FROM WAVES TO ECOSYSTEMS

THE NEXT STAGE OF DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION

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JUNE 2024

SNF ITHACA
RESEARCH SCHOLAR
WHITE PAPER NO. 1
The Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF) Ithaca Initiative in the Joseph R. Biden, Jr. School of Public Policy and Administration at the University of Delaware publishes the SNF Ithaca Research Scholars White Paper series in order to enhance understanding and exploration of topics related to civil discourse, civic engagement, and the mediated public square.

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# From Waves to Ecosystems

The Next Stage of Democratic Innovation

Josh Lerner

## Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>THE LIMITS OF ELECTIONS</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WAVES OF INNOVATION</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancient Representative Democracy</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancient Deliberative and Direct Democracy</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Electoral Democracy</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Direct Democracy</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Participatory Turn</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Deliberative Wave</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE PROBLEM WITH WAVES</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECOSYSTEMS OF DEMOCRACY</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECOSYSTEMS OF DEMOCRACY IN PRACTICE</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paris</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOW TO BUILD ECOSYSTEMS OF DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unhealthy Habits</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Solutionism</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Conflation</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Rigidity</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Abstraction</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Division</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies for Growth</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Build bridges</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Share infrastructure</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Name a common enemy</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Reframe what we’re for</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Invest in training</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A JUST TRANSITION FOR DEMOCRACY</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUTHOR BIO</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Anti-democratic movements are surging around the world, threatening to undermine elections and tear down government institutions. Unfortunately, our responses to these threats are not working. Most pro-democracy movements focus on defending elections. Others call for innovations in direct, deliberative, or participatory democracy. Champions of each approach have claimed that their solution alone will deliver real democracy.

There is, however, no one way to fix democracy. Elections and electoral reform alone are not enough, and neither is any other approach on its own. No single kind of democracy works well for all of our decisions. The only solution is many solutions. While for the past decades (and beyond), we have built up competing waves of democratic innovation, we are now seeing a transition to a new approach. The emerging next stage of democratic innovation focuses on weaving different democratic practices into balanced democratic ecosystems. From waves to ecosystems.

This white paper provides an initial roadmap for this next stage of democratic innovation. First, it reviews the limitations of a strictly electoral democracy and why innovations in democracy are necessary. It then surveys the past and present waves of democratic innovation and their strengths and limitations. Next, it maps the emerging trend toward connecting democratic innovations so that they become broader democratic ecosystems. Finally, the paper outlines key challenges and strategies for building democratic ecosystems and how we could make a just transition to a better system of democracy.

The Limits of Elections

We tend to think about democracy as a singular solid thing. We say that people live in a democracy, as they might live in a house. When we talk about democracy, we usually assume an implicit definition: a system of government in which people choose their leaders by voting for them in elections. Ideally, we have free and fair elections, and then our elected representatives govern. This electoral definition allows us to treat democracy as a condition that either is or is not present. Generally, if you have free and fair elections, you live in a “democracy.” Otherwise, you do not.

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, 45% of the world lives in a democracy, and 55% does not. Analysts often consider other features of democracy, such as freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and the rule of law. Ultimately, these factors are still tied to elections, as they shape our ability to elect politicians and politicians’ ability to govern.
Elections have enabled more people to participate in governing compared with other government systems. Local, regional, national, and international elections have brought millions of people into positions of power. They have provided effective representation and decision-making in many contexts, allowing voters to influence government agendas better. Elections have brought new generations of politicians to office that better reflect citizens. These political leaders have often shifted power and resources towards communities lacking both.

However, despite the strengths of elections, most people think that electoral democracy is inadequate. According to the Pew Research Center, most people in electoral democracies worldwide say that “their political system needs major changes or needs to be completely reformed.” In the U.S., perhaps the world’s biggest champion of electoral democracy, most people across nearly all demographic groups and ideologies believe that the country’s system of government does not work. People worldwide agree - only 17% consider US democracy a good model. According to UNDP data, 7 in 10 people worldwide report that they have little influence on government decisions.

Data backs up these opinions, showing that elections alone have generally not resulted in equal political power or government by the people. Research in the U.S. shows that elected representative government has tended to provide economic elites and business groups with oversized political influence, while average citizens have little or no influence. In Asia, there is no clear relationship between electoral democracy and equality, and some countries without elections have higher levels of equality. Around the world, elected governments are increasingly reshaping and exploiting elections to establish minority rule, in which a political minority rules over the majority. Elections have also tended to attract and put in power people who rate as more narcissistic and psychopathic than average, people who too often exploit their position for personal gain.

Long-standing social democracies have been most successful at using elections to deliver democratic governance and public trust, but they, too, are wavering. Electoral reforms like mandatory voting, proportional representation, and remote voting have made voting more effective and trusted. Nevertheless, even in places that have adopted these reforms, such as Brazil and Australia, trust in democracy is declining, polarization is rising, and people are increasingly rejecting government institutions. Electoral reform is necessary but insufficient.

Elections are a huge part of democracy, but they are not all of it. Democracy is a much broader concept: rule by the people. According to the majority of people around the world, elections alone have not delivered rule by the people. To build a more functional democracy, we must also consider other ways people have practiced it.

Waves of Innovation

For at least the last 5,000 years, humans have experimented with innovations in democracy. Each wave of innovation has championed a different solution to the challenges of democracy. We generally look at democracy through the lens of one wave - usually modern electoral democracy. If we expand our perspective and view these waves alongside each other, we can see a more complete
landscape of democratic possibilities. This section reviews six of the biggest waves of democratic innovation.

Waves of Democracy *(Design: Lara Pessoa and Marcella Nery)*

**Ancient Representative Democracy**

The first wave of democratic innovation was perhaps more of a dispersed rising tide than a wave. As David Graeber and David Wengrow document in *The Dawn of Everything*, cities in Mesopotamia and other nearby regions were governed democratically as early as the fourth millennium BC. People reached decisions through community councils and assemblies, often organized at ward, district, and city levels and sometimes for different ethnic groups or ages. “Even the most autocratic rulers of later city-states were answerable to a panoply of town councils, neighborhood wards, and assemblies - in all of which women often participated alongside men.”

The first records of formal elections date back to 754 BC in Sparta, where all citizens could vote and hold office. This approach spread to Athens and Rome a few hundred years later and then elsewhere in Europe, the Americas, and elsewhere a few millennia later. The most famous Athenian wave of democratic innovation, however, was not focused on elections, however, but rather on ways to overcome their flaws through deliberative and direct democracy.

**Ancient Deliberative and Direct Democracy**

Athenians found that elections ended up benefited elites and prevented government by the people, so they developed an alternative. They called it “democracy.” The word “democracy” comes from the Greek word “dēmokratia”, which means rule or power (kratos) by the people (dēmos) - in contrast to rule by elected officials. Between the 6th and 4th centuries BC, the ancient Athenian wave of democracy introduced two innovations: sortition and direct citizen voting on policies, now often called deliberative and direct democracy.

At the Athenian agora, citizens were randomly selected via lottery to serve on governing councils (such as the boule) and court tribunals. Athenians used the kleroterion - a giant stone with slots for different citizen tokens – as a device to select citizens to serve randomly. Citizens’ tokens were
randomly placed in columns according to tribe, and then colored dice were drawn from a tube to determine which row of citizens would serve.

Athenian kleroterion used to randomly select citizens to participate in councils. (Credit: Wikimedia Commons)

Meanwhile, all (male) citizens could vote directly on policies through the broader popular assembly. Thousands of citizens participated at this level. However, the Athenian innovations of democracy did not spread. While elections slowly grew in popularity, sortition and direct voting on policies remained rare for two millennia. A notable exception was the Iroquois Confederacy in North America, where women’s and men’s assemblies of 49 community members took turns deliberating on and approving decisions, as Michael Menser describes in *We Decide!*

**Modern Electoral Democracy**

Elections remained uncommon until the late 18th century when revolutions in America and France established male suffrage for national elections. More countries adopted (and often abandoned) elections for political office over the next century. It was not until the 20th century that the electoral wave of democracy grew to full force. This surge in democracy first inspired the idea of "waves of

Through three waves of democratization, electoral democracy grew from a marginal practice to one of the world’s dominant forms of government. Starting with the first wave after World War I, then continuing with the rise of decolonization and finally the decline of communism, successive waves of dozens of countries transitioned to holding elections.

**Modern Direct Democracy**

Alongside this wave of elections, people began experimenting more with direct democracy. This involves individual citizens voting directly on policies or laws rather than voting on people to represent them. In Switzerland, people started practicing direct democracy in the Middle Ages and then formalized it in their constitution in the 19th century. In the U.S., town hall meetings emerged as a common form of direct democracy in the 19th century, with face-to-face assemblies of residents voting on major issues.

Since then, cities, states, and nations worldwide have invited citizens to vote on policies at a larger scale through ballot initiatives, measures, or referendums. These efforts have had mixed results, sometimes enabling people to propose and democratically decide key issues and sometimes becoming overwhelmed by corporate propaganda and fake news.

Voting on policies at a town hall meeting (Credit: Getty Images / Hero Images)
The Participatory Turn

In the 1960s, activists began to push for deeper forms of participation beyond voting. This "participatory turn" inspired a wide range of participatory democracy practices, enabling people to make decisions about the issues affecting their lives. Participatory democracy often mixes methods of representative, deliberative, and direct democracy to create new channels for citizens to decide policies, laws, and budgets. Usually, this involves community members coming together to propose ideas, debate them, and vote to decide what gets implemented.

Participatory budgeting is perhaps the most widespread example, enabling citizens to decide how to spend public budgets in over 7,000 governments worldwide. Community members propose and discuss spending ideas and vote to decide which ones to fund. The government then implements the winning proposals.

Citizens developing proposals for participatory budgeting in Taiwan. (Credit: author)

The participatory turn also inspired rapid growth in participatory planning, public consultations, and community councils. These approaches have often used arts and technology in new ways. In legislative theater, community members act out plays to identify solutions to unjust systems and institutions and then translate those ideas into new laws. Meanwhile, dozens of digital democracy
platforms have enabled people to debate and decide policies online, often using artificial intelligence to identify common priorities.

The Deliberative Wave

Since the 1980s, a growing wave of deliberative democracy has shifted attention away from voting and toward dialogue as an alternate way to make democracy work. This “deliberative wave” has spread worldwide through over 600 initiatives. Usually, these programs convene a randomly selected but representative sample of the public to learn about an issue and identify solutions through reflective and informed discussion. This “mini-public” aims to reflect the broader community while being small enough for individuals to dive into deep discussion. Hundreds of citizens’ assemblies, juries, constitutional assemblies, and panels have put this approach into practice.

Despite falling under the umbrella of deliberative democracy, the most distinctive feature of these “mini-publics” is not deliberation. Structured consensus-seeking deliberation occurs in many settings, including electoral and participatory democracy. What the recent wave of deliberative democracy adds is a different way of selecting who deliberates. It uses “sortition” to randomly select participants (like in a lottery or selection for jury duty in the legal system), ensuring that everyone can participate at some point, but not all at once.

While randomly selected judicial juries decide individual legal cases, randomly selected citizens’ assemblies and juries consider broader public policies. In some cases, these programs have contributed to major policy changes, such as overturning Ireland’s ban on abortion and shaping a $5 billion budget in Melbourne. Many citizens’ assemblies, however, have not yet resulted in new policies or laws.

These six waves of democracy have each made big contributions, popularizing new ways for people to make decisions together. What happens when we step back from the individual waves and look at them together? Do they add up to a greater whole?

The Problem with Waves

Unfortunately, the waves of democratic innovations have not added up to a trusted and effective democracy. Part of the problem is our obsession with waves. Waves are great for propelling forward new ideas. However, they tend to move in one direction, compete, and eventually recede. These limitations have prevented democratic innovations from having deeper impacts.

Perhaps the greatest strength of waves is that they build attention and momentum for change. They make incremental changes more visible and impressive as parts of a greater whole. At the same time, they create a sense of purpose and progress, mobilizing people around a desired change. Waves feel good to ride. During each democratic wave, international institutions, governments, funders, researchers, and social movements have jumped on board, helping propel the wave forward.
Nevertheless, this forward momentum also leads to *groupthink*, undermining waves. Each wave's advocates become so focused on their goals that they often dismiss other approaches. Waves develop a kind of groupthink, which limits their ability to see other perspectives and build broader support. Each wave becomes top-heavy with big expectations that it will change everything and be the one solution we've been waiting for. These expectations eventually exceed what the wave can support, and it comes crashing down. The energy dissipates, moving on to the next wave.

Waves are also *competitive*, creating a zero-sum game in which the success of one wave hurts the others. Most advocates cast their preferred innovation as the solution, with any other approaches coming at the expense of their real democracy. Everyone wants to be a diva, and not enough people want to join a choir.

Advocates of electoral democracy dismiss other approaches as inconsequential and skewed. In making the case against participatory democracy, they complain that it is vague, unrepresentative, and easily manipulated and that decision-making must be left in experts’ hands. They vent that community meetings are not democracy; the problem with participatory democracy is the participants, and community input is bad. Likewise, they often dismiss deliberative approaches, arguing against “lottocracy” because it results in unequal participation and little concrete change. There is no alternative to elections. The only solution is to improve elections by making voting easier, more accurate, universal, and independent.

Participatory democrats also call for defending democracy against lottocracy. They argue that deliberative democracy over-promises and under-delivers. Meanwhile, many champions of deliberative democracy present randomly selected assemblies as the only true democracy. They argue against elections and push for democracy without elections. They conclude that elections are unrepresentative and ineffective at resolving major issues, and this is why people are disillusioned with government.

Partly due to this competition, waves of democratic innovation often do not last - they are unsustainable. Each wave undermines support for the others. When waves crash into each other, they both lose momentum. Moreover, funders, politicians, and institutions hastily move on to the next big thing when the wave fails to meet oversized expectations.

The waves of democratic innovation have each left their mark on our practices and imagination of democracy. However, waves also lead to groupthink, cause unhelpful competition, and are unsustainable. Our focus on waves prevents us from building more durable systems of democracy. What if all of these democratic approaches are limited individually but more effective together? What if we could balance the weaknesses of one model with the strengths of another?
Ecosystems of Democracy

After focusing on competing waves of democratic innovation for decades, many advocates, institutions, and researchers are transitioning to a new approach. A growing sector of the democracy reform movement is shifting from building waves to building ecosystems. Rather than pushing for one singular solution, this next stage of democratic innovation focuses on weaving different democratic practices into more balanced democratic ecosystems.

Democracy advocates are leading the way in promoting systemic approaches. The Open Government Partnership, one of the largest international organizations that has supported innovations in democracy, has shifted its focus to "mainstreaming participation" by advancing diverse democracy reforms "at a systemic level" across government. The OECD likewise calls for more integrated strategies for open government to “provide an umbrella to existing but scattered initiatives.” The U.S. organization Public Agenda has laid out a path towards healthier democracies by focusing on “government systems for engagement rather than single processes or institutions." The Innovation Growth Lab conducted a broad survey across the EU and found that “A majority want to take part, but everyone wants to do it in different ways.” As a result, they recommend “invest in a diversity of engagement methods.”

Major international institutions are also taking action. The UN member states have pushed for a comprehensive approach since launching the Sustainable Development Goals 2015. It calls for “responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels” in SDG 16.7 and “a direct participation structure of civil society in urban planning and management that operates regularly and democratically” in SDG 11.3.2. The EU has invested in a new network that “aims to fortify and renew democracy across Europe by weaving together local, national, European, and global networks into a coordinated joint effort.”

Researchers are proposing new frameworks for this systemic approach to democracy. Much of this work has focused on deliberative systems thinking, as Graham Smith and David Owen have documented. This approach connects different institutions, processes, relationships, and narratives into a broad deliberative system. Azucena Moran and Melisa Ross have called for ecosystems of collective governance, inside and outside of government, while Ricardo Fabrino Mendonça et al. have advocated for a deliberative ecology framework.

While these emergent strategies use different language, I propose we consider them a broader movement for democratic ecosystems. Why democratic ecosystems? Ecosystems are diverse, interconnected, and dynamic - a model for the democracy we need.

First, healthy ecosystems are diverse. In nature, ecosystems vary around the world. Different species thrive in different contexts - pine trees do well on alpine slopes but not on desert dunes. Likewise, different practices of democracy work well in different contexts. Citizens’ assemblies work well for resolving divisive political questions but less well for deciding detailed budget allocations.
Each ecosystem is also internally diverse. The birds, bees, flowers, and trees play different roles and are all necessary for the ecosystem's health. Different practices of democracy play different roles as well. They vary in who decides, what they decide, and how they decide. Elections enable people to decide on representatives through a vote. Those representatives then govern, making the rest of the decisions or delegating that power to appointed officials. Direct, deliberative, and participatory democracy lets citizens (and often noncitizens and others who are typically ineligible to vote) also make decisions about policies, laws, budgets, and more. Moreover, while these practices may include voting, they also include other ways to decide (from deliberation to consensus) and other ways to select representatives (from random to modified self-selection).

**Second, healthy ecosystems are interconnected.** They thrive through the interaction of their diverse parts. In natural ecosystems, diverse species not only coexist - they depend on each other for survival. If the flowers die, so do the bees - and vice versa.

As much as we may focus on elections or any other democratic practice, democracy is a complex ecosystem. What happens in one space impacts the others. When citizens vote against reproductive rights in a referendum, it can impact elections. When a champion of deliberation wins an election, it can launch a citizens' assembly. When citizens' assembly members return to their community, they may propose new ideas in town meetings or participatory budgeting programs. If those ideas gain enough traction, they may result in a referendum. Nurturing a landscape of interconnected democratic practices can make each one stronger.

When we disrupt an ecosystem by imposing one species over others, the ecosystem often collapses. When we overgraze cattle on a grassland, it becomes a barren desert. When we only plant one cash crop, such as soy, on the same plot of land year after year, it depletes the soil's nutrients and leaves the earth barren.

In our current democratic ecosystem, we are generally monocropping elections. We are pouring so much money and time into elections that other democratic practices are pushed to the sidelines, marginal and disconnected. Meanwhile, by over-relying on one inadequate practice, we are eroding the soil of democracy and depleting citizens' trust in government.

**Finally, ecosystems are dynamic and constantly shifting.** In natural ecosystems, flowers bloom in the spring, saplings emerge after fires, and migration patterns shift with a changing climate. In democratic ecosystems, participatory budgeting spreads during times of financial crises and social movement demands, and referendums multiply when divisive social issues emerge. Healthy ecosystems change over time to remain resilient as conditions and needs fluctuate.
The solution to our crisis of democracy is not to perfect elections nor to replace them with randomly selected citizens’ assemblies. We must deepen and connect the diverse ways we practice democracy to build more resilient and effective democratic ecosystems.
Ecosystems of Democracy in Practice

What might a healthy ecosystem of democracy look like? Several real-world examples show how we might connect democratic innovations to build stronger democratic ecosystems.

Paris

In 2021, Paris became the first big city to create a permanent citizens’ assembly. The City Council voted to establish this people’s chamber of government, a randomly selected body of citizens with real governing power. The city randomly selects 100 residents yearly to serve in the assembly, balancing the participants to reflect the city’s diverse population. The assembly can submit bills for debate in the City Council and evaluate and convene hearings on existing city policies.

The assembly also builds on the success of the city’s participatory budgeting program, the largest in Europe. Every year, city residents decide how to spend €100 million to improve the city. They propose ideas, deliberate, and then vote on which projects to fund. To keep the participatory budgeting dynamic, each year focuses on a different theme. Picking the theme is a divisive issue, so this decision is delegated to the citizens’ assembly (which is great at resolving big divisive questions). Participatory budgeting, the citizens’ assembly, and the city council are stronger together.

Source: OECD
South Korea

Diverse democracies can function on complex national stages. South Korea’s national participatory budgeting program, My Budget, was launched in 2018. My Budget combines participatory, deliberative, direct, and representative democracy. Citizens submit, discuss, and prioritize programs. The government then screens them for feasibility and sends them to a Citizens’ Budget Committee for review. It discusses and prioritizes the program proposals, and the government includes them in its national budget. The National Assembly, an elected body, then approves the budget.

The Citizens’ Budget Committee has as many as 450 people from across the country, randomly selected and balanced to ensure that marginalized groups and sectors are well represented. The government provides an Expert Support Council for guidance and online and in-person training to inform its discussions. For the 2021 national budget, 63 proposals were funded through My Budget, valued at $201 million. A small amount relative to the total national budget, but also a functional and dynamic ecosystem of democracy. A microcosm of what is possible.

*Source: Participedia*
Ecosystems of democracy can extend across national, state, and local levels. For decades, Brazil has used national public policy conferences to engage millions of people in deciding key policies. When crafting policies on issues such as health and education, the government has organized a series of municipal, state, and then national level meetings, where residents deliberate and vote on priorities. In 2023, the newly elected Lula government launched an upgraded national participatory planning process using a digital democracy platform.

How to Build Ecosystems of Democratic Innovation

How do we move toward healthy ecosystems of democracy? With difficulty, but hopefully also with smarter strategies. Changing centuries-old political and cultural practices is never easy, and we should not expect an overnight transformation of democracy. It has taken 5,000 years of democratic innovations to get us to where we are. But if we shift from promoting waves to building ecosystems, we can accelerate transitions to new practices of democracy. Below are five unhealthy habits that are getting in the way of this transition and five strategies for growing healthier democratic ecosystems.
Unhealthy Habits

1. Solutionism

One single solution can solve all of our problems. Democracy solutionism replicates the errors of technological solutionism. Technological solutionists claim that only new technology can fix complex problems. “To save everything, click here,” Evgeny Morozov puts it. Democracy solutionists claim that only their new democratic practice can fix democracy. If we reform campaign finance / adopt ranked choice voting / use deliberative polling / launch citizens’ assemblies / etc., then we will have real democracy.

Solutionism tends to misunderstand and misrepresent problems because it downplays the importance of context and the expertise of people already working on the issue. Thanks to its simple and enticing messaging, it often draws attention and resources at the expense of longer-term work that addresses the broader complexity and context of social problems.

2. Conflation

Democracy means my approach to democracy. Some advocates take solutionism a step further, assimilating all of democracy into their solution. They take over the concept of democracy, casually defining democracy as only their specific work. Often, this looks like organizations or coalitions that feature “Democracy” in their name but only consider one approach, such as defending elections, electoral reform, or citizens’ assemblies.

By leading with soaring aspirations to fix democracy and then conflating that with only one approach, these advocates can unnecessarily undermine potential collaborators and their own messages. By claiming the language of democracy strictly for their cause, they deflect attention and support away from other practices. As a result, advocates of these other approaches are then more likely to push back, directing their energy against elections, against deliberative democracy, or against participatory democracy - rather than against far-right movements conspiring against all forms of democracy. Even neutral parties are more likely to be skeptical, rejecting good and helpful practices because they cannot deliver on inflated claims to fix all of democracy.

3. Rigidity

My democratic practice must follow a specific formula - anything else is wrong. When democratic practices grow, they often develop a standard methodology. Elections are contests between multiple candidates, and the candidate with the most votes wins. Participatory budgeting invites people to decide what local infrastructure projects to fund. Citizens’ assemblies convene randomly selected citizens to learn about and make recommendations on a policy question.

These original formulas do not always work well, however, when the practices spread to different contexts or are combined with other methods. Too often, advocates (especially in the Global North) push back when other activists (especially in the Global South) try to adapt or adjust the practices. If the changes end up undermoming democracy, this resistance may be appropriate. However, if the
new formulas enable more democracy, even if it does not resemble the original version, excess rigidity can hold back progress.

4. Abstraction

I am pro-democracy, whatever that means. Many democracy advocates never define the democracy that they are advocating for. In 2023, for example, the 22nd Century Conference brought together leading community organizers in "the pro-democracy movement" to "effectively block the rise of the authoritarian right while advancing pro-democracy strategies and campaigns." However, it did not define what democracy it was for; by default, it only discussed electoral democracy. Even when advocates call for "expanding democracy work," the expansion usually only extends to the confines of elections.

When we leave democracy as an abstract concept, we reinforce the status quo and miss an opportunity to mobilize people for greater change. We leave people to understand that we are talking about the current dominant model - elections - and nothing more. When we do not define what we are advocating for, we lose a chance to "paint the beautiful tomorrow," as communications strategist Anat Shenker-Osorio describes. Most people are frustrated with electoral politics. If we can clearly and vividly describe a better future, people will be more eager to fight for it.

5. Division

My democracy work is fundamentally different and separate from yours. Like in any field, democracy innovators have become professionalized and segmented. People working on electoral reform often live in an electoral reform bubble, people working on deliberative democracy in a deliberative democracy bubble, etc. This specialization can be useful, as it allows us to do deep dives into fixing problems and advancing solutions. But sometimes, it goes too far, to the point where advocates of one democratic practice reject that other practices are relevant for their work.

When we build walls between democratic innovations, it is harder to see how they might complement each other. When we say that deliberative democracy and participatory democracy are fundamentally different, we prevent creative cross-pollination. Maybe random selection would help recruit new people to participatory budgeting. Maybe voting on proposals with price tags would help citizens' assemblies make recommendations that are more easily funded.

Strategies for Growth

1. Build bridges

Experiment with new ways to combine or link different democratic practices. Nick Vlahos, for example, has explored dozens of ways to integrate participatory budgeting and citizens' assemblies. Sometimes, even resurfacing old ideas in new spaces can inspire productive experimentation. For example, electoral and direct democracy have developed diverse approaches to voting, from first-past-the-post to ranked-choice voting to positive and negative votes. These methods could also improve voting in participatory budgeting or citizens' assemblies.
Stepping back from this technical level, we could also use more bridging terms at a higher level. The EU has started to use the term “participatory and deliberative democracy” to refer to the broad range of democratic innovations beyond elections. While the term is cumbersome, it opens up more space to blend approaches and connect them into something bigger.

2. **Share infrastructure**

**Establish common staffing and support for different democratic practices.** Rather than having separate government departments for elections, participatory budgeting, and citizens’ assemblies, create broader democracy offices or teams that support and connect this work. When civil servants are part of these teams, they are more likely to understand the range of democratic practices and how they can connect. These broader democracy teams can also better share digital participation tools, interpreters, publicity, and other support, which creates cost-cutting economies of scale.

Organizations can also share infrastructure. Rather than running separate advocacy campaigns for participatory budgeting, citizens’ assemblies, and electoral reform, they can form cross-cutting coalitions and tables. For example, the Open Government Partnership’s Multistakeholder Forums unite diverse civil society groups, organizations, and government officials to oversee diverse open government reforms. People Powered’s global mentorship program, accelerators, and Participation Playbook serve as shared infrastructure for NGOs working on democratic innovations.

3. **Name a common enemy**

**Focus blame on the anti-democratic forces that are our greatest shared threat.** The primary problem is not elections, sortition, or too much participation. Often, we name the problem as other people who share a similar goal but disagree on how to get there. While these people may not be our core supporters, they are not enemies. Democracy advocates generally agree on the most important things. We all want people to have more of a meaningful say in government. Our enemies are the forces that disagree not on the methods but on the end goal. Those who believe that the people should not rule but rather that a small, rich elite should make decisions.

Radical right-wing funders and authoritarian regimes have directed billions of dollars to think tanks, universities, media, hackers, and organizations to build a broad movement against democracy, against government by the people. When you see an allegedly grassroots movement fighting to overturn valid election results, chances are that it is bankrolled by a handful of billionaire donors, as Jane Meyer and Nancy McLean have documented, or by autocrats such as Vladimir Putin. These anti-democratic forces are coordinating their work globally through networks such as the Atlas Network and the Mont Pelerin Society.

These attacks aim to undermine our collective ability (in the form of democratic government) to limit excessive accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of an elite few. The anti-democratic forces dress themselves in a language of individual liberty, but in practice, this mainly means rich people have the liberty to hoard wealth at the expense of everyone else. Their end game is rule by a small elite.
As Anat Shenker Osorio explains, repeatedly naming the villains and their motivations can help build a broader base of supporters. Naming a common enemy helps us see and strengthen the values and ties that bind us together. It also weakens the enemy and its threats to democracy.

4. Reframe what we’re for

Develop shared language to communicate what democracy is and what it could be. Much advocacy for democracy is technocratic, promoting rule changes, institutional reforms, and complex participatory and deliberative processes. This language may carry meaning for the experts and organizations working on each democratic innovation, but it often fails to convey a broader purpose beyond these bubbles.

We need to be clearer about what we are for. Fair voting, citizen deliberation, and community participation may be campaign advocacy goals, but they are not ultimately ends in themselves. What is their deeper purpose? Are these ways to give people more say over their lives? To ensure that everyone has access to what they need? To build healthy and happy communities?

To develop a shared language, we need more of a shared mental model for democracy. Mental models are our core understanding of how something works. Current mental models lead people to see democracy as a system where people vote for their rulers in free and fair elections. We must build mental models of democracy incorporating a wider range of practices beyond elections. In the meantime, our advocacy and policy efforts are fighting against people’s deeply held assumptions and beliefs.

5. Invest in training

Retrain politicians, civil servants, advocates, and citizens to support healthy ecosystems of democracy. People have learned how to play specific roles in electoral democracy. Politicians try to win support. Civil servants try to carry out programs and policies. Advocates try to influence them both. Citizens vote but often do not participate beyond that. These habits die hard. Institutional cultures teach each class of newcomers to follow the same patterns.

To shift these old habits, governments and advocates increasingly invest in training and reorientation. Over 80 political leadership initiatives worldwide are training politicians and candidates to be more innovative in practicing democracy. Advocates use these programs to “occupy politics” to bring participatory and deliberative democracy into electoral politics. Groups like the Open Government Partnership, Apolitical, and People Powered are training hundreds of civil servants, bureaucrats, and government employees to shift their roles to help them understand and use diverse democratic innovations.

And, of course, one-off training is not enough - shifting roles also require ongoing learning opportunities, coaching, and peer support. Educational institutions are excellent sites for this learning at scale. Schools can integrate action civics and participatory democracy into their curriculum and activities. Universities can update programs, such as public policy and administration, to reorient students toward a broader range of democratic approaches.
A Just Transition for Democracy

If we want to save democracy, we need to do more than defend the current system - we need to transition to a better system. The next stage of democratic innovation is beginning to explore how to move beyond the dominant model of elections and competing waves of innovations.

How might we bring about such a systemic change? The field of climate action offers a good model to follow. To fundamentally change how we understand and address climate change, a global movement has called for a “just transition.” This strategy transitions us from an extractive system focused on fossil fuels to a sustainable system of diverse energy sources, and it transitions us in a way that is just and respectful for communities.

A just transition for our climate demands a massive change in how we work, travel, eat, and live. We need to drastically reduce our burning of fossil fuels and adopt policies and lifestyles requiring less energy consumption, with more energy coming from renewable sources such as wind and solar. The transition process must also be just, correcting for past harms and ensuring people’s well-being, even as they may need to change jobs and lifestyles.

Unfortunately, we are not headed toward a just transition for democracy. Instead, we are mainly defending the existing inadequate system. What if instead of solely defending elections, we also offered something better - a broader system of democracy that gave people a more meaningful voice?

This transition will not be easy. Like for climate change, it will require changing mindsets, jobs, skills, and everyday practices. The transition must also be just, which needs to look different in different places. Colonization, structural racism, and economic exploitation have depleted many people’s capacities to engage in democracy. Even if we had healthy ecosystems of democracy, not everyone would have equal access to them. If you face constant discrimination, do not speak the dominant language, or are working a 70-hour week, you are less likely to sign up for a citizens’ assembly - let alone organize one.

A just transition requires more resources and support for marginalized and harmed communities. As Theodore Roosevelt wrote, “There can be no real political democracy unless there is something approaching an economic democracy.” A just transition for democracy means directing more money, attention, and patience towards advocates in the Global South and historically marginalized communities everywhere. It means being more flexible and curious about how democracy has been and might be practiced in different places.

There are signs of a just transition for democracy. In recent years, global institutions have shifted resources and attention toward diverse democratic practices. The United Nations, European Union, and even the World Bank have committed hundreds of millions of dollars to innovations in participatory and deliberative democracy.
So far, however, this democratic transition has been as slow as our climate transition. We have experimented with alternative energy sources and innovations in democracy while continuing to pour vastly more resources into cars and elections. We have toyed with alternatives while the ice caps and our trust in democracy melt away. Extreme weather events and authoritarian regimes are wreaking havoc faster than our efforts to counteract them.

Advocates are starting to shift strategy to accelerate the democratic transition. They are moving from waves to ecosystems, from building up competing waves of innovation to weaving together different practices into healthy ecosystems.

Most of our biggest problems - from climate change to war to disease - are solvable if we move decision-making power away from oligarchs and billionaires and toward the rest of us. To do this, we need a democracy that is not dominated by any single practice, whether elections or sortition. The next system of democracy needs to be an ecosystem.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the following excellent people for reviewing versions of this white paper and offering essential feedback: Rocío Annunziata, Louise Caldwell, Nicole Curato, Andrés Falck, Jennifer Flynn Walker, Katherine Gibson, Carolin Hagelskamp, Hahrie Han, Tim Hughes, Panthea Lee, Sarah Lister, Renate Lunn, Rachel Mims, Hugh Pope, Sanjiv Rao, Greta Ríos, Katy Rubin, David Sasaki, Daniel Schugurensky, Aluna Serrano, Timothy Shaffer, Celina Su, and Caroline Vernaillen.

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Recommended Citation


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