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Democracy to the rescue

Politics might be broken, but it's certainly not irreparable — and democracy has the tools to fix it

This decade has seen trust in UK politics hit an all-time low. Politicians are the least trusted profession in Britain; only 12 per cent of the public trust them to tell the truth, putting them below estate agents, advertising executives and journalists. The British public's confidence in parliament has halved since the 1990s. When it comes to voting, people are opting out. Voter turnout fell to its lowest ever in 2001 — 59 per cent, compared to 84 per cent in the mid-twentieth century. Most of the public believe the current system isn't built with them in mind and does not deliver what they need — and the people who are furthest from power and opportunity have the least trust in the current system.

The good news? The British public still believes in the ideal of democracy, even if the reality falls short. Eighty-eight per cent of Britons think democracy is still the best form of government and the vast majority of people think it's important to live in a country governed democratically. This mirrors attitudes across European countries too. People also want more influence and to participate more in democracy, especially on a community level. Thus, our current approach to politics may be the problem, but democracy could be the solution.

What can we do?

We must think about how we can build democratic innovations into the representative democracy system to enhance its best qualities and strengthen its weak points. For this, we must go beyond traditional democratic functions – voting, contacting elected representatives and online consultations, if you're lucky – and come up with new ways of engaging members of the public in decision-making.

Rebuilding trust in politics will require a generational effort. No one personality, political party or policy intervention is enough. Whether it is a better voting system, fairer representation, or more political education, a range of approaches are required to achieve this shift. As part of this change, we need to start putting people at the heart of how we do politics.

At Involve, we regularly see how involving people from all walks of life can have a big impact on policy and on those involved, and rebuild trust between politicians and members of the public.

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There are many different methods of involving people in decision-making. You might have heard of Citizens' Assemblies, distributed dialogue or co-production. But more important than the specific method is the idea — how can we open up real decisions to everyday people and make sure that their responses are reflected in policy, programmes and services. This means recognising that people are experts in their own lived experiences – and often lots of other things too – and harnessing this expertise. By offering spaces for participation, dialogue and deliberation – such as Participatory Budgeting, Pop Up Democracy and World Café – we can build trust in politics and democracy at the same time as making much better decisions. Decisions that reflect the real needs, preferences and aspirations of members of the public.

'Deliberative democracy' brings together everyday people who weigh up the strengths and weaknesses of decisions and explore their common ground to come to a shared conclusion. It is underpinned by the idea that political decisions should be a result of fair and reasonable discussion among members of the public. This process can guide decision-makers as they make difficult decisions, especially those involving tricky trade-offs or polarising issues. One example is the Jersey Assisted Dying Citizens' Jury, which was the first time a government asked a representative group of the public to come together to listen, learn and discuss the issue of assisted dying. Seventy-eight per cent of the jury members voted in favour of assisted dying being permitted in Jersey, and five months later, Jersey became the first parliament in the British Isles to decide 'in principle' that assisted dying should be allowed.

Such processes enhance public trust because the public gets to have a say over real decisions — they become part of the decision-making process with the agency to drive change. And they start to believe in the system. In this way, democratic innovations increase legitimacy — not only of the individual decision-making process, but of the decision-makers involved. And what better way for politicians to build trust than to be in the room with everyday people, giving them a share of their decision-making power?

Rebalancing the scales of inequity

It is no secret that the political system favours those with more privilege and wealth. The growth of inequality has been linked by many as leading to the erosion of democracy. The tax burden in the UK firmly sits with the poorest, and they are least likely to engage in political life. It takes time, energy, resources and the right know-how to make the democratic system work for you — a luxury in this day and age. Participatory and deliberative democracy reaches beyond those who already work within the system. One of the ways we do this is to make sure that participants receive an honorarium to recognise the time they give to the process — equivalent to at least the UK real living wage.

We know low-income and disenfranchised groups face greater barriers in accessing the democratic system, so we need a targeted approach to readdress this power imbalance. This is just one part of the picture though — we need to tackle social and economic inequity as well as establish alternative ways of doing democratic engagement. We need to reach out to the disillusioned, disengaged and often silent majority of our population who often don't engage through traditional means to have a truly representative democracy. These are the people whose trust has been broken the most within the current system.

We need to build a bottom-up community of practice in democratic innovation and create networks across sectors that bring together people doing public participation and engagement.

It is a big and daunting job to revolutionise the way we do democracy, but recent years have seen growing interest in the use of democratic innovations. However, bad engagement processes can be worse than none at all. Tick-boxing exercises, barriers to participation, tokenistic processes without a clear decision to influence – or without feeding back to the public what did and didn't happen as a result of the process – can further erode trust in politics and democracy.

One recipe for success is to help policy-makers do public engagement in decision-making well. This is why we need to build a bottom-up community of practice in democratic innovation and create networks across sectors that bring together people doing public participation and engagement. We must prioritise capacity building inside and outside of institutions and build up a strong evidence base of case studies and good practice to help decision-makers try, test and share learning from doing public engagement in practice.

Another part of the recipe is that we need politicians to trust the people

too. And take heart from the places where good quality public engagement has been done before, like in Scotland, Ireland, Ostbelgien and Taiwan. Then we will have politics that feels owned by the people — shifting towards ‘we’ rather than ‘us and them’. If we want to embed or change the culture of democracy, it is going to take time, I am under no illusion that it will happen overnight. But there's a clear vision for the future we want to see. Politics might be broken, but it’s certainly not irreparable — and democracy has the tools to fix it.



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