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Closing the Gap Between Citizen Participation and Mainstream Politics

Richard Youngs

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Introduction

Over the last several years, citizen assemblies, juries, and panels have spread across Europe. Most of these have been run at the local or subnational level, a few at the national or even transnational level. Most have been called by public authorities, a smaller number created in more bottom-up fashion by civic groups. They all share a distinguishing feature: citizens are randomly selected to participate in debates about specific policies. In aggregate, these initiatives can be referred to as selection- or sortition-based participation.

As this wave of sortition-based participation consolidates, attention has turned to its wider political effects. While there is generally much to celebrate about this rise in participation, there remains a widespread feeling that the practice is not yet strongly enough embedded in mainstream politics to move the needle on overall democratic quality. Indeed, experiences suggest that standard channels of decisionmaking and political debate often undercut the influence of sortition initiatives.

This paper examines how sortition-based deliberation might be embedded more firmly and effectively within other democratic arenas. Its focus is not on the design and process of sortition forums themselves—many other publications have offered this level of evaluation in recent years.¹ Rather, it explores options for building sortition-based forms of participation more fully into longer-standing channels of mainstream politics. If selection-based citizen participation is to have wider relevance to democratic renewal, it is important to identify the political factors that can either stifle or oxygenate its potential. This paper assesses what steps

might be taken better to prevent politics from pushing sortition-based participation to the margins and what can be done to infuse politics more widely with the benefits of such participation.

The first section of this paper distinguishes between two levels of embedding sortition-based participation. One relates to a relatively focused agenda of so-called institutionalization; the other to more general shifts in political dynamics. The paper then considers progress and obstacles to embedding sortition-based participation at each of these two levels—while suggesting that it is the second, wider political understanding that is especially important. The final section offers five guidelines for assessing how the gap between sortition-based participation and other sites of political activity might in the future be narrowed.

The Challenge of Embedding Selection-Based Participation

During the last decade, the practices of selection-based deliberative participation have advanced dramatically. Their defining feature is that participants are selected by lot to represent the population, as opposed to election-based representation. What was a relatively rarefied world of random selection methodology has muscled its way to the forefront of many democratic reform agendas in countries including Austria, Denmark, France, Spain, and the United Kingdom, to name but a few. It is certainly not the only strand of democratic innovation to have taken shape, but it is one important area of efforts to redress Europe's much-dissected democratic malaise. During this last decade, the proponents of sortition forums have focused mainly on the twin concerns of improving participative methodologies and increasing the uptake of initiatives like citizen assemblies.

The sortition agenda has clearly succeeded in this sense. The practical design and organization of selection-based deliberation have improved immeasurably. The fact that meaningful numbers of successful assemblies have enticed citizens into detailed and constructive policy debates has done much to silence doubts about the practicalities of sortition-based participation. Selection methods have become more sophisticated, and practitioners have learned much about how to frame questions, set agendas, and involve external experts.

As these practices have spread, democratic reformers outside the highly specialized world of sortition initiatives have begun to take note. A decade ago, neither formal policy documents nor analytical accounts of macro-trends in democracy paid much attention at all to these initiatives. Today, this situation has inverted: more or less any strategy, document, or debate about the state of European democracy now makes a routine call for more citizen

participation. At a time when the macro-trendlines in European democracy have often looked inauspicious, sortition-based participation has been a striking and somewhat against-the-grain area of growth.

Of course, there is still room for more sortition forums. While there is much excitement—some understandably self-promotional—about the spread of deliberative participation, it bears repeating that this is still not a particularly widespread practice. Databases record several hundred initiatives across the developed world during the last decade;² that's an average of just a handful per year, per country. In many countries, such as many Eastern European states or Italy, authorities remain reluctant to experiment at all. And even in places where the reception has been more enthusiastic, the number of initiatives each year remains a drop in the ocean compared to the hundreds of thousands of decision processes constantly underway at multiple levels of territoriality.

Still, based on the number of sortition-based participative initiatives and their organizational robustness, it is undeniable that there have been remarkable advances made in the last several years. The challenge is now of a different order. It is not so much about getting the basic case for sortition-based participation onto the agenda or silencing doubters by showing that successful assemblies can be held. Rather, it is to demonstrate that these initiatives are capable of reshaping democratic politics in a more far-reaching fashion—or, at least, it is about posing the question of whether this wider impact is a feasible and desirable goal.

Much attention is now paid to multiple democracy indices that monitor trends in democratic quality around the world. Yet none of these indices separate out a specific measurement for the numbers or importance of sortition forums. Even those indices that do have separate categories for participation or deliberative democracy measure general levels of participation or “public deliberation.” The spread of formally organized sortition-based forums is not measured in these widely cited indices, so they are unable to make any link between these initiatives and the overall level of democratic quality.³

This all points to the agenda of what this paper will refer to as *embedding participation politically*.

While there is widespread agreement that more work is needed to insert participative-deliberative forums into mainstream politics, determining what this actually means is no easy task. For many years, deliberative theorists focused on (and disagreed about) issues largely internal to deliberative processes, like the importance of consensus, reason-giving, and individuals' positions reflecting the public good. A wider, so-called systems approach has since emerged, which explores how the interaction between different democratic practices and institutions affects the deliberative quality of the polity as a whole.⁴ Building on this work, there are now calls for analysis to focus not just on the abstract quality of deliberation but also on getting selection-based forums to dovetail with other democratic arenas and practices beyond deliberation.⁵ Better sortition design and better political embeddedness

need to advance hand in hand. This paper takes up the spirit of this very latest iteration in debates about deliberative participation and defines the so-called embedding challenge in these terms.

Two different levels of embedding sortition-based participation within politics can be identified and distinguished from each other.

The first level is often called *institutionalization*. These are the ways of ensuring that sortition-based participative forums take place on a more systematic basis and with formal processes to feed their conclusions into institutional decisionmaking processes. Most debate in the last several years has occurred at this level.

A second level refers to the broader need to embed participative dynamics, behaviors, and attitudes into mainstream politics. At this level, debate is less advanced, subject to more divergent views, and still in need of more basic conceptual ordering.⁶

While both levels are imperative, this paper in particular looks at the second, wider dimension—with a focus on ideas for filtering sortition forums' benefits into mainstream politics and the broader public sphere in more substantive and integral ways.⁷ Mainstreaming sortition-based participation politically is not just about institutionalization. Making sortition-based participation fully political means grappling with the overarching reasons why democracy is falling short. The challenges related to this idea of embeddedness in mainstream politics are more difficult and onerous, but they could ultimately prove more consequential and decisive for the future of direct citizen participation.

Institutionalization

Much debate has already taken place around the so-called institutionalization of selection-based participation. This term is used to reflect the conditions under which citizen forums become a regularized part of decisionmaking processes. Some champions of participation insist progress is being made and that more headway along the same lines is feasible and desirable as a route to political embeddedness.

A recent OECD report points to the variations in institutionalization that have advanced in recent years.⁸ These are institutionalized in one or both of two ways. The first way is that participative exercises have a degree of regularity or even permanency and are no longer one-off experiences. Some subnational authorities have instated permanent citizen assemblies with broad agenda-setting roles (such as in Ostbelgien or Paris). Others have permanent advisory panels to feed views into specific local government decisions (Canada) or hold a municipal planning assembly once every electoral cycle (Australia).

The second form of institutionalization is that participative exercises are accorded some kind of guaranteed place in the decisionmaking process. An increasingly accepted method is to call citizen assemblies prior to major decisions. Some feed directly into national referendums (for example, in Ireland). In some cases (such as Finland, Switzerland, or five U.S. states), assemblies are called to draw up background information prior to a referendum being held. In other cases, assemblies feed their outcomes into parliamentary committees (in Brussels). In some instances, the order is reversed, with citizen assemblies being the result of a certain number of signatures being collected on a certain issue (one Austrian state).

The progress achieved through these different forms of institutionalization is impressive and it has begun to move selection-based participation to a new level of importance. Most new assemblies now come with some degree of formal connection to state bureaucracies or parliamentary committees, in the sense of these other bodies committing to incorporate the results into their internal processes. Good-practice examples include the Irish constitutional assembly and several of the climate assemblies run in the last two or three years.

Still, the trend is not without its limitations. While more authorities are opening up to increasingly regular forms of participation, most assemblies and panels are for now still one-off exercises. The select number of examples of institutionalization cited in studies can be seen from a glass-half-full or glass-half-empty perspective: there are many more places where such arrangements do not exist than those where they are being tried out.

One sobering consideration is that increasingly rich layers of formal institutional embedding have not guaranteed tangible policy impact. The Conference on the Future of Europe drew impressively from best practice to get citizen panels embedded in plenary discussions with politicians and joined an open digital platform to panel deliberations. Yet it is widely agreed that larger political factors held back any decisive breakthrough on democratizing the European Union (EU).⁹ While the European Commission has committed to holding citizen panels on key issues where it proposes new legislation, and already has three of these planned, analysts argue that European-level assemblies will only have an impact if they are more fully incorporated into EU institutions' regular decisionmaking cycles.¹⁰

It can be especially difficult to generate firm institutionalization from outside formal government structures. In Germany, the civil society–led Bürgerrat Demokratie initiative showed that nonstate organizations can play a supportive role in sortition-based participation, but this forum was designed to feed into a government commission on democracy that ultimately never took place.¹¹ Instead, the parliament chose to form a commission on Germany's role in the world, which seemed well embedded in formal terms but left many weaknesses in the country's foreign policies starkly intact amid the turbulent crises of 2022.

The current templates of institutionalization do not guarantee that the recommendations of sortition initiatives are actually taken on board, just that there is follow-up discussion or that participation takes place on a topic that is already on the institutional agenda. Most of these routes to institutionalization are about plugging selection-based participation into local-level decisionmaking on fairly specific issues. These are welcome and exciting changes, but it would be a stretch to classify their impact as a major revolution in politics.

Political Embeddedness

The political challenge extends beyond the well-established agenda of institutionalizing sortition-based deliberative forums. Simply making such participative exercises more frequent is not, in itself, political embeddedness. Reports routinely stress that policymakers need to commit to taking on board the results of sortition forums. This may be the case, but such a step is not sufficient to achieve political embeddedness nor is it what this notion means in its most complete sense. Embedding sortition-based participation more politically involves a wider and thornier set of issues.

If the kind of formally delineated institutionalization described above is making headway, the broader embedding of sortition-based participation is for now at a more preliminary stage. The current debate is often reduced to one about whether other democratic channels adopt sortition forums' recommendations. This is very different from seeing sortition forums as one part of back-and-forth democratic debate with other actors. Noted experts have suggested that it is time to move beyond such a one-way framing and consider instead how selection-based participation can be “enmeshed within a wider web of institutional relationships.”¹² Embedding participation politically should not be simply about how citizen assemblies' recommendations journey through other parts of the democratic system, but about fitting participative methods into a holistic notion of democratic renewal.

Many practitioners hold to a notion that sortition forums need to be kept politically neutral and out of party politics. The lingering skepticism is evident in the way debates over sortition-based participation tend to be framed. For many, sortition initiatives need to be kept within tightly defined parameters and not overreach their utility to democratic decision-making.¹³ One common evaluation is that for institutionalization to work, there must be no major political disagreements on the issues and no politics involved in judging how well the participative forums function.¹⁴

These are fairly onerous conditions that often give the impression that sortition-based participation works best before politics kick in—that is, it should be confined to a kind of pre-political space, uncorrupted by political differences, and feed in evidence and ideas that can then become fodder for mainstream politics. Selection-based deliberation is often celebrated as a way of softening political differences or polarization between participants.

Yet combating democratic erosion arguably requires *more* political contestation in political debate and a wider, not narrower, spectrum of policy options.¹⁵ Indeed, some deliberative practitioners have recently shown interest in exploring sortition options beyond neutrality.¹⁶

For some thinkers, the aim is not so much to embed sortition-based participation more firmly in existing political structures but to almost supplant them in far-reaching ways—or, at least, to radically reduce the role of political parties, elections, and other standard democratic forms.¹⁷ Much of the advocacy around participation has a fairly hostile tone toward mainstream politics, deeming parties and elections to be almost irredeemably short-termist and incapable of addressing the public good.¹⁸ For some champions of sortition-based participation, the whole point is to circumvent these channels rather than involving them in a wider project of all-inclusive democratic renewal.

This skepticism must be taken seriously. It correctly points to the dangers of sortition-based participation being unduly politicized. However, more holistic thinking points toward a different conclusion. Ideas about selection-based participation usurping other democratic channels risk being overly dismissive of the strengths of standard liberal democracy, as well as (for now) lacking detail. A degree of politicization can be healthy for the impact of tightly managed sortition outcomes. Some insist that the deliberative participation community and the broader democratic reform community need to stop talking past each other and think through how advances in each field can be incorporated by the other.¹⁹ At the EU level, participation needs to be accompanied by measures to generate a common political sphere, which sortition is not well placed to create.²⁰

Prominent democratic theorists argue that the trend toward more sortition-based participation risks being counterproductive for democratic quality if it hollows out intermediary organizations between citizens and the state. Critics often accuse sortition initiatives of dampening political contestation in an unhelpful and artificial way, or of trying to shield politics from its inevitably and properly agonistic qualities. These forums do not deal with core power imbalances within societies; the limits to their impact result from issues of power more than a lack of institutionalization. These critics feel sortition initiatives treat politics as an exercise in problem-solving guided toward objectively good, supposedly win-win outcomes. They do not allow participants unhappy with the results of citizen-assembly debates to regroup and compete again for influence at a later date, which must be a key element of democratic politics.²¹

One influential critical framework insists that to have positive democratic impact, sortition forums must work in tandem with mass participation—otherwise they empower only a tiny number of people and risk generating even more dissatisfaction among the general population.²² A recent report stresses that all citizens need to have access to participatory processes and on a rolling basis, with participation becoming an “intrinsic mode of operation” across the existing political system.²³

Proponents of sortition-based participation will feel such criticisms are unfair, of course, and that citizen assemblies do enable real political differences to be played out rather than stifled. Yet the prevalence of doubts does suggest a need to probe more closely the relation between sortition-based participation and mainstream politics. The crucial question relates to the ultimate purpose of sortition: Is it to foster citizen debate on very specific policy goals? Or is it about reviving the democratic system as such? If there is support for the second and more ambitious of these goals, then some specific ways for politically embedding participation should be considered and pursued.

Guidelines for Democratically Embedded Participation

As the rise of sortition-based participation moves into its next phase, there is scope for exploring ways of more firmly embedding its practices politically. Overall expectations should be kept at a reasonable level, certainly in the short to medium term, and the possible disadvantages of overreach remain pertinent. But there are useful options that might facilitate constructive crossover between sortition-participative initiatives and other areas of democratic politics.

A core theme guiding this agenda is the need for integrative democratic renewal, as opposed to an approach that prefers one democratic practice to the exclusion of others. The aim should be to improve the overall quality of democracy across Europe and slot selection-based participation into this wider reform agenda, as opposed to simply adding to the number of citizen assemblies. The focus should be on making sure civil society organizations, social movements, political parties, and other actors play a more effective and citizen-empowering role in a networked notion of democracy, with a more widely available infrastructure for sortition-based participation that contributes to this aim.²⁴

The trends in institutionalization outlined above can and should be extended further. Public authorities could collaborate in designing a far more transformative kind of institutionalization, based on more robust and wider indicators to measure how mainstream politics either complement or cut across individual sortition forums. However, the need to politically embed sortition-based participation goes well beyond repeating the familiar injunction that politicians and authorities need to take citizen assemblies' outcomes on board.

While efforts to extend incipient forms of institutionalization can play a valuable role in closing the gap between sortition-participation and other political processes, this is not enough—it reflects a relatively narrow approach to the challenge of politically embedding selection-based participation. Five additional guidelines might help mainstream politics and selection-based participation empower and energize each other in mutually reinforcing fashion.

1. Establishing prior legitimacy for participatory exercises and mechanisms

First, mainstream politics need to help give sortition-based participation stronger prior legitimation. Mainstream politics can help by providing stronger democratic underpinnings for the growth in sortition-based participative initiatives. A recent project concludes that these initiatives need to grow organically out of better democratic debate to reflect a notion of more “participatory participation,” as opposed to the present approach of public authorities and city councils simply bringing in specialist organizations and experts to run standard sortition forums with little prior scrutiny.²⁵

A glaring question mark in the case for sortition-based democracy is that it requires a precommitment to deeper democratic quality. Current accounts say little about how that democratic commitment is established in the first place. The scenario habitually painted is that national or local governments agree to hold more participative forums and that the most relevant questions are about how these are run and how their outcomes can be impactful. But in most places, democratic commitment is dwindling, not widening.²⁶ Templates for sortition-based participation then assume what still needs a priori to be achieved: a reversal of current trends against democratic deepening and democratization. They are design templates but have no causal theory for how the prior political will to deepen participation is supposed to take shape.

It is this perspective that keeps debates about sortition-based deliberative forums so strikingly disconnected from other analysis on wider trends in democracy. The debate about sortition-based participation can often appear extremely niche. In its current form, it rests on the supposition that elites are already committed to deepening democratic participation and that the germane political issue is about how to run more officially sponsored assemblies and amplify their impact. But this condition clearly does not hold in most places. Indices have shown that over the last decade, the overarching political trend runs firmly in the opposite direction.²⁷ Most regimes are intent on hoarding more power and closing off space for independent civic initiatives. This is the case in authoritarian regimes, semi-authoritarian states, and formally democratic states with illiberal governments.

As such governments and regimes restrict civil society and squeeze the lifeblood out of other forms of democratic representation, it seems unlikely that they will readily volunteer to hand citizens more power through a radical extension of sortition-based democracy. Even the countries where public authorities organize assemblies have recorded declining scores in democratic quality.²⁸ If certain governments have been intent on limiting and distorting standard electoral democracy, it seems naïve to think that the same authorities will be entirely open to ceding power voluntarily to a different type of democracy.

In most countries, a robust form of prior politicized legitimacy is needed. Participation needs to be structured as a more political pathway to pushing back against executive aggrandizement or de-democratization. To date, most debate has focused on how to ensure impact *after* a sortition-based forum has taken place. It is also important to consider what kind of wider democratic space and legitimacy is needed beforehand. It is in this sense that political embeddedness is most needed.

At present, citizen assemblies and other forms of sortition rarely emerge from other sources of political legitimacy. They have been pushed by a narrow circle of officials, experts, and participative practitioners, but rarely subject to wide-ranging democratic debate. It is likely that most of the public are not aware of these assemblies even where they are held successfully (with the exception of a handful of especially high-profile initiatives). And their creation can seem very instrumentalized and arbitrary in terms of when they are called, by whom, for what purpose, and with what remit. If selection-based participation is to expand, this should be a matter of prior choice and debate through civil society, protest movements, political parties, parliaments, the media, and elections.

Mainstream politics should not be reduced to the role of implementing sortition forums' decisions, as is often suggested, but rather occur around fundamental a priori questions of whether populations want citizen assemblies, on what terms, on what issues, and in what kind of relation to political actors. Currently, citizens are not presented with or invited to express clear choices on such questions. A more pluralistic debate is needed before citizen assemblies can adopt a problem-solving focus. This kind of legitimacy will be especially crucial as and when policies adopted from sortition forums' recommendations start to go wrong or impose heavy costs on parts of the population.

Some of those running climate assemblies acknowledge this problem and have begun trying to build up broader prior debate.²⁹ The vast majority of citizen participants in the Conference on the Future of Europe wanted to see future citizen panels developing as a result of more vibrant democratic debate elsewhere in the political system—not as a way of getting around that debate.³⁰ Ideas should also be considered for iterative interaction between sortition mechanisms and referendums so that each can influence the other, rather than referendums simply being held on assemblies' one-off final recommendations.³¹

2. Connecting parties and participation

The second guideline relates to political parties' use of sortition-participation tools. One often-suggested route to close the gap between innovative sortition forums and mainstream politics is to take the ethos of sortition-based deliberation into political parties. Instead of focusing only on citizen assemblies within local municipal authorities or one-off set pieces called at governments' behest, a campaign could be mounted to use parties as vehicles for sortition-based participation. This could be mutually beneficial. It would help political parties revive their connections with citizens and move into the new participative era, and it would help sortition-participation mechanisms embed themselves within currently mainstream democratic channels.

This participation-parties link is undoubtedly challenging. Champions of sortition are often blisteringly critical of political parties; indeed, a feeling that parties are irredeemably inept and dysfunctional is one of the most potent drivers behind the case for direct citizen participation. Conversely, there is a risk that importing the ethos of such participation could undermine some of the core features and services of political parties. Still, there is scope for exploring more positive crossover between parties and sortition. While it is well beyond the scope of this paper to delve into debates about the mounting problems of political parties *per se*, it must be worth trying to restore their fortunes through participatory involvement before assuming that democracy's future can only be built by circumventing or even discarding parties.

Groups could be selected from party supporters and supportively involved citizens with mandates to feed ideas into parties' manifesto-writing process. Sortition councils of selected members could have a formal role alongside other formal decisionmaking bodies within party structures. By increasing participation on themes that mirror concerns evident among the general population, parties could feel more invested in the general wave of sortition—rather than seeing sortition as a threat to their programs. Many new and so-called digital parties, like the Five Star Movement in Italy and Podemos in Spain, promised internal participation and direct democracy but have drifted toward being top-down personalized parties. Selection-based policy councils could help restore their initial promise and be more effective in dispersing power than the looser forms of local discussion groups and online voting or petitioning that they have used to date.

This would provide parties with more disaggregated input into different issues. Parties play an important role in aggregating different issues into nominally coherent ideological packages—a role that individual sortition forums are not well positioned to play. One key weakness of political parties is that citizens have to take or leave their programs as a whole and cannot pass judgement on their components separately. Using sortition-based participation within parties might help mitigate this to some extent. Even more ambitiously, a series of *interparty*

assemblies could be attempted. These could select representatives of different party cadres to deliberate across party lines on certain issues. Core to deliberative theorists' case is the claim that putting polarized citizens in a room brings about convergence; if they are right, why could we not expect the same of deliberation between political parties?

3. Fusing participatory mechanisms and social movements

The third guideline concerns a closer fusion between small-scale sortition forums and large-scale social movements. Loose civic movements have fueled intense political engagement in recent years. If champions of sortition base their arguments on the assumption that existing channels of citizen engagement are broken, the social movements and mass protests that have gained momentum over the last decade question their base assumption. Some argue that sortition forums should be seen as the new civic infrastructure to replace a failed civil society.³² But civil society engagement has in fact widened more dramatically than sortition forums.

Some analysts see social movements as the key route to introducing genuinely empowered sortition-based participation into the political system, as opposed to the tame and cosmetic version that they believe currently predominates.³³ To the extent they have declined to build links to social movements, climate assemblies have reinforced a technocratic-managerial and depoliticized approach to climate policies—actually undermining the possibility of systemic transformation. Mass ecological movements still need to be able to seize sortition initiatives to these ends.³⁴ Cities with citizen assemblies have been better at linking with each other through multi-city networks than with other parts of their own movement-based democratic ecosystems.

Democratic renewal needs to flow from and use existing community infrastructure rather than dropping in predesigned, off-the-shelf new bodies.³⁵ Civil society organizations could play a role in questioning citizen-assembly participants, as their ideas should be subject to much tougher scrutiny and not simply assumed to be benign. It is crucial that these civic actors are not just the so-called usual suspects, but include people who are more skeptical of the issues being discussed. These efforts could be connected to the increasing number of citizens' panels being commissioned by companies to inform their strategies and extend deliberative processes in the workplace.³⁶

In turn, social movements themselves could use more deliberation and also align their actions with output from sortition forums. Promising developments in this direction could be pushed further. Some research points to valuable efforts to embed deliberation in nonviolent protest movements in contexts where democracy is curtailed or under threat.³⁷ A citizen assembly on health reform in the United Kingdom worked effectively with civil society input.³⁸ The idea for the permanent Paris citizen assembly came from the Yellow Vest movement, but linkages there between sortition and protest have since dried up. Recent climate assemblies have included civil society organizations as stakeholders, but they have in some cases walked

away in frustration.³⁹ Participants of the French climate assembly later created their own civil society body. Extinction Rebellion has begun to incorporate citizen assemblies, although with ongoing debate over whether these are a top priority relative to the adoption of more radical protest tactics (as with the group's Just Stop Oil offshoot).

Participative deliberation needs to be joined to wider democratic activism rooted in material struggle and imbalances. In general, sortition forums still struggle with this mass mobilization of society;⁴⁰ politicians often present citizen assemblies as a more managed and controlled alternative. Yet mass mobilization, run through collective organizations, has become a valuable part of mainstream politics and should not be so readily neglected by the designers of sortition forums.

4. Embedding participation in public-policy consultations

The fourth guideline is that sortition-based participation could be usefully embedded in the various forms of public-policy consultation and petitioning that have multiplied in recent years. The type of citizen participation that has expanded most dramatically is not sortition-based forums but open consultations. Nearly all governments—national and subnational—now provide opportunities for citizens to offer input into early phases of proposed policy actions. As this is likely to continue to be a prominent part of authorities' efforts to engage citizens, it might be useful to explore whether the gap might be narrowed between this increasingly mainstream type of consultation and sortition forums.

Of course, these consultations are a far cry from selecting representative citizens with highly controlled remits; they do not carry the same democratic robustness or potential but are habitually included under new means of enabling citizen participation. While consultations, especially through online platforms, are now extremely numerous, they commonly generate fairly passive and fragmented input. Citizens participate in online petitions, pressing for certain concerns or issues to be dealt with, but their input rarely leads to any quality back-and-forth debate or deliberation. Still, this is the kind of initiative that most governments offer, and it remains the avenue through which millions of citizens engage with public policy—far more than get to be involved with sortition-based forums. Open consultations are now an established element of political decisionmaking cycles; as such, their standing in relation to sortition participation merits some consideration.

A key question is whether such open consultation might be harnessed as a platform for deliberative participation, instead of being separate from sortition-based process. Sortition-participative components could be built into existing and widely used petitioning and consultation mechanisms. There has been some thinking the other way round: attaching consultation-like mechanisms to citizen assemblies, whether through crowdsourcing or allowing citizens to make petitions to assemblies. This should also be feasible in the inverse direction, adding sortition bodies to already operating consultative mechanisms. Authorities in several countries—from Taiwan and South Korea to states in the Balkans, Africa, and

Latin America—have begun to experiment with developing collaborative, ongoing dialogues as an offshoot to online platforms.⁴¹ These are generally still fairly open-ended participative additions and there remains scope for bringing in more robust sortition techniques to the world of consultative and petition-oriented digital platforms.

5. Linking sortition forums with each other

Finally, there may be a need to think about how sortition forums relate to each other as their numbers grow. Other sites of political decisionmaking and deliberation could also help guide the relationship between different sortition forums that might have conflicting mandates. So far, the focus has been on how each sortition forum individually relates to public authorities and institutional decisionmaking processes. As they become more numerous, however, there will need to be clearer rules about how they interlock with each other and how tensions between them are to be resolved—an issue that remains curiously underdiscussed.

Political embeddedness could play a helpful role in managing the prospect of overlapping sortition bodies. As these forums multiply, it is unlikely they will be fully aligned with each other. A citizen assembly on economic policy might insist on ending central bank independence, while one on democracy might push to reduce governments' direct power over economic policies. What if an assembly on employment pushes more opportunities for export businesses, while one on international policy recommends a moratorium on new free-trade deals and a retreat from globalization? What if an assembly on climate policy comes out in favor of an immediate end to Russian oil and gas imports, while another on social policy wants subsidies to keep domestic gas prices low? Some kind of permanent infrastructure could be charged with overseeing and mitigating such tensions. This could include a blended mix of selected citizens, elected politicians, senior officials, and civil society organizations.

Conclusion

These five guidelines are neither detailed institutional templates nor solutions, but they offer broad opportunities for embedding selection-based participation more fully into mainstream democratic politics. They are suggested here as a means of generating debate on this crucial next step in the development of citizen participation. Their shared core ethos is that the need for political embeddedness and connection is relevant across the institutional spectrum. Reflections on institutionalization have advanced the way sortition forums dock into public authorities. However, embeddedness cannot only be about how other institutions adjust to take on board sortition forums—the latter must also adjust to root themselves in preexisting sites of democratic engagement and citizen organization. This flip side to the participative equation has been strikingly overlooked to date.

These arguments are not to be overstated. If sortition-based forums are not embedded, their influence will be less than it could be; if they fuse too far with other democratic channels, then they risk replicating weaknesses of the status quo. Each form of democratic engagement has its own strengths and needs to preserve its distinctive contribution to overall democratic quality. Some will insist that the now-proven utility of sortition-based participative forums should not be risked by pushing their extension too far. However, even with these caveats and sensible precautions in mind, European democracy could benefit from more integrative patterns of political renewal that include ways of ensuring that selection-based participation is more widely embedded in mainstream politics.

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Notes

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