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REDIRECT LUNCH DEBATE

Political divisions and gag rules

What role for democratic experiments?

2 November 2026, 12:00 CET

Guest speaker:



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Introduced and moderated by:



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REDIRECT LUNCH DEBATE

2 NOVEMBER 2026 | 12:00 CET | ONLINE

Political divisions and gag rules

What role for democratic experiments?

An analytical account of the online REDIRECT Lunch Debate

GUEST SPEAKER

Mark E. Warren

Professor Emeritus, University of British Columbia

INTRODUCTION AND MODERATION

John Erik Fossum

ARENA Centre for European Studies, University of Oslo

Online discussion in collaboration with the University of Oslo

Political representation / deliberation / democratic innovation

THE REPRESENTATIVE DISCONNECT | HORIZON EUROPE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The debate examined whether democratic experimentation could help reopen discussion of Norway's relationship with the European Union. Building on an earlier Oslo event, Mark E. Warren, John Erik Fossum and other participants considered how citizens' assemblies might contribute to a more informed public conversation without displacing the authority of elected institutions.

FIVE INSIGHTS FROM THE DISCUSSION

01 A political opening

Political reluctance can leave consequential choices outside ordinary debate. An independent deliberative initiative might generate public engagement where parties see high electoral risks.

02 A design dilemma

Inviting politicians may increase institutional support, while visible political control can undermine the confidence of citizens who distrust established elites.

03 A public-facing process

An assembly intended to inform a referendum must connect its deliberations to a much wider population through communication, openness and sustained public engagement.

04 Deliberation and voting

A referendum can offer a moment of popular decision, but complex European choices may require preparatory debate and further assessment over time.

05 Failure has consequences

Sponsorship, expert selection, funding and public trust need careful attention: a failed experiment could discourage further democratic innovation.

CENTRAL QUESTION

How could a democratic experiment widen public discussion while retaining credibility, political relevance and a clear relationship with representative institutions?

EVENT BACKGROUND AND PARTICIPANTS

The REDIRECT Lunch Debate, *Political divisions and gag rules: What role for democratic experiments?*, took place online on 2 November 2026. Mark E. Warren, Professor Emeritus at the University of British Columbia, was the guest speaker. John Erik Fossum of the University of Oslo introduced and moderated the exchange.

The online event was organised in collaboration with the University of Oslo. The published programme identified Marianne Riddervold and Erlend Jørgensen of ARENA, University of Oslo, among the discussants. The conversation also included contributions from other REDIRECT researchers and audience members.

The discussion followed an Oslo public debate on 7 October about how Norway might address entrenched disagreements concerning its European relationship. That earlier meeting examined political parties, referendums and citizens' panels. The November exchange moved from this initial diagnosis to the practical design of democratic experimentation.

Warren began with possible citizens' assembly models; subsequent interventions tested their relationship to public trust, the wider public sphere, political leadership, referendum procedures and elected representatives. No specific experiment, referendum or funding arrangement was adopted.

ROLE	EVENT PARTICIPANT
Guest speaker	Mark E. Warren — University of British Columbia
Introduction / moderation	John Erik Fossum — University of Oslo
Announced comments	Marianne Riddervold — ARENA, University of Oslo
Announced comments	Erlend Jørgensen — ARENA, University of Oslo
Discussion	REDIRECT researchers and audience participants

KEY POINT

The event was an exploratory discussion of possible institutional designs, not the presentation of an agreed Norwegian citizens' assembly proposal.

WHY THE EUROPEAN DEBATE REMAINS DIFFICULT

Fossum opened by revisiting a persistent difficulty in Norwegian politics. Norway is closely connected to European decision-making through its existing arrangements, while the question of EU membership remains politically sensitive. Parties may have little incentive to reopen a disagreement that divides their supporters and could destabilise established political positions. In earlier research, Fossum described this type of issue avoidance as Norway's European *gag rules*: political arrangements that contain membership conflict while continuing adaptation to EU decisions.

This combination creates a gap between the practical significance of European decisions and the opportunities citizens have to debate the direction of their country's European relationship. Fossum related the issue to changing security and economic circumstances that may be testing arrangements once considered relatively settled.

The October Oslo event had already explored whether parties, a staged referendum or public discussion could break the impasse. The November exchange began from the possibility that an additional democratic instrument might be needed.

Warren approached the Norwegian case cautiously. He stressed that he was not an expert on Norwegian politics, but recognised a possible instance of representative disconnect: a consequential issue that political leaders perceive as a difficult or costly one to address. The resulting leadership vacuum could create an opportunity for a public-facing deliberative process.

He drew a parallel with the Irish experiences of citizens' assemblies on divisive social questions. The analogy was not meant to imply that EU membership resembles those issues in substance or complexity. Its relevance lay in a political configuration in which established leaders had incentives to shift part of the agenda-setting burden to citizens.

The proposed experiment would therefore aim not to bypass representative democracy, but to create a public conversation substantial enough for elected actors to engage with it.

KEY POINT

Political avoidance may create space for democratic innovation, but any new process must remain connected to the institutions responsible for collective decisions.

WHAT CAN A CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY DO?

Warren distinguished between two broad roles for citizens' assemblies. The more familiar model addresses recommendations to governments or other decision-makers. Another model directs advice towards the wider public, particularly when an assembly is connected with a referendum.

The Norwegian discussion concentrated on the second possibility. An assembly would need to be sufficiently representative, visible and sustained to offer citizens a meaningful basis for considering a decision about their European future. Warren raised the possibility of a relatively large, socially diverse body operating long enough to draw wider attention well before a vote.

This difference matters for institutional design. If the main audience is the public, the process must reach beyond those selected to participate. Public hearings, clear communications, access to materials and credible reporting of disagreements become integral features rather than optional additions.

Warren also cautioned against assuming that a citizens' assembly is suitable in every setting. Its usefulness would depend on the precise democratic problem it was asked to address, the political environment in which it operated and the decisions to which its work was connected.

TWO DISTINCT ADVISORY ROLES

Assembly → institutions

Recommendations to elected or administrative decision-makers.

Assembly → public

Publicly visible deliberation that may help inform a referendum.

The intended audience shapes recruitment, communications, timing and the relationship to subsequent political decisions.

DESIGN PRINCIPLE Begin with the democratic function, not with a preferred institutional format.

POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT AND PUBLIC TRUST

A central design dilemma concerns whether politicians should participate in the assembly. Their involvement might strengthen the confidence of parties and elected representatives, who would otherwise risk seeing a new participatory body as a competing source of authority.

Yet the same involvement could weaken public confidence if the assembly appeared controlled by the political actors whose reluctance had contributed to the stalemate. Warren identified this as a real trade-off, not a problem with an obvious universal solution.

One possibility was to retain a citizen-led assembly while inviting politicians and organised interests to observe proceedings or present arguments in a transparent setting. Such arrangements might expose elected representatives to the quality of citizens' reasoning without giving them control over the participants' conclusions.

Warren emphasised the importance of a recognisably diverse membership and of the absence of political career incentives among randomly selected participants. Public trust, however, was discussed as a potential achievement of careful design, not a guaranteed result.

THE THREE-SIDED LEGITIMACY CHALLENGE

Public trust — **Institutional support** — **Visible independence**

No single design maximises all three aims. The balance must be tested against the Norwegian political context.

VALUES, EXPERTISE AND REASONED DISAGREEMENT

An audience intervention questioned whether deliberation could alter positions grounded in strongly held values, particularly where EU membership has become associated with identity and political distrust. Warren responded that attempting simply to remove such commitments from the debate was unlikely to be fruitful.

His alternative was to recognise the values participants already bring to the process, while placing them alongside competing considerations. A concern for sovereignty, for example, might be examined together with the desire to influence decisions, secure prosperity or participate in emerging European cooperation.

The aim would not be to declare some values illegitimate. Rather, participants could compare their implications, recognise overlaps and consider compromises that political competition often obscures.

This approach also places demands on expert selection. A deliberative body requires access to reliable information, but the initial choice of experts can itself become a source of suspicion. Warren suggested that assembly members should have the capacity to request additional testimony if they consider the initial range insufficient or biased.

That possibility is important even if it is rarely exercised. It signals that citizens are not merely receiving an agenda established elsewhere, but can question how evidence is assembled and which perspectives deserve examination.

The discussion therefore treated facilitation, agenda-setting and expertise as political design choices. Their legitimacy depends on whether competing values and interpretations can be heard without giving any actor an automatic veto over the process.

KEY POINT

Deliberation need not eliminate disagreement. It can make competing values visible, examine their implications and create conditions for reasoned judgement.

FROM REGIONAL DISCUSSIONS TO A NATIONAL DEBATE

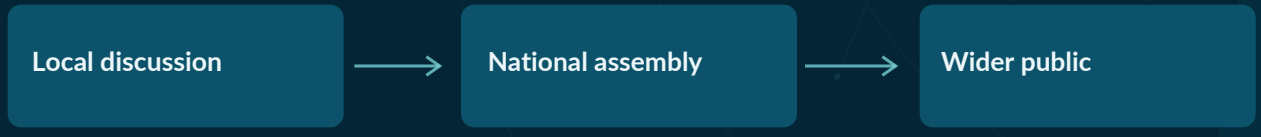
One proposal was to begin with smaller discussions or citizens' assemblies at county level, allowing participants to consider the European relationship through issues such as energy, security, agriculture or fisheries. A later national assembly might then draw on these conversations.

The attraction of this approach is that it could give an abstract and polarised issue a series of concrete entry points. It could also create more opportunities for participation before the country faced an explicit membership decision.

Warren identified important risks. Regional or sector-specific exercises might deepen existing territorial and policy divisions if each constituency came to defend a narrow set of interests. A collection of local forums would not necessarily produce a shared national conversation.

He therefore suggested examining the political landscape before settling the format. More modest preparatory activities, including focus groups or small citizens' juries, might clarify the agenda and reveal where proposed arrangements could encounter resistance.

A POSSIBLE MULTI-LEVEL PATHWAY



The conversation raised this sequence as an exploratory option. It also exposed the possibility that territorial or issue-based organisation could reinforce, rather than overcome, polarisation.

DESIGN TEST Does the pathway connect perspectives, or harden separate constituencies?

CONNECTING DELIBERATION TO THE WIDER PUBLIC

A recurring question concerned citizens who would not be selected to take part in an assembly. If a national deliberative experiment lasted many months, how could the broader population follow the process, contribute to it and develop confidence in what participants were doing?

Warren observed that the principal difficulty in the British Columbia citizens' assembly experience had been attracting sustained public attention. Many citizens became interested only as a referendum approached. For a Norwegian process, he therefore placed considerable importance on professional communication and open channels for public submissions.

Contributions from individuals and groups would need to be received, organised and acknowledged in ways that allowed outsiders to see that their concerns had been considered.

A further intervention broadened the question from communication to the public sphere itself. The democratic value of an assembly would depend not only on the quality of discussion among selected participants, but also on whether the wider population could recognise and engage with the people and arguments involved.

The exchange also considered Norway's European debate as a cross-border question. Fossum suggested that perspectives from other Nordic countries could help Norwegians compare experiences of EU membership and European cooperation without treating national identity as a fixed or exclusively domestic frame.

These suggestions pointed to a wider democratic task: designing public visibility, opportunities to contribute and comparative learning into the process from the outset.

KEY POINT

A high-quality discussion among selected citizens cannot, by itself, transform national debate. The wider public must be able to follow, question and recognise the process.

REFERENDUMS WITHIN A LONGER DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

The participants repeatedly returned to a distinction between referendums as moments of decision and deliberation as an extended political process. A yes-or-no vote can provide a clear public mandate, but may compress complex choices into a binary question whose consequences have not been adequately explored.

An exploratory option involved a preparatory assembly or series of discussions before a vote on opening negotiations. Depending on that decision, a later assembly could examine the outcome of negotiations before another referendum.

The value of this proposal was not that a complex arrangement would automatically produce a better outcome. It was the possibility of giving citizens time to consider priorities and evidence, and of connecting successive decisions to clearly defined questions.

The discussion also raised unresolved issues: how to establish the first agenda, how to involve external European actors, whether political parties would support a lengthy process, and how its stages could remain intelligible to the public.

EXPLORATORY SEQUENCE - NOT AN AGREED PLAN

Public deliberation → **First** referendum → **Possible** negotiations → **Assessment** and final vote

The staged approach was discussed as one possible means of linking informed debate, negotiation and popular decision-making. Its legal, political and organisational requirements remained open.

The duration and renewal of earlier referendum mandates also remained open questions.

DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION AND REPRESENTATIVE INSTITUTIONS

The relationship between an assembly and Parliament emerged as a central institutional issue. Luca drew attention to the historical connections between referendums, parliamentary action and political conflict. He argued for democratic experiments that acknowledge the work of representative institutions rather than appearing to replace it.

Warren agreed that an assembly disconnected from elected bodies could face serious difficulties. A new forum might be perceived as claiming a competing democratic mandate, particularly if parliamentarians believed that their authority to deliberate, decide or reject proposals was being undermined.

The relevant design question was therefore not whether representative institutions should disappear from the process, but how they could relate to an independent public deliberation without controlling it.

The discussion also brought an intergenerational dimension into view. Fossum observed that younger political actors had not participated in Norway's earlier membership referendum. Citizens who were too young to vote at the time may nevertheless live with decisions whose authority persists decades later.

This prompted questions about the duration of referendum mandates, the constitutional and political standing of popular votes, and the representation of people affected by decisions in which they could not originally participate.

The point connected a very specific Norwegian dilemma with a wider problem in democratic theory: representative institutions and participatory instruments must remain responsive to a changing population, not merely reproduce the divisions and decisions of an earlier political moment.

KEY POINT

Democratic experimentation can complement elections and parliaments only if its authority, purpose and relationship to existing decision-making institutions are credible and clear.

SPONSORSHIP, FUNDING AND RISKS OF FAILURE

As the discussion became more concrete, Warren and Fossum examined who might initiate, oversee and finance an ambitious citizens' assembly. Sponsorship was treated as a question of public legitimacy. Funding from organisations perceived to have a preferred political outcome could expose the process to suspicion even if the work itself were conducted fairly.

A distinction emerged between academic researchers preparing a design study and an institution taking responsibility for running a public deliberative process. Researchers could map the available choices and identify likely difficulties, while an independent secretariat or other suitably constituted body might be better placed to administer a future exercise.

No preferred funding source or institutional arrangement was agreed. Several alternatives were raised precisely because every option appeared to carry possible political costs.

Warren repeatedly recommended testing proposed design choices for political vulnerabilities before any public launch. One option was to develop a substantial report evaluating different models, then subject that analysis to critical scrutiny from people with varied perspectives on the issue.

The concern was not simply to avoid reputational damage to the organisers. A visible failure might discredit citizens' assemblies in Norway for years, making later experiments harder to undertake. The potential consequences of an unsuccessful initiative therefore extended beyond a single event.

The conversation ended this phase without claiming that a workable blueprint had already been found. Rather, it established a sequence for further inquiry: identify the democratic problem, compare institutional alternatives, test perceived vulnerabilities and only then consider implementation.

KEY POINT

Legitimacy is not produced by good intentions alone. Independence, finances, expert selection and political feasibility must be designed, explained and tested before launch.

MAIN FINDINGS AND RELEVANCE TO REDIRECT

The online REDIRECT discussion treated democratic experimentation as a practical response to representative disconnect, but not as a substitute for the institutions of representative democracy. Five related findings emerged.

1 Institutional purpose

A citizens' assembly should be designed around a clearly defined democratic function, including whether it advises officeholders or informs the wider public.

2 Political and public legitimacy

Political involvement can facilitate uptake while threatening perceived independence. The appropriate balance depends on context and transparent rules.

3 Deliberation beyond the room

An assembly's influence depends on wider visibility, opportunities to contribute, trustworthy expertise and meaningful public communication.

4 Decisions through time

Referendums and deliberative processes may be connected, but sequencing, agenda control and the authority of earlier decisions remain difficult questions.

5 Representative reconnection

For REDIRECT, the central issue is how citizens' engagement can be linked with political responsiveness and the authority of elected institutions.

CLOSING REFLECTION

The exchange opened a research and design agenda; it did not establish a commitment to convene an assembly, launch a referendum or adopt a particular Norwegian model.

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