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'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

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.
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> 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 ciitzens.

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.



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David Van Reybrouck is one of Belgium's leading authors and intellectuals. He studied archeology and philosophy at the universities of Leuven and Cambridge and obtained his PhD in Leiden. In 2008, he published the pamphlet *A plea for populism*, followed by *Congo: The Epic History of a People*, a bestseller that has been translated from Dutch in more than twelve languages. His 2013 book *Against Elections: The Case for Democracy* was translated in twenty languages and received endorsement from Kofi Annan. In 2011, he started the G1000 project, the platform for democratic innovation that aims to increase citizen participation in democratic decision-making.