

Moving Beyond the Paradigm of “Democracy”: 12 Questions

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Recent events, including the latest Israel-Hamas war, the surrounding debates across university campuses, and the resulting societal divisions, have only strengthened my belief in the need for more deliberative spaces. Spaces that create the epistemic conditions that enable us to be with complexity, to channel our collective intelligence, and to find common ground with one another. Spaces that maximize the constructive side of humanity. These recent events have equally deepened my inquiry into questions about borders, identity, citizenship, and the language we use to talk about our relationships with one another and with place.

To overcome the deep divides we face today, I argue that we need to move beyond the paradigm of democracy. Whether rightly or wrongly, democracy today has become inextricably associated with elections, political parties, campaigns, and debates. While many are fighting to “save” or “renew” democracy in light of its potential demise and the increasingly likely threat of an authoritarian future in many parts of the world, I do not find it an inspiring clarion call to try and save the status quo. It is precisely because the risk of authoritarianism is so strong that we need a compelling and hopeful alternative. We need to establish new institutions, processes, rituals, and spaces, and I believe that these should center deliberation in a more relational, more-than-human worldview.

Two Key Concepts: Deliberation and More-Than-Human

Deliberation means weighing evidence with the aim of making shared decisions. Weighing evidence entails more than just reviewing facts. We need to create the spaces that enable us to understand our individual and collective values, to feel the emotions that shape our understanding of the facts, and to articulate those values and emotions in relation to our understanding of what’s going on in the world.

By emphasizing the **more-than-human**, I’m referring to the aspect of our relationship to place that is not just about city or country but about **our relationship with the living world**. Now, this might seem far away from the top concerns of today when we’re talking about war and so on. As Kerri ní Dochartaigh has written in *Thin Places*, talking about her experience of growing up in Derry during the Troubles:

“When whole streets are burned down, and the fact of a city changed beyond recognition, very few folks notice their disconnect with the natural world. When you’ve no home to go to because it’s been petrol bombed, seeking the wonder of the wild world is not a priority.”

Yet she also goes on to articulate precisely why reconnecting with the natural world can be so healing and so powerful:

“There is so much life in the places around us and, sometimes, for some of us, somehow, this helps us to value our own life . . . Battles, governments, laws, leaders—borders—come and go, but the land and its sacred places remain unmoved and unchanged in their core.”

A disconnection from the natural world is one part of why many people feel disconnected from each other, leading to feelings of loneliness and depression and powerlessness. These are precisely the emotions that autocrats feed upon, enflaming them to entrench divides and increase their own strength. Reflections on the more-than-human also open up deeper enquiries about citizenship, borders, and identity.

Citizens’ Assemblies as an Emblematic Deliberative Space

For all of these reasons, I believe that [citizens’ assemblies](#), anchored in a more expansive and relational view of who has agency and rights, are a key part of the change that we need to reconnect with one another. They are central in the transition toward another paradigm beyond democracy, one with new institutions, processes, rituals, and spaces, both physical and virtual. Citizens’ assemblies are not a silver bullet, but they are a central part of what we need.

I’m talking about the sorts of assemblies that bring together a group of people by sortition (meaning by lottery, stratified for representativeness) for extended periods of time to delve into the complexity of an issue. Assembly members hear from experts, stakeholders, and people with lived experience; listen to one another; and do the hard work of finding common ground about what we should do about this issue facing all of us.

For example, take the recent citizens’ assembly in France, where I live, about whether the existing legislation on end-of-life issues should be amended and, if so, how. From December 2022 to April 2023, 184 people selected by sortition engaged in 27 days of deliberation. They heard from and questioned over 60 experts. They developed 67 detailed recommendations, on which they found 92% consensus, that formed a 176-page report delivered to President Macron. The essence was that the legislation should change to enable euthanasia and assisted dying under certain conditions. Furthermore, they advocated for greater investment in palliative care and a wider set of considerations about the additional research that’s needed around these issues.

This is just one citizens’ assembly out of hundreds. The work I did with my colleague Ieva Cesnulyte at the [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development](#) documented almost 600 case studies around the world. Our former colleagues just updated this resource; there are now almost 800 examples that show us what’s possible. I was involved in designing the first permanent assemblies in Paris, Brussels, and elsewhere.

And the work that we’re doing at [DemocracyNext](#) is building on the foundations of this evidence and experience. We’ve systematized existing knowledge into our [Assembling an Assembly Guide](#). We’re working with governments and other public authorities across the world in strategic collaborations with local actors to anchor permanent and empowered citizens’ assemblies as a normal way to make certain decisions. At the moment, we’re working with [MIT Center for Constructive Communication](#) and a coalition of other partners to get a **U.S. Citizens’ Assemblies Action Lab** off the ground. We’re also working to show that the principles of sortition and deliberation can be applied in other contexts, too—like a project we just finished with two public museums in Germany. Furthermore, we’re starting a new project that explores **more-than-human democracy**.

However, if citizens’ assemblies are to become the heart of another democratic paradigm that’s not centered around elections, we still have a fair bit of work to do to provide better answers to the kinds of questions that will come up more often if, and hopefully when, citizens’ assemblies become even more widespread than they are today.

12 questions

Inspired by Richard Feynman, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist who famously kept a list of 12 questions, I have also put together a list of 12 questions. My hope is that some of you reading this may be further along on the journey to finding answers or may be interested in joining forces to explore these questions together.

How do we shift **power** to citizens' assemblies?

1. What does **accountability and legitimacy** entail if citizens' assemblies have binding decision-making authority?
2. Should participation in citizens' assemblies be **compulsory** in the same way as jury duty?
3. When carrying out sortition processes, how should we decide **which quotas are appropriate, fair, and legitimate**? By which criteria does the citizens' assembly need to be representative of a wider population? This is a political decision, and there are trade-offs between emphasizing representativeness or emphasizing diversity.
4. Should we use the word "**citizen**"? It feels like a bit of a double battle to defend its use as an inclusive, active, and expansive word beyond the very limiting meaning associated with formal political rights that has come to dominate today's environment.
5. How do we bring the **more-than-human** world into our conception of democracy? Is it the rights-based approach and constitutional protections, or is it something else entirely that we're struggling to imagine?
6. How are rapid advances in **AI** and other new technologies impacting how we should think about agency, accountability, authority, and responsibility? Can AI have agency?
7. What does **leadership** look like in a new paradigm?
8. Who decides who decides? It feels like we're in a big moment of turbulence, transition, and fierce intellectual debates, prompting lots of conversations about the need to rewrite the social contract in some way. I'm noticing more and more conversations around **constitutional** amendments and changes. What does the process look like to update these key constitutional texts?
9. If you think about places that are in the deepest conflict today, like Ukraine and the Middle East, what is the proposition for an entirely new governing system? Is it a constitutional process for establishing a new governing system? Or is it proposals for a new ecosystem of institutions that are not about elections? Is this an opportunity for the emergence of a fully embodied first new paradigm?
10. What should we call the **post-democratic paradigm**? I'm increasingly convinced that "democracy" is not the right word and concept that we're talking about. But it's not clear what the new one is yet, at least not to me.
11. How can **technology** be leveraged to enhance deliberative spaces and the epistemic conditions that we need? How can technology enhance transparency and help facilitate the widespread adoption of citizens' assemblies and other deliberative spaces? Together with the MIT Center for Constructive Communication, we have launched a new [Pop-Up Lab on Tech-Enhanced Citizens' Assemblies](#) to build prototypes and experiment with ways to address these questions.

Concluding Thoughts

The first big moment that had an impact on my intellectual trajectory and led me to work on democratic innovation and deliberative democracy was my first day of university. I was in London and Lehman Brothers crashed. It was the first time I had a feeling of some seismic changes that were about to happen. It's why I ended up studying politics.

Today, it feels like we're in a similarly seismic, paradigm-shifting moment. It feels like we're on the brink of some really big changes that are already starting to unfold. I feel a sense of urgency and a responsibility to act to bring about the future that I want. Because there are other people actively fighting for very different kinds of autocratic futures, pulling in the opposite direction.

We are seeing a growing wave of citizens' assemblies and other deliberative spaces, a growing number of conversations about our relationships with each other and with the living world, and a growing number of people who think we need to do so much more than tinker with electoral reform.

That's what gives me hope that another future genuinely *is* possible. Hope is not the same as optimism. As Rebecca Solnit beautifully put it in *Hope in the Dark*:

"Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act. When you recognise uncertainty, you recognise that you may be able to influence the outcomes—you alone or you in concert with a few dozen or several million others."

I urge us all to act together to shape the future we want.

About the Author

Claudia Chwalisz is the founder and CEO of DemocracyNext, an international research and action institute working to enable more people to see the potential of sortition (selecting decision-makers by lottery), deliberation, and participation as transformative democratic principles that shift who has power and how decisions are made. She is co-lead of the Tech-Enhanced Citizens' Assemblies Pop-Up Lab with the MIT Center for Constructive Communication, an advisor to Design & Democracy and The Data Tank, and an Obama Leader Europe 2023. Claudia was involved in designing the world's first permanent citizens' assemblies with members selected by sortition. Previously, she led the OECD's work on innovative citizen participation.

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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