Abstract

On the 25th March 2017 leaders of the EU27 and EU institutions ratified the Rome Declaration. They committed to invite citizens to discuss Europe’s future and to provide recommendations that would facilitate their decision-makers in shaping their national positions on Europe. In response, citizens’ dialogues on the future of Europe were instituted across the Union to facilitate public participation in shaping Europe. This paper explores Ireland’s set of dialogues which took place during 2018. Although, event organisers in Ireland applied a relatively atypical and more systematic and participatory approach to their dialogues, evidence suggests that Irelands’ dialogues were reminiscent of a public relations exercise which showcased the country’s commitment to incorporating citizens into the debate on Europe whilst avoiding a deliberative design which could have strengthened the quality of public discourse and the quality of public recommendations. Due to an absence of elite political will for a deliberative process, as well as structural weaknesses in design, participants’ recommendations lacked any clear and prescriptive direction which could shape Ireland’s national position on the future of Europe in any constructive or meaningful way.

Keywords: citizens’ dialogues, future of Europe, European Union, mini publics, deliberative democracy, participation.

Introduction

In 2018, citizens’ dialogues on the future of Europe (FoE) were organised across the European Union (EU). These mini publics were instituted in response to formal commitments made by the EU27 and EU institutions in Rome on the 25th March 2017. The Rome Declaration committed to listen to European citizens and incorporate their recommendations in shaping Europe’s future direction in line with key policy areas outlined in the 2016 Bratislava Declaration. The Rome declaration was born in response to a continent experiencing growing Euroscepticism and potential fragmentation in the face of inward migration and the reverberations of the most recent global financial crisis. It coincided with the activation of Article 50 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (the Lisbon Treaty) which launched the Brexit negotiation process.

Ireland’s set of citizens’ dialogues were organised by European Movement Ireland (EMI) on behalf of Ireland’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFaT). Organisers suggested that public recommendations collated during the events would feed into a national report which would facilitate decision-makers in formulating the national position on Europe’s future. These dialogues were an opportunity to communicate Europe to citizens, enhance their understandings of the EU, encourage participation in the conversation and strengthen citizens’ relationship with Europe through the process of consultation. As rapporteur during the events, one had unique observational access to the organisation and development of the dialogues. That access provided a basis for this critical evaluation. The central claim of this paper is that despite a unique attempt at systematizing citizens’ dialogues, Ireland’s design hindered the full potential of participants to make a meaningful contribution to Ireland’s national position on the future of Europe. Designed with some of the (theoretical) ingredients associated with the generation of public deliberation, a deliberative democratic exercise was not intended for the events and design structures were weak. As participants at Ireland’s dialogues were not expected to engage in critical deliberation, they were not expected to provide critically generated prescriptive recommendations to policymakers. In turn, the quality of discourse was weak and this affected the quality of citizens’ contributions to Ireland’s national report.[1] Evidence collated from research interviews with individuals close to the coordination of the dialogues suggests that the events represented a box-ticking exercise in public relations on behalf of the DFaT at a time when Europe (and Ireland) was at political crossroads.[2] The weaknesses in design is attributed to the fact that organisers never intended citizens to steer policymakers in shaping Ireland’s national position on the FOE in any concrete prescriptive fashion but rather use these events to primarily showcase the Irish governments efforts in communicating with and listening to the people during times of great uncertainty in Europe. Therefore, whilst the Irish government outwardly fulfilled its commitments to incorporate citizens in shaping Europe’s future, its dialogues were designed in such a way that citizens’ preferences lacked any concrete empowerment and subsequent influence over the Irish government’s national position on Europe.

The Rome Declaration

The Rome Declaration was signed on the 25th March 2017 four days prior the United Kingdom’s (UK) invocation of Article 50 which initiated the Brexit process (see European Council, 2017). In Rome, EU leaders committed to incorporating citizens into the debate on Europe’s future integration trajectory in key policy areas outlined in the 2016 Bratislava Declaration and Roadmap (European Council, 2016). These areas included migration and borders, security and defence, economic and social development, and youth opportunities. These were rather contentious policy areas which populist forces have capitalised upon in developing their Eurosceptic narratives particularly within Southern and South-Eastern EU member-states. Several months after the UK’s June 2016 Brexit Referendum, the standard Eurobarometer 86 report showed that there was a general trend of optimism across Europe (European Commission, 2016). However, immigration, terrorism and unemployment were deemed amongst the top issues facing European countries. This was not unprecedented given that the socio-economic conditions in the aftermath of the financial crisis combined with inward irregular migration patterns had given momentum to the rise of far-right and far-left populist parties who came to enjoy electoral success in some EU member-states, not least in Italy, Greece, and Hungary.

Negative public opinion threatens the future stability of Europe and European leaders suggested that wider public participation could improve public opinion of the EU, encourage interest, and trust in EU institutions and enhance efficacy. The standard Eurobarometer 86 shows that only 15% of Europeans spoke frequently about EU matters. 52% spoke only occasionally and 33% of Europeans never spoke about the EU at all. In Ireland, a mere 16% had a strong interest in EU matters whilst only 37% had medium interest (European Commission, 2016). These figures suggest that in the months preceding the Rome Declaration there was a strong element of disengagement between EU citizens and Europe, as well as a lack of understanding about the EU as a broader political entity. However, despite a perceived lack of understanding about the EU, 56% expressed the belief that things were going in the wrong direction in Europe. Only 42% of Europeans tended to trust the European Parliament whilst a mere 38% tended to trust the European Commission. Overall, only 36% of Europeans trusted the EU as a political entity, whilst 54% did not trust the EU at all (European Commission, 2016). Such disengagement amidst growing Euroscepticism provided the ingredients for significant challenges to the future of the European project.

Following the Rome Declaration, the European Commission’s March 2017 Whitepaper on the Future of Europe offered five scenarios for the future functioning of the European Union which would help facilitated public discourse on the policy issues outlined in Bratislava. These included carrying on, nothing but the single market, those who want more do more, doing less more efficiently and doing much more together. As the document suggested, Europe’s form (by 2025) will follow its function. And that function would be influenced by public discourse in key policy areas. (European Commission, 2017). Thus, 2018 saw the emergence of citizens’ dialogues on the FoE across EU member-states influenced by the elite commitments made in Rome. Unlike many other dialogues, Ireland’s citizens’ dialogues applied a systematic and participatory framework but despite the participatory element, Ireland’s dialogues lacked a factor necessary to strengthen the quality and clout of citizens’ recommendations in shaping the future direction of Europe. That factor was democratic deliberation, and its absence hindered the full potential of the dialogues in process and impact and brings into question their very purpose.

Principles of Democratic Deliberation

Archon Fung (2015) conceptualises mini publics as a ‘broad genus’ of arrangements which attempt to facilitate public participation in wider political discourse and equip the public with the opportunity to influence political outcomes. Popular models include deliberative focus groups, deliberative polls, citizens’ juries, consensus conferences and scenario workshops (see Ozanne et al, 2009; Setälä & Smith in Bächtiger et al, 2018: 301). Others common model include citizens’ assemblies and even citizens’ dialogues. Although useful for empowering citizens’ voices, not all mini publics incorporate systematic deliberation as a tenet of their practice and this is the case in many models of citizens’ dialogues (Kuyper & Wolkenstein, 2019:661). This is particularly true for Ireland’s Citizens’ Dialogues on the FoE. Despite being non-systematic in terms of recruitment and non-deliberative in practice, these dialogues facilitated aminipopulus consisting of a sizeable body of participants brought together to discuss important public policy issues with the essential aim of generating what Robert Goodin and John Dryzek refer to as ‘some kind of ‘uptake’ in the broader political system’ (Goodin & Dryzek, 2006 in Jacquet, 2019: 639).

Deliberation is a unique form of social discourse marked by its systematic design and desired outcomes (Barabas, 2004). Deliberative exercises are marked by epistemic deliberation which aims to foster critical discourse using reasoning skills in the face of empirical truths to encourage cognitive transformation amongst discussants (see Estlund & Landemore in Bächtiger et al, 2018). In accordance with deliberative democratic norms this ought to produce democratic deliberative outputs (recommendations) which can impact public policy decision-making in the wider political system. Outputs are intended to be produced via consensus, following a reasonable period of deliberation (Suiter et al, 2016). Thus, as a systematic process, deliberation is characterised by the interplay between deliberative democracy (an epistemic process) and democratic deliberation (informed outcomes).

Certain conditions need to be present within a mini public for meaningful deliberation to unfold (see Bächtiger et al, 2018:1-8; Ryfe, 2005). Deliberative procedures work best when internal quality is strong.[3] When deliberative forums display high levels of heterogeneity in make-up, observers expect participants to experience attitudinal shifts from opposing positions toward a centre point representing mutual understanding (Suiter et al, 2016). A degree of mutual respect, equality, open-mindedness, a willingness to accept alteration of one’s initial preferences and a desire to reach consensus is required (Bächtiger et al, 2018). Such attributes are nurtured through engagement with relevant facts, or persuasive arguments, reasoned with recognition toward current or probable future contexts or outcomes (scenarios). Participants ought to be fact-regarding (non-biased), future-regarding (consider long-term outcomes) and other-regarding (hold non-altruistic intentions) (see Offe & Preuss, 1991 in Held, 2009:232) as opposed to binding themselves to comfortable biases and heuristic understandings of the world around them which may satisfy their own political preferences or goals (Bächtiger et al, 2018; Ryfe, 2005;uiter et al, 2016). McCormick (2013) argues that people often engage in confirmation bias by taking their cues only from preferred political figures and/or media outlets which satisfies and reinforces their own beliefs and viewpoints. This provides them with comfort and self-certainty, leading them to believe that their choices are reasoned and informed. However, preferences are not fixed, and one can position oneself toward attitudinal change through exposure to a diversity of opinion, a degree of open-mindedness, adequate access to information, a minimum understanding of the issues at hand and an ability to apply critical reasoning through deliberation. Barabas (2004) refers to this as ‘enlightenment’, as deliberators move away from the notion of fixed and unyielding preferences and develop a greater appreciation for the flexibility and growth of preferences when exposed to new and persuasive information (Knappe, 2017:60). Through cognitive enlightenment deliberators can work toward reaching consensus in understanding on key critical issues within society. In turn, this empowers them to influence the creation of balanced and constructive policy-outputs and to hold policymakers to account (see Barabas, 2004; Elkin, 1999; Ryfe, 2005).

When organised adequately, participation enhances learning, efficacy, and mutual understanding that benefits democracy through the creation of well-rounded and constructive viewpoints, free from the constraints of self-interested thinking (see; Luskin et al, 2002; Chambers, 2003; Mutz, 2006). However, this begs a question. How can citizens be motivated to put biases or pre-conceived ideas aside in the name of epistemic deliberation and learning? Jon Elster suggests that the mere act of participation inherently constrains participants during a deliberative process (see Suiter et al, 2016). The expectation (or pressure) of participating in a group setting can influence participants to reassess their attitudes so that their contributions may be perceived by peers as sensible, reasoned, and valid. People inherently care about what other’s think about them and their views. Therefore, to enhance their credibility as deliberators they may attempt to be as open-minded and accommodating of others’ viewpoints so that their personal characters (and opinions) may retain integrity in the minds of their peers. Elster refers to this as the ‘‘civilising force of hypocrisy’’ (Elster in Suiter et al, 2016:200). Of course, one may argue that this could induce biases, were discussants - fearful of being challenged, disliked, or dismissed - may feel pressured to agree with the opinions of more dominant or reasonably sounding peers as to mitigate negative reactions or responses. It has also been suggested that the anticipation of participating in deliberative exercises encourages participants to learn more about the issues at hand. Therefore they may become more open to learning and offering critical perspectives due to the privilege of being asked about their personal viewpoints. Thus, perhaps in line with an increased sense of efficacy comes a more serious and well thought out approach to deliberation (Luskin et al, 2002:460).

The Nexus of Deliberative and Representative Modes of Democracy

Many proponents of deliberative democracy argue that mini publics, even those of a deliberative nature, are not meant to undermine or replace representative democracy but ought to co-exist, reinforce, and improve its operation by acting as a solution to democratic deficiencies or distortions (see Fung, 2006; Kuyper & Wolkenstein, 2019). Kuyper and Wolkenstein (2019:657) suggest that when representative institutions function well, then mini publics ought to be ‘decoupled from those institutions’ and ‘non-authoritative in their decision-making power’. However, when representative institutions are working ineffectively, distort legitimacy and there is need for a remedial solution, mini publics ought to be coupled (or bridged) with such institutions yet remain non-authoritative’ in their power. The latter is sufficed by providing elected representatives with a plurality of competing and well-informed public viewpoints which enhances elite understanding of multi-faceted perspectives on issues facing society (Brown in Bächtiger et al, 2018:172; Knappe, 2017). This should allow elites to make better (informed) political decisions on behalf of their constituents, thereforetrengthening their claim to representative legitimacy (see Gutmann & Thompson in Paul et al, 2000:166; Ozanne et al, 2009). Saward (2010) suggests that representative legitimacy is not about accepting or supporting public representatives and their policy goals but the policy goals of representatives reflecting public recommendations on political matters. Thus, representative legitimacy is sourced in elites’ efforts to be responsive to constituents’ political preferences on policy issues. Ideally deliberative democracy ought to work with representative democracy in such a way that they mutually reinforce one another but also provide mutual constraint i.e., by mitigating abuse of, or failures in, representative power and mitigating incidences for popular usurpation (Shapiro et al, 2009). Jacquet (2019:640) states that mini publics may be viewed as ways to enrich the representative link between citizens and their elected officials. Therefore, citizens may view such forums as ways to hold representatives to account for their policy recommendations whilst inherently legitimising the virtue of representative democracy.

Deliberation and the Future of Europe

Reflecting on the debate around the EU’s democratic deficit, one may argue that better channels for public participation ought to be developed to strengthen the relationship between citizens and their representatives, improve public efficacy of political affairs and to improve the quality of information or data transferred to representative elites who are responsible for policymaking. In line with Jane Mansbridge’s idea of the deliberative system (see Bächtiger et al, 2018), deliberative forums ought to be systematically influential in terms of fostering deliberation at other levels of decision-making within the wider political structures of society (see Curato & Böker, 2016). In turn stronger ‘internal quality’ of deliberation ought to wield stronger ‘external qualities’ from deliberation.[4] ‘Mini publics with poor internal quality give democratic innovations a bad name, and this may have practical consequences in, for example, its application in policymaking and civil society circles’ (Curato & Böker, 2016:186).

If designed adequately, citizens dialogues on the FoE have the potential to bridge the nexus between domestic deliberative exercises with the wider representative system at the EU level. Scholarship surrounding participatory and deliberative democracy extends well beyond the analysis of the deliberative quality of mini publics but also evaluates the potential for deliberative forums to inform and shape the wider political system which itself consists of a multitude of deliberative forums within the context of representative democracy (see Brown in Bächtiger et al, 208:178; Curato & Böker, 2016). The EU’s intergovernmental policymaking frameworks (see Bickerton et al, 2015; Moravcsik, 1998; Rosamond, 2000) often encourage representative elites within the frameworks of multi-level governance (MLG) and policy-networks to draw upon domestic forces to inform national preference bargaining and consensus seeking. As Mansbridge (2010:64) argues, bargaining in negotiations ‘can and must be justified deliberatively’. This provides a space for Jurgen Habermas’ two-track model of deliberative democracy (see Brown in Bächtiger et al, 208:178) to be realised, as national preference formation and intergovernmental negotiations on the future direction of Europe can [potentially] be shaped by adequately designed deliberative exercises at the domestic level. Although Ireland’s citizens’ dialogues on the FOE were designed with a systematic framework in mind, they fundamentally lacked the impetus for a democratic deliberative process.

Ireland’s Citizens’ Dialogues on the Future of Europe

Generally, citizens’ dialogues on European matters tend to follow town hall style forums. They tend to employ a speaker-audience dynamic usually steered by a panel of expert speakers followed by a short question and answer session with the audience. In this sense, the label citizens’ dialogue is rather superficial and unwarranted. With a general absence of deliberation (or even debate) and rarely the means to provide discussion-based feedback, they tend to be less effective in commanding elite responses to citizens’ recommendations (see Farrell et al, 2019; Suiter et al, 2016). As Archon Fung (2003) suggests, mini publics risk futility when they lack the means to affectively empower citizens to shape the political world around them, and the organisation of town hall models seem to be reproduced time and time again despite the growth in other sophisticated and constructive (systematic) models of mini publics (Fung, 2015: 514-515). Following the European Commission’s call in 2017, many citizens’ dialogues on the FoE across the EU were designed with the town hall model in mind. Such procedures are counter-productive to strengthening the link between citizens and Europe especially when opportunity for collective participation at such events is stifled by design. In Ireland, several notable citizens’ dialogues have since followed this model of public participation.[5] However, Ireland’s regional citizens’ dialogues on the FOE during 2018 deviated significantly from such a model.

Having been delegated with responsibility for organising the dialogues on behalf of DFaT, EMI hosted citizens’ dialogues across the four provinces of Ireland between February and May 2018.[6] A national report was published in October 2018 which showcased participants recommendations (see DFA, 2018b). Public participation during the events was encouraged through open invitation. The events were advertised via print media, radio, and social media platforms. Each event consisted of several round-table discussions with 8-10 participants per table including a trained moderator. Participants were provided with a briefing document containing five discussion themes and associated questions with an explanation of key policy developments in the EU. Each event opened with a short introduction by coordinators and keynote speakers stemming from the private and public spheres. Participants were allocated 8 minutes to discuss each question followed by an extra 2 minutes for moderators to round up key arguments and extract any further information that would then be uploaded via sli.do and viewable on a conference screen.[7] In addition to the formal discussions, participants in and beyond the events could submit their suggestions on key topics through an online submission process on DFAT and EMI websites. Those present at the events were invited to fill out post event feedback postcards and evaluation forms (see DFA, 2018a; DFA, 2018b). Participants did not receive financial compensation for their participation in the dialogues.

Ireland’s dialogues were deemed an example of best practice due to their participatory approach, although they lacked a democratic deliberative procedure (see EMI, 2018). Despite the participatory style of the dialogues, the recommendations collated in Ireland’s national report echoed the broad recommendations showcased in other national reports from across the EU (see European Commission, 2019).[8] Given Ireland’s participatory approach, one would have expected Ireland’s report to express comparatively stronger recommendations even in the absence of democratic deliberation. Although Ireland’s citizens’ dialogues must be commended for their relatively more inclusive efforts, a lack of deliberative procedure and weakness in both design and operation led to the development of broad and vague public recommendations which impeded participants to develop and contribute prescriptive recommendations on the FoE that could go some way to influencing the choices of public representatives in shaping Ireland’s national position. It was clear throughout the process that important structures such as the sampling procedure, the style and structure of discussion questions, and time allowance for discussion significantly hindered the quality of participation and hindered the full potential of what were costly, time demanding and generally well organised events.

The Sampling procedure

An open-invitation procedure was chosen by event organisers to recruit participants. In turn, participant make-up was subject to self-selection. This bears responsibility for deficiencies in achieving a cross-representative sample of Irish society. Open invitation was cost effective, but it meant that the dialogues ran the risk of incorporating only those who had time to attend (such as retirees etc.), those interested in EU affairs (educated professionals, students, teachers, civil society/NGO representatives, civil servants etc.) and those with personal interests or stakes in the single market (entrepreneurs, farmers etc) (see Fung, 2015). Ryfe (2005) argues that self-selection processes have a ‘snowball effect’ whereby those who attend such events often recruit others from their own social circles. Ergo, self-selection runs the risk of attracting individuals with similar socio-economic backgrounds, social experiences, education, and/or attitudes which may lead to homogeneity in political viewpoints (Suiter et al, 2016). Ozanne et al (2009) states that often deliberative forums tend to be dominated by highly motivated, educated and socioeconomically privileged participants who are better informed politically, and who have time to spare (see Knappe, 2017). Suiter et al (2016) also suggests that those who are of higher social standing, educated and older do not tend to change their views during or after deliberation compared to those of younger age-groups, those of lower social standing and with lower education.

The self-selection process in Ireland’s citizens’ dialogues hindered the potential for a plurality of viewpoints which adequately reflected a cross-representative sample of Irish society particularly in terms of age, ethnicity and socio-economic status and education. In addition, a lack of pre-deliberative surveying, meant that the potential to organise seating arrangements to foster a diversity of viewpoints (wherever identified) from the sample was diminished. Referring to the self-selection method as a weakness, one interviewee stated that ‘seating plans are the hardest part to manage and that absolutely was the case for the citizens’ dialogues’’ (Organiser, 2020). The incidence of participants choosing to sit with peers or family members was noticeable at times due to open choice seating. A combination of these factors enhanced the incidence of homogeneity at some discussion tables hindering the quality of discourse. Setälä (2017:848) notes that group deliberation, especially those associated with self-selection procedures, are often criticised for leading to ‘conformism or ‘group think’ behaviourisms. Thus, the snowball hypothesis holds theoretical weight in methodological designs where self-section processes are applied (see Ryfe, 2005).

When the quality of the representative sample was queried based on self-selection, one interviewee acknowledged that the dialogues ‘were not particularly diverse’. They consisted of mostly older people with free evenings to spare and while members of the New Irish community participated in some events this did not change the fact that the events were ‘very white-heavy’ in racial make-up (Organiser, 2019). This point was reiterated by another interviewee who said that ‘where we all would have liked to see diversification was in terms of the presence of different nationalities and ethnicities’ (Organiser, 2020). Although event organisers did not survey the socio-economic background of participants, it was observed that participants appeared to be relatively white, educated and/or middle-class and generally interested in EU matters and expressing pro-EU sentiments. Another interviewee said ‘…... with self-selection, the people who came were quite informed about Europe…... in Ireland most people were quite pro-European. There were not too many anti-European voices there’ (Senior Official B, 2019). The interviewee proceeded to state that Ireland ‘is not your typical European member-state’ and some ‘other citizens’ dialogues [beyond Ireland] were more constructive [due to diversity]’. Empirically, there was also an underrepresentation of working-class participants as well as those who expressed Eurosceptic viewpoints which hindered the diversity of viewpoints expressed during round-table discussions. The overwhelmingly pro-EU sentiments expressed by relatively educated, middle-class participants meant that opportunity for critical discussion based on competing viewpoints on Europe was hindered which subsequently affected the quality of recommendations.

Given the link between ideological patterns and social cleavages it is vital that organisers of participatory exercises account for variations in age, sex, race, socio-economic status, education levels etc. These factors fundamentally shape social experiences and therefore public attitudes on political matters. An enhanced heterogeneity accounting for such variations would help facilitate/improve the critical dimension of discourse in combination with other adequately applied design factors. A cross-representative sample of society is better achieved through controlled representative sampling methods. Controlled heterogeneity improves participatory exercises due to the likely presence of a series of independent variables which can explain differences in opinions and attitudes. Population sampling, such as quota sampling, is one of several methods that can be used to enhance diversity and quality in deliberative settings (Setälä, 2017:848). ‘Quotas are particularly important in smaller mini publics to oversample marginalised groups, not only to ensure their presence but also to increase the likelihood that their voice is heard’ (see Setälä and Smith in Bächtiger et al, 2018:302).

Style and Structure of discussion Questions

‘I like the deliberative element but there is an element of realpolitik caution when it comes to a suggestion of a promise to follow the directions suggested by participants.’

(Organiser, 2020)

Systematic deliberation begins with a set of clear, concise, and well-structured questions which shape the character and capture the purpose of the deliberative exercise. A set of poorly phrased questions is likely to affect the quality of discourse. Poor questions foster confusion, affect deliberative consistency, and weaken the strength of deliberative outputs. Good questions are essential even in mini publics which lack deliberative democratic qualities. All participants ought to know exactly what they are being asked and why. Thus, questions ought to be planned carefully when attempting to unearth important data which may shape public policy or national policy positions.

The discussion themes guiding the dialogues focused on a prosperous and competitive union, a safe and secure union, a sustainable union, a socially responsible union and shaping globalisation. Unexpectedly, the theme-based questions developed by EMI were not structured around the European Commission’s five scenarios regarding the future of integration and governance in key policy areas.[9] Briefing materials also did not sufficiently explain what the five scenarios meant for Europe, how the policy areas being spoken about at the dialogues related to these future integrative options and the potential consequences of different scenarios for each policy area. One interviewee suggested that organisers avoided such questions as they did not want to ‘lock’ themselves into any sort of model that would have been politically untenable and undeliverable (Official, 2019). Another stated that ‘the nature of the debate on the FOE changed over time…...the five scenarios became less important’ to the overall discussion and as such, the final report ‘summarised [the discussions] while avoiding anything controversial’ (Senior Official B, 2019). This was reiterated by another who said that ‘...the Rome declaration was something peripheral, something down the line…… not something that caught on’ (Organiser, 2020). Thus, the broader the questions, the more interpretive leeway policymakers had regarding citizens’ recommendations. In line with this, Senior Official B stated, ‘what was taken up in the [Ireland’s National] report [by officials] had an element of subjectivity, like any report’. In turn, public constraint over elite choices would be minimal in this context. ‘In politicised contexts of representative decision making, mini publics are thus likely to be associated with the goals of those who initiate them and, as a consequence, the outcomes of deliberations remain contested’ (Setälä, 2017:852). Another interviewee argued that the absence of such questions was not particularly intentional but acknowledged the consequences of their absence (Organiser, 2019). This interviewee said that event organisers were more interested in finding out if Irish people were happy with the current direction of the EU, rather than querying attitudes on ‘specific’ issues. This was an unexpected response, given that the dialogues from their inception were influenced by clear commitments in the Bratislava and Rome Declarations, yet they failed to ask citizens clear questions about the future direction of Europe relative to policy governance. When queried about the consequences of poor questions, weak or ambiguous public feedback and elite accountability, one interviewee suggested that in the absence of clear and well-thought-out public suggestions elites will always plot their future political stances and preferences through their own subjective interpretations and in accordance with the programme of government (Organiser, 2019). Maija Setälä states that mini publics are often accused of being ‘tokenistic’ ventures used by elites to merely silence critical voices in civil society and that elites are often selective in choosing public recommendations for policy considerations (Setälä, 2017:851). The data suggested that this was box-ticking process and potential for elite interpretation of citizen’s recommendations is quite high.

One interviewee stated that the self-selection process made it difficult to brief participants on the topics in advance of the events. In addition, due to time constraints as well as the accelerated pace of the events, participants did not have adequate time to ponder the nature and meaning of what were ‘not very concise’ questions (Organiser, 2019).‘[in organising such events] you are giving people a lot of information and you are asking them to talk about a lot of things in a very short space of time and that can be difficult’ (Senior Official, 2019). Therefore, more information would have been necessary to generate better quality discourse. The broad questions combined with a lack of adequate time for contemplation meant that grasping the meaning of the questions became a tedious and confusing task for participants. As a result, participants responses appeared generic in nature and offered little in terms of prescriptive recommendations to policy makers. As such the rather broad and nonprescriptive quality of the recommendations as outlined in the national report shows that there is indeed much room for elites to subjectively interpret citizens’ recommendations in accordance with the government position, if desired (see DFA, 2018b).

Time Allocation

‘The longer the period that citizens are able to spend together learning and deliberating about an issue, the better the outcome can be expected to be from a deliberative perspective’.

(Setälä & Smith, in Bächtiger et al, 2018:302).

Time allowance is another important factor for why the dialogues expressed poor internal and external quality. Even if a deliberative procedure were to be implemented, discussion time would have been completely insufficient for the generation of strong prescriptive recommendations. Time limitations also had a noticeable effect on equality of voice and contributions, with more assertive participants monopolising discussions at a cost to more passive participants. Whilst equality of opportunity for expression was provided, not all voices were equal in deliverance. One would expect this to have a negative effect on the degree of diversity of opinion at the tables; a vital factor for true critical dialogue to be nurtured.[10]

Most of the citizens’ dialogues were completed within 2.5 hours. Participants were given 8 minutes to discuss each topic and an extra 2 minutes to round-up discussions. Therefore, each roundtable had a mere 40 minutes to discuss five policy-based questions. This was an inadequate amount of time to critically deliberate such matters whilst expecting any substantial shift in cognition or the achievement of consensus on key issues. One interview stated, ‘they [dialogues] gave a sense of snappiness but obviously there was never going to be the opportunity to discuss anything in depth in eight minutes… ‘(Organiser, 2019). Another stated that ‘you would need a full evening for each of the five questions, the debate was on the future of Europe after all’ (Organiser, 2020). Despite a correlation between a lack of discussion time and the quality of the recommendations, feedback reports show that 82% of citizens felt that they did have enough time to discuss each topic (DFA, 2018a). However, it is necessary to reiterate that these events were not deliberative in essence and for systematic deliberation to adequately unfold around complex public policy issues, a greater deal of discussion time would be necessary to generate sufficient and prescriptive public recommendations. It was suggested that in line with the dialogues being a ‘box-ticking’ exercise to show that Europe was listening, ‘whether these were ever going to be forums to discuss anything in depth is another question entirely….’ and whether the policymakers would take such views on board is yet to be seen (Organiser, 2019). If indeed the process was an exercise in public relations, then this explains the shortcomings in design and the lack of interest in developing a genuine deliberative approach that could empower participants to shape policy in a meaningful way.

Ireland’s Citizens’ Dialogues: Meaningful but Effective?

Evidence collated suggests that Ireland’s citizens’ dialogues were a government funded tokenistic exercise in public relations to communicate Europe to EU citizens amidst growing uncertainties in and beyond Europe rather than providing genuine spaces for citizens to shape the future direction of the European Union. Evidence also suggests that the public relations objective behind these events explains weaknesses in design and oeration which fundamentally hindered their full potential and the means to empower citizens to shape Europe’s future direction in a meaningful way. Despite being inspired by elite commitments made in Rome to incorporate citizens into shaping Europe’s future, these mini publics were never meant to follow a deliberative practice due to the constraints that deliberative outputs may have placed on national policymakers in negotiating Europe’s future. The greater the quality and strengths of citizens’ recommendations, the greater the requirement of public responsiveness to those recommendations, which may or may not fit in line with government interests.

In determining the meaningfulness of these events, it is necessary to consider that these events did provide a space for citizens to come together to discuss their views on Europe. There were no restrictions on who could attend, and organisers and public officials connected and communicated with citizens throughout the events. These are virtues in themselves. Thus, the events had meaning in the sense that citizens were invited into the wider conversation on Europe, they had an opportunity to express their views and to be listened to by fellow citizens and public representatives. However, these minpublics fell short of their fullest potential as the intended outcomes of event organisers did not match the objectives conveyed by European leaders in Rome in March 2017 when they committed to giving citizens a voice in shaping Europe’s future direction. These events were not designed to empowered citizens to shape or steer Europe’s future direction in any prescriptive or operative manner. Subsequently, citizens’ dialogues would be more democratically effective if they were developed with principles of democratic deliberation and deliberative democracy in mind. For these mini publics to become genuine forums of public consultation on the future of Europe, there ought to be a deliberative stimulus that incentivises participation and produces quality outputs. In utilising principles of democratic deliberation and deliberative democracy, organisers would strengthen the quality of participation, the quality of deliberation and the quality of public recommendations. This would be significantly more valuable to Europe’s future direction(s), the role of citizens in shaping such direction(s) and strengthening the link between Europe and its peoples.

Although the dialogues fell short of their full potential in terms of empowering participants to contribute critically deduced and prescriptive recommendations on Europe’s future direction, the recommendations – in their present form – were nevertheless welcomed by national and European policymakers. Alongside the suggestions outlined in other national reports across Europe, the European Commission have used the suggestions to shape the content of several progress reports which subsequently shaped the narrative of the intergovernmental discussions on the future of Europe at the 2019 Sibiu Summit in Romania. The Sibiu Summit has since paved the way for the EU’s Strategic Agenda 2019-2024 which highlights priority policy areas of public interest/concern regarding the future of Europe. Subsequently, the future conversation will be steered by the Conference on the Future of Europe (see European Council, 2020) which provides a renewed opportunity for national organisers to systematically improve future citizens’ dialogues along deliberative lines.

Ireland’s Citizens’ Assemblies as a Template for Systematic Improvement?

In recent years Ireland experienced considerable success with its citizens’ assemblies on several constitutional matters. Farrell et al (2019) suggests Ireland has been a ‘trail-blazer’ in this process and its assemblies contributed something of a ‘systematisation of deliberation in the Irish process of constitutional review’. A pilot assembly called ‘We the Citizens’ was held in 2011 to test the potential for public participatory procedures in an Irish democratic context (see Farrell et al, 2013). This project came to inspire later motivational and methodological aspects of Ireland’s participatory culture (see wethecitizens, 2015). Following this, the Convention on the Constitution (2012-2014) and the Citizens’ Assembly (2016-2018) played important roles in the transformation of constitutional provisions not least pertaining to moral issues including same-sex marriage and abortion. In July 2019, the Citizens’ Assemblies Act was signed into law. The legislation eases access to the use of information on the Irish Register of Electors for the purpose of selecting participants for participation in mini publics. The enactment of the legislation indicated the State’s growing recognition for public participation as an important and essential dimension of Irish democracy.

As consultative mini publics, citizens’ assemblies are not ‘decision-making modes’ of citizen participation (see Ryfe, 2005). Nevertheless, they provide a useful template for producing high quality public deliberation. Like citizens’ dialogues, public representatives are not bound to consider the public recommendations collated during citizens’ assemblies (see Farrell et al, 2019:119). However, their systematic procedure for generating public deliberation has gone some way toward commanding elite responsiveness and recognition toward citizens’ preferences. In citizens’ assemblies, participants are part of the report shaping process. Ireland’s citizens’ assemblies consisted of a random representative sample of 99 participants (and 99 substitutes) accounting for diversity in age, sex, social-strata, and region. This allowed event coordinators to account for a plurality of public opinions influenced by socio-political cleavages, and to mitigate low turnout. The citizens’ assembly was generally held once a month and consisted of roughly 1.5 days of deliberation over the course of each designated weekend. This provided ample time for participants to read essential materials, hear from experts and deliberate issues critically. Trained moderators guided discussions as to ensure equality of opportunity to contribute, ensure that participants were provided with adequate information and materials, and kept the discussions civil. The round-tables discussions were rotated after each deliberative weekend as to ensure that particpants were exposed to new personalities and potentially different viewpoints and understandings. Thus, the combination of viewpoints was inherently maximised, and participants were exposed to a greater variety of differing attitudes and opinions (see Farrell et al, 2019:116). Arguably, this lessens the extent in which strong bonds may be formed amongst familiar peers which could skew quality of deliberative outputs.

Inferring if future citizens’ dialogues could be improved by borrowing the design of citizens’ assemblies, all interviewees agree that such a model could strengthen citizens’ dialogues, operationally and in terms of citizens’ empowerment. However, one interviewee reiterated that whilst citizens’ assemblies make proposals on constitutional matters, ‘citizens’ dialogues are there to provide political direction’ (Organiser, 2020). This is a valid point and one does not expect dialogues to enhance EU citizens’ ability to constrain elite choices on the constitutional nature of Europe at EU bargaining tables but the principles of democratic deliberation and deliberative democracy which are key characteristics in citizens’ assemblies could act as a useful template for enabling event organisers to strengthen citizens’ recommendations during such dialogues in a way that citizens and elite preferences may become better aligned. However, as evidence suggests, the political will to develop dialogues in such a way would have to be present, but alas, this is not currently the case.

Conclusion

Although emulating a systematic and participatory design atypical of mini publics of their calibre, Ireland’s citizens’ dialogues on the future of Europe were reminiscent of a government funded public relations exercise rather than a systematic process aimed at meaningfully empowering citizens to shape Europe’s future direction. These dialogues, like others across Europe, were instituted following an elite commitment to invite citizens to converse and provide recommendations that would feed into Ireland’s national position on the future of Europe. A clear lack of elite political will for democratic deliberation and weaknesses in design thwarted the full potential of these dialogues to empower participants (citizens) to shape Ireland’s national position on Europe. Although there were some merits to these mini publics, they were fundamentally insufficient for advancing public influence over Europe’s’ future direction. Evidence collated suggests that although event organisers designed the events in such a way that the Irish government delivered on its formal commitment to invite citizens into the conversation on the future of Europe, they also designed the events in such a way that public recommendtions would be nonprescriptive and would lack a binding quality that may have required policymakers to become bound by public preferences on Europe which may have diverged from the government’s official position. Ireland’s unique participatory approach toward citizens’ dialogues, as observed in 2018, has the potential to set a precedent which can strengthen dialogues as a calibre of mini public, but the approach alone is insufficient in the absence of an elite political will to encourage a systematic design which adequately facilitates democratic deliberation and the generation of clear prescriptive public recommendations on Europe’s future.

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[1] Public recommendations outlined in Ireland’s national report were intended to inform the national position on the Future of Europe.

[2] The UK’s departure from the EU was not only a symptom of Europe’s wider existential crisis but was a direct threat to Anglo-Irish relations due to technicalities associated with the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (Belfast

Agreement) and the possible re-establishment of a physical border between the North and South of the island.

[3] Internal quality refers to the quality of the mini public in both design and procedure. A mini public that cultivates critical deliberation, attitudinal shift and consensus building amongst a diverse cohort of peers is said to possess the qualities necessary for strong internal quality.

[4] External quality refers to the external (i.e., political) influences stemming from deliberative democratic exercises. A mini public with strong internal quality (diversity, critical deliberation, attitudinal shift and consensus building) has the potential to generate stronger external outputs (elite responsiveness and/or influence the content of public policy or the public policymaking process).

[5] Town hall style forums were hosted in third level institutions across Ireland in 2018 and 2019 e.g., Citizens’ Dialogues on the FoE (NUI Maynooth, February 2018). The Citizens’ Dialogue on Brexit and Europe (Institute of Technology Tallaght, December 2018) and the Citizens’span style="font-family:Calibri"> Dialogue on Brexit and Europe (University College Cork, February 2019). A series of Civic and Sectoral town hall style forums on Brexit are ongoing across the island since 2018.

[6] DFaT provided EMI with €175,000 for the 2018 period and a further €250,000 per annum between 2017 and 2020 for its FOE Programme which funds citizens’ dialogues (see EMI, 2017:3)

[7] Sli.do is a web-based polling app which allows conference attendees to ask questions via their personal technological devices.

[8] Ireland’s official national report differed to the rapporteurs written report. Several parts were revised and following official revision in DFaT.

[9] Discussion themes and questions can be viewed in Ireland’s national report on the Citizens’ Dialogues on the FoE (see DFA, 2018b)

[10] Restrictions on discussion time combined with a large turnout of self-selected participants seated at roundtables can significantly affect equality of discourse. Under time restrictions, it is unlikely that an equality of opportunity to contribute could be met.