

Directly Representative Democracy

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With modest reforms and resources, we can reinvest substantially in the deliberative infrastructure of our politics.

“At the close of the constitutional convention a lady asked Benjamin Franklin: “Well, Doctor, what have we got—a Republic or a Monarchy?” Franklin replied: “A Republic—if you can keep it.”

—James McHenry

Today we may be apt to read this anecdote as a gently cynical joke. After all, Americans have managed to keep their republic for almost two and a half centuries now. But at the time, Franklin was surely quite serious, if witty, in expressing his concern. History to that point suggested that republics were unstable, especially at scale, and that democracies were prone to degenerating into tyranny. For many citizens those dormant concerns have begun to resurface. Invoking Franklin’s quip expresses urgent, not gentle, cynicism, and, if it is a joke, it is gallows humor. Post-truth politics leads to pre-authoritarian governance. Even many of those for whom it may seem overheated to talk of losing our republic worry with [political theorist Hannah] Pitkin that “the arrangements we call ‘representative democracy’ have become a substitute for popular self-government, not its enactment.” The banality of tyranny, perhaps.

On either the urgent or banal reading, representative democracy is nevertheless in trouble. Confidence and trust in our democratic institutions are at an all-time low. Average citizens do not feel motivated or empowered to participate in their own self-governance; cynicism and apathy flow from a rigged system and scorched-earth partisan warfare.

In response, proposals abound for making representative democracy either less represen-

tative or less democratic. Going alternatives in the institutional status quo just cycle around: technocracy creates democratic deficits; populist nationalism threatens rights; direct democracy ends up empowering vested interests at least as much as the status quo; and doubling down on interest-group pluralism encourages citizens to act as consumers, with parties turning voting and elections into little more than tribal antagonism.

Many democracies around the world exhibit the same array of symptoms. The internet, identified by early techno-optimists as a boon for democracy, actually seems to be accelerating many of these dangerous trends. Social media and social algorithms enable people to sink into their respective bubbles, connecting only with the like-minded, seeing only (sometimes fake) news that resonates with predispositions.

Our alternative, which we call “directly representative democracy,” seeks to reconnect citizens to their government as *citizens*—that is, as partners with their representatives and each other in seeking just and effective policy. On this account, citizens should not be regarded only as consumers who “buy” policy by contributing money to organized interest groups or votes to

political parties. Rather, they should have a direct role in advising and evaluating the reasoning and policy actions of their representatives. Thus, we argue that contemporary democracies need new, effective channels of communication

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between citizens and their government. Rather than merely trying to find the right balance between our representatives acting as “delegates” or “trustees,” the goal is to lessen the tension between the two.

Directly representative democracy is a proposal for building more direct, inclusive, and deliberative connections between citizens and government officials in order to create alternatives to our broken system of interest-group politics and blind partisanship. We propose it as a paradigm to narrow the gap between our highest ideals and disappointing realities by leveraging new communication technologies to reconnect citizens to their “immediate representatives.”

Political theorist and political reformers have traditionally contrasted direct and representative democracy, depending upon how much power is exercised directly by the people themselves (e.g., in referenda) versus how mediated that exercise is through representatives (e.g., via elected officials). We claim that the traditional contrast between direct and representative democracy—



at least as it plays out in today's discussions about political reform—does not fully capture the practical possibilities. We propose augmenting existing democratic institutions to make them simultaneously both more direct *and* more representative. Doing so will enable citizens to

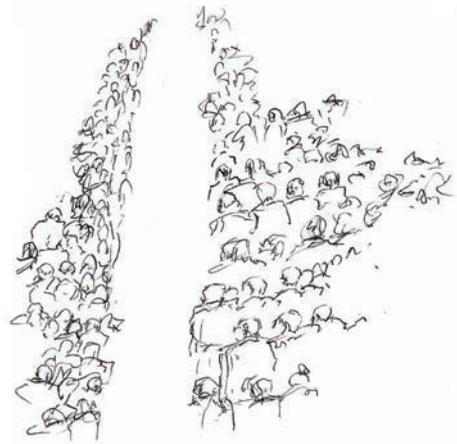
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reconnect with their representatives, engaging them in important, substantive policy matters.

Directly representative institutions can take many forms and can connect citizens with any branch of government. Our own innovation in directly representative democracy involves a new kind of online deliberative town hall meeting that brings average citizens into dialogue with their elected legislators on important policy matters, *directly as citizens*, rather than only as voters, campaign contributors, or members of interest groups. Both the citizens and the members of Congress who participated in our project agreed that the deliberative town hall that we designed improved communication and trust. Thus, our term, *directly representative democracy*, is not an oxymoron nor merely some middle position between direct and representative democracy. Rather it *expands* the policymaking and legitimacy-evoking capacities of representative democracy itself.

Our approach is *direct* in that the primary representative relationship is between a con-

stituent and her elected official. Parties and interest groups, though important, are emphatically secondary and derivative. You may be an environmentalist, an evangelical Christian, a teamster, a Republican, or some combination of these. The representative claim that you have on your elected officials, however, does not depend upon and need not flow through these identities. Direct representation in this sense is important for both theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically, we are all individual citizens with rights and the moral power of political judgment—something that is not merely a weighted average of our supposed group interests and identities. Moreover, when those characteristics are translated into the policy process, they often get used in a misguided way. Say that you are an environmentalist, and as such, you are leery of genetically modified foods. But you do not like pesticides either, and GMOs require fewer pesticides. And you are worried that without either, food costs will go up, causing hardship for poor people, contrary to your egalitarian commitments. Such



cross-cutting identities create cross-cutting frames and considerations that inform our political judgments. But interest groups (including *public* interest groups) tend to act as inflexible agents of their core demands. Direct representation ameliorates this problem and encourages

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citizens to engage policy in a more substantive and nuanced way.

Our approach is *representative* in that it focuses on and seeks to improve citizen communication within institutions of representative government, rather than emphasizing initiatives, referenda, and other unmediated institutions as the primary engines of reform. Directly representative democracy agrees that the scale and scope of modern democracies preclude direct institutions from effectively serving as more than a supplement to governance. Unlike the relatively few enfranchised citizens of ancient Athens, most citizens of contemporary democracies have day jobs and many other demands on their time. The benefits of representative government, moreover, are not merely matters of “second best.” Talented public servants who acquire policy expertise can promote high-quality deliberation, develop coherent and forward-looking policy, and protect against lurches in public opinion, among other reasons to favor representative over direct democracy.

Our approach is *democratic* in that we seek to create new and meaningful opportunities for citizens to participate in ways that go beyond checking off a ballot every few years, writing a check to a political organization, or shouting protest slogans. Indeed, our vision is closer to the civics textbook presentation of democracy than either technocracy or interest-group pluralism. Directly representative democracy centers on reintroducing effective and inclusive communication between citizen and legislators.

With *directly representative democracy* we propose instead to strengthen both the representative and democratic elements simultaneously—to expand representative democracy’s potential in good times and in bad. Rather than concede to a cycle of zero sum lurches between reform movements that do not cut to the root of the problem, we propose building more direct and deliberative connections between citizens and government officials that would be a boon in any context. But such connections are especially urgent as an alternative to our broken system of interest-group rent-seeking and partisan intransigence. Building them will go some way toward reconnecting citizens to their government as citizens, rather than merely as consumers or tribal combatants.

Directly representative democracy is *direct* in that it bypasses and supplements the highly mediated pathways of interest groups, parties, and mass media that constitute status quo politics. It is *representative* in that it strengthens established representative institutions rather than attempting to work around them. And it is *democratic* in that citizens play a robust

role through all phases of the political process, rather than simply showing up every four years to render an up or down judgment.

Nor is our proposal merely notional. Instead, it is based on a series of groundbreaking experiments that evaluated an alternative conception

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of democracy in a realistic, yet scientifically rigorous, way. Members of Congress agreed to be randomly assigned to samples of their constituents, participating in online town-hall meetings about some of the most important and controversial issues of the day. The results reveal a model of how our democracy could work, where politicians consult with and inform citizens in substantive discussions and where otherwise marginalized citizens participate and feel empowered. Our evidence suggests that with modest reforms and resources, we can reinvest substantially in the deliberative infrastructure of our politics.

Some may worry that we have an overly optimistic vision of human potential. Many argue that both human nature and the practicalities



of mass democracy restrict the role that average citizens can play in self-government to periodic opportunities to remove elites from power. Such arguments extend beyond the empirical and policy domains. In recent years, democratic theory has been preoccupied with debates regarding so-called ideal versus non-ideal or realist political theory. We believe that such arguments have been somewhat miscast. In most cases the conflict is not between views anchoring the idealistic and realistic poles. After all, the noted philosopher John Rawls, often treated as the arch-ideal-theorist, extensively engaged the social scientific literature of his day and on that basis argued for his “realistic” utopia. And conversely, most leading realists hardly reincarnate Machiavelli. Rather, the debate hinges on (1) how practical constraints should guide our norms and institutions and (2) how malleable putative facts about politics and human nature really are. Herein lies one of our contributions to democratic theory.

Given the evidence presented above, our proposals do not require starry-eyed idealism to warrant their promise. Thus, defeatism about the putatively tribal nature of politics is unwarranted. Parties and interest groups do not exhaust the domain of the political in modern democracy. Instead, we agree with James Madison, who provided both a more balanced vision of citizens’ capacities as well as practical reasons to extend a modicum of faith in the potential of democratic governance:

As there is a degree of depravity in mankind which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust, so there are other qualities in human nature which justify a certain portion of esteem and

confidence. Republican government presupposes the existence of these qualities in a higher degree than any other form. Were the pictures which have been drawn by the political jealousy of some among us faithful likenesses of the human character, the inference would be that there is not sufficient virtue among men for self-government. (Madison, Federalist No. 55)

For Madison, institutional innovation was the key to promoting the parts of human nature that justify “esteem and confidence.”

Is Now the Time?

“While confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities ‘unwise and untimely.’” Thus, Martin Luther King Jr. launched his great epistle on political protest, rejoicing those moderate white ministers who rebuked him for abandoning deliberation and negotiation in favor of disruption. Extraordinary injustice justifies extraordinary politics, Dr. King explained. Many people today fervently believe that we live in similarly extraordinary times and call again for extraordinary politics. Indeed, such calls for extraordinary politics hail from all over the political landscape.

Black Lives Matter highlights the ways in which urgent racial injustices that motivated the Civil Rights Movement remain urgent. The Tea Party formed out of fears that the federal government’s growing reach stifles economic dynamism and threatens the prerequisites of a free society. Indivisible and the Occupy movement coalesced from corresponding fears that corporate plutocracy was eroding democratic norms of equality and the rule of law. The Never



Trump movement suborned unfaithful delegates, rebelling against its own party’s standard bearer. And Trump himself drew support from those who wanted to radically disrupt establishment politics generally. All of these groups claim the kind of urgency, enormity, and moral clarity that justify disruption over deliberation.

Readers of very different political stripes might therefore worry that the reforms proposed in this book—which focus on improving the deliberative quality of ordinary politics—are altogether “untimely.” Now is not the moment, you might say, to emphasize dialogue and deliberation. At best, we are naive and complacent, rearranging deck chairs on a sinking ship of state. At worst, we abet a fundamentally broken system.

Yet, despite appearances, Dr. King affirmed the priority of deliberative politics. While languishing unjustly in a jail cell for engaging in disruptive action, he responds with a remarkable enactment of higher-order deliberative politics, one that justifies and delimits the conditions of extraordinary politics: “Since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and that your criticisms are sincerely

set forth, I want to try to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.” The subtlety and sublimity of Dr. King’s reply emerge from the way that he fused the rational persuasion of the text with the moral suasion of its context. The letter itself is a brilliant contribution to deliberative politics, penned under wildly inauspicious circumstances.

We should not be surprised to find deliberative politics at the heart of the Civil Rights Movement. From the perch of history, we tend to focus on the acts of civil disobedience themselves rather than on how the protesters justified and prepared for them. We are tempted to see the justification as obvious and the preparation as a formality. Yet that is precisely because the leaders of the movement were explicit and exacting about both: “In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action.” Knowing that police dogs, fire hoses, night sticks, and jail cells would follow on their actions rendered such careful progression anything but obvious and perfunctory.

Dr. King believed that any political movement that could withstand the scrutiny of history would first need to reengage in deliberation informed by the facts collected before considering disruption. But more important, any successful movement must aim to restore deliberative politics on terms that are more just and inclusive:

You may well ask: Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches and so forth? Isn’t negotiation a better path? You are quite right in calling for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action.

. . . Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue.

Done well, disruption and deliberation can work together to deepen democracy. After enduring the dogs and night-sticks, John Lewis stood for a seat in Congress.

We leave it for each reader to judge which of today’s rallying cries meet Dr. King’s criteria. We submit that the directly democratic reforms of ordinary politics that we propose remain vital whatever you decide. Even if our proposals were to succeed beyond our highest ambitions, they would, of course, still pale next to the Civil Rights Movement’s epochal achievements. And we evince none of its leaders’ moral courage in proposing them. Nevertheless, they share in the same vision of building a democratic community rooted in equality, freedom, justice, and mutual understanding. To those who worry that directly democratic reforms are untimely, then, our reply echoes Dr. King’s concern that in politics, “‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’” Our republic can scarcely afford further delay.

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