

Experimentocracy

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INTERDISCIPLINARY WORKSHOP ON REIMAGINING DEMOCRACY ESSAY SERIES



HARVARD Kennedy School

ASH CENTER
for Democratic Governance
and Innovation

I'm a science-fiction author who writes about (among other things) fictional social structures: gift economies, reputation voting, decentralized post-Westphalian nations, authoritarian cabals fueled by fear of AI, and so forth. So, in the context of recreating democracy, you might expect me to be a fountain of wacky ideas for new constituencies, new kinds of voting, new forms of representation, etc. I will touch on a few such ideas, but they're not the primary thing I want to talk about. You see, I come to you not just from the world of science fiction, but also, more directly, from the tech industry—specifically, that California superorganism known as Silicon Valley.

One of the Valley's awkward little secrets, hidden in plain sight, is that most tech startups are not really about technology at all. Some are . . . but usually, there's little doubt that the tech in question basically works(ish), and that it will get steadily better over time. Instead, the doubt, the risk, the gamble, is how ordinary people will respond to a particular configuration of new-ish technology. In other words, most so-called tech startups are really anthropology experiments.

You see this everywhere. OpenAI is a real hard-tech startup, doing cutting-edge research, but ChatGPT was absolutely an anthropology experiment, and its wild success an entirely unexpected outcome. Airbnb and Uber were experiments with the idea that people would happily ride in the cars and stay in the houses of strangers from the internet. Fifteen years ago, this seemed very strange; it was controversial and often dismissed with furious contempt—although even then, careful observers would have noticed such experiments had already been running for years, on a crude and ad-hoc basis, on Craigslist.

Today, those notions have graduated from wacky experiments to integral elements of the fabric of modern society. It's important to remember that this can and does happen, especially when you're talking about something as seemingly quixotic as recreating democracy. There are several reasons that the tech industry, for all its flaws, is the primary engine of change in the world today. One is that governments seem increasingly sclerotic and paralyzed. But perhaps the most important is that the tech industry is, to mix a metaphor, a crucible of petri dishes, seeding the world with thousands of experiments every year.

This is the most effective way to consistently change the world because most anthropological experiments fail, no matter how brilliant their inventors. The meta-lesson of Silicon Valley is that the way to change the world is not to work for years on perfecting a single idea before launching it. Instead, it is to try a whole new idea every six months, again and again, until one of those seeds bears fruit.

As such, if we want to recreate democracy, we probably need some kind of democratic test bed.

There is no point in expending the time, effort, and cost required for, say, national quadratic voting—building and hardening the systems to implement and communicate them to the voting population, at scale—if it turns out that the cold, hard anthropological fact is that ordinary people will not use it. I personally think it's a promising idea, but what I think doesn't matter if the anthropological experiment fails. To identify which ideas for recreating democracy could actually work and, conversely, which have disconcerting emergent properties, we need to be able to experiment with them relatively easily, quickly, and cheaply instead of building a whole new polity and only then discovering it was founded on a failing experiment.

Conveniently, some such test beds already exist. In America, famously, the states are supposed to be the laboratories of democracy—and sometimes are. But they're unwieldy for our purposes. We probably want something smaller, lower-stakes, more ad-hoc. One obvious set consists of grassroots communities that create their own governance from the ground up. These range in gravitas from intentional communities and fan clubs to churches and NGOs. To the extent that they matter to their constituents, though, all are very viable petri dishes for democratic experiments.

There also exist even more direct and explicit democratic test beds. Inconveniently, they were mostly created by disreputable fringe subcultures. However, an occupational hazard of talking about new nations, and new *kinds* of nations, is that such experiments overlap more strongly than we might like with people

who simply want to escape traditional governmental oversight completely. A loose taxonomy of such constructs includes:

- **Distributed Autonomous Organizations (DAOs)**, online groups that support a wide variety of different kinds of voting, mostly enforced by blockchain software. A common knee-jerk reaction is “Ugh, blockchain,” but I would urge people to try to restrain that feeling, for once. DAOs may be the most mature experimental substrate available for online democracy. (Of course, using a DAO for experiments doesn’t imply your final democracy has to be built on a blockchain!) More extensively, and theoretically, Balaji Srinivasan recently wrote a book about distributed nations, called *The Network State*, and hosted an associated conference. There are also “CityDAOs,” online organizations with a remit restricted to a particular geography, an interesting hybrid.
- **Temporary Autonomous Zones (TAZs)**, in which people self-organize in a given geographical area for a limited period of time. The advantage a TAZ has over a church or fan group is that people commit not just an interest or an aspect of their life but their entire selves, briefly living in it, personally and physically, and experiencing all its good and bad. The most famous TAZ is probably the annual Burning Man festival, and as a several-time attendee, I confess my instinct is that any attempt to democratize Burning Man would be a spectacular disaster—but I would be very interested in any experiment that proved me wrong! Another example from earlier this year is Zuzalu, a “pop-up city” hosted by Montenegro and described as “an experiment in co-living and exploring what the physical presence of an online tribe would look like.” This has some overlap with the next construct.
- **Charter cities and special economic zones**, legally prescribed areas free to construct their own governance mechanisms untrammelled by the usual norms and restrictions of the nations that host them, within limits of course. Special economic zones are popular and successful worldwide but do not traditionally feature experimental democracies; still, they exemplify a possible approach. Charter cities are more explicitly special democratic zones, with their own governance structures. Interest in them is growing, and examples exist, such as Próspera in Honduras. However, it’s fair to say that to date there have been no successes among them . . . and Honduras’ law enabling charter cities has since been repealed. Seasteading is an even more extreme, and even less successful, extension of this approach. A more restrained example might be the recent purchase of a broad swathe of land near San Francisco by a group of wealthy Silicon Valley figures, with an eye to creating a brand-new California city.

It’s worth going over some potential experiments to see how well they might suit these various test beds. One area of considerable experimentation is in voting. A few different forms that people have proposed include:

- **Direct voting**, featuring regular plebiscites on individual issues.
- **Quadratic voting**, in which each constituent gets multiple votes and can spread them across multiple issues or not, but the more they focus on fewer issues, the less impact one vote has.
- **Liquid voting**, in which constituents can designate delegates who will vote for them.
- My own variant, *mandatory liquid voting*, in which votes can *only* be cast after they are delegated.
- My own favorite (not original to me), **participatory budgeting**, in which people vote not only at election time, for representatives, but also at tax time, for budgets, by personally designating a sizable percentage of their personal taxes for specific government initiatives or departments (perhaps with a one-year delay to give budgets time to adjust). This can connect democratic desires to actual governmental action far more effectively than mere voting. I’m especially fond of a variant in which you can take part in participatory budgeting *only if you voted*.

Note that these are mostly orthogonal to, for example, whether a democracy is representative, what that representation looks like, and what/how many tiers of representation exist. They're also essentially independent of experimental form; you could run a DAO, a TAZ, or a K-Pop fan group with any of these systems. A separate area of experimentation is *constituencies*. Historically, these are designated by geography, from districts to entire nations. I think experimenting with online constituencies is likely worthwhile. These could include:

- Optional online consistencies in which people can choose to vote *either* in their geographic district or as part of a sufficiently broad online community to which they have meaningful ties.
- Entirely online constituencies, or even nations, or even an *entirely virtual* state whose passport gives its citizens the right to live and work in a subset of Westphalian nations. The concept of living and working in a nation whose passport you do not hold is extremely well established, and there's no intrinsic reason why a virtual state could not be a passport-granting nation.

Finally, it would be remiss of me not to mention forecasting, given that I currently work at the forecasting platform Metaculus. The value of forecasting is that—surprisingly—individual errors tend to cancel one another out, such that groups of people consistently forecast more accurately than any individual, even experts. As such, forecasting the effects of various forms of democratic experimentation would likely be a very quick and efficient way to identify those that have the most and least promise.

About the Author

Jon Evans is the author of nine novels, most recently *Exadelic* from Tor Books. His journalism has appeared in *The Guardian*, *Wired*, *Quartz*, *The Globe & Mail*, *The Walrus*, and (weekly, for a decade) *TechCrunch*; he has traveled to more than 100 nations and reported from Iraq, Haiti, Colombia, and the Congo. Jon is also the former CTO of technical consultancy HappyFunCorp, the founding director of the GitHub Archive Program, and a University of Waterloo electrical engineering alumnus.

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About the Ash Center

The Mission of the Roy and Lila Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at is to develop ideas and foster practices for equal and inclusive, multi-racial and multi-ethnic democracy and self-government.

About the Second Interdisciplinary Workshop on Reimagining Democracy

This essay was adopted from a presentation given at the [Second Interdisciplinary Workshop on Reimagining Democracy](#) held on the campus of Harvard Kennedy School in December 2023. Convened with support from the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation and the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, the conference was intended to bring together a diverse set of thinkers and practitioners to talk about how democracy might be reimagined for the twenty-first century.

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