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REVITALIZING DEMOCRACY

SORTITION, CITIZEN POWER, AND SPACES OF FREEDOM

"Representative government is in crisis today, partly because it has lost, in the course of time, all institutions that permitted the citizens' actual participation, and partly because it is now gravely affected by the disease from which the party system suffers: bureaucratization and the two parties' tendency to represent nobody except the party machines."

—Hannah Arendt, 1970

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Sortition: The Key to Globally Coordinated Climate Change Action?



By Jonas Kunz and Hans Kern | Bard Institute for the Revival of Democracy through Sortition (B.I.R.D.S.)

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Public policy advocates, lobbyists and concerned scientists came together in the decade from 1979 to 1989, to bring climate change awareness to Capitol Hill and effect prudent policy. A thorough account of this struggle with inertia, was published in the August issue of the New York Times Magazine. Nathaniel Rich's article *Losing Earth: The Decade We Almost Stopped Climate Change* fills the entirety of that issue and makes for a frustrating read, to anyone who cares about the planet. The protagonists, Rafe Pomerance and James Hansen, bear a sisyphusian task of bringing good sense to the Senate, the House and the Executive. These men likely did more than anyone else at the time, to bring climate change into public and political discourse. The story culminates, however, in a failure of the U.S. government to sign on to a

binding CO₂ reduction treaty at the Noordwijk Ministerial Conference of 1989. This disappointment has repeated itself subsequently in all attempts at global treaties, from Kyoto to Paris. After 40 years of such stone-rolling, by an ever-growing base of exceedingly competent, savvy and inspired individuals, it is time to ask why this isn't working. Nathaniel Rich's article offers a foundation for analysing these failures, which this paper will relate to the fundamental shortcomings of electoral representative democracy as a whole. It goes on to argue, that deliberative democracy by randomly appointed citizen's assemblies — "sortition" — is the answer to the challenge posed by climate change.

Climate change by human industry (anthropogenic warming) has been known to scientists at the highest levels within the U.S. government, at least since 1979. That year, the 'Charney Report' — Carbon Dioxide and Climate: A Scientific Assessment — presented the research of nine atmospheric, meteorological and oceanographic scientists convened at Woods Hole Institute, to the National Research Council. The introduction to this report by Werner E. Suomi pronounces: "If carbon dioxide continues to increase, the study group finds no reason to doubt that climate changes will result and no reason to believe that these changes will be negligible. The conclusions of prior studies have been generally reaffirmed. However, the study group points out that the ocean, the great and ponderous flywheel of the global climate system, may be expected to slow the course of observable climatic change. A wait-and-see policy may mean waiting until it is too late." Almost 40 years ago, scientists were already cautioning policy-makers about the need for action on carbon emissions. By 1988, James Hansen, atmospheric scientist at NASA, was testifying before Congress to confirm that temperature anomalies had emerged from surface temperature data, indicating warming greater than the natural background trend: "The global warming is now large enough that we can ascribe with a high degree of confidence a cause-and-effect relationship to the greenhouse effect...the greenhouse effect has been detected and it is changing our climate now."

In 1979 the facts were on the table and by 1988, proof was in the pudding. In the Washington D.C. of the 70s through today, however, denialism and procrastination on climate change have reigned supreme. This, despite the fact that from the beginning, oil-industry representatives and policymakers had set out in earnest to address the issue. How was it possible that the three pillars of Washington — industry, lobbies and the White House — wanting to collegially address the issue, failed. As Rich explains “...some of the largest oil companies, including Exxon and Shell, made good-faith efforts to understand the scope of the crisis and grapple with the possible solutions.” Even more surprising, in hindsight, is the fact that “in the decade that ran from 1979 to 1989, we had an excellent opportunity to solve the climate crisis. The world’s major powers came within several signatures of endorsing a binding, global framework to reduce carbon emissions.” To arrive at a clear understanding of what went wrong, we must first do away with the common misconception that big industry is and always has been the main culprit. In fact, as the article reveals, the oil industry was the first, to take due diligence measures, on the dangers of climate change and was preparing to adapt to policy changes. The policy changes, however, never came. Resistance did not come from the outside, it came from within the political structures themselves. In the words of Rich: “almost nothing stood in our way, nothing except ourselves.”

One intrinsic obstruction, came in the form of neoliberalist confidence. It clearly played a significant role in early climate change inaction. As, for example, when William Nierenberg advocated “caution, not panic,” at a point where preemptive action would have been preferable. “Better wait and see. A blind faith in American ingenuity to make adaptations as they come” writes Rich to sum up Nierenberg’s thinking: “Optimism about the saving graces of market forces, pessimistic about the value of government regulations, a monetary conservatism about spending on future problems.” These words mirror the hallmark values of Reagan’s neoliberal agenda: if the market caused it, the market can fix it. Never mind that climate change culminates with the momentous force of industrialized activity on a civilization scale, that has gone unchecked for centuries. No function of the market could simply stop this train in its tracks, despite Nierenberg’s confidence. Rafe Pomerance:

“who came of age during the Vietnam War and the birth of the environmental movement [...] shared none of Nierenberg’s Procrustean faith in American ingenuity. He worried about the dark undertow of industrialized advancement, the way every new technological superpower carried within it unintended consequences that, if unchecked over time, eroded the foundations of society. New technologies had not solved the clean-air and clean-water crises of the 1970s. Activism and organisation, leading to robust government regulation, had.”

While ideology therefore kept some of the players relying on American ingenuity, others, like Pomerance had no such illusions. Without an invisible hand to trust in, he was catalysed into action, had to take things into his own hands. Still, the quality of global warming as a largely invisible threat, catered to both approaches: it justified inaction, but also allowed for overly generalising, even vague, calls to action. Today, according the UN report, we are 12 years away from major calamity on a global scale. That timescale may well be generous, as the direct effects of global warming are now encroaching severely on Western perceptions. One thing is clear: the “invisible” factor of climate change, as an excuse for dithering, is rapidly giving way to blatant visibility.

Global warming, when first it became known, did not present an immediate threat to the expansionist precepts of mercantile America. Rather, it was a vague challenge to an absolute order governed by seemingly absolute logic. Today, the challenge has obviously become more formidable, more existential and more empirical. But not yet so in the 1970’s and 1980’s. The appeal that therefore had to be made, was for preemptive and preventative policy-making. Politics was, and still is, a far cry from being capable of this. The tension between the immediate and the future, was one which Margaret Mead was privy to. Writing in 1975, she said that “never before have the governing bodies of the world been faced with decisions so far-reaching. It is inevitable that there will be a clash between those concerned with immediate problems and those who concern themselves with long-term consequences.” The clash which she predicted, came to pass with global warming. Her distinction

between immediate and long-term thinking, invites elucidation. Usually, those concerning themselves with long-term consequences, arrive there by a reckoning with problems in the present, and a pursuit of solutions that may last into the long-term. The tension is one between a reductive reading of a situation, often coloured by personal bias, and a holistic, whole-systems reading of a situation. As it happens, Neoliberal thinking offers very much of the former and very little of the latter.

But couldn't it be said that the nuclear arms race provides an example of both preemptive and effective mobilisation, in the face of a large global geopolitical threat? The nuclear arms race differs from the prospect of a global war on global warming, on one very substantial point: the threat of nuclear armageddon was invoked as political tool to advance industries, to expand American presence in the world. This explains why global warming has not been seized upon by a White House administration: it would not spell an industrial advancement, so much as a It would invite a deep reshuffling of priorities, both unpopular and complex. The list of main industrial contributors to global warming, reads like a who's-who of campaign contributors and major lobbies. Thus, a reckoning with warming would force an eventual reckoning with causes, and inevitably force the ruling party or administration to confront the very stakeholders whose favour it had to woo. Acknowledgement of the problem of climate change, opens a pandora's box that electoral politics is unprepared for. The prospect of a political "war on global warming" therefore remains contradictory, so long as political interest is beholden to major industrial perpetrators and a voting constituency with a culturally entrenched adherence to the promise of American exceptionalism and the self-righting powers of neoliberalism. To the extent that climate change is a product of the precepts that dominate in society and the political alliances with industry that enable them, without challenge, it cannot be politically acknowledged.

In spite of the hard-earned lessons that the 70s environmental movement had made, market fundamentalism won out by default and without effort. Politicians exploited a misguided faith in the self-righting ability of economic

systems, to delay and dither. The unpredictable timescales of climate change only added to this convenient uncertainty. Scientist, being, in their usual method, reticent to cast predictions in stone, did not pronounce a 100% certainty on the specific “what, when and how” of anthropogenic warming effects. Politicians, exploiting the wiggle room within the specifics of the hypotheses and their timescales, obfuscated the simple and overarching certainty of climate change and the need for action it engendered. The illusion was created, of an indefinitely post-potable scenario. Even today, where there is a 100% consensus within the scientific community that the changes are already well underway, the effects of this doubt-mongering are everywhere. It seems that only hard, empirical, slap-in-the-face climate calamities can break through the smokescreen that was built. But even then, political discourse continues in its myopic focus on short-term problems and short-term outcomes.

How can something as big as climate change be openly ignored, even when it has become empirically undeniable? Rich’s article sheds light on this, in the retelling of a 1986 exchange between Curtis Moore, staff member of the Committee on Environmental and Public Works and Rafe Pomerance. Moore had stated that climate change was not a problem, inviting the bafflement of Pomerance: “Yes, Moore clarified — of course, it was an existential problem, the fate of civilization depended on it, the oceans would boil and all of that. But it wasn’t a political problem. Know how you could tell? Political problems had solutions. And the climate issue had none. Without a solution — an obvious attainable one — any policy could only fail. No elected politician desired to come within shouting distance of failure. So when it came to the dangers of despoiling our planet beyond the range of habitability, most politicians didn’t see a problem.” While climate change constituted and constitutes a very real problem, it is one that elected politicians are not only able to ignore, but are actually strategically incentivised to. Who, after all, wants to run on a losing issue? The fact that it is possible for elected representatives to obfuscate a momentous problem, may at first seem incongruous with the idea of electoral democracy. But as experience has shown, it is by no means.

As Moore pointed out, politicians on Capitol Hill are able to exercise, within their mandate, the privilege of acknowledging or ignoring issues. Is this not a gaping design flaw in the system? Yes, and no. Yes, because it seems absurd that politicians who are supposed to act on behalf of their voting constituency can be disposed to ignore an issue that potentially affects every single one of them, in the long run. Yes, also, because we are still lacking mechanisms within our political representation whereby the people are able to set the agenda of issues to be addressed by politicians and whereby the people are able to hold the politicians accountable for their delivery of action on those issues. No, because, what may seem like a flaw, exposes a purposeful disjunction maintained between the public and those acting politically on their behalf. This disjunction goes back to certain beliefs and principles that were consciously favoured in the founding of American democracy. In other words, what seems to us like a flaw was once viewed as a saving grace. The so-called founding fathers debated over what kind of republic should be their legacy, and their fear of the ‘tyranny of the masses’ won out over arguments for greater democratic inclusion. Thus, the American constitution was explicitly conceived only to partially empower the ordinary citizen, while favouring rule by a ‘natural aristocracy.’

In the words of Benjamin Rush, signatory of the Declaration of Independence, “all power is derived from the people,” though they can rarely wield it: “They possess it only on the days of their elections. After this, it is property of their rules, nor can they exercise or resume it, unless it is abused.” But even this transient power is far from certain, nor its abuse safeguarded, when we consider the many manipulations of the electoral process known to us today; including: runaway corporate funding of campaigns in the aftermath of the Citizens United vs. The Federal Elections Commission ruling, the manufacturability of political consent (i.e. bi-partisan media monopolies, facebook fake news and Cambridge Analytica), an electoral college that thwarts majorities, gerrymandering, etc. etc. What emerges, in sum, is a staggering view of a democratic disjunction, between the people (demos) and political power (kratein.) It takes similar form, to a greater or lesser degree, in countries around the world today. To speak, therefore, of a

failure of democracy, when considering the present failure of political structures in addressing issues environmental or otherwise, is inaccurate. What we perceive is the failure of a very poor example of one brand of democracy: electoral-representative democracy.

It is possible that with a systematic remediation of the above-mentioned manipulations of the electorate, the flaws of American democracy might be fixed and politics again produce prudent policy. Steps toward this might include improved mechanisms of accountability and recall-ability, the introduction of a citizen agenda-setting process to which representatives would be directly answerable, and clearer divisions between industrial interest and political interests. But, this is neither certain, nor is it feasible that avenues for the implementations of such changes could be opened. How many of our contemporary politicians, after all, would support the introduction of measures under which they might lose their jobs more easily, that would compromise their political immunity (and in some cases impunity), sever the relations with industry they might have and which bring personal benefits and lifetime securities; in short, a shake-up of their own power. The answer, it seems likely, is few. This is a conundrum with which advocates for improved electoral-representative democracy are intimately familiar.

Even if elected representatives, by some collective change-of-hearts, decided to make themselves more accountable and allow for agenda-setting bodies, the structural difficulties inherent to the electoral system would make this almost impossible. The nature of competitive elections is that whenever there is a winner, there must be a loser. Party policy platforms are framed according to what appeals to the interests of the largest constituent body, with a campaign-narrative free of contradictions. What one party gains in support, another must lose. Hence, all winning strategies are necessarily framed adversarially. This, in short, is a zero-sum game. The need to maintain majority approval, induces incumbents to favour general topics and questions with easy answers, over uncomfortable but possibly much more important ones. In fact, the policy points that invariably earn the most

support, are either impossibly general or hyperbolic or shift the causes of a problem toward some external agents, thereby mobilising support for a rally-around-the-flag to fight the straw man. A good, hard look at difficult question, demanding compromises and possibly sacrifices, rarely, if ever, wins elections. Even bi-partisan coalition approaches usually come about by uniting an additive majority of both parties against all those holding an independent position, for the sake of addressing vital and immediate problems, like government payroll or social security. This improvisational compromise cannot allow for more complex, philosophical or nuanced viewpoints to find expression. It is, rather, a matter for the survival of the competition itself. Bi-partisan coalition is the application of duct tape, as a last-ditch effort to preserve the zero-sum game from a breakdown under its own incongruities.

In Rich's article, John Sununu, White House Chief of Staff under George Bush, explains the failure of administrations to embrace and act on climate responsibilities: "It couldn't have happened, because, frankly, the leaders in the world at that time were at a stage where they were all looking how to seem like they were supporting the policy without having to make hard commitments that would cost their nations serious resources. Frankly, that's about where we are today." This streak of duplicity running through politics, of saying one thing and doing another, is nothing new to spectators of the political circus. It is, furthermore, a direct result of the zero-sum fallacy that electoral democracy commits. Representatives get caught up in partisan posturing around issues that, because of party policies or party voting history, are polarised or otherwise caught in adversarial manoeuvring. Even if a possible compromise were in sight, the need of either party to appear as the sole "winner" on the topic — as the party that is and was always right in their proposals — makes such compromise strategically undesirable. Consider this: the caprices of politicians begin to make more sense, when we view them not as acting out of self-interest, but as trying to balance too many conflicting interests at once.

In reality, decision-making processes do not usually produce zero-sum outcomes — “my win is not only your loss and your loss is not only my win.” Rather, they evolve around compromise and dialogue, producing more meaningful decisions and are capable of reaching a consensus, which in a zero-sum approach is not possible. Within the constraints of our zero-sum system, therefore, politicians are voted in by pitting the interests of the majority against those of a minority. While they may know it, they are unable to publicly acknowledge that politics is about making the reasonable decision, which may not be popular and does not represent the immediate interests of the largest number, but is in the long-term interest of the greatest number. The upshot of this divided situation, is that politicians rarely, if ever, articulate a cross-platform agenda, such as climate change action would be. They know it would cost them and their party votes. Systemically, therefore, electoral party politics produces ever-recurring deadlocks on some of the most important and biggest issues. The non-zero-sum nature of politics emerges organically in a system that reaches decisions through a process of rationed deliberation, where nobody holds sway and authority is ultimately shared. Such a scenario, as we will argue further on, is possible, in the form of deliberative democracy.

In addition to the contradictions posed by party politics, there is a demographic factor to consider, when seeking to explain climate inaction. Within any country affected by climate change, career politicians with ample economic buffers and securities, won't be the first to notice its ravages. Elected representatives are likely a statistical group with lesser first-hand experience of climate change. Thus, they are, on a personal level, neither spurred on nor qualified to deal with this problem. The complication of political representation by non-representative samples of the population, here becomes palpable. It is not only non-democratic, it is dangerous. Were there a chart with wealth on the x axis and concern for the planet on the y, a straight line pointing downward at a right angle, would likely emerge, indicating a directly inverse relationship between wealth and environmental concern. This follows from a basic truth about human nature: we assign significance to what is within our field-of-view; a threat that we don't see, we

don't tend to deem a threat. A perfect dilemma presents itself in today's world, where wealth equals power. Industrial magnates, insulated from the negative externalities of their ecologically destructive schemes, continue to exert their influence on politicians. Climate change ignorance, is thus reaffirmed two-fold: by the corruption of politicians by moneyed interest, and the blissful ignorance which their positions afford. To the extent, therefore, that powerful economic interests and job security hold sway on policymaking, climate change remains invisible.

The handicaps of our present-day politicians are intimately entwined with the particular brand of democracy we have come to accept as its definitive form. Its present ailments did not emerge in association with electoral representation by pure chance. They co-evolved with it. To seek, therefore, to remedy them, without addressing the root-cause, is a short-sighted undertaking. In time, the same corruptions would invariably take hold again. The inability of the U.S. government to embrace and act on its climate responsibilities, sheds light on deep-seated flaws in the political system, that go to its very theoretical foundations. It is the authors' considered opinion, that what is revealed is a failure of electoral democracy itself, which repeats itself in the ostensible democracies of the world. The very tenuous connection between represented and representatives maintains a disjunction that disenfranchises and alienates the citizens, while giving representatives impunity. Attempts to bridge this gap by means of the system that created it, have proven futile. If votes, the main tool of engagement in present democracies, can't remedy its crisis, then what possibly could? It is clear, that the only way to resolve the impasse is by means of a more legitimate, more authentically democratic decision-making process.

Of the many proposed alternatives to the system of electoral representation, one is currently making a comeback. Sortition is as old as democracy itself and constitutes the appointment of citizens to decision-making bodies by random choice, or lot. Sortition was introduced by the demos (people) of Ancient Athens around 500 B.C., and continued to be used in city-states across Europe, until the late Renaissance. It was eventually abandoned in

favour of more elitist conceptions of democracy, i.e. parliamentary elections. Doing away with the adversarial and often nonsensical process of party campaign politics, sortition draws lots. The result is an incredibly diverse sample of backgrounds, in short: a microcosm of society at large. Such an accurate picture of society, when tasked with making decisions, produces decision that take into account an equally diverse set of viewpoints and considerations. Instead of saying: “we need a qualified elite to decide for the people,” this system proposes: “the people themselves should be able to decide on the questions at hand.” The biggest drawback to sortition is usually thought to be that irresponsible and untutored persons will be given power, to which they are not qualified. Essential, therefore, to this new exercise of power is deliberation: random choice alone is harmful, if it doesn’t create a forum for speaking and listening among those chosen randomly, before decisions are made.

Many experiments with this form of governance, in more than 25 countries so far, have shown: when you put a randomly chosen group of people in a room together, to deliberate on important issues, with access to a panel of experts for consultation, they will produce decisions that are more farsighted, more inclusive and take into account a much wider set of considerations than the current and partisan elite. The ultimate outcome is a wiser political process. Kofi Annan, seventh Secretary-General of the United Nations, from 1997–2006, understood this function of sortition. Speaking in 2007, he stated: “We need to make our democracies more inclusive. This requires bold and innovative reforms to bring in the young, the poor and minorities into the political system. An interesting idea ... would be to reintroduce the ancient Greek practice of selecting parliaments by lot instead of election. In other words, parliamentarians would no longer be nominated by political parties, but chosen at random for a limited term, in the way many jury systems work. This would prevent the formation of self-serving and self-perpetuating political classes disconnected from their electorates.” Though there are different conceptions of how exactly it should be implemented, it is thought by many advocates of the idea, that sortitionate bodies should exist alongside elected ones, at local, regional and federal levels. In such a case, electoral

politics could be more directly held accountable and answerable to the will of the people. This would result in a wider sharing of political responsibility and a rebalancing of power.

A dangerous idea? It is not. Trials have been convened around the world in recent years, to test the power of decision-making through the deliberation of randomly chosen individuals sharing physical spaces. From these citizen's assemblies, hosted by a variety of different non-governmental, academic and governmental groups, a common picture emerges: decisions are made that take into account a range of viewpoints representing an exceptionally broad range of demographic backgrounds, outlying and radical views are often moderated by the discussions, the experience of political responsibility leads to more informed citizens, and creative new solutions emerge that would otherwise not have been heard. The raw, unfiltered opinions of politically disenfranchised individuals are almost sure to lack an awareness of common needs, interests and possibilities. Deliberation among sufficiently diverse groups, however, creates this awareness. What this form of democracy can harness, is hive intelligence, giving rise to policy recommendations or decisions that are greater than the sum of the assembly's individual wills. Sortition is, therefore, a democratic process capable of producing a common voice that places the long-term before the short-term, the collective before the individual and the sensible over the desirable. With panels of experts sufficiently broad and inclusive of the most relevant insight on the questions being debated, the evidence shows that sortitionate decision-making bodies will produce the most climate-wise proposals and laws. All of this, while satisfying the widest demand for legitimacy we could place in a democracy: voluntary rule by the people.

A political process capable of legitimately arriving at decisions that effectively grapple with the complexity and scale of global warming, is what our moment calls for. Sortition may sound to some like a 'gamble.' Considering, however, that the present electoral democracies have an increasingly tenuous hold on the credulity and imagination of their citizens, leaving them unchallenged is now the riskiest gamble. We must be careful not to conflate the failings of that

brand of democracy with a failure of democracy itself. Nor should we see it as a failing of complexity in politics. From the lens of a status quo that is burdened with a long history of bad complex politics, the prospects for an effective complex political process may seem hopeless. As problems mount, politics devolve into gridlock and bureaucracy, the illusory appeal of ‘strongman’ unitary leadership experiences a revival. Technocrats and experts — some well-meaning and others opportunistic — would readily step up to the plate and decide based on their expertise what needs to be done. The only problem is this: many of the problems of our day, culminating in an ecological crisis, were brought about by a situation in which a few were tasked with making decisions for the many. In countless cases, these few were readily ethically compromised while in office or arrived there thusly. What we need now, is the possibility of inclusion for the disenfranchised voices. The experience of having a say in the discussion of important questions, or even the prospect thereof, is often enough to turn a wilfully ignorant civilian into a responsibly reasoning citizen.

The political failures of our day, can be said to have derived from a situation where responsibility was not shared widely enough, and power not checked from enough sources. Now, what if we were to put into power the foremost experts of each field as it relates to a particular aspect of a problem, ensuring they are incorruptible, and let them decide? Well, firstly, responsibility would still not be shared widely enough and power not checked from enough sources to guarantee a process above moral reproach. Secondly, if these experts were to make the decisions, they could end up blundering terribly by making scientifically informed decisions that overlook vital insight from the experience of an engineer, the ingenuity of an inventor, the pragmatism of a farmer etc. If, however, we were to allow such experts to make recommendations for decisions, then we would be looking at the panel of experts that every good deliberative council should have. The complexity of a now global ecological crisis requires thinking of a complexity on the same order of magnitude. This is only achievable through hive thinking, as embodied by the deliberative democratic process in sortitionate decision-making bodies, with the vested power to enact policy.

Writing in *The Spirit of the Laws* in 1748, Baron De Montesquieu already argued that the “suffrage (elections) by lot is natural to democracy; as that by choice is to aristocracy.” But how does the elitist aspect of our current ‘aristocracy’ relate to global warming? Consider that wherever decision-making power rests with a disproportionate representation of the population, the decisions made are a disproportionate representation of the people’s interests. Thus, the ‘natural aristocracy’ favoured by the American republic, can’t help but paint a very one-sided picture of American priorities and possibilities. Meanwhile, the great irreducible plurality that defines the American life remains largely outside the frame, unaccounted for. This includes the suffering of the poor, the disenfranchisement of minorities, the prison-industrial system, the destruction of entire cultures abroad at the hand of American weaponry, the healthcare crisis, the great upheavals of industry by technology, the growing precarity of livelihood and jobs, food insecurity and environmental collapse. Only a system that can take account of such an incredible variety of grievances, could yield the kind of legitimate decision-making power needed to implement prudent policy around them. Only a true democracy, therefore, could include such multiplicity, and only deliberative democracy through sortition, can directly include the greatest possible variety of voices in a room, while ensuring that they did not arrive there by questionable means to represent ulterior agendas.

“Michael Glantz, a political scientist who, at the time, was at the National Center for Atmospheric Research, argued in 1979 that democratic societies are constitutionally incapable of dealing with the climate problem. The competition for resources means that no single crisis can ever command the public interest for long, yet climate change requires sustained, disciplined efforts over decades.” If this is the case, climate change will only truly command the public interest once it has become the dominant, most unrelenting resource-threatening menace to the entirety of society. Some would argue we have reached that point, or are on the cusp. The fact, then, that our politicians are still not reckoning with this problem, is disconcerting, to say the least. This issue could very well be the one to make or break faith in the ideal of democracy, rule by the people. Sortition, if properly

implemented, could redeem democracy in the face of the climate challenge. A sustained, disciplined acknowledgement and reckoning with climate change is not likely to come from the elected for the reasons enumerated above. It is feasible, however, that when decision-making power derives from a broad sample of the population, including those more precariously exposed to consequences of climate change, the issue will remain on the table until dealt with adequately. Doing so, on a global scale, may require all-in commitments by the powers of the world. It is understandable that this has not yet happened, considering that wanting legitimacy of elected representatives. Their actions are not vested with the full accountability to the constituents on whose behalf they are acting.

“Economics, the science of assigning value to human behaviour, prices the economy at a discount” observes Nathaniel Rich. “The farther out you project, the cheaper the consequences. This makes the whole climate problem the perfect economic disaster. The Yale economist, William D. Nordhaus a member of Jimmy Carter’s Council of Economic Advisers, argued in the 1970s that the most appropriate remedy was a global carbon tax. But that required an international agreement, which Nordhaus didn’t think was likely.” An international agreement of this sort, would require sacrifice — the prioritisation of the long-term over the short-term, which Margaret Mead identified. The same problem presents: the biggest beneficiaries are the ones least likely to make concessions. The strongest countries responsible for the largest share of the industrial activity, should at the same time be the ones most able to make concessions in terms of capital and political leverage. But, it seems, it is precisely a desperate desire to keep such a position that has paralyzed America and the West into almost complete inertia. Ironically, it is precisely this inability to adapt that currently undermines America & the West’s continued ascendancy on the world stage. The conclusion of Rich’s article, is a somewhat dour appraisal: “these theories share a common principle: that human beings, whether in global organisations, democracies, industries, political parties or as individuals, are incapable of sacrificing present convenience to forestall a penalty imposed on future generations.” Is this a design flaw in us, or a design flaw in our systems? We are inclined

toward the latter, knowing, that under ideal conditions of truly random allotment and balanced, informed deliberation, humans are capable of making the right, though difficult, decisions.

Whether it is a fact we are ready to acknowledge or not, global warming is at heart a land use problem. Some of its main causes are poor agricultural practises, deforestation, urbanisation, land theft and the lasting legacy of colonialism. These things need to be addressed, to the disadvantage of some, who presently benefit from destructive arrangements, but to the advantage of a great many more. But what political body today has the authority, legitimacy, and recognised impartiality to reckon with such issues without leading to conflict? There is, arguably, none. Could there be? Yes. It would have to satisfy a few requirements. Firstly, we lack a globally connected resource that can furnish appropriate expertise, consultation and recommendations for local land use, with view to bioregional needs and capacities and how they relate to the bigger picture. Of course, there are countless organisations out there who have answers. To arbitrate and effectively give priority to the most relevant experts and expertise, a filtering organ might be necessary. These recommendations, then, would need to find audience with authority. Hence, we also lack an inclusive political process that can mediate between competing interests and produce prudent policy decisions, with the legitimacy of people power and the force of law. Sortitionate decision-making bodies with the vested power to enact policy, implemented at the local to the U.N. level could effectively grapple with the challenges of our day. A growing number of groups are advocating for a revised U.N. charter, and the implementation of a second “citizen’s chamber” (See. paper Global Governance and the Emergence of Global Institutions for the 21st Century.) We suggest such a citizen’s chamber should be sortitionate.

Never before has human society known such a globally interconnected problem as climate change. Globalisation seems in many ways to have been its main vehicle. Consider the unnecessary carbon footprint of bottled water from the South Pacific or an apple grown in New Zealand and eaten in a NY supermarket. At the same time, globalisation has the potential for being the

conveyor of knowledge and tools to address this challenge on a globally interconnected scale. Given how quickly new ideas can spread and new practices be adopted simultaneously all over the world, there is much positive change that can be hoped for. The prospects for a global movement of regenerative activity from cottage industry to large-scale industry is staggering. Dispelling the false prophecy of a technological “deus ex machina”, we instead go in search of real, practical, nitty-gritty answers. Climate change is, doubtless, one problem with many causes and many symptoms. The response, is therefore constituted of a proportionately diverse range of remedies. All of these can and should be given avenues of expression in politics. Electoral representation is not grown to this task. Sortition arguably is. In a political process that is based on allotment, decision-makers are no longer divided by political affiliation, making way for the only two affinities that matter: a willingness to participate and being in a common space to address common issues. The deadlocks of partisanship will fall to the wayside, giving way to the possibility and plurality of participatory citizenship. Getting beyond denial and obstruction, we can now move toward a conception of power as enacting necessary regulation, while facilitating and subsidising necessary projects.

Climate change forces us to reckon with the failures of our present political models, and engages us in the largest collective problem-solving (figuring) challenge in history. To trial the effectivity of new and old decision-making models is no longer just an option, it is essential. The opportunity that climate change presents to humanity, should therefore not be underestimated. Nor, however, should the danger it invites. We cannot afford to let our democratic institutions deteriorate further and invite autocracy, technocracy and corporatocracy to take the helm. Even now, big industrial conglomerates are plotting to turn climate change into yet another cash crop. Dickey geoengineering schemes, green-washed infrastructure, climate-resistant supercrops and their attendant pesticides and fertilizers, would only make things worse, while growing scarcity would drive up monopolists’ profits, tightening the vicious cycle. Not to mention that climate change causes conflict, and the weapons and petrochemical industries have no qualms to

meet the demands. In short, if there is not a legitimate redistribution of decision-making power, putting the fate of our planet back in our hands, we leave it to those least interested in properly dealing with it. Under conditions of ecological collapse and climate instability, the wider implications of our choices become harder to ignore. As the causal feedback loops strengthen, it is a mere matter of time before the collective dimensions of our lives will begin to overpower individual aspects. Exigency will claim agency. The negative consequences of our choices as individuals will become more intractable, and our personal decision-making agency increasingly subsumed under the demands of collective action: a comforting thought under good, inclusive governance, a disconcerting one under the present arrangement. The stakes are high. The possible outcomes, are, as Buckminster Fuller famously pointed out: Utopia or Oblivion. We opt for utopia.

'Deliberative democracy makes citizens happy'

David van Reybrouck on how a small community in Eastern Belgium puts randomly selected citizens at the heart of politics.



Photo: David van Reybrouck at the G1000 Citizens' Summit

Interview by Daniel Kopp

May 20, 2019

From September 2019 onwards, the German-speaking community of Belgium is to have a permanent system of political participation using citizens' drawn by lot, next to the existing parliament. Daniel Kopp spoke to David van Reybrouck who, with experts from the G1000 organisation he co-founded, has been instrumental in designing the so-called "Ostbelgien Model" – and has advocated for the use of citizen participation through sortition since the release of his book "Against Elections: The Case for Democracy".

In your book, you criticise that representative democracy has basically been equated with elections since the late 18th century.

You call this “electoral fundamentalism”. So why do you think electoral representative democracy is in such a crisis today?

You see a lot of symptoms. To start with, there's a growing disenchantment with the way democracy is working now. I mean, the number of people voting has gone down dramatically all over Western established democracies.

Haven't we seen an uptick recently, in the national elections in Finland for instance, or in Spain.

Well, having one cooler summer does not mean the end of global warming. I'm sure there are variations, but the overall tendency is pretty clear.

At the same time, across established democracies, one third of voters change parties. The difference between parties might be very small, but the migration movement underneath can be massive.

But that could also just be a sign of a healthy democracy if voters do change parties more frequently.

Oh yes, but it makes politicians very nervous. It may be that voters change parties more in line with their political affinities, but the whole idea of rational voting behaviour turns out to be empirically a very, very different one. Very few people know who's minister of what, very few people know who's in government, and very few people remember the party that they voted for five years ago.

I mean, the whole theory is beautiful. People have needs, people know their needs, people find politicians that respond to their needs, they vote them into power, they monitor them during their tenure, and then at the end, they are sanctioned negatively or positively. That's the whole idea of representative democracy.

But in practice, do they rationally choose politicians and filter their own needs? Why did poor people vote for Donald Trump then? In systems with many parties, do they always effectively remember whom they vote for and do they keep track of what people are doing?

All these are assumptions from political theory, which just do not hold empirically.

So the fact that people shift from election to election between parties might be a sign of a full political maturity and political freedom. You're no longer born within one political family and spend your entire life there. That might be a sense of freedom but it might also be seen as a form of political “shopping”. Whatever the motivation, it makes politicians very nervous. Their base is no longer solid.

So people also just tend to vote against rather than for something – for instance anti-establishment parties which are not necessarily representing your interests?

Exactly. Regardless of whether the vote is positive or negative, rational or irrational, this electoral volatility is a fact – and it has an impact on politicians. If less and less people go to vote, if less and less people trust political parties, if the volatility is so high, it means that political parties do realise that running a government can have massive negative effects on your popularity afterwards.

In Belgium the electoral fever has become permanent. We're seeing a form of paralysis. We're seeing politicians who know what should be done but who do not dare to move because they fear that another political party might benefit too much from their decision.

What I realise now is that of all the challenges representative democracy is facing, climate change is by far the biggest one. Climate change is too big for the way we do democracy now, and it can kill democracy. It can also heal it.

Like some of the more radical climate movements like Extinction Rebellion that are calling for citizens' involvement to deal with climate change?

That's right. Much to my surprise, they are still trying to improve democracy. They might as much call for authoritarianism. I once gave a talk in Copenhagen, Denmark being one of the most established democracies in Europe, where university students were basically pleading in favour of benign authoritarianism because the climate challenge was too important to be left to democracy.

So we need to reinvent democracy?

Yes, and it's happening in Belgium. It's mostly small countries that are experimenting with new forms of democracy: Ireland, Belgium, Holland, Estonia, Denmark.

Arguably, Emmanuel Macron tried to involve citizens in political decision-making after the yellow vest protests broke out. In one of our recent interviews, Loïc Blondiaux called Macron's Grand Débat national a formal concession to the protests – but without any substance. Would you agree with that?

The least you can say about Macron is that he's aware of the fact that democracy should innovate. If all sectors of public life should innovate – business, arts, sports, academia – it's quite right to say that democracy should innovate as well.

Actually, I was much intrigued to see Macron's reaction to the yellow vests, saying that when it comes to climate change, there should be a permanent citizens' assembly drafted by lot as a climate council.

I'm sure if he would have done that before launching the idea that the petrol tax should go up, citizens would have said “we understand the problem, but you have to remember that people living in the countryside do not have the same access to public transport.”

I spoke with Macron when he was visiting Belgium in November. Three weeks later, his prime minister started to talk about civic lotteries for the first time. In the Grand Débat National, they've done it for the first time. I'm not

quite convinced whether the method they used was the right one, but at least for the first time in Europe, one of the major countries, one of the bigger countries, dared to work with sortition, that is: public deliberation with random samples of citizens.

The Grand Débat National was right to include so many citizens, but it had two major drawbacks: first, people had to decide for themselves whether to go or not. Self-selection typically favours men above 50 with a college degree. Maximal diversity was therefore not guaranteed. Second, the agenda was not set by citizens but by Macron himself! In his letter to the French people, he basically said “I see we have a problem, we should talk about this and this.” Well, if you have a problem, you might ask people what they define as a problem. And he said from the very beginning: we’re not going to talk about taxation for the rich.

Besides lower voter turnout and electoral volatility, you mention falling numbers in members of political parties as the third symptom for the decline of representative democracy. How can political parties stop this trend?

I think it’s interesting for political parties to start experimenting with new forms of citizen and member engagement.

The Flemish Liberal Party has been drafting citizen panels by lot, both from their members and from non-members. After a couple of days or weekends, the first thing these participants say when they present their results to politicians: we respect you more than ever before, we didn’t realise your job was so complex. It's an incredible form of democratic schooling.

There’s also new research about what this involvement does to participants. First and foremost, deliberative democracy makes citizens happy. Citizens who participate in it go home and feel happy and respected, not only in the evening but for weeks, months, years later. It's quite a contrast with the current system where frustration, even humiliation is dominant.

We need to find ways of making democracy a less frustrating business, a happier experience, a more respectful experience.

In your book, you also argue that social media has a detrimental effect on representative democracy because it puts politicians in permanent electoral campaign mode – and gives citizens the impression of being able to influence politics.

Every second, you can follow what's going on. You can even react upon it. There's an acceleration of speed with the flow of information. But the rate of genuine political involvement is still the same as in the late 18th century: you can tick a box every four or five years. That's creating a lot of that frustration. There's such a gap between the speed of knowledge and then the speed of expressing yourself.

The second thing is that our system comes not only from an age where information was moving more slowly. It also comes from an age where people were quite willing to delegate power.

A citizen has power one day every four or five years. The thing you do on that day is to give that power away. That's it. And it has worked reasonably well for the past two centuries. We forget some unpleasant people who got prompted into power, but overall score of six out of ten, let's say.

Now, the basic idea of representative democracy is an idea of delegation. You give your power away and you can sanction the person who got your vote four or five years later. But people are not willing to give their power away anymore. We're so different from our great-grandparents.

We have democratised education since the end of the Second World War. We have democratised information with television and radio and internet, and then we have democratised communication with social media. The only thing we have not democratised is democracy itself.

So how do we do that?

In the past, we democratised the aristocratic procedure of elections by giving more and more people the right to vote: factory workers, farmers, women in the in the 20th century, migrants, teenagers.

So never before in history have so many people had the right to vote – and the democratic hunger is still not stilled. This means we need to broaden democracy. Today, it's no longer about the right to vote. It's about the right to speak, too. The next step in the process of democratising democracy is making sure that next to the right to vote, people also obtain the right to speak.

Let's talk about Belgium then. You've been instrumental in designing the so-called "Ostbelgien Model". In the small German-speaking community of Belgium, there will now be a dual structure of a permanent Citizens' Council and a Citizens' Assembly operating in parallel with the regional parliament. How exactly will it work?

You have the Citizens' Council, the Bürgerrat, with 24 people who are there for 18 months and would change every six months. One third goes away, eight people go away to avoid that it becomes like a real parliament.

They have two jobs. The first job is that they set the agenda, that is, they ask the questions. The second one is they take care of the answers, but they don't give the answers. They are going to determine the size and the duration of the Citizens' Assembly, which might be around 50 citizens drawn by lot working for three weekends over three or four months on recommendations for, let's say, the isolation of school buildings.

Then when these are ready, they go to the parliament to present their recommendations together with the Bürgerrat. Parliament has to receive them, has to engage in debate with them. After that, parliament and government, the relevant commission and the responsible minister, need to reply.

A year later, the parliament has to say what it has done with the citizens' recommendations. And if they will not follow up on them, they have to motivate it in written form.

But in a system with non-binding recommendations, the citizens could just be ignored, or politicians engage in cherry-picking what they like.

Yes, true. But the Belgian constitution literally says that all power comes from the nation, that is the parliament. So it's impossible to have a binding recommendation. We've gone as far as was possible within the Belgian constitutional context. I trust that within the next twenty years, the constitution will be adapted to make deliberative democracy even more substantial.

Arguably, the model does increase citizen's involvement, but it's still only a fraction of the people that actually participate, even if they rotate.

According to our most careful pessimistic guesses, 60 per cent of people will sooner or later participate. It might easily go to 80, 90 per cent once it's running. This is with only three assemblies a year.

Still we're running a prototype. Prototypes are expensive. I can easily imagine that this will become five, six, ten assemblies a year. Then you'll see even more participation.

The president of the parliament in East Belgium himself said that he wants it to become the laboratory for democratic innovation in Europe. Let Europe learn from us, he said.

If you scale this up and try having citizens' assemblies on the national, maybe even European level, this seems to become more complicated as you'll have a smaller and smaller fraction of people who are actually involved.

That's right. In Ireland, 99 citizens debated about constitutional issues like abortion and gay marriage, and afterwards it came to a national referendum, for the simple reason that the Irish constitution cannot be changed without a referendum. This helped to include the rest of society, even when a referendum is not ideal. The informed opinion of a subset of your population is often better than the uninformed opinion of the entire population, or the must less informed opinion at least.

The bill to introduce this in Ostbelgien was approved unanimously by all political parties in the regional parliament. Why was there such an openness – and appetite – for this kind of democratic innovation?

I was really moved to see that the six political parties, from across the spectrum, agreed upon the fact that they should do this. The fact that we as an organisation went to talk to every single political party individually and collectively, that really helped. Our role is to be politically neutral and nonpartisan. We speak to everybody basically.

I think the main reason why it worked there for the first time is that it's a very small community, and it's a high-trust society. They have a parliament with 25 members who are only doing this in the evening. For them, citizens are not these idiots who are shouting irrational demands or trolling or whatever. They're people they work with during the day in their offices and schools and hospitals.

So this trust between politicians and citizens makes the difference – and do we lack that elsewhere in Europe?

Yes, actually what I see now is that there's little trust in citizens in European democracy. There's very little love for the white proletariat. With the rise of populism, with the rise of radicalism, with the rise of xenophobia, we've been pushing people in the hands of the extreme right by blaming them for behaving badly. A big, big, big, historical mistake.

We have to make a distinction between populist voters and populist leaders. I know a lot of populist voters who are fantastic people, you can talk with them. It's basically taking people seriously, even if they express their demands or their grievances in sometimes unpleasant or ugly ways.

I spent a lot of my last 30 years working on nonviolent communication: read the message behind the message. I think European politics, and especially the left, has become very poorly equipped in terms of emotional intelligence. The left has been chasing people away.

And it frustrates me massively to see how Germany is repeating exactly the same mistakes Belgium and Holland made in the 1990s when we were faced with the rise of the radical right. It's the demonising of citizens.

There's been growing compassion for migrant workers and asylum seekers. And once the factory worker can travel to Spain or to Marbella or to Antalya in Turkey, they no longer seem to receive a lot of compassion.

The Irish vote for marriage equality started at a constitutional convention.



Photo: Irish voters celebrate the country's historic referendum legalizing gay marriage. (The Washington Post)

By David Farrell, Clodagh Harris and Jane Suiter

June 5, 2015

On May 22, Ireland became the first country in the world to introduce marriage equality through a national referendum to change the country's constitution.

The vote was a world first in one other sense: Never before has a country changed its constitution as a result of deliberation involving a random selection of ordinary citizens. The government's decision to call the referendum came because of a recommendation from the Irish

Constitutional Convention, which had been asked to consider a range of possible constitutional reform questions.

Origins of the Irish constitutional convention

The genesis of the ICC was Ireland's economic meltdown in 2008-09, a crisis that the country is only now starting to emerge from. This economic calamity hit the political system hard. Citizens vented their anger in the 2011 general election, installing a new government – a coalition between the large center-right Fine Gael party and the smaller left-of-center Labor party.

Both parties had stressed constitutional and political reform. Both promised to place citizens at the heart of the process. The result was the 2011 Programme for Government, setting out the coalition's agreed policy priorities, which proposed establishing a constitutional convention, but which was vague on the details.

Irish political scientists mobilized to influence the design and operation of the proposed constitutional convention. An organization known as We the Citizens was established under the auspices of the Political Studies Association of Ireland, funded by Atlantic Philanthropies. The principal mission of We the Citizens was to persuade Irish policymakers of the merits of “deliberation” – a process of decision-making involving a random selection of ordinary citizens, with carefully calibrated discussions informed by experts. To that end, it organized a pilot citizens' assembly in June 2011. This experiment's research findings were presented to senior government officials and all the political parties' leaders in a series of face-to-face meetings.

The We the Citizens model became the template for the constitutional convention. Many on its academic team went on to support the work of the convention.

How the Irish constitutional convention operated

What marked the ICC as unique was how its membership was selected and how it operated. British Columbia had blazed a trail with its citizens' assembly in 2004. The ICC similarly put ordinary citizens at the process's heart. In the Irish case, the citizens were sitting cheek by jowl with politicians; citizens comprised two-thirds of the 100 members, with members of parliament the other one-third.

The ICC's citizen members were selected randomly by an opinion poll company (ensuring a fair representation in terms of sex, regions and socio-economic sectors). They did not run for election, as had happened for the Icelandic Constitutional Council, nor were they selected to represent particular sectoral interests, as has happened often in the past in processes like this.

The reason for selecting citizens at random was to ensure that they were there in their own right as ordinary citizens; they didn't feel mandated as a result of fighting for office, nor did they feel duty bound to represent vested interests. Rather than the norms of parliamentary grandstanding and debating from fixed positions that so often governs bodies of this type, the norm was deliberation, with detailed discussion after becoming informed on all sides of the issue, respecting differing views and being prepared to change one's mind.

The ICC discussed marriage equality in depth

Marriage equality was without a doubt the most significant of the eight topics that the ICC was invited to discuss. Constitutional lawyers and child psychologists, who had provided briefings documents in advance, made brief presentations to the ICC members and fielded questions. Key advocates presented next, including a Catholic bishop, adult children of same-sex couples and a gay opponent of marriage equality.

There was huge mainstream and social media interest, far more so than for any of the other topics discussed by the ICC. More than 1,000 individuals and organizations uploaded submissions to the ICC Web site. After a

weekend of deliberation and debate, the members voted on the matter in secret, as was the ICC practice. A full 79 percent voted in favor of recommending that marriage equality be put on the ballot.

This strong endorsement by the ICC members, followed by intense media attention, forced the hand of the socially conservative prime minister, Enda Kenny, who up to that point had resisted his junior coalition partner's demands for a referendum on the issue. In all, the ICC made 40 separate recommendations; the government has acceded to just five of these so far. Among those, the referendum on marriage equality has been especially prominent.

'Success has many fathers'

Many individuals and organizations have claimed credit for the marriage equality vote. Undoubtedly, the highly successful Yes campaign was key to securing the 62 percent vote in favor.

But the Irish Constitutional Convention played an important role too. Arguably, the question would not have been put to the Irish people during this government's tenure if not for the ICC. Including representatives of all the parties in the ICC's deliberations (its 33 political members came from all the parties) ensured a high degree of cross-party consensus in favor of marriage equality — both in favor of putting it on the ballot, and in favor of its success.

This Irish case demonstrates the real-world application of what political scientists refer to as “deliberation.” Deliberation produced a real-world constitutional change, the first time that that has happened — showing this method really can matter.

Professor David Farrell holds the chair of politics at University College Dublin.

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Dr. Jane Suiter is a lecturer in political communication at Dublin City University.

All three were members of the academic and legal team that supported the work of the Irish Constitutional Convention. This post is written in a personal capacity.

Oh God, Not Another One!?



Project by Selina Thompson

'We don't know how to do democracy. We don't know how to make decisions together, how to create generative compromises, [...] until we have some sense of how to live our solutions locally, we won't be successful at implementing a just governance system regionally, nationally or globally'

– Adrienne Maree Brown, Emergent Strategy

When Boris Johnson prorogued Parliament earlier this year, 202 hours of Representative Democracy were lost.

For Oh God Not Another One, Selina Thompson Ltd and the people of Leeds and Manchester will reclaim those hours, investigating politics beyond representation.

Following a postcode lottery, we will bring together a 'Kitchen Table Council' of locals and the hot political problems of the day, to make solutions and action them together.

Come: watch, support and take your seat at the table as we throw a small, provocative challenge at our elected representatives in the wake of another snap election.

Can we reach consensus? Can we do politics better than those who claim to do it for us? Will we change the world... or will all the problems we get be about bins and sound levels?

Originally conceived as Sortition in 2018, the project returns to Leeds, Manchester and London this year, and will be our first new work since salt: we couldn't be happier.

Oh God, Not Another One is commissioned by 14-18 NOW, East Street Arts, Leeds International Festival and The Lowry (for WEEK 53 festival). Originally co-commissioned by 14-18 NOW: WW1 Centenary Art Commissions and The Arnolfini, supported by Jerwood Arts, by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, Arts Council England and by the Department for Digital Culture Media and Sport.

We Need New Models to Rebuild Trust in Institutions



By Sonal Shah and Hollie Russon Gilman

July 29, 2020

To achieve greater equity, we first need to build trust between people and institutions, both public and private. Trust is low. While growing inequity (not just inequality) contributes to the lack of trust, shifting that requires new mechanisms to communicate, collaborate and make structural change. Building and maintaining trust must be intentional, we can not go back to business as usual. It will not be easy. This will require power shifts. Each group will need to give up some power to achieve impact. Over the next few weeks, we will write about various steps needed to build trust. This note is focused on how engagement needs to change from public relations to creating effective collaboration and feedback loops.

There are models of participation and collaboration in governance that have been tested locally and globally. We can learn from what has worked through

some illustrative examples. The recent calls to Defund the Police, for example, have sparked new civic energy and a willingness for experimentation inside and outside of government. But defunding is only half the equation: Building out an affirmative alternative is just as urgent. Communities across the country have shown that having greater public empowerment in budget decisions, through for example participatory budgeting — especially for Black and Brown communities — leads to different outcomes. But, this requires decision makers being willing to give up some of their power to communities in a genuine manner that builds trust.

Creating opportunities for people and communities to engage is a first step towards building public trust, especially in shaping the experience for disenfranchised/overlooked communities to participate. Public leaders should anticipate that their calls for engagement will be viewed with suspicion. However, community champions can create bridges. Too many people see civic engagement as an exclusive club. Moving beyond the usual suspects requires reaching beyond our bubbles and building new partnerships, especially those that are racially equitable. There is much to learn from different communities like the disability rights community about how they built partnerships to achieve outcomes and build language and spaces that are more inclusive.

There is a unique opportunity for institutions to build upon and support community driven engagement efforts in six key ways:

Genuinely empower disenfranchised communities.

Community members who are disenfranchised community members are experts on issues that pertain to them. They are proximate to their challenges and many times have localized solutions. Let's trust them and genuinely empower disenfranchised communities. Initiatives like Participatory Budgeting, which are being adopted across the country in counties and cities can be replicated. Participatory budgeting allows residents as young as 11-years-old to allocate public resources and vote on projects in their communities.

Create a culture and expectation of data transparency.

Have a real conversation about creating a more transparent government, starting with how the term is defined. Are residents being able to access data, or is government sharing data across departments? Are communities publishing their own data? Is real-time data just being pushed out or is it made easier for residents to use? Let's create a culture and expectation of data access and also privacy.

Engage external expertise to add public sector civic technology capacity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that innovators want to help the public sector. COVID-19 also exposed gaps in digital access, highlighting the importance of the renewed energy towards civic, digital innovation. The federal government could create a technology fellowship to work with cities/counties/states. Technology fellows can help local communities access talent and can help local institutions strengthen their technology infrastructure with input from diverse stakeholders. Let's engage external experts to add public sector civic technology capacity.

Use a community-focused framework to create feedback loops.

Community members should actively shape and design engagement- both the feedback mechanisms and the process of engagement. This includes who does and does not participate as well as how they engage. For example, in Jackson, Michigan, The People's Assembly brings 20% of residents together "to share their opinion about what they would like to see happen in the city." This model gives Black residents the opportunity to build economic and political power, and ensures equity is front and center. Let's use community-focused frameworks to create feedback loops.

Make digital equity a priority.

Digital equity should be a priority as the future will be a hybrid, combining in-person and online experiences. Effective digital tools, especially those used in decision-making and governance, should be accessible to and inclusive of all communities. Income and education are strongly correlated with broadband use at home, so the best and most effective tools should be multi-modal, with the outcome that all people, with varying levels of access, literacy, and training, should be able to participate.

Engage multi-sector partnerships and anchor institutions.

Government alone can not solve all problems. Responsible government partnerships with universities, philanthropies, industry, and civil society will be even more critical. This will require building new models of partnerships based on shared outcomes. For instance, universities can lead efforts on ethical stewardship and can help address pressing concerns, including a pipeline for talent, capacity building, technical assistance, data collection and analytics, or research.

To build trust between institutions and people, we need new models, new approaches and a commitment to change. It will be important to engage multiple sectors and designate responsible anchor institutions to bring together stakeholders. Done well, it can be transformational, but it requires intention, consistency and a willingness to learn and adapt.

Democracy Is Hard. These Cities Are Finding Ways to Pull It Off.



By Elena Souris and Hollie Russon Gilman

March 26, 2020

Democracies are radical. While many of us take it for granted today, our current conception of democracy emerged fairly recently—and the idea that the governed should have a say in the governing process, no matter their race, gender, income, or ability, remains revolutionary.

In practice, however, democracy doesn't always achieve its lofty ideals. Traditional methods of civic engagement, such as town halls and elections, only allow residents to pass judgments and express preferences—typically on decisions that have already been made. Oftentimes, these processes are only open to citizens, or incorporate barriers to lower-income residents, residents of other legal status, people of color, and people of differing abilities.

But from Mexico City to Helsinki, city governments are redesigning and opening up the democratic process so that residents hold more civic power: the ability to truly participate in governing and decision-making.

Recent research from New America examined 42 cities that applied to the Engaged Cities Award, run by the civic engagement nonprofit Cities of Service. These cities experimented with new models of civic engagement, democracy, and governing to collaborate with constituents on a wide range of public problems—some as concrete as blight, and others as abstract as trust in government.

Faced with unique challenges, cities implemented ideas around civic engagement in their own distinct ways. All of them, however, emphasized the importance of balancing long-term and short-term engagement opportunities, building multi-sector partnerships (including diversity and equity), addressing intergenerational challenges, and managing expectations.

But what emerged as one of the most effective methods of engendering civic participation was building new government infrastructures to develop, support, and institutionalize an expanded democracy.

From 2010 to 2018, the city of Bologna, Italy redesigned new civic engagement infrastructure to replace a system that was prohibitively bureaucratic (a group of citizens had to receive approval from five different offices just to repaint a community bench). In 2015, the government redivided the city into new districts, with their own councils and presidents. Two years later, in partnership with the University of Bologna, it built a six-person Civic Imagination Office, which supports one “lab” per district dedicated to establishing connections between the government and citizens.

This new structure supported the government’s “public collaboration pacts”—which were introduced in 2014 to help residents fund and promote projects around the care of urban common areas—and their Incredibol! program, a community-focused competition for startups in creative and

cultural industries that began in 2010. Each year, Bologna provides 10,000 euros per Incredibol! winner, 150,000 euros for collaboration pact projects, and a million euros for participatory budgeting.

The result? Increased voter turnout, 508 collaboration pacts, 15,000 square meters of city walls cleaned and 110 city benches renovated, and new businesses and community projects. Overall, by 2018, 14,400 of Bologna's 388,000 people had voted in participatory budgeting projects, and 1,700 citizens had participated in District Labs meetings.

Implementing a new, comprehensive government system to facilitate civic participation is a major undertaking. But, as seen in Bologna, investing in these infrastructures helps governments prove that citizen engagement is a priority, not just a campaign slogan. It also sets up engagement efforts for success: Without the necessary funding or government buy-in, resident efforts would be less effective than they otherwise could be.

Still, not all new infrastructure needs to be so elaborate. Faced with limited time and resources, it's possible for municipalities to implement these ideas at a smaller scale and still see powerful benefits.

Take the city of York in the United Kingdom, for example. To combat widespread loneliness, the government implemented a "Neighbourhood Approaches to Loneliness" program, which ran for three years in two specific neighborhoods. After completing a training program, local volunteers became community researchers, carrying out fieldwork to identify the many factors around loneliness. Volunteer researchers reached out to other residents, participated in community feedback sessions, engaged local partners, and ultimately identified their own action plans.

Aided by government-provided project management training and seed funding, the program saw the creation of neighborhood groups and action projects throughout the city—including Goodgym York, a program that combines impact volunteering and exercise (for example, a younger resident going on weekly runs to visit isolated older people). As a result of these

efforts, residents living in participating neighborhoods have reported feeling less lonely and more confident, with improved overall well-being.

Of course, the York program required serious commitment, effort, and funding from the city government. The resulting infrastructure, however, is community-based rather than government-based. Unlike Bologna, which amended its internal government infrastructure, York invested in the community infrastructure, training residents in effective civic engagement and helping them build a network of long-term neighborhood groups.

But crucially, this approach still includes government recognition of that new infrastructure, as well as recognition of local residents' expertise in identifying causes and solutions for a challenging community problem.

York and Bologna aren't the only success stories. Lansing, Michigan has established a Department of Neighborhoods and Citizen Engagement, while Santiago de Cali, Columbia designed a "neighborhood table" program of civic organizations that has helped decrease conflict and violence by improving relationships between community members, the local government, the private sector, and NGOs.

Another noticeable global trend is the expansion of mayoral offices to include experimental roles (such as Chief Storytellers or Chief Innovation, Technology, and Data Officers), which create new opportunities to formally open up the government decision-making process and leverage innovation, storytelling, and data to be more responsive to residents.

This institutionalization of civic engagement isn't a new idea. For decades, Philadelphia's neighborhood parks and recreation centers have acted as engagement points for "friend's groups" and advisory councils, which share responsibility for taking care of public spaces and meeting neighborhood needs with local programming. Parks and recreation centers have become organized spaces for Philadelphians to flex their civic muscles, meet community members, and form new relationships with their government.

Ultimately, there are an untold number of ways to build institutional support for civic engagement. But forging partnerships with constituents and supporting civic power can have a powerful impact. Cities found that the resulting strategies were more effective and inclusive, with the added benefit of improving relationships between officials and residents and increasing trust in government.

Of course, new infrastructure alone can't solve civic engagement challenges. Cities must also leverage technology in accessible ways that don't assume equal access to the internet or smart devices. Efforts must also empower diverse leadership, amplify under-privileged voices, encourage residents and city staff to innovate, and collaborate with local private sector and nonprofit partners.

When they're achieved, however, the benefits of these governing approaches speak for themselves. From COVID-19 to a recession, cities around the world face immense practical and existential problems that cannot be addressed solely at the state or federal level. Working with residents to strengthen civic, social, and communal life not only bolsters the health of our democracies, but provides immediate, much-needed benefits for us all.

Politics Without Politicians

The political scientist Hélène Landemore asks, If government is for the people, why can't the people do the governing?

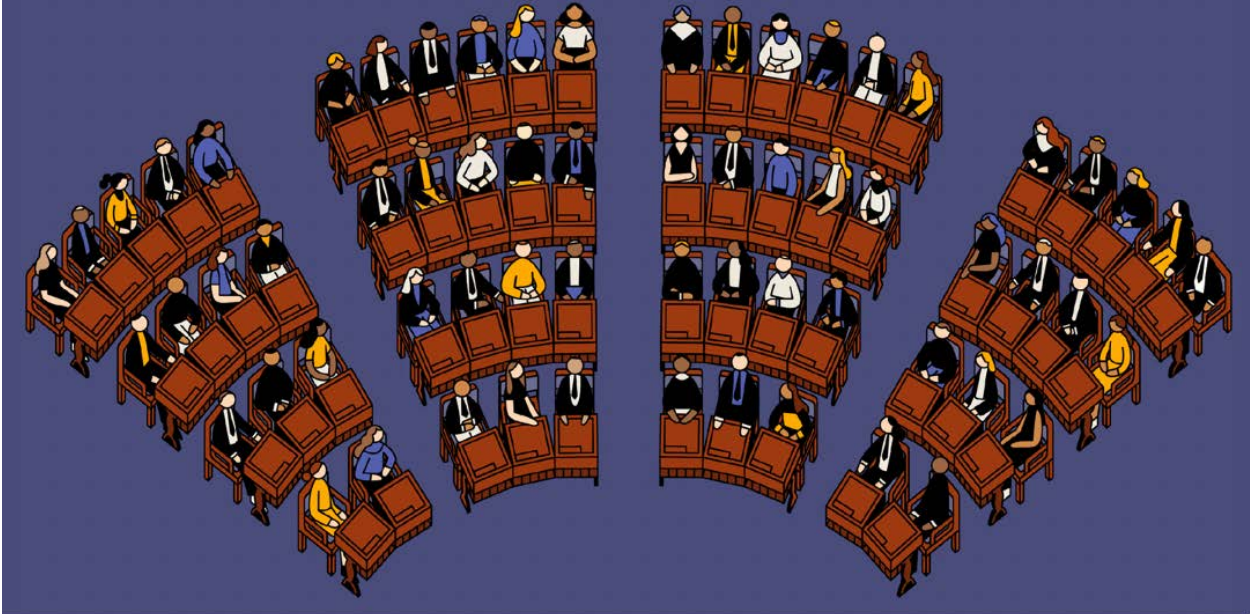


Illustration by Rose Wong

By Nathan Heller

Feb. 19, 2020

Imagine being a citizen of a diverse, wealthy, democratic nation filled with eager leaders. At least once a year—in autumn, say—it is your right and civic duty to go to the polls and vote. Imagine that, in your country, this act is held to be not just an important task but an essential one; the government was designed at every level on the premise of democratic choice. If nobody were to show up to vote on Election Day, the superstructure of the country would fall apart.

So you try to be responsible. You do your best to stay informed. When Election Day arrives, you make the choices that, as far as you can discern, are wisest for your nation. Then the results come with the morning news, and

your heart sinks. In one race, the candidate you were most excited about, a reformer who promised to clean up a dysfunctional system, lost to the incumbent, who had an understanding with powerful organizations and ultra-wealthy donors. Another politician, whom you voted into office last time, has failed to deliver on her promises, instead making decisions in lockstep with her party and against the polls. She was reelected, apparently with her party's help. There is a notion, in your country, that the democratic structure guarantees a government by the people. And yet, when the votes are tallied, you feel that the process is set up to favor interests other than the people's own.

What corrective routes are open? One might wish for pure direct democracy—no body of elected representatives, each citizen voting on every significant decision about policies, laws, and acts abroad. But this seems like a nightmare of majoritarian tyranny and procedural madness: How is anyone supposed to haggle about specifics and go through the dialogue that shapes constrained, durable laws? Another option is to focus on influencing the organizations and business interests that seem to shape political outcomes. But that approach, with its lobbyists making backroom deals, goes against the promise of democracy. Campaign-finance reform might clean up abuses. But it would do nothing to insure that a politician who ostensibly represents you will be receptive to hearing and acting on your thoughts.

The scholar H el ene Landemore, a professor of political science at Yale, has spent much of her career trying to understand the value and meaning of democracy. In recent years, she has been part of a group of academics, many of them young, trying to solve the problem of elected democratic representation—addressing flaws in a system that is widely believed to be no problem at all. In her book “Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many” (Princeton, 2012), she challenged the idea that leadership by the few was superior to leadership by the masses. Her forthcoming book, due out next year and currently titled “Open Democracy: Reinventing Popular Rule for the 21st Century,” envisions what true government by mass leadership could look like. Her model is based on the

simple idea that, if government by the people is a goal, the people ought to do the governing.

“Open democracy,” Landemore’s coinage, does not center on elections of professional politicians into representative roles. Leadership is instead determined by a method roughly akin to jury duty (not jury selection): every now and then, your number comes up, and you’re obliged to do your civic duty—in this case, to take a seat on a legislative body. For a fixed period, it is your job to work with the other people in the unit to solve problems and direct the nation. When your term is up, you leave office and go back to your normal life and work. “It’s the idea of putting randomly selected citizens into political power, or giving them some sort of political role on a consultative body or a citizens’ assembly,” said Alexander Guerrero, a professor of philosophy at Rutgers who, in 2014, published an influential paper arguing for random selection in place of elections—a system with some precedents in ancient Athens and Renaissance Italy which he dubbed “lottocracy.” (It’s the basis for his own forthcoming book.) In open democracy, Landemore imagines lottocratic rule combined with crowdsourced feedback channels and other measures; the goal is to shift power from the few back to the many. To many Americans, such a system will seem viscerally alarming—the political equivalent of lending your fragile vintage convertible to the red-eyed, rager-throwing seventeen-year-old down the block. Yet many immediate objections fall away on reflection. Training and qualification: Well, what about them? Backgrounds among American legislators are varied, and members seem to learn well enough on the job. The belief that elections are a skills-proving format? This, too, cancels out, since none of the skills tested in campaigning (fund-raising, glad-handing, ground-gaming, speechmaking) are necessary in a government that fills its ranks by lottery.

Landemore was taken with the unorthodox idea that normal people, in a group, could be trusted with big, scary decisions.

Some people might worry about commitment and continuity—the idea that we are best served by a motivated group of political professionals who bring experience and relationships to bear. Historically, such concerns haven't weighed too heavily on the electorate, which seems to have few major reservations about choosing outsiders and weirdos for important roles. If anti-institutionalism has become a poison taken as a salve, then maybe it's the institutions that require adjustment. Landemore's open-democratic model purports to work with the people as they are, with no reacculturation or special education required—and its admirers describe the idea as being durable, sophisticated, and able to channel populist sentiment for good.

“Democratic governments are losing perceived legitimacy all over the world,” Jane Mansbridge, a professor of political leadership and democratic values at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, told me. “The beauty of open democracy is that it has a firm understanding not just of the complexity of democratic principles but of how to make those principles cohere in a way that meets people's deepest intuitions.” She sees it as an apt response to population-sized problems, such as climate change, that seem to require solutions more pervasive and willful than professionalized leadership can muster. “Landemore is very much on the side of all the young people in the world who are saying, ‘How the heck are we going to manage this?’” Mansbridge said.

Landemore herself would point to the last U.S. Presidential election—a contest between two candidates so unpopular with the people as to have the lowest approval ratings in the history of American Presidential races. Roughly four in ten eligible voters did not bother to show up at the polls, and Donald Trump was elected against the will of the majority of citizens who did. Such an outcome seems to strain the premise of democracy. Could picking leaders randomly, and getting everyone involved, be worse?

I went to visit Landemore one freezing day this winter; newly hardened ice sparkled on branches stretching out over the road. “I think I lost five years of life expectancy renovating this place,” she told me, as I stepped inside the Cape Cod-style house in New Haven where she lives with her husband, Darko

Jelaca, an engineer, and their two young daughters. “I don’t know whether I’d do it again.” We sat at a long dining table in a bright nook. At forty-three, Landemore is tall, with long blond hair swept back into a ponytail; she wore a checked flannel button-down, jeans, and Ugg boots. She grew up in a village in France’s flinty Normandy region, and came to Paris at eighteen, with stars in her eyes, to take a spot at the élite Henri IV prep school. She ended up at the École Normale Supérieure, which channels brilliant young people toward a distinctly Gallic strait of glamorized intellectualism. Landemore’s passion then was for philosophy, her interest having grown from a question that had haunted her teen-age years: Why do the right thing? Her parents were atheists; she’d been reared without a faith. In the absence of a god and mediating clerics, she wondered how we were compelled to make good choices.

Philosophy offered her the first semblance of an answer. In school, she fell in love with the work of David Hume, whose theory of the human passions touched on decision-making, but this path took her only so far. She found herself studying rational-choice theory and taking classes at France’s top political academy, Sciences Po. Until then, Landemore had held no real interest in politics. (Her earliest ambition was to be a novelist.) But the intersection of the field with social science and decision-making behavior fascinated her, and she arranged a yearlong exchange at Harvard, where she could study rational-choice and game theories in more depth.

She packed up her life in Paris, landed at Boston’s Logan airport, got in a cab, and told the driver to take her to the Harvard campus, expecting him to be impressed by the fancy address. “I was trained at institutions in France where they tell you, you know, ‘You’re the élite of the country, and it’s a big responsibility,’ and I bought that,” she said. “But he was not impressed at all!”

Instead, they talked about his job. He announced his yearly earnings, which flabbergasted Landemore. (He was doing really well!) She loved the way that American society seemed to be full of egalitarian surprises of this kind, not deferential to old status markers, as French society is. “It really struck me—

that you can be a Harvard student on a level playing field with a taxi-driver, in the same way that you can be a millionaire on a level field with a nurse,” she said. “Of course, it’s not true: the money distortions in this country are very problematic, politically and economically. But, on a *social* level, people behave as if they think it doesn’t matter, and that’s quite remarkable.” It puzzled her that this openness wasn’t better reflected in American institutions.

By that point, Landemore had reached the conclusion that individuals did the right thing basically out of self-interest: to get what they needed, to win respect, and to avoid negative cycles of retribution—incentives that, presumably, carried into their work as leaders. Why *groups* did the right thing, though, was a trickier, more interesting question. In complex societies, the interests of self-preserving individuals and the interests of big, varied groups aren’t always aligned. It’s obviously a bad idea—for me—to kidnap my next-door neighbor’s golden retriever and put him on a giant hamster wheel to generate electricity for my house. But what if many of us could get a cut in electricity fees by voting for a power plant that kidnaps dogs owned by people we don’t know? Could we, as a group, be relied upon to make the right decision?

That year, in a course at M.I.T., Landemore learned about a probability principle known as Condorcet’s jury theorem, named for the Marquis de Condorcet, who set it down in 1785, not long before being imprisoned by revolutionaries. The theorem says: imagine that there’s a vote between two options, A and B. And imagine that we, the observers, know with godlike certainty that Option A is the better choice. If the odds for each individual voter choosing Option A are more than fifty per cent—that is, if each voter is even slightly better than a flipped coin at choosing correctly—then the chances of the group doing the right thing increase as more people are added. One might argue, as many political scientists do, that there is no such thing as a “correct” choice in politics. One might also suggest, dismally, that voters are worse than chance at making good choices. But it is possible to take the opposite view. When Condorcet’s theorem was rediscovered in the nineteen-sixties, it helped generate a new wave of interest in the wisdom of crowds.

For Landemore, it carried a more specific imperative: “I thought, Why is that not more obviously used as an argument for democracy?”

Unless you believed that most citizens would make worse political choices than a flipped coin, didn't the theorem argue for their direct empowerment? “It's not original to say that Condorcet's jury theorem was important for democracy, but it's original to make so *much* of it,” Mansbridge told me. Instead of returning to Paris at the end of the year, Landemore applied to Harvard, where she completed her Ph.D. She was taken with the unorthodox idea that normal people, in a group, could be trusted with big, scary decisions.

A lot of our ideas about political leadership can be traced back to Plato's Republic, which is still a foundational text of political philosophy. Plato—another person preoccupied with the question of why we do the right thing, separately and together—suggested that individuals have different aptitudes and should hold distinct roles. “We must infer that all things are produced more plentifully and easily and of a better quality when one man does one thing which is natural to him,” he said, quoting Socrates. Those suitable for leadership, Plato argued, are philosophers, trained to seek truth above other rewards, and reared and educated not to be swayed by flights of public opinion. When, Plato wrote,

the world sits down at an assembly, or in a court of law, or a theatre, or a camp, or in any other popular resort, and there is a great uproar, and they praise some things which are being said or done, and blame other things, equally exaggerating both, shouting and clapping their hands, and the echo of the rocks and the place in which they are assembled redoubles the sound of the praise or blame—at such a time will not a young man's heart, as they say, leap within him? Will any private training enable him to stand firm against the overwhelming flood of popular opinion?

Plato's division between well-educated, judicious leaders and the crazy and uproarious masses came to be so widely accepted that it's easy to forget that he was writing as a contrarian in his time. Higher education in Greece then was often in the hands of the Sophists: private tutors, thinkers, and craft

masters. Plato believed that engaging in higher thought for wages was corrupting and schlock-prone—the corporate lecture circuit of its day—and he rarely missed an opportunity to dump on those who did it. (His efforts succeeded: “sophistry” remains a sneer more than two thousand years later.) Yet the Sophists do seem to have believed that crowd wisdom was *true* wisdom. Aristotle, Plato’s student, ended up sharing this belief. In Book III of his *Politics*, he posited that, “although each individual separately will be a worse judge than the experts, the whole of them assembled together will be better or at least as good judges,” and advocated for the masses’ participation in government.

Our leadership model today, in everything from the Supreme Court to “The West Wing,” lives in Plato’s shadow—the ideal drilled into Landemore at the Parisian *grandes écoles*. In the government of the United States, founded by well-educated people terrified of mob rule, this emphasis was by design. As Landemore researched crowd wisdom, however, she started wondering whether Plato’s thinking on the matter had been more idiosyncratic than enlightened.

In “Democratic Reason,” Landemore poked at the long-standing knot of disdain for mass decision-making. Twentieth-century theorists such as Joseph Schumpeter and Seymour Martin Lipset saw democracy as a way for people to select leaders, not to take the wheel themselves. Many supposed democrats diagnose citizens as apathetic, irrational, and ignorant; voters are regarded not as agents but as consumers to whom something—a candidate, a platform—must be sold. Democracy, Landemore noted, had become a paradox: it was said to be guided by citizens voting according to their interests, and yet voting according to their interests was what they were thought to be incapable of doing.

Landemore thought that confusion arose in part because people were talking about two different kinds of democratic benefits without reconciling their causes. Some arguments for democracy have a “deliberative” basis—they flow from the idea that the coming together of the people as a group, as in a town hall, brings varied viewpoints and styles of thought into conversation,

resulting in broader, finer problem-solving. Other arguments are majoritarian in nature, based on statistical principles of good mass decision-making. (Condorcet's theorem is a fine example.) At first glance, these seem mutually exclusive: you can't have the benefits of people debating issues in a room *and* the benefits of large numbers of people simultaneously going to the polls. In Enlightenment republics like France and the United States, the strategy for government traditionally has been to try to do both things, but in sequence. We go to the polls to vote for representatives, and then, afterward, they go into meetings to hash things out.

The goal is to involve as much of the public organically in
as many decisions as possible.

As Landemore continued her study, she began to think that real democracy—democracy that actually delivered on its principles—might emerge more fully if we could figure out how to bring the advantages of deliberation and crowd wisdom into true unity. There were hints about how this might be achieved. If a messy slate of options about greenhouse-gas reduction could be sharpened down to two through discussion, a complex decision could be primed for the wisdom of the majority. By the same token, the alarming spectre of majority tyranny would be less likely to emerge if substantive deliberation among many different kinds of people could be woven into the decision-making process. Because the goal of Landemore's first book was simply to challenge distrust of mass decision-making, she stopped short of spelling out what such an overlapping system might look like. "I still had a relatively conservative idea of democracy," she said.

Across the street from Landemore's office complex, on the Yale campus, stands a building that she finds truly and deeply hideous. Recently constructed in the Gothic style, it is modelled on several older Gothic buildings nearby, which, in turn, were designed to resemble Gothic academic buildings in Britain. This mindless continuity is ludicrous, she thinks, and has resulted in an ugly building faced with what she described as "thin, stuck-on bricks," all in the supposed service of tradition. "Aesthetically, it's a

disaster!” she told me. Yet the building’s most grievous offense arose from the design process itself: people like her, who worked among these buildings, hadn’t been consulted about them.

Landemore had business to conduct in her office when I visited, and on the way she stopped off for a bowl of fish noodles and a mango smoothie at Duc’s Place, a small Vietnamese spot that she likes downtown. She had put on a coat and, in the French style, had done something ambitious and elegant with her scarf. The owner, Duc, came up to greet her. “Duc was a postdoc researcher in biology at Yale, studying fruit flies,” she said, after he’d gone. “He got fed up and left to start a restaurant. Now he makes every dish with scientific rigor.” It seemed a quiet lesson about the arbitrariness of elite channels: we all have many capacities, and our ability to lead in government shouldn’t depend on whether we’ve decided to work with fancy people at Yale or run a bánh-mì shop nearby.

In 2017, writing in the general-audience journal *Daedalus*, Landemore took direct aim at modern democratic representation. Ask people to picture deliberation in action, and, these days, they might think of the Senate floor, filled with craggy, well-coiffed pros from Harvard and Yale, filibustering, hewing to their party programs, and doing everything they can to hold their seats. Deliberative democracy had grown inseparable from this vision, she argued, with unpleasant effects. To call such elite representation democratic was ridiculous, and thus bad for the brand; it was no accident that faith in democracy seemed to be on the decline.

Still, how could you have deliberative democracy without those people? You couldn’t bring an entire nation together in a room. You had to have a small group deliberating on behalf of the whole. Landemore came to think that the problem wasn’t representation but the way that representatives were chosen. A truly democratic approach would reflect the strengths of the masses and serve basic democratic ideals of inclusiveness and equality, as Landemore wrote in *Daedalus*:

Inclusiveness means both that every adult member of the demos is entitled to a share of power and that the definition of the demos itself is inclusive. Equality means that this share of power must be equal for all. . . . This principle of equality also means that each voice should be given the same ex ante chance of being heard where deliberation is needed. Finally, equality means that each individual has the same opportunity of being a representative where representation is needed.

“Open Democracy,” Landemore’s forthcoming book, returns to the question she left hanging in “Democratic Reason”: What might it look like if a governmental system wove together deliberative and majoritarian democratic power? Her model follows five requirements: equal and universal participatory rights; deliberation as a part of the process; majority rule; democratic representation (which, in her vocabulary, means that a group of elected intermediaries can still exist in subordinated roles); and transparency in the goings-on. Open democracy, she says, is about being represented and representing in turn. “There’s still room for experts—we’re not getting rid of all the time-saving and professionalization that the governmental system already has,” she told me. “It’s just that at the crucial junctures—the moments of decision-making and agenda-setting—we make sure that there’s an openness to citizens. The point is to let the system breathe.”

Landemore bases her model on what she calls “mini-publics”—little assemblies of anywhere from a hundred and fifty to a thousand people—which do the work of governing. Their members are selected lottocratically, or in jury-duty fashion. And, although they’re not representative in the personal sense—the accountant who lives next door isn’t representing *me* during his time in government—they reflect the range of public interest.

What distinguishes Landemore’s ideal from other lottocratic models, such as Guerrero’s, is the breadth of her funnel: the goal is to involve as much of the public organically in as many decisions as possible. Her open-democratic process also builds in crowdsourced feedback loops and occasional referendums (direct public votes on choices) so that people who aren’t

currently governing don't feel shut out. Citizens are well compensated for their time in service; they step away from their normal work, as in the model of parental leave. (Such a system, it must be said, is easier to imagine in countries with more evolved workplace policies than those of the United States.)

There is no stable “they” in open democracy, no political
élite to resent; there is only a stable idea of “us.”

Beyond such basic design elements, Landemore's schema is open-ended—less a recipe than a set of operating principles. It would be more equal than the current system, because everybody would have an equal chance at being in government and an equal voice once they got there. And it would be more inclusive, because everyone, regardless of whether they are currently in government, would have unmediated contact with the decision-making process. One result, Landemore believes, would be a healthier democratic learning curve on the part of the public. Not because everyone would suddenly be obliged to become a political junkie—on the contrary, they'd be free to tune out completely when not in government—but because, for some period of their lives, they'd be forced to learn the political process from the inside, compelled to think through influential political decisions in collaboration with random Americans who disagree.

More remarkably, such a system would clear away the politics of élitism—the question of whether leaders represent people like us. There is no stable “they” in open democracy, no political élite to resent; there is only a stable idea of “us.” The faceless, huddled masses with their varied colors, life styles, and wealth levels *are* the government. “Once you force people into a context where they have to get past the posturing and commitment to ideas, where they have to address real-life problems with people like them—even if they think differently—you solve a lot of issues,” Landemore explained.

Critics of open democracy tend to fall into three categories. Some are unconvinced by the premise that something is structurally at fault in

electoral representative democracy as it's currently performed. (Our troubles might lie elsewhere: in the educational system, or in rising inequality.) Some dispute the theory that there exists a "better" outcome in politics, and that we should judge democratic models by how well they help us get there. And some doubt the practice itself—it sounds great on paper, but can it work? "My own bet is that human self-deception and bloody-mindedness will always prove stronger than our desire to learn inconvenient truths," Christopher Achen, a professor of politics at Princeton and one of Landemore's collegial critics, said. "Human history is full of attractive ideals that turned out to be unworkable or profoundly dangerous when tried. But it is also full of 'implausible ideals' that came to be everyday common sense a century or two later."

Landemore says that what she would classify as open democracy has already been tried in limited contexts. In Finland, from 2012 to 2013, aspects of the approach were used to reform snowmobile regulation—a problem that sounds incidental only if you've never spent a winter in Finland. The government involved the public in diagnosing the problem and finding solutions. Landemore, who was a consultant on the project, read comments from Finnish people and, she said, was blown away. "It's *not* ignorant," she told me. "It's not angry or unconstructive the way we imagine 'ordinary citizens' to be."

Around the same time as Finland's experiment, Iceland used a Landemorean process to draw up a new constitution, starting with a deliberative forum of nine hundred and fifty randomly selected citizens. A smaller assembly of twenty-five elected but nonprofessional representatives drafted a document and released it for public scrutiny. (Landemore sees this step as an expression of what's sometimes called "liquid" democracy—the people's ability bestow their voting power onto ad-hoc representatives when they want to.) Icelanders offered thoughts in thousands of online comments; in response to their input, the constitution was revised eleven times. The final version was submitted to the whole country in referendum, and more than two-thirds of Icelanders signed off on it. For the past several years, the document has been in limbo, because the parliament—made up of Iceland's

full-time, elected politicians—never held its own approval vote. Yet Landemore still sees the process as a success. The constitution is not only a solid specimen, she says, it contains several enlightened, twenty-first-century ideas, such as a universal right to Internet connection, that probably wouldn't have emerged from more elite discussions.

Finland and Iceland have something in common, of course, which is that they're small nations set up to be culturally assimilating. Nearly everyone there goes through the same school system and, thanks to universal social programs, shares other life-style benchmarks; one Finnish person meeting another can be confident, regardless of either's race or background, that they share an essential experience of Finnishness. That's not true in the United States, which takes pride in allowing the Hasidic Jew, the new Korean immigrant, and the Appalachian artisan to live in culturally distinct communities and conduct life in their preferred ways. (This is why, as I've argued in the past, the Nordic model deserves admiration but isn't translatable to the U.S.: doing so would require redefining American liberalism in a way that would alarm many on the left.)

As evidence that open democracy can work in larger, more culturally diverse societies, Landemore points to France's Great National Debate—a vast undertaking involving a vibrant online forum, twenty-one citizens' assemblies, and more than ten thousand public meetings, held in the wake of the *gilets jaunes* protests, in 2019—and, this year, to the country's Citizens' Convention on Climate Change. The climate convention, which asked a hundred and fifty randomly selected citizens to help draw up plans that would reduce French emissions, started last fall and continued into this year; Landemore is spending the late winter in Paris, studying how the discussions unfold for her book. "Seeing the deliberations in my language, sitting at those tables, hearing the conversations—it's really moving," she told me. "It's going to sound corny, but there was *love* expressed in the interstices of these meetings." She puts a lot of stock in the so-called deliberative polls conducted by James S. Fishkin, a professor of communication at Stanford, who brings hundreds of random citizens together to discuss an issue and compares their opinions before and after this

process. The result is often a convergence of views rather than the polarization that one might expect.

Most of Landemore's critics don't share her optimism. "In my view, the few careful empirical evaluations of citizen deliberation and deliberation assemblies have generally been depressing, and the more closely one looks at their evidence, the more depressing they become," Achen, the Princeton professor, said. Many of her allies, too, are wary of taking the public as it comes, when citizens may not be prepared. Guerrero, who honed the idea of lottocratic government, believes that government by the people has to happen alongside institutional development: education, expert consultation, and the like. "For me, a big part of using ordinary citizens to make political decisions is figuring out how to create the institutions that will make it possible," he told me. "I worry about broad citizen input on topics where people haven't learned very much." Landemore considers herself a follower of John Dewey, one of America's most comprehensive theorists of democratic culture, yet she puts a heavier, narrower emphasis on governmental structure than Dewey, who saw good democratic habits as emerging much more broadly from the mores of civil society: the way we're taught, the way we work, the way we relate to one another. Landemore's model channels leadership from the bottom up, but her idea of agency within a society-state remains, in an important sense, top-down.

Her view is that good democratic habits will cascade if the form of government is fixed. When I asked her about strongly reform-minded candidates in the current Presidential election, she dismissed their governmental ideals as "conventional." "I don't see it in Sanders or Warren or any of those guys—it's still about them, *their* vision, and *their* leadership. Yes, they want small donors instead of big donors, but—" She gave an unimpressed shrug. She is hopeful about open-democratic models being incorporated, in the U.S., into state and local governments, but, for national reform, she looks to European nations, which have shown a taste for experimentation and, in some cases, a stronger public will.

“It’s striking that, with all the things that are going wrong in the United States, there’s no mass rebellion here,” Landemore said. “In France, there were strikes for a pension reform that’s needed. Here, there is such apathy—a sense in which people don’t even trust one another, or themselves, to do anything. So, creating a sense of empowerment, possibility, and self-confidence as citizens? It would be a good place to start.”

Landemore is raising her two daughters in what she calls the American manner—long-leashed, supportive, indulgent of individuation—rather than in the strict and feather-grooming manner of the French. It has surprised her how different from each other each of her girls has come to be. The older one, now eight, has always been literary, empathetic, and nuance-minded. The younger one, now five, has always been mathematical, expressive, certain of what she wanted. Landemore, in her writing, has championed mass rule in part because it draws on “cognitive diversity”: the idea that different minds naturally work in different ways, and that getting more variety into the mix increases problem-solving power. She has been moved to find that range emerging in her household.

When it got dark on the evening of my visit, Landemore left her office and went to pick up her daughters at after-school care—a protracted process of collecting the day’s art work, helping arms find jacket sleeves, zipping up, locating backpacks, trundling out into the ice, and strapping everybody into the car, a Honda CR-V.

“*Tu te sens mieux, ou t’as mal à la tête?*” (“Do you feel better, or does your head hurt?”), Landemore asked her younger daughter, who had returned to school after a couple of sick days.

“*Oui, j’ai mal à la tête,*” the girl said cheerily, as if the idea had just occurred to her.

Landemore and her husband are raising their daughters to be trilingual. With Mom, and sometimes with each other, they speak French; with Dad, who grew up in Serbia, they speak Serbian; all of them speak English with

everyone else. At home, Jelaca was waiting with a pick-me-up snack before their family Tae Kwon Do lesson: a plate of delicate crêpes, his specialty. (That the Serbian, not the Frenchwoman, turns out to have the best crêpe skills in the house is the sort of surprise about human capacity on which her fluid system aims to draw.)

For half an hour, the family went around the table, as they do each evening, naming the best and worst parts of their days, talking over their individual progress over the past several hours. Then they finished their food, put on their coats, and headed out once more into the world and the dark night.



Why Taxing the Rich May Not Save Democracy

Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has proposed taxing incomes above \$10 million at 70 percent. SUSAN WALSH/AP

Elizabeth Warren and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have proposed new taxes to bolster government revenue and reduce inequality. The plans may not do either.

By Zachary Karabell

Jan. 29, 2019

The government shutdown dominated the news these past weeks, but far more consequential were proposals floated by newly minted presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren and freshman representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to significantly raise taxes on the very rich.

Their plans are not the same: Ocasio-Cortez aims to raise the marginal tax rate to 70 percent on income above \$10 million (which would affect only 0.1 percent of US households). Warren, on the other hand, has suggested a novel “wealth tax,” which would tithe the net worth of the very rich at 2 percent for assets above \$50 million, and 3 percent for those with more than \$1 billion.

Estimates are that Warren's tax could generate \$2.75 trillion in revenue over a decade.

Both plans, as well as variants being suggested by other Democratic presidential hopefuls such as Kamala Harris, would impact the denizens of Silicon Valley and the leaders of the tech industry. Warren's tax, for instance, would raise more than \$3 billion from Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos alone, billions more from other tech billionaires, and more again from the mere centimillionaires and their poor decamillionaire cousins.

Or would it? Leaving aside those who think these tax-the-rich ideas are nascent socialism, would they accomplish what they are designed to? Would they adequately fund new social programs and, more important, would they start moving the needle of inequality back toward equality? Based on past experience, the answers may be disappointing.



Senator Elizabeth Warren has proposed a "wealth tax" on fortunes greater than \$50 million.

CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY IMAGES

That doesn't mean these ideas are meritless. Teasing out how economic inequality might fray democracy and social cohesion is a key question of our time, but it remains a question, not a foregone conclusion. If inequality is a cause of both economic insecurity and lack of access to essentials such as housing and health care, then reducing it is key; but if such necessities can be provided even while inequality persists, then maybe we should focus on how to meet those needs rather than on reducing the gaps.

Then there's the practical challenge of realizing the revenue. It is one thing to set a high rate, and another thing to collect the tax. In a widely publicized exchange at Davos last week, tech titan Michael Dell was asked if he supported ideas such as Warren's and Ocasio-Cortez's. Predictably, he said no, adding that he couldn't think of any place where such rates have effectively reduced inequality. Eric Brynjolfsson of MIT responded by pointing to the US in the 1950s and 1960s, when rates were high, growth was robust, and the gap between rich and the rest was narrower.

It's true that the marginal tax rate in the United States peaked at 91 percent in 1960 for people with incomes over \$400,000, which was only a few thousand households. But few, if any, people paid that rate. The tax code then included a range of legal loopholes such as deducting your golf club membership that reduced the effective tax rate (the rate that the IRS actually collected) to around 45 percent. It's also true that there was less income inequality in the 1950s and 1960s, but you can't prove that the higher rates led to less inequality. The many loopholes, and abuse of the loopholes, were driving forces for the Reagan-era tax reforms of the 1980s, which simultaneously lowered tax rates *and* closed loopholes.

The same concept was at the heart of the 2017 tax cut, which lowered the corporate tax rate to 21 percent, from 35 percent. This was widely assailed as a tax break for the rich; the top personal income-tax rate was also lowered slightly, though the cap on deductions for state taxes means the rich in states like California and New York often will wind up paying more. More crucially, before 2017, few American corporations, especially larger, global ones, paid the 35 percent. Instead, multinationals such as Apple kept considerable profits overseas, trillions of dollars in toto, to take advantage of lower

corporate rates elsewhere, making the effective corporate rate about 24 percent.

Judging from the past, therefore, a hike in the marginal rate and a wealth tax are unlikely to generate the promised revenue. Bezos and other tech executives could, with some effort and inconvenience, park billions of their assets outside the US to avoid those rates, just as Apple and other companies did. Warren has promised that the rate would be applied to assets outside the US, but enforcing that would be well-nigh impossible.

But advocates of these plans aren't justifying them purely on the basis of how much tax revenue they'll generate. After all, even if every dollar were actually collected, \$275 billion a year wouldn't balance a \$5 trillion federal budget or significantly raise living standards for the tens of millions of struggling Americans in a \$20 trillion economy. Even if that money were redistributed to 100 million lower-income Americans, it would amount to several thousand dollars per person. That would meaningfully aid those on the lower end of the income scale, but it would not meaningfully reduce inequality. The gap between Bezos with \$3 billion less and someone earning \$18,000 would not be significantly smaller than the gap between Bezos now and someone making \$15,000.

That's why the key argument for these plans is about their effect on the broader society, and democracy. Emmanuel Saez, an architect of Warren's plan, has said it could "have a significant effect on wealth concentration in the long run," adding that such concentration is inimical to democracy.

The question is whether that's true. Would there be less social foment in the US if less wealth were concentrated in the top 1 percent, or 0.1 percent? Western Europe has more equality, yet France, the UK, the Netherlands, and Sweden have seen the same rise of anti-globalization, anti-immigration, and pro-nationalist movements as the US. Inequality may be part of the mix, but why are countries with more equality exhibiting the same fraying of democracy?

Lack of security, lack of a safety net, lack of optimism about the future, the challenges of automation and trade—all of those are pressing, and none is easily fixed by a tad more equality or by tithing the wealthy. If, however, government is looking for more revenue to fund needed programs, the very wealthy are an easy source, and none are juicier than the lords of tech who've made so much so quickly.

Despite their lofty rhetoric of helping everyone, tech executives and investors have been among the biggest winners of the nation's growing inequality. It would be foolish to think such outsized rewards would go unchallenged.

So while the nascent tax plans emerging from a crowded Democratic field may sound appealing, they are for now either incomplete or unrealistic. It's about time, however, that the underlying questions receive the debate and attention they deserve.

The new citizens' panels: a powerful antidote to cynicism



Peter MacLeod, co-founder of Mass LBP, at the company's Toronto offices. The company crowd-sources public policy, finding ways to give the public a greater say in public policy issues.
MOE DOIRON/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

By Michael Posner

April 29, 2011

One day last January, Anne McIntyre won the lottery. Not, alas, a financial windfall, but something arguably more enlightening. A retired educator living in Halton Hills, Ont., Ms. McIntyre was one of 36 area residents selected to participate in a novel democratic exercise. Meeting over four Saturdays, the group was asked to conceive a strategic plan for Halton's newly elected regional council. After a crash course in the challenges facing

the council - fiscal, environmental and social - they drafted policy recommendations.

For Ms. McIntyre, this "innovative form of public consultation was a revelation. It gave me a real awareness of the complexity of the issues." Pat Moyle, Halton Region's chief administrative officer, was equally impressed. "These people were really engaged," he says. "Once they appreciated what was involved, they delivered a surprising level of thoughtfulness. I'd do it again in a heartbeat."

None of this comes as a surprise to Peter MacLeod, 32-year-old principal of Mass LBP, the Toronto-based company that devised the Halton experiment. "The standard story is that citizens are apathetic and ignorant," he says. "But when you actually give them the opportunity to do something real, they step up."

Indeed, Mr. MacLeod's 3½-year-old firm is part of a new wave of consultants trying to reinvigorate Western democracies with greater public engagement. These include Ottawa-based Dialogue Partners and Ascentum, and America Speaks, based in Washington, D.C. Dozens of citizens panels have also been set up in Britain and elsewhere in the European Union.

Of course, the public pulse is routinely taken in various ways. But polls tend to measure single moments in time. Focus groups and online dialogues rarely seek or establish consensus. And town halls often become venting platforms, filled with more heat than light. Certainly, none gives to - or asks of - citizens as much as the in-depth process these groups are adopting.

According to Mr. MacLeod, well-staged public engagement exercises are win-win situations. Although politicians pay lip service to the importance of citizens and families - especially during election campaigns - "they see the broader public itself as polarized, volatile and ill-informed. And the public is cynical, lacking trust in politics and political institutions. We're a house divided against itself. So our work is about rehabilitation - authority's view of the broader public's capacity to play a useful role, and people's

appreciation for the complexity of issues and the sincerity of authorities. It tempers skepticism on both sides."

But do citizens' panels actually make a difference when policy decisions are made? There is evidence they do.

In 2009, Robin Biron, chief executive officer of Cobourg, Ont.'s 103-bed Northumberland Hills Hospital, was facing a fourth consecutive year of deficits and more cuts to its \$60-million annual budget. "Given our relationship with our community," Mr. Biron says, "it was imperative to engage them before decisions were made and gain their perspective on the options." In this instance, 28 lottery winners committed five full Saturdays over a 12-week period.

In the end, the panel's recommendations mirrored those the hospital's board had considered. "We would do it again, no question," Mr. Biron says. "It proved to me that you can effectively engage your community on difficult issues. But you have to structure the engagement constructively. Two microphone stands in a town-hall meeting that lets people rant and rave - that's not the engagement we want."

Elsewhere, the Ottawa Hospital Cancer Centre will implement changes this summer in patient-care practices, many of them based on the 108 recommendations it received from a panel of cancer patients and their families, co-ordinated by Mr. MacLeod's team.

Besides, Mr. MacLeod notes, "while learning is essential, the work is too elaborate and time-consuming for clients to pursue simply for the purpose of public education. The results have to be useful, providing clarity around complex issues and generating public legitimacy."

The hunger of Canadians for meaningful involvement in policy issues was brought forcefully home to Mr. MacLeod by the Ontario's Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform's 2007 request for volunteers. About 7,000 Ontarians agreed to commit 16 weekends over nine months to sit in a windowless room

at York University - "not to talk about jobs, health care or the environment," he notes, "but something as obscure as electoral reform."

Typically, Mass LBP and its corporate clones facilitate discussions, but don't shape the final product. "It's not about us being the smartest people in the room," Mr. MacLeod insists. "Nor is it about thinking that the People know best - full stop." In fact, the process is less about consulting than it is about adult education. "The real emphasis is on learning. Our product is legitimacy - that's what we're trying to manufacture, just as juries and elections do. We're helping decision-makers make better decisions that enjoy public support."

Depending on the client, Mass LBP supplements citizen panels with larger round tables, to which the wider public is invited. In a hospital context, for example, round tables might explore such issues as access, seniors, drugs, outpatient and emergency care. The only rules for these discussions, Mr. MacLeod says, are "civility and the law of two feet."

Typically, about two-thirds of the way through the process, "people think it's a waste of time or the results are precooked, or no one will agree," he says. "But we're not looking for 100-per-cent consensus. That's a communist election. Most of the time, if you have the same values and knowledge base, 70 to 80 per cent will agree."

Mr. MacLeod takes it as a given that Western democracies need to raise their game. In agrarian, illiterate societies, it might have made sense simply to elect representatives to go off to the city to make laws. "But we are not that any more," he says. "We've never had a more literate, mobile, better connected public. So why, as a mature democracy, are we so bad at just bringing strangers together to solve problems?"