

Permission and Participation

Kathryn Peters

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Gridlock. Polarization. Party capture by fringe interests. Disproportionate donor influence. Insufficient representation for minoritized communities. The structural problems hindering American legislatures from effectively serving as checks on executive power and policymakers for the public are well understood and thoroughly documented.

We're living through a moment of further decline, as the known problems of winner-take-all elections in single-representative districts interact with increasingly nationalized public discourse, the commodification of politics as entertainment, and a backlash against recent gains in racial and gender equality.

And yet public opinion polling suggests that this status quo alienates many Americans and overlooks majority agreement on a wide range of seemingly intractable policy issues. Reformers have advanced ranked-choice voting, proposed changes to campaign finance rules, and suggested a variety of other systemic tweaks, large and small, to address these issues.

But given that this gathering offers us the opportunity to reimagine democracy, it's worth asking: Instead of seeking incremental reforms, what would happen if we stopped seeking permission and began experimenting with alternatives? Could one path to reforming elected legislatures include replacing or bypassing them entirely?

Imagining a people's legislature

What if we replaced legislatures made up of elected representatives with randomly selected assemblies tasked with creating new laws? In the justice system, jury trials are understood to be a critical check on the power of the judiciary. And while the jury system itself is not flawless, it has served as a model for using representative groups of citizens to lead other government processes, from redistricting to drafting ballot initiative summaries.¹

In 2019, John Gastil and Erik Olin Wright [published a proposal for a hybrid legislature](#), made up of one elected and one randomly selected chamber, alongside a series of responses to the idea from across the political sciences. Whether established in conjunction with an elected chamber or as a standalone alternative, this essay explores some additional considerations and potential benefits to reestablishing contemporary direct democracy through a randomly selected legislature.

But Why?

Replacing professional politicians with actually random, person-off-the-street representatives may sound ludicrous. Reestablishing Athenian democracy doesn't necessarily sound like the solution to our contemporary democratic challenges. Moreover, our faith in the capabilities and goodwill of our neighbors is at an all-time low, making it difficult to imagine placing so much responsibility on a totally untested body.

But this design addresses several of the root causes of our current political dysfunction.

- **Gridlock.** Fundraising demands encourage candidates to take policy positions that appeal to their most ardent supporters—and that tend to be more extreme than the views of their full constituency. This pressure also reduces candidates' willingness to compromise from those extremes. Bypassing elections closes this specific path for donors to discourage negotiation.

1. A note on the use of the term "citizens" here: While U.S. immigration policy has made the question of citizenship deeply fraught for many people, especially those who feel the precarity of temporary or undocumented residency, much of the research here uses the term to connote membership and community ties rather than mere presence. This discussion of citizenship is one of participation and contribution rather than legal status, and I use the term "people's" in my own construction to better include representation from those who are nonpermanent, undocumented, and/or of other legal status.

- **Deliberation.** Many selected assembly members would not hold an existing party affiliation or a partisan identity. Beginning policy conversations with a more heterogeneous group creates new spaces for deliberation and compromise that may be open to proposals outside either current party platform.
- **Polarization and extremism.** Most legislative elections are uncompetitive or competitive only in the primary election stage. These districts marginalize the voices of opposition-party and unaligned voters, which in turn raises the perceived emotional stakes and us-versus-them nature of political opposition. Among a randomly selected body, most people would be able to identify a legislator representing their views and interests to claim as “theirs,” broadening the pool of those who feel represented and included.
- **Broadening the conversation.** With potential representation drawn from across the population, campaigns for social and policy change have incentive to develop broad-based grassroots support and general recognition rather than mobilizing a small, dedicated core. This may create new incentives for policy campaigns that build coalitions, inspire positive emotion, and attract more inclusive political communities.
- **Selecting for governing over campaigning.** Random selection will bring people into the work of government who would not otherwise have chosen to do so, and some of those people will find that they’re genuinely gifted at it or have a passion for the issues. The process of campaigning leads many would-be candidates to self-select out, and the people who choose to run share a number of personality traits that can undermine their public service. A pipeline from random selection into later elected or appointed public service could improve the quality of governance work across the whole of government.
- **Civic education.** Participation in deliberative groups provides an excellent and advanced civic education for those selected and their immediate families and communities. The possibility of being chosen may also shape how engaged people are in more day-to-day civics lessons within their communities. Adopting this model at the local level for city councils or commissions could rapidly re-personalize the role of government and enhance understanding of its powers and limitations.

A Modern History of Random Selections

In addition to juries, representative bodies have served in a number of critical policy functions in recent years. Five states include public participation or randomly selected members on redistricting commissions that define the boundaries of their congressional and other legislative districts, with Arizona being the first to adopt an application-then-lottery process in 2000.

Oregon’s Citizens’ Initiative Review (CIR) commission may be the most-studied example of how a randomly selected, deliberative group works and its impact on public policy. Established in 2011, the CIR invites 20–25 randomly selected Oregonians to participate in a four-day process to review proposed ballot initiatives. The participants hear from experts and advocates on each side of the issues, then draft the text that will appear on the ballot for each issue and vote on final approved summaries. Facilitated by the nonprofit Healthy Democracy, this process compensates participants at a rate based on the average daily state wage.

In other settings, randomly selected panels have served as advisory bodies on city council wages, zoning codes, climate and energy policy, and patient engagement in health research. These groups have largely played advisory roles, generating reports rather than making binding policy decisions, and their use still depends heavily on the decision-making and goodwill of elected officials. Other International

Workshop on Reimagining Democracy (IWORD) presentations addressed [convening and facilitating deliberative, participatory bodies](#) and hopes for [expanding their use through improved supporting technology](#). These experiments suggest that we could use participatory bodies for far more than the limited power and influence governments have delegated thus far.

Getting There from Here

Unsurprisingly, we don't often get to fundamentally redesign how major components of our government—say, the U.S. Congress—work. Developing more participatory governance isn't going to start with a constitutional amendment and the random selection of 435 representatives. Waiting for formal adoption via the current status quo isn't how radical ideas come to life, as [Jon Evans' IWORD talk on "experimentocracy"](#) also underlined.

Even now, though, there are two potential areas where randomly selected bodies could make an immediate positive impact and illustrate the potential for larger change down the line: changing the composition of many citizen advisory commissions and other local governmental bodies nationwide, and holding citizens' assemblies on a variety of highly polarized, nationally gridlocked topics. These assemblies could develop and then advocate for people's agendas that demonstrate the potential for greater compromise and progress than our legislatures currently support.

To the first, my home in Orange County, North Carolina offers opportunities for residents to sit on the local sewer board, a parks and rec advisory committee, a jury commission, the housing authority, and a dozen others. At present, these roles are filled by those who show up—or they sit underserved. This leaves these commissions deeply vulnerable to capture by exactly the special interests we see damaging national politics. This has the potential to impact critical topics such as who belongs in the community, who local resources are meant to serve, how schools educate and what values they impart, and how to encourage and manage economic growth. Using a lottery of local residents and providing a stipend for each of these roles would welcome many new faces into local governance, provide valuable public education about the functions of local governance, and shift who runs for city council, school board, and even state legislative seats over time.

Looking nationwide, there are 89,000 municipalities and 13,000 school districts. Those offer many, many roles that could serve as new entry points for randomly selected representation and new forms of public deliberation. Why not begin experimenting with even a fraction of them? That shift could come from within local government, by changing the selection processes for these bodies—but it doesn't have to. An outside group modeled on the work of [Run For Something](#) could also perform the randomization, invite people to join these commissions and councils using their current selection processes and criteria, and (within any ethics rules set by local and state law) provide support and incentives to help those new representatives thrive.

Similarly, we have all seen statistics about how many issues share a broader public opinion consensus than news coverage of political debate would suggest. From gun control to abortion, many seemingly intractable issues may be intractable primarily because of who we've entrusted to address them. A series of "people's assemblies," drawn from across the country or perhaps state by state, could take up some of these topics and identify potential areas for compromise and policy change. In explaining their deliberations and internal negotiations, the assemblies could make a strong public case for new paths forward. These paths may look quite different from those identified through political polling or focus groups, both of which are popular in developing political messaging by asking individuals their opinions in a vacuum. Furthermore, persuasive messages developed by peers rather than elites may do much to shift popular opinion toward potential paths forward.

Participation beyond Permission

In both these experimental scenarios, we'll get the opportunity to learn what works and what doesn't. Local bodies will test what kind of professional support helps amateur representatives work most effectively and how to limit undue influence from experts and facilitators. We'll see whether and how this kind of participation shapes other forms of civic engagement and public trust.

Most importantly, experiments like these reclaim the notion of governance of and by the people, offering avenues that our current system of professional representation and issue advocacy often closes off. Waiting for permission to address our current political challenges only deepens the problem. Finding creative solutions and paths forward—even and especially at a small scale—offers new channels for hope and renewal in our civic life. Isn't that where we should begin?

About the Author

Kathryn Peters is an independent strategist and technologist who works to create a more engaged, inclusive democracy. She is currently imagining the potential of local politics, smaller social media communities, and more human-scale communication to revitalize our public discourse.

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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Harvard Kennedy School
79 John F. Kennedy Street
Cambridge, MA 02138
617-495-0557
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