# Democratic Innovation and Representative Democracy

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We live in a period of hopes and fears for democracy. The fears, however, are now foremost in our minds. Democratic erosion is now taking the perverse form in which institutions long associated with democracy, especially competitive elections, have become vehicles for authoritarian populists to undermine other institutions necessary to democracy, including rights and the rule of law. Yet although the democratic project seems to be backsliding, the democratic values of citizens remain relatively strong. Hopes for democracy will involve continuing to defend, reform, and reinforce electoral democracy, while supplementing these institutions with "democratic innovations"—processes that tap these democratic values with smarter and better citizen participation, more equal and responsive representation, and better deliberation. If we can target the democratic deficits in representative democracies with these kinds of innovations, the democratic project will continue to march forward, and our hopes will have places to land.

We live in a period of hopes and fears for democracy.[1] The fears, however, are now foremost in our minds. If we enter the terms *democratic backsliding, democratic erosion*, and *democratic recession* into a Google Ngram, and we see a dramatic increase in their usage about ten years ago. Data from *Varieties of Democracy* (Papada et al. 2023) reinforces the fears: while the democratic project has marched forward, especially in the decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall, there has been some recession over the last decade, with a number of liberal democracies devolving into electoral democracies—that is, polities with elections, but without the rights, liberties, and protections that underwrite democratic citizenship (Galston 2018; Diamond 2020).

And, of course, our fears have been sharpened by the surges of authoritarian populism in many of the developed democracies, including our own. Democratic erosion is now taking the perverse form in which institutions long associated with democracy, especially competitive elections, have become vehicles for authoritarian populists to undermine other institutions necessary to democracy,

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including the rule of law, rights that define and empower democratic citizenship including the right to vote, freedom of the press, the professionalism and impartiality of administration, and sometimes even elected legislatures themselves (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Today, resurgent authoritarianism is rarely the result of military coups, but rather the work of political elites who have won elections, from Trump and Orban to Poland's Law and Justice, the Alternative for Germany, and France's National Rally.

Add to these threats the popular view that electoral institutions are not performing democratically. The American National Election Studies, for example, tracks responses to the statement: "People don't have a say in what the government does." In 1960, 72% of respondents disagreed with this statement. By 2020, only 27% disagreed (ANES 2024). This is, of course, data from the United States, which the Economist Democracy Index famously demoted to its "flawed democracy" category in 2016 (Economist Intelligence Unit 2016). Higher ranked democracies don't show this same level of discontent, but very few citizens are satisfied with how democracy is working in their country (e.g. European Social Survey 2023). In short, representative democracy, even in established democracies and in its key electoral form, may be losing its grip on the democratic project.

If these are the fears, are there any hopes? Perspective is important: we need to step back so as to appreciate the gains associated with the democratic project, lest the current challenges distract from its world-historical accomplishments. Although the causalities are complex, rankings of counties by the quality of democracy are highly correlated with almost every measure of social well-being. Strong democracies tend to be healthier, happier, more

innovative, wealthier, less violent, less corrupt, more pluralistic and tolerant, better for women and minorities, and more attentive to the worst off. These indicators help to get at what might be called the "existential meaning of democracy," or maybe the "deep normative meaning of democracy": people want self-government in the sense that they want control over their lives and futures, they want freedoms and choices about how they live their lives. They want their children's lives to work out; they want to be able to plan for the future. These are the existential values embedded in aspirational democracy.

And importantly, although the democratic project seems to be backsliding, we're not seeing broad a popular retreat from democratic values in the established democracies, even if there is dimmed enthusiasm for existing institutions (Norris 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2018; Treisman 2023). Authoritarian threats may build on democratic discontents, but they are elite-led. As Larry Bartels puts it in a study of European threats, while "ordinary citizens in these cases were guilty of prioritizing the quality of their daily lives over democratic institutions and procedures, they were little more than passive bystanders to the erosion of democracy" (Bartels 2023, 15). If so, the democratic recession looks more like an institutional performance gap: electoral institutions are failing to reflect the democratic values of citizens, and in some cases actively undermining them.

Popular disaffection from electoral democracy is no small matter: the democratic project can't survive without elections, voting, and the forms of representation and responsiveness they provide. But the pathways to better democracies will involve continuing to defend, reform, and reinforce electoral democracy, while supplementing the legacy institutions of representative democracy with "democratic innovations"—processes that involve smarter and better citizen participation, more equal and responsive representation, and higher quality deliberation (Smith 2009; Elstub and Escobar 2019). This said, and I want to emphasize this point, democratic innovations are only part of a broader, multi-generational project to defend and expand democracy. There are no silver bullets. Democratic innovations will only do their part when combined with defences of constitutionalism, the rule of law, administrative expertise and impartiality, and political rights, such as the right to vote and the integrity of elections. And democratic innovations will work better when combined with reforms to the legacy institutions of democracy, including, for example, everything from reforming electoral systems to administrative processes. But it remains an open question as to whether we can defend, reform, and innovate quicky enough, and in the right ways.

What I want to do here is to place these challenges in context, with attention to how the emerging field of democratic innovations needs to develop to meet these challenges. First, I'll say something about the structural drivers of the challenges. Second, I'll come back to the argument that it's not that democratic *values* are in crisis, but rather that we have performance gaps: our legacy institutions of electoral democracy are necessary but not sufficient to address the challenges. Third, I'll suggest that we need to think about democratic innovations systematically, in terms of the deficits and opportunities within the representative democracies. Finally, if we can take up these challenges, we can refine an agenda for democratic innovation that may help to move the democratic project forward.

The structural causes of discontents within the developed democracies are well-known. Foremost is the globalization of economies over the last fifty years or so. Globalization has produced wealthier economies, but most of the gains have gone to those who are already wealthy, and to those who are educated in ways valued by knowledge economies (e.g.; Huber, Gundeson, and Stephens 2020) In the developed democracies, those without resources, skills, or education have found themselves competing with low-wage economies overseas. Nation-states have had to choose between being left behind economically, or allowing control over the economy to relocate into transnational and global markets and trade regimes. From the standpoint of democracy, because nation-states have less control over the structural forces of globalized economies, those elected to represent the people are likewise less powerful, which in turn decreases the powers of electoral democracy, and lends power to nationalist, isolationist, and anti-immigrant politics as the pathway to restoring control by "the people" (Gray and Warren 2024). Economic globalization seems to have aggravated inequalities of representation already affected by inequalities of wealth, education, race, and social capital (e.g., Gilens 2012).

Second, economic inequality in most of the developed democracies is regionalized: dynamic urban areas, like San Francisco, London, or Frankfurt, have tended to do well, while rust-belt areas—think parts of Ohio, Yorkshire, and much of the former East Germany—have tended to stagnate, so that economic inequalities are overlaid by regional economic polarization.

Third, economic polarization is aggravated by cultural polarization. In the economically dynamic urban areas, citizens tend to be younger, more racially and ethnically diverse, more post-material, and generally more tolerant and progressive. Citizens in less dynamic areas view these developments as threats—what political psychologists call *status insecurity*. Pippa Norris and Ron Inglehart argued that the 2016 election of Trump was, at least in part, a backlash to rapid and progressive cultural change, represented politically by the election of Obama in 2012 (Norris and Inglehart 2019; see also Mutz 2018).

Fourth, these trends are interacting with the development of social media and now AI, which make it relatively

easy for both domestic political entrepreneurs and foreign mischief-makers to organize, spread rumors and misinformation, and target voters with psychologically engineered appeals, producing epistemic bubbles that lock citizens into separate worlds of information, values, and judgments (Anderson 2021).

Finally, polarization is now driven by the sorting of identity issues (especially religion in the United States) which overlays and often displaces the more familiar and long-standing economic cleavages.

The Edelman Trust Barometer (2023) reported on cross-national survey questions that measured opinions on whether "my country is very divided," and "I do not feel these divisions can be overcome." Responses to these questions placed the United States in their "severely polarized" category, while another group of developed democracies, including the UK, France, Japan, and Germany, were judged to be "in danger of severe polarization." The problem is dramatically illustrated by 2016 and 2022 surveys from the Pew Research Center showing that "growing shares of both Republicans and Democrats" say "that members of the other party are more immoral, dishonest, closed-minded than other Americans," with those mentioning four or more of these traits increasing from 22% to 43% of Democrats, and 30% to 53% among Republicans (Pew Research Center 2022). Electoral democracy, with its competitive incentives, tends to refract and magnify polarization, especially in countries with winner-take-all electoral districts.

We should worry about polarization because it signals that adversaries are becoming enemies, and enemies are less likely to deal with conflict peacefully. A poll from NPR-Marist from April 2024 found that 1 in 5 believe that Americans must resort to violence to "get the country back on track," with twice as many Republicans as Democrats expressing this view (Public Broadcasting Service 2024). Democracy, of course, fails if it cannot channel conflict away from violence and into talking and voting. But even short of this, polarization tends to erode representative institutions and to undermine collective capacities to address underlying discontents.

In sum, economic globalization, regionalization, cultural polarization and backlash, and social media are now interacting with the strategic incentives generated by competitive elections and the organization of electoral democracy by territorial districts and jurisdictions in ways that are undermining the capacities of electoral democracy to generate good responsive government.

And yet support for democratic values in the developed democracies remains strong. The World Values Survey shows that that overwhelming majorities in the democracies rank the "importance of democracy" very highly, even when they are disappointed with how "democracy" works in their own countries (Ferrin and Kriesi 2014; Kriesi 2020; Norris and Inglehart 2018; Welzel 2021). In the developed democracies, World Values indicates that responses to the "importance" question have barely budged over the waves from 2005–2022 (World Values Survey 2024). Indeed, even populist authoritarians claim that they represent democratic values, against elitist legislatures, courts, and bureaucracies.

If there is a current democratic recession, then, it's probably specific to election-based representative democracy, just because its institutional design features are interacting badly with trends of the last several decades. We can't do without electoral democracy, but we should be thinking about how to preserve and improve its best effects—accountability, representation by locale, and nation-states with capacities to do things because they have most of the people behind them—while reforming and innovating in ways that address their weaknesses. Reforms and innovations need to push back against polarizing institutional incentives, build new kinds of representative bridges to decision-makers, upgrade citizen knowledge and competence, and reach across borders. Success will mean new collective capacities to address the structural drivers of discontent, but the near-term pathways to success will require mitigating polarization and generating legitimacy so that democracies can get things done.

The theme of the 2024 APSA meetings, *Democracy: Retrenchment, Renovation, and Reimagination*, makes this point. *Retrenchment* is about defending democratic institutions under threat. *Renovation* is about reforming the institutions we already have so that they work better and more effectively. *Reimagination* is about innovating new practices and institutions that supplement and reinforce the legacy institutions of representative democracy. I'm focusing on democratic innovations as one part of a broader set of democratization strategies because they are the newest, and the least recognized and studied part of the problem, at least within political science.

So, what are "democratic innovations"? The term itself is relatively recent, introduced into the language of democratic theory and practice little more than a decade ago, though many of the practices we now count as democratic innovations are decades older. By *democratic innovations*, we usually mean practices and institutions a) that function to deepen or widen democracy; b) that fall outside of the older, legacy institutions of representative democracy; and c) that supplement rather than replace these institutions, ideally by targeting sites of democratic deficits within representative democracy. While there is a wide diversity, democratic innovations usually involve the participation of ordinary citizens, new forms of representation, and learning and deliberation by citizens and public officials alike. Democratic innovations have names like social auditing, open government, Deliberative Polling®, citizens'

assemblies, citizen juries, online deliberative forums, Future Design, Participatory Budgeting, and many more.

One increasingly popular design, for example, is the "deliberative mini-public." As the name implies, a deliberative mini-public is a body comprised of ordinary citizens usually selected through stratified random selection so as to be demographically representative of a broader public. Deliberative mini-publics are usually focused on one issue, about which the body learns, hears from experts and advocates, and then deliberates to issue a recommendation (Setälä and Smith 2018). The bits of research we have on the public reception of deliberative mini-publics suggest that citizens, especially those with populist leanings, view these bodies as more trustworthy and more representative than elected legislatures (Warren and Gastil 2015; Cutler et al. 2008).

Another example is Participatory Budgeting, in which cities commit some portion of their budget to open processes, usually in underserved areas of cities (Wampler 2012). Meetings are usually facilitated so as to generate proposals, use voting to select representatives from among participants, who then work to make the proposals feasible and hand off their decisions to the city. There is some research from Latin America that suggests that Participatory Budgeting results in more just distributions of city services, while marginally reducing corruption (Stolzenberg and Wampler 2018).

Democratic innovations like these are increasingly widespread. Although we don't yet have good research, there are probably tens of thousands of new channels of citizen participation and representation in most of the democracies, often outside of the more visible politics of electoral representation. It's not just governments that have been innovating. There are increasing numbers of nongovernmental organizations, activist organizations, and consultancies that specialize in democratic innovations. *Participedia*, a website that crowdsources information on democratic innovations, lists over 800 organizations with interests in democratic innovation (see also Lee 2015), and has entries on 2,200 or so cases (Participedia 2024). *Participedia* has documented 350 or so new processes—although the true number is probably more like 100, as many similar processes are branded with different names. The LATINNO project, which documents cases of democratic innovation in Latin America, has collected over 3,700 cases across 18 countries, selected so as to represent the diversity of new processes rather than the Latin American population of cases—which probably numbers in the many tens of thousands (LATINNO 2024). The OECD published a report a few years ago documenting the increasing numbers of deliberative mini-publics in OECD countries (OEDC 2020). The European Union is now moving into democratic innovation space with significant amounts of money. In Political Science, the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) now has an ongoing section devoted to democratic innovations, and the APSA has a rapidly growing related group.

So, where might democratic innovations fit into political systems? We might think of the spaces for democratic innovations at three levels: a) those within the peak institutions of electoral democracy; b) those "below" these peak institutions, in decentralized and deconcentrated areas of governance and in civil society; and c) those "above" representative democracy, between and beyond nation-state organization.

Turning first to electoral democracy, in some countries, like the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States, reforms of electoral systems themselves are probably more important than democratic innovations—reforms like getting rid of gerrymandering and voter suppression tactics in the United States. But there are also innovations that could improve elections, such as infusing them with deliberative processes that make it more difficult for election strategists to manipulate voters. These might include new ways of deliberatively connecting representatives and constituents, such as Michael Neblo and colleagues' experiments with Deliberative Town Halls (Neblo, Esterling, and Lazer 2018, Alnemr et. al. 2024). "America in One Room," a national Deliberative Poll® run by James Fishkin and his team on a national representative sample before the 2020 election, showed remarkable decreases in polarization (Fishkin et. al. 2021). The 2012 Irish Convention on the Constitution, a deliberative mini-public, mixed elected politicians in with randomly chosen citizens. The politicians were so impressed with the deliberative qualities of the process that they supported deliberative mini-publics on abortion and marriage equality, which in turn led to successful referendums (Farrell and Suiter 2021). The Irish cases suggest that if elected politicians come to understand some of the better democratic innovations, they are more likely to integrate citizen-based processes into decision-making, especially for issues that are polarized or gridlocked, as were the issues of abortion and marriage equality in Ireland. The German-speaking region of Belgium now integrates deliberative mini-publics into regular parliamentary processes, with the mini-publics mostly serving to set legislative agendas, in this way combining electoral representation, demographic representation, deliberation by ordinary citizens and deliberation between citizens and politicians (Economist 2019).

And speaking of referendums, the other place in which voting takes place in electoral democracies is, of course, in popular voting processes, such as ballot measures and referendums—so-called "direct democracy." There are many *democratic* problems with these ballot measures, including manipulated agendas and citizen ignorance, as we saw with Brexit (El-Wakil and McKay 2020). But they're still likely to be used more and more, because populist politicians and citizens like their apparent "directness," which seems to bypass so-called "corrupt

elites" and "special interests." So, we need to think about how to democratize direct democracy. One of the best recent innovations is the Oregon Citizens' Initiative Review, which attaches a citizens' jury to important or controversial ballot initiatives, with the aim of encouraging broader public attention, information, and deliberation (Gastil and Knobloch 2019). Or referendums might be held in two stages, putting citizens on notice that they should learn about an issue before the second vote (Barber 2003, ch. 10). Or, more radically, referendums might be integrated into the normal legislative process, as they do in Switzerland with "optional" or "facultative" referendums. The referendum option enables citizens to challenge legislation, with the result that elected politicians are much more attentive to representing citizens in their legislative activities (El-Wakil 2017).

Democratic innovations are more advanced within the administrative parts of states—what might be called "governance-driven democratization" (Warren 2009; Blijleven, Hulst, and Hendriks 2019). As the business of government has become more complex, legislatures have tended to sketch directions, and then hand off much of the politics to administrative rule-making. The legitimacy gained through general election platforms will often fail to feed through to specific policies, not least because electoral constituencies are not policy constituencies. So, when, in the post-World War II era, government agencies began to grow rapidly in their missions and reach legislatures increasingly directed them to engage with affected publics as they develop policy. While such directives are usually executed in ways that minimally satisfy legislative requirements, in the last couple of decades, some agencies have been more imaginative, using a variety of innovative ways of engaging their constituencies. Denmark's well-developed system of "network governance," for example, brings citizens and civil society organizations into multiple points of administrative decision-making (Sørensen 2022). These trends are likely to accelerate, providing new opportunities for democratic upgrading of what are now, mostly, authoritarian bureaucracies. These developments are especially important for citizen views of government trustworthiness and responsiveness, since most of our street-level interactions with government are with the administrative state.

Complexity in governance has also been pushing more decisions "below" the peak institutions of representative democracy, often in ways that produce more opportunities for democratic innovations. Since the mid-1970s, many responsibilities have been decentralized to lower levels of government through new federal arrangements (e.g., Spain's and Italy's autonomous regional governments, where experiments with democratic innovations are increasingly common; Barbeito and Alonso 2022; Participedia 2024), and de-concentrated, moving decisions to places that are closer to service delivery (Sørensen, and Vabo 2020). There are clear dangers to democracy when public entities shift responsibilities to entities with unclear mandates and accountability, especially in countries with histories of patronage and corruption. This said, these developments can and often do provide new opportunities for democratic innovation. We're increasingly seeing municipal and regional governments engaging with citizens on local issues such as planning for transportation, waste disposal, social housing, schools, public health, and urban planning. These developments are often driven by activism and advocacy, but they can also be driven by the professionalism of those involved in service delivery. Democratic innovation in municipalities can even be driven by political commitments to distributive justice, as was arguably the case with Participatory Budgeting when it was originated in Brazil.

Opportunities for democratic innovations "above" electoral democracy are more challenging owing to their scope and distance from most citizens. But because some of the key structural drivers of democracy erosion are global, we need to be especially attentive to these spaces of opportunity.

First, we should pay close attention to the emergence of single-issue governance regimes that cross jurisdictions, such as security regimes, trade organizations, and issue-specific international organizations (Dryzek and Tanasoca 2021). Opportunities can be driven by the need for international, multinational, and trans-national organizations to create their own legitimacy, since they usually cannot borrow legitimacy from nation-states. There are now a few experiments with transnational deliberative mini-publics focused on issues like immigration and climate change, but as these are still quite unusual, we should probably think of them as proof-of-concept events rather than new forms of transnational democratic governance (cf. Dryzek and Neimeyer 2024; Isernia and Fishkin 2014).

Second, opportunities have been emerging within established member-state organizations. Formally, democratic states should represent their people within international organizations. But some, most notably the United Nations and the World Bank, also establish constituencies more directly, especially around issues closely related to human development and human rights. For these reasons, these organizations are now paying attention to democratic innovations.

Third, global civil society continues to grow and develop, often directly in response to global challenges. Cause-based civil society organizations establish and organize informal constituencies that cross jurisdictions. While most such organizations are not internally democratic, they do bring into existence structures and organizations that could be democratized with the right kinds of processes (Gray and Warren 2024).

Finally, and most difficult to democratize, are structures of global capitalism. I don't have much to say about democratic innovations in this domain, except to note that democratization will probably continue to be defensive, and will show up in trade agreement riders in issue areas like labor and environment, and in local pressures on investment decisions, often pushed by transnational civil society networks. Some firms now conduct quasi-democratic forums, seeking to respond to opposition while earning what they often call "social licenses to operate" (e.g., Wilburn and Wilburn 2011)

Now, to the million-dollar question: Do democratic innovations work? That is, do they depolarize publics enough to channel political conflict back into talking and voting? Do they include more people, especially those with fewer political resources? Do they lead to better deliberation? Do they support and improve representative democracy? Do they increase the democratic legitimacy of states sufficiently so they can collectively provide for the people? I would like to tell you that, in aggregate, they do —but we aren't there yet.

Part of the problem is that the universe called "democratic innovations" contains poorly executed processes. Sometimes the rhetoric is overblown, especially by democracy entrepreneurs seeking to sell their processes (Lee 2015). Other processes amount to democracy-washing: attempts by governments to give a democratic veneer to decisions made elsewhere (e.g., Lang and Warren 2012; Fuji Johnson 2015). In many cases, governments cherry-pick the results of new processes they like, while ignoring those that do not fit with their agendas (Font et. al. 2018). And almost all cases are modest and incremental, and it is hard to tell whether any given case actually moves a political system.

So, this is where we political scientists come in. We need more research on a world that may be moving ahead of the discipline. There are at least six areas we need to build out. First, democratic deficit-driven demand for democratic innovation will depend in part on the specific kinds of constitutional and electoral systems that are in deficit. The emerging field of democratic innovations needs to develop close partnerships with comparative democratization experts to identify context-specific democratic deficits and opportunities.

Second, political science is now heavily weighted in favour of studying voting, elections, and public opinion, and other data rich areas—because that's where the data is. The new field of democratic innovations is data poor, especially the kind of data that supports high-end quantitative research. This circumstance is changing, in part because of projects like *Participedia* and the LATINNO project—but we have a long way to go before the quality and depth of data is equivalent to the data that supports, say, comparative election studies.

Third, to date the field of democratic innovations has been strongest in response to problems that can be localized—problems like transportation, health care, and urban planning. The field hasn't focused on democratic deficits that result from the large-scale structural drivers: especially global markets, structural inequalities, fiscal policy, or war and security—that is, many of the forces that are driving resurgent populisms, including its authoritarian variants.

Fourth, because most democratic innovations are (rightly) focused on involving people more extensively and deeply in government and governance, we need to think about political divisions of labor so that citizens' time, energy, and intelligence are used to maximum effect.

Fifth, we need to understand the incentives of elected elites. We need to understand the kinds of problems that democratic deficits present for elected politicians in order to build elite coalitions that will support democratic innovations and reforms.

Finally, we need to find ways of normatively evaluating the system-level consequences of democratic innovations. Are they deepening and expanding the democratic project by generating more inclusions for those who have been left out? Do they reduce polarization? Help to produce decisions that are smarter and better informed? Provide legitimacy gains that increase collective capacities, including more trust in government? Generate citizen commitments for better distributions of public goods, protections, and social welfare? I am hopeful on all these counts—and there are promising bits of evidence, but so far, we just have bits.

The field of democratic innovations needs to grow quickly and intelligently enough to help backfill the democratic deficits in our legacy institutions of representative democracy. If the field can do so, democratic innovations should help to contain our fears and give our hopes for democracy someplace to land.

## Acknowledgments

## Note

1 This talk borrows some language and ideas from Warren (2022).

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