekends and supported by professional moderation, the assembly heard from legal experts, reports from those affected by the law, statements from the church and ethics professors before a suggested solution was reached. The parliament adopted the proposals and decided to amend the constitution accordingly. In the referendum that followed, without which a constitutional amendment could not enter into force, the proposal for the liberalization of the abortion law was adopted with a majority of 66% of the population, with a voter turnout of 64%. A decade-long dispute was overcome through constructive cooperation between the citizens' assembly and parliament.

Ireland gained worldwide attention with this process. The central success factors of the process are the public, fact-based moderated discourse of a socially representative assembly and its connection to parliament. Topics such as climate protection, same-sex marriage or the right to vote were dealt with using the same procedures.

### **4. Principles of the participation process**

#### **Sortition**

Voter turnout has been declining for years. Low-income, educationally disadvantaged citizens in particular are not exercising their right to vote. These social sections of the population are also not represented in parliament. More equal rights are offered by the sortition process, which characterizes some participation procedures. Random selection ensures more participation by otherwise underrepresented groups, as participation is personal and independent of gender, education, profession or party affiliation. This process reaches people who have never before taken part in political activities and at the same time reliably activates a representative diversity of citizenship.

### **Open-ended process: citizens set the agenda**

The procedure is open-ended, which is ensured by the process design. Professional experts are consulted on the individual topics. Guidelines ensure that reform proposals serve the common good, strengthen parliamentary democracy, conform to the constitution and can be implemented.

### **Parliamentarians are part of the procedure**

In the normal citizen participation process where the current system produces dissatisfaction, parliamentarians do not experience getting into a confrontational discussion with citizens. Conversely, parliamentarians can provide citizens with information on what the advantages of parliamentary democracy are and how voting processes are conducted across parties, parliamentary groups and in parliament. Through direct exchange, mutual understanding grows. Because they are the only ones who can make changes or additions to the representative system, parliamentarians are involved from the outset. This also ensures that citizens have a clear addressee for the results of the citizens' assembly.

### **Involvement of the Bundestag and Federal Ministries**

The parliamentary groups of the Bundestag, the President of the Bundestag and the responsible ministries (BMI/BMJV) are informed about the project and are each involved in an appropriate way. Andrea Nahles and Ralph Brinkhaus from the government factions have promised support.

## **5. Phases of the procedure**

### **1. Regional conferences to prepare the citizens' assembly at federal level:**

First, questions and topics are taken up at regional conferences (agenda setting), which are to be dealt with in the citizens' assembly. At six three-hour evening events, 50 citizens and 15 political representatives work out proposals for the agenda of the citizens' assembly at federal level. The events will take place in Erfurt, Schwerin, Munich, Gütersloh, Koblenz and Mannheim.

### **2. Citizens' assembly democracy:**

The first phase is followed by the main phase, in which, across two weekends, 160 randomly selected citizens from all over Germany draw up recommendations for concrete reforms to politicians. In order to ensure a solid and diverse knowledge basis for the citizens' assembly at federal level, scientific and political experts as well as ordinary citizens are invited to report on their experiences with citizen

participation. It is important that the different opinions and perspectives are incorporated so that the citizens of the citizens' assembly can weigh the pros and cons of the various proposals on the basis of the information given. The recommendations are drawn up exclusively by the citizens.

The participants receive an expense allowance and, if necessary, further support, e.g. for child care. The results will be verified by public representative surveys.

### 3. Day of Democracy:

The results of the citizens' assembly are summarized in a citizens' report. On the Day of Democracy, a major event in Berlin, the citizens' assembly's report will be presented, discussed and handed over to the public and to politicians.

Ideally, the process should cooperate with the expert commission on democracy as soon as it is set up. Independently of all this, all parliamentary groups of the German Bundestag are the addressees of the recommendations of the citizens' assembly.

### 4. Civil society support in the implementation process

Once the results of the citizens' assembly have been handed over to the politicians, it is planned that the politicians will be accompanied by civil society in implementing the recommendations.



### 6. Project coordination

The role of the coordination group shall be to,

- promote results-oriented work
- ensure that procedural issues, rather than factual issues, are dealt with
- ensure that the procedural elements run smoothly with one another
- check that all relevant groups are represented appropriately in the process

The coordination group is represented by:

- initiators of the process (Mehr Demokratie e.V.)
- implementing institutes/process support (nexus Institute, IFOK)
- representatives of the citizens involved

## **7. Publicity**

The entire project is accompanied by intensive public relations work. All results of the individual process phases are published online and the entire process is presented transparently. A documentary film will be produced about the process.

## **8. Advisory board / Evaluation**

An advisory board represents prominent civil society organizations. The members of the project advisory board give the procedure social legitimacy and weight. They support the communication of the results into the political process and assume joint responsibility for supporting the political implementation. Due to its composition, the advisory board guarantees the neutrality of the initiators and ensures the quality of the procedure. The members of the advisory board include BAGSO, BUND, Bundesverband deutscher Stiftungen, Bündnis für Gemeinnützigkeit, DGB and Zdk.

The process is scientifically accompanied and evaluated by the Research Center for Democratic Innovations at the University of Frankfurt (Director: Prof. Dr. Brigitte Geißel).

## **9. Cost of the process**

The costs of the process, amounting to € 1.4 million, will be covered by donations from citizens and civil society.

## **10. Schedule**

Phase 1	Regional conferences to prepare the citizens' assembly	June 2019
Phase 2	Citizens' assembly at federal level	September 2019
Phase 3	Day of Democracy in Berlin	November 2019
Phase 4	Civil society support during implementation	2020

## **11. Contact**

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